



THE ART OF EUROPE CHALLENGED BY THE "OTHER"

European influence in Japanese architecture (1860-1930)

Jean-Sébastien CLUZEL

ABSTRACT

Emperor Meiji ended a period of two centuries in which his country was closed to the outside, and conducted an intense policy of modernization throughout his long reign (1868-1912). Foreign engineers and architects—Italian, French, British, German and American—were called on to take part in this undertaking, and travelled to the archipelago to manage large and small construction projects. They were behind the first structures in Japan marked by European models, and also trained the first Japanese architects in Western architecture.



Bank of Japan, built between 1890 and 1896 in Tokyo by Tatsuno Kingo. Source : [Wikimedia Commons](#)

In Japan, the isolationist policy instituted by the Tokugawa Shogunate came to an end between 1853 and 1867, which is to say between the arrival of the squadron of Matthew C. Perry (1794-1858) in Tokyo Bay, and Emperor Meiji's recapture of power. The latter, who was aware of his country's archaic state compared to the major Western powers, would conduct an intense policy of modernization throughout his reign. As part of this undertaking, his government enlisted a considerable number of foreign diplomats, officers, lawyers, merchants, intellectuals, engineers and architects. These men helped implement projects aiming to achieve Western modernity in matters

of industrialization, militarization, and education.

Westernization

In this context, numerous Italian, French, British, German and American engineers and architects went to the archipelago to manage large and small construction projects, which contributed to the industrialization of the country as well as the modernization of its infrastructure. The government also tasked them with the image of Japan's Westernization, with the works of the Briton Thomas James Waters (1842-1898) being among the first of this genre. In 1871, he drew the Mint Office (*Zôheiryô*) and the Senbukan Residence in Osaka, and the following year he produced the Yamazato suspended iron bridge in the imperial palace compound.

Coveting a position as leader in the industrial era, the Meiji government also reformed university education by inviting many Westerners to transmit their knowledge to the young Japanese elite. The British architect Josiah Conder (1852-1920) was known as the first professor of architecture in Japan, even though this title applies more to the French architect Charles Alfred Chastel de Boinville (1850-1897), who resided in Scotland, and the Italian Giovanni Vincenzo Cappelletti (1843-1887). For all that, from 1877 onward, Conder taught the art of building for a decade at the Imperial University of Tokyo, in addition to the history and the theory of architecture, for which he was recognized as the father of modern Japanese architecture.

The learning of modern science and techniques across all disciplines continued beyond borders. In architecture students from the Imperial University of Tokyo were introduced to the Western art of building, while other students supplemented their training in famous foreign firms, or in the most important schools in America, Europe, and even colonial India. For example, Yamaguchi Hanroku (1858-1900) studied at l'École centrale de Paris between 1876 and 1879. During the 1880s, Tatsuno Kingo (1854-1919), who was trained by Conder in Japan, left for London to work in the famous firm of William Burges (1827-1881). Shortly after his return from England, he became the director of the technical department of the Imperial University of Tokyo. Such travels for the purpose of study continued. In 1921, Nakamura Jumpei (1887-1977) studied architecture at l'École des beaux-arts de Paris for two and a half years before returning to Japan, where in 1925 he became a professor at the College of Engineering in Yokohama. He trained an entire generation of Japanese architects there in the French tradition.

The university curriculum offered to future architects was thus steeped in Western thinking and methods from the very beginnings of the Meiji era. Borrowings from the Old World, which were systematic in the teaching of architectural projects, urban planning, and regional planning, were also present in the first Japanese theories of architecture and restoration. They also led to the establishment of new disciplines, such as the history of architecture, whose pioneers were Itô Chûta (1867-1954), Sekino Tadashi (1868-1935), Amanuma Shun-ichi (1876-1947), Adachi Kô (1898-1941), and somewhat later Ôta Hirotarô (1912-2007).

Birth of the pseudo-Western style

These first generations of Japanese builders and theorists, along with the first incoming architects from the West, were the promoters of a new architectural style known today by the name *giyôfû*, or pseudo-Western style. This terminology, used to designate modern Japanese architecture whose form resembles Western architecture, helps group constructions according to two types.

First there are structures with Western forms, but whose techniques of production are clearly from the Japanese tradition, in other words from carpentry. In Japan during the 1870s, workers in the building trade were primarily carpenters, and it was difficult to find sufficiently skilled labour to produce structures using masonry. These hybrid structures, which looked Western but were produced using Japanese processes, are thus the oldest, as demonstrated by the wooden cross-ribbed vault of the Oura church built in Nagasaki in 1864. Then there are the buildings whose appearance and construction techniques are Western. Waters, Chastel de Boinville, and Conder

created the first structures of this type. With the Bank of Japan which he created in Tokyo between 1890 and 1896, Tatsuno Kingo became the first Japanese architect to build in this same style.

There has been such acculturation with the West in the Empire of the Rising Sun since the 1870s that it is vain to seek within the architectural avant-garde purely Japanese theories or productions that do not bear the mark of the Old World. This assessment should nevertheless not lead to a confusion of Westernization and modernization. At the heart of the Meiji period, in a number of Japanese cities—Kawagoe in Saitama Prefecture, Takaoka in Toyama Prefecture, and Takayama in Gifu Prefecture—residences of wealthy merchants were built in a Japanese style, offering another face of Japanese architectural modernity.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

CLUZEL, Jean-Sébastien, *Architecture éternelle du Japon, de l'histoire aux mythes* (Dijon: Éditions Faton, 2008).

SHIMIZU, Shigeatsu, *Giyôfû kenchiku (Pseudo-Western-style Architecture)* (Tokyo: Shibundô, 2003).

STEWART, David B., *The Making of a Modern Japanese Architecture* (New York: Kodansha International, 1987).

Source URL:

<https://ehne.fr/encyclopedia/themes/arts-in-europe/art-europe-challenged-other/european-influence-in-japanese-architecture-1860-1930>