

A Historical Walk Around Kyoto



Photo by Masayoshi Masuda

Autumn Leaf Festival in Arashiyama

This Autumn Leaf Festival provides a glimpse into Japanese aristocratic culture and history in the Heian Period (794–1191). The aristocrats enjoyed boating on the River Oi surrounded by beautiful mountains, while composing a poem and dancing to music.

This festival is held on the second Sunday of November, one or two weeks before the best time to see autumn leaves. It takes place upstream of the River Oi near the Togetsu Bridge. This Arashiyama area is well-known for its autumn-leaf viewing among tourists.

Origin of Boating Parties in Japan

The origin of these boating parties dates back to 898, when the retired Emperor Uta (867–931) visited here and had a boating party. The original boating party festival is the Mifune Festival held in May at the same place. It began in 1928. This Autumn Leaf Festival came later in 1947, and is held to express gratitude to the guardian deities of the Arashiyama area for colorful mountains.

Variety of Boats in the Festival

Some boats participating vary depending on the year. However, historic places and traditional performing arts associated with this area are always recreated and introduced to the audience.

The first boat in the photo shows a recreation of aristocrats composing a poem extemporaneously, and is read with traditional music in the background. The second boat in the same line is modeled on the Nonomiya Shrine. A black wooden shrine gate and brushwood fences, the symbol of the shrine, are decorated on the boat. A woman wearing *Juni-hitoe** is also sitting on the boat. This woman is modeled on the ancient princess who used to stop by the Nonomiya place in this area to purify her spirit. In modern times, this shrine has been in the spotlight as Princess Masako became pregnant after praying at the shrine. There are about ten more boats with various performances such as Japanese harp music and flower arrangement.

* A Kimono prototype. Formal wear for women of high rank consisted of many layers of clothing.