

Around ten thousand cat sculptures and figurines are displayed at this Shinto shrine, the resting place of a woman and her cat. The woman was beheaded for appealing to her daimyo for justice, an action that was banned, despite having been swindled by a wealthy and corrupt neighbor.

The shrine takes its name from the woman, Omatsu, whose story inspired her community to create a place to honor her and her cat, who was killed alongside her. *Dai* means great, and a *gongen* is a manifestation of a Buddhist deity in the form of a Shinto deity. Omatsu's tragic story took place during the Edo period (1603–1867), most probably between 1681 and 1686. At the time, successive years of poor harvests plagued many villages, leading to widespread poverty.

Omatsu was married to Sobe, the village headman. Representing many of the townspeople, Sobe asked a wealthy neighbor, Nogami, for a loan. As collateral, Sobe offered some of his land.

Around the time when the loan was to be repaid, Sobe and Nogami met by chance and Sobe gave Nogami the money that he was owed. Although Nogami did not give Sobe a receipt, he promised to do so soon. But he never did.

Sobe died from an illness, leaving his land to Omatsu. She repeatedly requested a receipt from Nogami, who constantly denied that Sobe had repaid him. Ultimately, Nogami took control of the disputed land.

Omatsu attempted to fight this injustice. She requested assistance from the town magistrate, who demanded sex in return for his help. She refused him and appealed to the community court, but the official with jurisdiction in the matter was the same magistrate whose advances she had earlier rejected. He was angered by Omatsu's refusal and, after being bribed by Nogami, ruled in Nogami's favor. In a final attempt to seek justice, Omatsu approached the local daimyo to beg for help.

At the time, commoners were forbidden to appeal directly to their domain lord. Omatsu thus was charged with breaking the law and received the death penalty. According to local accounts, in the months leading up to her execution, her cat, Mike (pronounced *MEE-kay*), never left her side.

The executioner reportedly decapitated both Omatsu and Mike on a riverside while villagers watched from hiding. The townspeople buried Omatsu and her cat close together. They also planted a memorial tree. The actions she took while fighting for her rights gave her a high status in the eyes of her community.

According to legend, after their deaths, a fearsome and monstrous cat with supernatural powers haunted the homes of Nogami and the magistrate. Both men perished shortly after and, eventually, the stolen land was returned to Omatsu's heirs.

Omatsu became a symbol of how fighting for justice can win eventual victory. Her grave gradually grew into a shrine dedicated to her memory and that of her cat.

Today, more than 10,000 ancient and modern metal, porcelain, and wooden sculptures of cats in various poses and featuring different designs can be found throughout the shrine grounds. Some are believed to have the power to heal or bring good fortune in return for prayers. Many people visit the shrine to pray that they may have the personal strength to achieve their goals, such as starting a business or passing an exam.

The Museum of Tradition displays historical documents and artifacts related to Omatsu and the Edo period. Papercut artworks by artist Miyata Masayuki (1926–1997) tell the story of Omatsu and her cat, and visitors can watch an animated video of her life.



## Huge Beckoning Cat of Good Fortune and Happiness

This two-meter-high beckoning cat (*maneki-neko*) welcomes visitors. Many people enjoy having their photograph taken with this lucky cat.



## Buddhist Pine Tree

A resident of the town planted this yew plum pine, also known as a Buddhist pine (*Podocarpus macrophyllus*), three centuries ago. The tree is a designated Natural Monument.



## Omatsu's Grave

Omatsu was a woman at the center of a tragedy in the Edo period (1603–1867). A priest who was moved by her life gave her the honorary name Omatsu Daigongen. *Dai* means great, and a *gongen* is a manifestation of a Buddhist deity in the form of a Shinto deity.



## The Shrine for Omatsu's Cat, Mike

After Omatsu's death, the spirit of her cat, Mike (pronounced *MEE-kay*), is said to have avenged her. Mike was deified and is enshrined in this small shrine.



## Healing Cat

If you have an illness or injury, petting the cat in the same spot is believed to have healing power.



## Great Cat Statue

This statue protects the shrine.



## Cat Buddha

This statue in the form of a cat keeps people safe from disasters.



## Stone Jizo

This statue of the bodhisattva Jizo, a Buddhist deity, is the guardian of children.



## Kannon (Bodhisattva) Rock

This rock is said to resemble the Buddhist deity Kannon, bodhisattva of compassion.



## Seven Lucky Cat Gods

These cats bestow visitors with good luck.



## Corridor of Cat Figurines

Approximately 10,000 cat figurines are lined up here.



## The Museum of Tradition

This museum houses art and documents illustrating Omatsu's story, and visitors can watch a video about Omatsu and her cat Mike. Under the eaves is a spot where visitors can rest and enjoy the view of a waterfall and greenery.