

The Prestigious Kyoto Prize Comes to San Diego

The award celebrates excellence in science, philosophy, and the arts this month

BY DEAN NELSON

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November's prize ceremony in Kyoto | Photo courtesy of Inamori Foundation

O nstage, Her Imperial Highness Princess Takamado looks pleased. She is dressed in clothing representing 1,000 years of history. To her right, dozens of children, also in traditional costume, sing an ancient Japanese song. To her left, in more modern attire, are a technology expert who has pioneered work in robotics and automated driving, a scientist whose work in immunotherapy has led to breakthroughs in cancer treatment, and a philosopher whose research has

Kyoto Prize Gala

March 14, 5:30 p.m.
Sheraton Hotel and Marina, Harbor Island
858-352-8400

•There is no charge for university events. Register at kyotoprize-us.org.

led to a new theory of justice.

The princess gazes on both the past and future of civilization.

This was November, in the ceremony for the Kyoto Prize, which selects laureates in the fields of Advanced Technology, Basic Sciences, and Arts and Philosophy. Its global prestige is similar to the Nobel Prize. In fact, nine Kyoto Prize winners have also won the Nobel, like Yoshinori Ohsumi, who won in 2012 and 2016, respectively.

Kyoto is the cultural center of Japan and a city known for its temples, shrines, and artistry. And judging by the audience, the event has a lot to do with San Diego's future. In addition to dignitaries from around the world, the gathering included representatives from many San Diego businesses and universities—Kyocera, ResMed, Union Bank, San Diego Airport Authority, USD, UCSD, SDSU, PLNU, and many others.

“San Diego is one of the largest innovation centers in the world,” says Malin Burnham, one of the prize's early supporters. “Much of our future is in innovation, so it's important that we plant another flag in the ground to tell the world what we're about.”

The Kyoto Prize was started in 1984; in 2001, USD hosted the laureates on campus. The San Diego–Kyoto connection has grown ever since, and now the laureates visit San Diego each March for the annual Kyoto Symposium, when they give lectures and performances at various universities.



This Year's Laureates: (from left) roboticist Takeo Kanade (advanced technology), medical scientist Tasuku Honjo (basic sciences), and philosopher Martha Craven Nussbaum (arts and philosophy)

At least one San Diegan has received the prize. Walter Munk, called the “Einstein of the Oceans,” was a Kyoto laureate in 1999 for his work at the Scripps Institution of Oceanography.

“Hosting the prize in San Diego brings our city a lot of prestige,” says Dick Davis, the Kyoto Prize administrator and former executive director of San Diego Regional Economic Development Corporation. “These kinds of events are usually in media centers like New York or Los Angeles. It’s a great recognition for San Diego.”

While in Kyoto, the San Diego contingent gets a glimpse of the significance of each laureate, and can plan how best to showcase them here. When the prize is celebrated in San Diego this month during the Kyoto Symposium, the universities and businesses cooperate in an unprecedented way.

“One of the big concerns we had when we wanted to expand the event throughout San Diego was whether the universities would work together,” says Rod Lanthorne, former CEO of Kyocera North America. “It turned out that the schools were very complementary, and consistent with a prize that is meant to lift up the human spirit.”

This year’s laureates include philosopher and ethicist Martha Craven Nussbaum, whose ideas helped form USD’s Humanities Center, as well as Takeo Kanade, who will showcase his robotics work for driverless cars and prosthetics at UCSD. Tasuku Honjo, whose research is advancing life sciences and medicine, will speak at SDSU about his cancer therapies, while PLNU* will host the media interviews and opening luncheon for the laureates. Local businesses will also feature them in events, exploring how the laureates’ research connects with their own. “A lot of laureates come from fields in technology that San Diego is known for,” Lanthorne says.

Kazuo Inamori, the founder of Kyocera, funds the prize through the Inamori Foundation as a means to advance human achievement as well as to improve cultural and spiritual dimensions of society. “Being part of the Kyoto Prize connects San Diegans to ideas that are shaping the future,” says Mary Walshok, associate vice chancellor at UCSD. “It puts our young people in touch with breakthroughs and expands our region’s global footprint.”

When the ceremony comes to San Diego this month, it won’t include a princess or a look into our past. Here, it will be all about the future. A fundraising gala will feature the laureates and will introduce potential future laureates: Three high school students from San Diego and three from Tijuana will each receive a \$10,000 college scholarship.

“When those young people tell the audience about their excitement for science and the arts, well, it’s just tingling on the backbone,” says Burnham. “That’s our future.”

Now Presenting

March 15, 10 a.m.

Tasuku Honjo on immunotherapy

Price Center East Ballroom, UCSD, 9500 Gilman Drive, La Jolla

March 15, 2 p.m.

Takeo Kanade on robotics

Conrad Prebys Aztec Student Union, Montezuma Hall, SDSU, 6075 Aztec Circle Drive, College Area

March 16, 10:30 a.m. & 2 p.m.

Martha Craven Nussbaum on arts and philosophy

Shiley Theatre, USD, 5998 Alcala Park, Mission Valley

**Full disclosure: Writer Dean Nelson is the founder and director of PLNU’s journalism program.*

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