

Green Maple Leaves Welcoming Imperial Messengers : Chokushi-no-ma in the Tozamurai

In 1603, Nijo-jo Castle was built by Tokugawa Ieyasu, the founder of the Tokugawa shogunate, at its current location to the southwest, the *urakimon* (opposite to the demon's gate) direction, in relation to the Imperial Palace. The castle later underwent major repairs in preparation for Emperor Gomizunoo's visit in 1626. Afterward, it served as a place for a few successive shoguns to stay during their visits to Kyoto and as a base for negotiations with the Imperial Court until the end of the Edo period.

The Chokushi-no-ma at Ninomaru-goten Palace was a room dedicated to people from the Imperial Court. Nijo-jo Castle is the only existing Japanese castle where this kind of room remains. This exhibition features the Chokushi-no-ma and displays a mural depicting green maples in this room.

Visitors welcomed in the Chokushi-no-ma

Chokushi were messengers dispatched by the Imperial Court to announce the intention of the emperor on his behalf. Ninomaru-goten Palace had a special room designed to courteously welcome *chokushi*. That was the Chokushi-no-ma. It is thought that *chokushi* took seats on the upper level of the room.

In the initial years of the Tokugawa shogunate, one of the challenges faced by the new government was ensuring cooperation from the Imperial Court. To foster harmony with the Imperial Court, the shogunate arranged the marriage of Tokugawa Masako, a daughter of the second shogun, to Emperor Gomizunoo and received the emperor's visit at Nijo-jo Castle in 1626. Nevertheless, in 1627, the emperor granted permission for priests of particular Buddhist temples, including those from Daitoku-ji Temple, to wear purple robes, which symbolized the high ranks of wearers, without any consultation with the shogunate. This event, known as the "Purple Robe Incident," triggered escalating conflict between the shogunate and Imperial Court. In 1634, to improve the deteriorating relationship with the Imperial Court, Tokugawa Iemitsu, the third shogun, visited Kyoto, leading a massive army of 300 thousand troops. After Iemitsu entered Nijo-jo Castle, the Imperial Court often sent *chokushi* to the castle to congratulate him on his arrival in Kyoto and for other purposes. After that, Kyoto saw no shogunal visits for a long time. In 1863, during the tumultuous final years of the Tokugawa shogunate, Tokugawa Iemochi, the 14th shogun, visited Kyoto—the first shogunal visit to the Imperial Capital in 229 years. He was then greeted by *chokushi* at Nijo-jo Castle. In 1866, *chokushi* were once again dispatched to the castle to deliver the imperial message to appoint Tokugawa Yoshinobu as the 15th shogun.

After the Tokugawa shogunate returned political power to the Imperial Court, Nijo-jo Castle became an imperial villa in 1884. When Crown Prince Yoshihito (later Emperor Taisho) visited Kyoto, he stayed in Honmaru-goten Palace at Nijo-jo Castle. Issues of the *Hinode Shimbun* (present-day *Kyoto Shimbun*) newspaper mentioned audiences with the crown prince held in the Chokushi-no-ma at Ninomaru-goten Palace on May 27, 1900 and on June 7, 1907.

This means that the Chokushi-no-ma changed its status from a room for welcoming *chokushi*, or imperial messengers, to a place for visitors to have an audience with the crown prince.

How the Chokushi-no-ma is designed

The Chokushi-no-ma is located in the Tozamurai building, which served as a waiting area at Ninomaru-goten Palace. On its southwest side, the building has rooms that look intimidating with tiger murals, while its northeast side is characterized by the gentle atmosphere of rooms decorated with botanical murals. The Chokushi-no-ma is a room on the northeast side, comprising *jodan* (upper) and *gedan* (lower) levels. In the Edo period, the room was also called "Tenjo-no-ma" or the "Jodan" and "Gedan" of the Tozamurai.

Since the Chokushi-no-ma was not intended for the shogun, the owner of the castle, to be seated on its upper level, the room was designed differently from other meeting rooms in the palace. For example, the Chokushi-no-ma lacks a *tsukeshoin* (writing alcove), a study for the owner, which the other meeting rooms have on the left of the upper level when seen from the lower level. In addition, in the Chokushi-no-ma, *Jodan-kamachi*, a transverse member between the upper and lower levels, and *chodaigamae* decorative doors are made of clear-lacquered zelkova wood with the grain, instead of black-lacquered wood.

The entire mural of the Chokushi-no-ma depicts spring and summer plants, particularly featuring maple, peach, and *hinoki* cypress trees. The large alcove and *chodaibusuma* sliding doors are adorned with maple trees displaying green leaves tinged with a faint red hue. These maples are of a kind named "Nomura." Unlike other types of maples that sprout green leaves in spring and turn red in fall, this particular kind exhibits red leaves in spring, followed by green leaves in summer and red again in fall. With birds perching on their branches and trunks, the green maples in the Chokushi-no-ma herald the arrival of summer.

The wall of the large alcove depicts a green maple standing on the ground at a beach, with a winding trunk and branches extending upward to reach golden clouds. The wall with staggered shelves portrays rocks and an azalea. While the surface of sliding doors of the closet above the staggered shelves depicts *ume* plum, cherry blossoms, Japanese kerria and peony flowers, the usually unseen back side of the surface is decorated with violet, dandelion, and *hokogusa* (Japanese cotton weed) flowers. The surface of the *chodaibusuma* sliding doors depicts green maples hidden upward in golden clouds and reappearing above the *nageshi* (horizontal beam), with rocks in the foreground and a beach in the background. The *hinoki* cypress tree painted on the south side of the lower level gives an impression of towering height. Meanwhile, the surface of the *koshi-shoji* (paper sliding doors with waist-high wooden panels on their bottoms) on the north depicts a creeping peach shrub. The entire room is thus designed to offer a sharp contrast between the north and south.

The mural in the Chokushi-no-ma shows a style from the late Momoyama period, as seen by the way of depicting green maples and *hinoki* cypresses that are so high that they look as if they are piercing the ceiling while using golden clouds, the depiction of tree trunks biting the gold ground, and the way of using curves. This mural is attributed to Kano Jinnojo.

Missing birds and violets

Of the original painted surfaces in the Chokushi-no-ma, two southern surfaces at the lower level have more brilliant gilt grounds and colors than the others. Therefore, it has long been supposed that these surfaces were repainted. This supposition has been confirmed by the recent discovery of reduced reproductions of Ninomaru-goten Palace murals made by Itaya Hiroharu, a high-ranking painter who served the Tokugawa shogunate and accompanied Tokugawa Iemochi during his visit to Kyoto. His reproduction of the Chokushi-no-ma mural shows seven birds and violets under the tips of *hinoki* cypress branches. *Record of the Nijo Imperial Villa* (stored at the Archives and Mausolea Department, Imperial Household Agency of Japan) suggests that this part of the mural was repainted around 1885 to 1886, when the villa, the former Nijo-jo Castle, underwent major repairs. It is thought that the depiction of those seven birds and violets was removed from the surface during the repairs. Since the original painted surface with the seven birds and violets no longer exists, the reproduction displayed in the Chokushi-no-ma at Ninomaru-goten Palace also lacks this depiction. However, ongoing research efforts have provided new insights into the appearance of Ninomaru-goten Palace in the distant past.

Just as the maple leaves change their colors according to the season, the Chokushi-no-ma has experienced transformations over time in terms of its visitors and the motifs depicted in its mural. The green maples serve as witnesses to the changes that have occurred over the years.

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