

## The National Museum of Western Art: a Global Partnership Model

By Mukesh Williams



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In 2016 the National Museum of Western Art in Tokyo, or *Kokuritsu Seiyō Bijutsukan*, became the 20th World Heritage Site in Japan, and the first and only such site in the Japanese capital. It symbolizes the mentor-disciple bond, the concept of elastic renewability, the support of local communities, the promise of the Japanese government to preserve the original surroundings, Franco-Japanese friendship, and Japan's rise as a modern democratic nation engaging with the developed world. World Heritage Sites constitute a "priceless and irreplaceable" possession not only of a nation but of mankind and their deterioration or loss is a loss for the world. They represent universal values of perfection and cooperation and, therefore, utmost care must be taken both by nations and world bodies for their preservation. Lists of recommended World Heritage Sites are usually prepared by nation states and sent to the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), which then proposes them to the World Heritage Committee for consideration. Two important criteria for such consideration are that the sites recommended must have "Outstanding Universal Value" and a proposed plan for their protection in the future. The museum, located between Ueno railway station and Ueno Zoo fulfills such criteria. The proposal of the museum to ICOMOS was made both by the Japanese government and the Paris-based Fondation Le Corbusier, whose aim is to preserve the renowned Swiss-French architect's legacy.

The museum was built in 1959, the year that diplomatic ties between France and Japan were resumed after the hostilities of World War II. It also symbolizes the concerted efforts of Le Corbusier's Japanese disciples to promote their mentor's modernist architectural vision in Japan. His disciples were aided by many Japanese artists, businessmen, bureaucrats and academics that either worked in the area of modern architecture or practiced modernism in architecture. The global architectural partnership between France and Japan would not have been possible without this mentor-disciple relationship which overcame cultural problems to realize their goal. Over the years the Japanese government has recognized the museum as a unique architectural asset within the Ueno Park complex and has taken steps to preserve its surrounding landscape by not allowing any high-rise buildings to destroy the ambience and the scenic appeal of the skyline.

### European Influence on Japanese Architecture

Just as Japanese fine arts have played a significant role in shaping French imagination since the early 1900s, French pop culture, psychology and architecture have greatly influenced the ways Japan expresses itself. The rise of *Japonisme* in the West from around 1872 had a great impact on modern art movements like Impressionism, Art Nouveau and Aestheticism. During the 1920s Japanese architects were willing to experiment with modern architectural styles from Europe, especially those found in France which were based on ease and elasticity and use of local building materials. At this time the Swiss-French architect Charles-Edouard Jeanneret-Gris (1887-1965), popularly known as Le Corbusier, began to attract the attention of young Japanese architects. Le Corbusier understood the strain and squalor of urban life and was keen to make the lives of the working-class poor a little more comfortable by designing stacked apartments with living rooms, bedrooms, kitchens and garden terraces. His conceptions of both *Immeubles-Villas* and the city of Chandigarh in India demonstrate his belief in give and take with the local culture. For Japan this kind of architectural model was alien but soon this would change.

The change would take place in the architectural angles, the spaces created and the building material used. From the *shinden-zukuri* or the palatial manors of the Heian Period, the agricultural houses of the Jomon and Yayoi to the aristocratic structures of the Kamakura and Edo eras, Japanese architecture relied heavily on cumbersome Chinese-tile roof and timber structures. With the destruction of major cities during World War II Japan adopted a Western-style steel-framed architecture which after the 1960s began to incorporate Japanese simplicity, flexibility and horizontal angles. Japanese architects such as Kunio Maekawa (1905-1986), Junzo Sakakura (1901-1969), Takamasa Yoshizaka (1917-1980), Kenzo Tange (1913-2005), Fumihiko Maki (born 1928) and others began to work on fusing Western and Japanese styles to construct hybrid buildings in urban areas. Maekawa, for example, designed the Edo-style Tokyo Bunka Kaikan building that sits beside the National Museum of Western Art in 1961, as if to be in eternal conversation with his mentor Le Corbusier. This

partnership in style between Japan and the West began during the postwar era. Three of these Japanese architects — Maekawa, Sakakura and Yoshizaka — were students of Le Corbusier's in France during the 1920s and returned to Japan after a decade to help design many modernist structures and supervise the construction of the National Museum of Western Art.

