

# Landscape Art

## Retracing The Past

By *Kyoji TAKUBO*

### History of Japanese Architecture

**JOSIAH** Conder, a British architect, came to Japan in 1877 and advocated the Western-style architecture featuring ferroconcrete buildings. Kingo Tatsuno and Tokuma Katayama, who studied under Conder, laid the foundation for Western-style architecture in Japan.

Apart from the question whether or not building materials for contemporary architecture such as iron, glass and concrete fit well into the Japanese climate and landscape, many Japanese architects, such as Kenzo Tange, Junzo Sakakura and Kunio Maekawa, used these materials to construct postwar Japan. In particular, these three architects had much in common since all of them were influenced by Le Corbusier, well known for his raw concrete wall surfaces. Postwar Japanese architects spread international-style architecture in Japan while making the most of the aforementioned three building materials and, riding on the crest of a building boom generated by the 1964 Tokyo Olympic Games and the 1970 Osaka World Exposition, they have built the present urban centers bristling with high-rise buildings.

Turning to older Japan, on the other hand, Chogen, a Buddhist priest known as an architectural genius, was an active player in the architecture of the Kamakura era (1192-1333). He is famous for his leading role in the reconstruction of the Todaiji temple. He brought his talent into full play in regard to not only architecture, but also public works projects for the improvement of infrastructure.

In the Muromachi era from the 14th to 16th centuries, another Buddhist monk – Soseki Muso – left some superb gardens in various parts of Japan, including the famous garden of the Saihoji temple. In the earlier 8th-century Nara era, the great Buddhist priest Gyoki contributed to nation-building through architectural projects. We have just looked back on the three ancient eras of Kamakura, Muromachi and Nara at random. But we can see that in those times, Japan, although under the strong influence of China, transformed architecture introduced from abroad into the Japanese style little by little.

Then what about Japan before Gyoki's times? Of course, there was some influence from the Chinese continent. But Japanese architecture was also strongly affected by Korean culture. *Haniwa* clay figurines, especially house-shaped ones, unearthed from burial mounds built in ancient times since the Yayoi era (dating from several hundred years B.C.) look like the prototypes of *Shinto* shrines for me. Also, I feel something like nostalgia when looking at a photo of rows of houses in an old town on the Korean Peninsula. Am I the only one who feels so? For example, I feel that has something in common with an old Japanese port town fronting the Seto Inland Sea.

"Absolute Scene – 1987"

### Vanishing Landscapes

The Japanese people have traditionally believed that God resides in every tree and every blade of grass or that all things in Mother Nature have souls. From time immemorial, they have listened to voices of nature standing face to face with mountains, rivers, the sea and fields.

We Japanese, it may be said, have traditionally perceived our own existence by feeling the spiritual world of nature and thereby proved the importance of the sensibilities of humans that have biological characteristics. This has appeared in every form of Japanese original styles such as paintings, poems and songs, etiquette and behavior that underlie the forms of *budo* (martial arts).

However, today in Japan, a "scrap-and-build" architectural rush has been repeated in the midst of rapid economic development because of the efficiency-first principle that has prevailed since the end of World War II or because of blind devotion to the market economy. As a consequence, structures and houses, built in the Meiji, Taisho and Showa eras from the late 19th to 20th centuries, have disappeared in rapid succession, to say nothing of the traditional Japanese architecture that flourished in the Nara, Heian, Kamakura, Muromachi and Edo eras of ancient Japan.

Under these circumstances, the Japanese government revised the Cultural Property Protection Law in 1975 to create "a system of designating areas for the protection of traditional structures." Under this system, efforts have been made to preserve historical communities and rows of houses like *joka-machi* (castle towns), *shukuba-machi* (post stations) and *monzen-machi* (temple towns), which have remained in various parts of Japan.