### Concrete Enforced Boxlike Structure

The modernist influence is apparent in the design of the National Museum of Western Art. The square boxlike structure of the Le Corbusier Main Building with *piloti* or pillar-supported galleries was built in 1959 over 1,587 square meters of land. It was largely influenced by Le Corbusier's conception of the Sanskar Kendra Museum in Ahmedabad, India, which he designed in 1954. The New Wing designed by Maekawa was constructed in 1979 over two floors with 1,480 sq. meters of space. The winding staircase of the museum with its finely polished wooden banisters cuts across art galleries as you climb the mezzanine and clerestory floors, revealing the height and space on the second floor. Le Corbusier fused two different ideas while designing the building, drawing images from the human and animal world alike to realize his vision. The first idea used an anthropometric scale of proportions in the construction called the "modulor" system, while the second developed the idea of "unlimited growth" anticipating future expansion. The human body measurement scale involved an average height of 183 centimeters for a European man and with arms stretched upwards reached 226 cm. Le Corbusier conceived of any future expansion of the building as shell like, perhaps like that of a snail which expands its shell from the center as it grows. The modulor system was based on a long tradition of investigations conducted by creative geniuses from Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519) to Leon Battista Alberti (1404-1472) and attempted to find harmony between human scale and architectural scale. Le Corbusier's contemporaries from Europe, like the German architect Walter Gropius (1883-1969), differed from Le Corbusier in certain ways, but he was also involved in the modernist movement in architecture and believed in organic buildings. The organic unity of reinforced concrete and living body created a warm personalized space in which art could be appreciated and understood.

### Impact of Japonisme

Japan and France have shared a fascinating history since the 1900s when Japanese culture and aesthetics began to make an impact upon Western artistic movements such as Impressionism and Art Nouveau, an influence often referred to as *Japonisme*. The Western creative imagination was mesmerized by the soothing irregularity of space, the ornate models of *objet d'art* and the calligraphic flow of lines born of Japanese aesthetics. Many Western artists incorporated the aesthetics



*The National Museum of Western Art in Tokyo, Japan*

of form and lines in their representations of reality. The continued modernization of Japan since the Meiji Period saw many Japanese architects visiting the West, such as Tange, who then fused traditional Japanese and Western modernist styles to bring the style called "international modernism" to Japan. The National Museum of Western Art devoted to showcasing Western art from the Renaissance to modern times, that is till the 1920s, grew out of the Matsukata Collection of Impressionist paintings acquired from 1916 to 1923, which also included works by the sculptor Auguste Rodin (1840-1970). El Greco's "Christ on the Cross" was bought by the museum from Wildenstein & Company's Tokyo branch in 1974. The architectural design of the museum itself is regarded as an example of international modernism.

### ICOMOS Conception & Concerns for World Heritage Designation

The decision to designate the museum as a World Heritage Site was not an easy one. ICOMOS wanted to see if the candidate buildings around the world reflected the modernist architectural movement initiated by Le Corbusier, preserved original edifices and were not likely to be affected by new tall structures in their vicinity. Professor Akiko Mabuchi, the director general of the museum, pointed out that though Le Corbusier designed many buildings ICOMOS could not find a clear theme or distinctive reason for the construction of some of them. She noted that at times some of Le Corbusier's buildings were "reconstructed, partially changed". The concern of ICOMOS with the initial nomination was the vague aim of listing some of the edifices. Then on the final recommendation, 17 buildings were carefully selected from the standpoint of "an outstanding contribution to the modern movement" of architecture; this resulted in the success. ICOMOS was quite concerned whether any "taller building would be built within Ueno Park" in future. In order to overcome this concern

Taito Ward passed a law to prevent any future construction of tall buildings in the vicinity.

## Collaborative Effort in Design & Construction

The museum represents the collaborative efforts of the mentor, his disciples, skillful Japanese carpenters and masons. Le Corbusier had attracted many followers by the turn of the 20th century, who helped him prepare the blueprints for his works. Mabuchi explained that Le Corbusier was in Japan “only for two weeks” which included visits to Kamakura and Kyoto. So he did not have enough time to “acquaint himself with Japan” and its culture. So to complete this project three of his disciples actually chose the construction materials conducive to the landscape. Le Corbusier could not supervise the construction of the building and his disciples interpreted his idea well to effectively realize his work. The carpenters and masons who actually built the edifice were experts in executing Le Corbusier’s design.

Then there were university professors such as Takamasa Yoshizaka and Kenji Imai from Waseda University and Hideto Kishida from the University of Tokyo, who influenced the “next generation architects”. These artists became devotees of Le Corbusier. Japan already had a “great tradition” in architecture, and architects like Tadao Ando and Kisho Kurokawa were able to interpret the “style and ideology” of Le Corbusier. Mabuchi feels that even the boxlike structure of the museum supported by pillars resembles a “traditional Japanese building” and shows the influence of Japan on modernist architecture,

though “some might disagree”.

It is possible to say that Le Corbusier was influenced by Japanese aesthetics and *Japonisme* and that his structures possess a subliminal likeness to a Japanese house. Though little documentation is available on the influence of Japanese aesthetics on Le Corbusier, it is difficult to believe that he remained uninfluenced by *Japonisme* or by the idea of “harmonizing nature with life”. Mabuchi conjectures that Le Corbusier became well-established in France during the 1920s and 1930s, a time when *Japonisme* and *ukiyo-e* were popular in Europe, and so would have been “in that sense influenced by Japan.” In the case of Le Corbusier, this can only be a conjecture, but the American architect Frank Lloyd Wright (1857-1959), for example, who lived during the same period, was deeply influenced by Japanese architectural styles. Mabuchi tells us that we should not forget the “contribution from the Japanese side” in the collaborative project of constructing the museum.

There was a shortage of funds to construct the museum as the money required was not forthcoming due to a weak economy. The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture asked for 100 million yen from the Japanese government to build the museum but received only 50 million yen. Observing a shortage of funds businessman Aiichiro Fujiyama set up an association for establishing the National Museum for the Matsukata Collection in 1954. He aimed to collect 100 million yen but many artists disapproved of the scheme. When painter Sotaro Yasui (1888-1955) talked passionately to them that by contributing to the fund they would be the final beneficiaries, they were convinced and began to support the association wholeheartedly. So even when there was a shortage of funds there was a determination to construct the museum.

Mabuchi says Le Corbusier was involved in the construction of “private property and individual houses” and “painted pictures and wrote books” to make a living. He was more interested in improving life in cities and creating better housing than money. The philanthropic concerns of Le Corbusier’s project and the concerns of those connected with it has created a memorable tradition.

## History & Location

The complex history of the museum, its prime location and the concept of renewability, or *mugen seicho*, are three important aspects of its artistic heritage. The recognition of the museum, which was originally made to house the Western art collections of Japanese businessman Kojiro Matsukata (1865-1950), as a World Heritage Site is also a reminder of the ravages of World War II and the confiscation of the collection, which remained in France, by the French government as a “prisoner of war” shortly after the war. It was only after the resumption of diplomatic relations between the two nations that the collection was returned to Japan on the condition that a French architect would create the building to house the works of Matsukata

Photo: Author



Jukyu Seiki Hall (19th Century Hall)

and that it would be called the “National Museum of Western Art”. In April 1959 the artworks arrived on the vessel *Asamon Maru* and in June the museum opened to public viewing. So the recognition of the museum as a World Heritage Site was not only for its modernist architecture but also for the history of the rich Western art collection that it possesses.

The museum also occupies a distinctive location in the Tokyo landscape, being situated just one minute from Ueno Station at the entrance of Ueno Park and in close proximity to Ueno Zoo. It also has a restaurant called *Suiren* (named after the famous “Water Lilies” series of paintings by Claude Monet) which overlooks a small garden with camphor, zelkova and ginkgo trees. Here visitors can enjoy a Japanized western cuisine for about 2000 yen.

### Concept of Unlimited Growth & New Needs

The idea of unlimited growth is rather difficult to realize, Mabuchi says. The construction of a spiral-shaped building with limited space creates the problem of constructing the main entrance. If there is a lot of land then architects can design additional buildings upon it. This would solve the problem, but acquiring a lot of space in an urban setting is very difficult. We have to contend with what we have. Le Corbusier was right that museums will need more space over a period of time as art collections grow, but even if they want to expand horizontally it would be problematic if land is not available.

Designing a building is obviously different from designing a city, and though Le Corbusier was called upon to design the city of Chandigarh in India, he was never commissioned to design one in Japan. According to Mabuchi, many architects dream of designing a city, such as Fumihiko Maki from the University of Tokyo who designed Daikanyama in Tokyo. Maki considered functionality, unity and beauty in creating a “wonderful space”, as Le Corbusier did with Chandigarh. When Japan began to modernize there were restrictions only on “height and floor area ratio” but not on the kind of buildings that could be constructed. So often a disproportionate and ugly building would arise in the middle of a residential area and even if the residents opposed such a construction they could not do anything about it. Some of the Edo Period cities were more organized and beautiful as there was a clearer conception of aesthetics in those days. Obviously each country reacts to its public architecture in different ways.

In spite of the concepts of unlimited growth and renewability, the museum “desperately” needs more space and land. Mabuchi says the museum’s storage is full and whenever there is a new exhibition works from the regular exhibitions need to be removed to make room for the new exhibits. The museum only has space to accommodate 20 people in an exhibition room, whereas it actually needs space for 30 at a time. The need of the hour is a new building. Mabuchi suggests that an international competition could be held for a new design, or that the museum could be extended behind the large sculptures in its garden



Photo: Author

Prof. Akiko Mabuchi, director general of the National Museum of Western Art, and the author

and lead underground to Ueno Station, with the permission of the Tokyo Metropolitan government, so that commuters could have direct access to it. Mabuchi is also interested in collaboration with foreign museums, not necessarily those connected to Western art. But in order to have a “long and stable collaboration” with international museums, the National Museum of Western Art needs more than the present 12 salaried curators. Since it specializes in Western art the curators visit museums in Europe for a period of three months by turns.

Memories of World War II have often been traumatic for Japan but the National Museum of Western Art is an example of how the animosity of war can be converted into an abiding friendship between nations. The Museum also represents the way the mentor-disciple relationship can globalize an architectural movement called modernism and create a monument of creative genius that ICOMOS and the World Heritage Committee recognizes as invaluable, inimitable and of abiding human value. Today, this paradigm of boxlike spiral architecture houses one of the finest collections of Western art in Japan and is a reminder how nation states if they wish to can cooperate and create a win-win situation from a distressing past.

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