Photo: Anzai





In this context, particular attention should be paid to the fact that before the enactment of the law, architectural historian Teiji Ito and photographer Yukio Futagawa published a photographic album titled *"Private Houses in Japan,"* a collection of photos taken on a nationwide tour over as long as 25 years from the second half of the 1950s. Around the same time, architect Mayumi Miyawaki conducted a survey of rows of old houses and came up with their architectural drawings together with students of Hosei University from a viewpoint of design surveys. This has posed a question worthy of pondering not only for Japan of today, but also for China, South Korea and other Asian countries now in the process of rapid development as was the case with Japan of the recent past.

### From Contemporary Art to Landscape Art

From 1970 to 1980, I published my creations in the sphere of contemporary art. However, I got fed up with artists' personal "self-expressions" and reliance on exhibitions as an appeal to society. I was also disillusioned by the very uncertain world of art dealers and auctioneers, who in effect treat artists' works as the object of speculative dealings. Consequently, I gradually shifted the objects of my expression from the illusional world on the canvas to the real landscape that spreads in front of my eyes.

In 1987, I announced my creation *"Absolute Scene – 1987"* together with architect Ryoji Suzuki and photographer Shigeo Anzai. At two old private houses in Tokyo's Aoyama area, doomed to destruction due to land redevelopment, we carefully removed *fusuma* (papered sliding partitions), walls, doors, *tatami* mats and floors until just before the houses were about to collapse, leaving only beams and pillars. Then we spread thick tempered glass plates on the floors to exhibit only the memory of the two houses to the public for two weeks. Visitors, walking on the glass spread on the floors, experienced the lingering memory of the two houses. This marked the first time that I had become involved with architecture.

Later, from 1989 to 1999, I lived in a small town in Normandy of France and engaged in the revival of the entire inside and outside of a small chapel in ruins as my work of art.

Photo: Shuzo Saito



Chapel of Appletrees in a small town of Normandy, France

In this work, I used the old chapel as material for my expression instead of building an entirely new chapel. I first dismantled the chapel and reconstructed it in conformity with my own feelings. I attached particular importance to recreating the structure and landscape that I chose while keeping their image unchanged from before.

This work dealt with a particular landscape representing the whole of things and matters that will live much longer than myself. I call it "landscape fine art." I have also given the name of "landscape art" to the scenes of expression that will live into the future even after the disappearance of the artists involved.

### Mt. Kotohira Revival Project

After returning to Japan, I have undertaken a "Mt. Kotohira revival project" for the Kotohira Shrine, commonly known as "Konpira-san," in the western Japanese prefecture of Kagawa since 2000. This is the landscape art covering the whole precincts of the shrine and Mt. Kotohira, the object of worship for visitors to the shrine.

The vast precincts of the shrine are said to cover an area of about 300,000 *tsubo* (about 990,000 square meters), dotted with religious structures, cultural facilities, stone steps, roads and various other things. It's like a small country surrounded by a tutelary forest.

My motto is the "creation of an unalterable landscape." But this does not merely mean the devoted preservation of old things without doing anything.

My style of expression is to emphasize the wonders of life and the vigor of nature such as a camellia putting forth flowers at different places every year but keeping its image totally unchanged from the previous year. In France, this method of expression might be called *"paysagiste."*

My work at both the Normandy chapel and the Kotohira Shrine is my act of expression for bringing the landscape of a particular scene into bold relief. For that aim, it is necessary to look back on the past of the scene, pick out the elements of image that make the scene what it is today, and carefully fit the elements into the present landscape before my eyes again one by one. I took a hint of this from the works of the three artists mentioned before – Ito, Futagawa and Miyawaki.

"The present" appears in a continuation from "the past." But "the future" will not necessarily emerge ahead beyond "the present." Rather, "the future" is supposed to be hidden ahead beyond "the past," isn't it?

"Life" that determines the future pervades the landscape of nature that quietly spreads before our eyes, with nothing unusual at first glance.

Landscape art means exercising full care to let this "life" continue to live endlessly.

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Photo: Hisako Takubo



A new building in the precincts of Kotohira Shrine designed by the author