

Charmed by Red and Black

- Lacquer at the 1925 Paris International Exhibition -

By Okabe Masayuki

In 1925, the bright invigorating April weather brought a touch of added gaiety to the streets of Paris. A million tourists a year visited the city but this year they were especially surprised by the sense of vitality and the sheer beauty of the city that was a veritable Mecca of flowers.

The Armistice to end the First World War had been signed just six years earlier in November 1918. There had been millions of casualties, and fertile lands had been laid waste by a hail of shells and clouds of poisonous gas. Paris had almost fallen and France as a whole had suffered badly during the bitter conflict. Despite being one of the “victorious nations,” the road to recovery had seemed a long and particularly difficult one. The rebuilding of the economy had not gone according to plan and the population was actually falling. But despite their concern for the recovery of the nation, tourists still came to Paris only to find that it seemed even more prosperous than it had during the

Belle Époque before the First World War.

The biggest attraction during 1925 was the exhibition which ran for 195 days from 28th April to 8th November. Twenty-one countries including Japan were invited to take part in this major event that was held quite near the Eiffel Tower on both banks of the Seine and linked by the Alexander III Bridge. Centrally placed and easily accessed, the exhibition was an inevitable draw for tourists. It was the first exhibition to be held since the end of the First World War. As such, a number of countries which had gained post-war independence such as Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Yugoslavia as well as such regions as Alsace, which had been returned to France, were all very keen to make positive political and international statements at the exhibition and built highly individual pavilions. However, what was particularly noticeable was that a large number of the more than 130 pavilions, including the Grand Palais, standing on the 27-hectare site were occupied by French firms or by government organizations (Photo 1).

Many of the pavilions were copiously decorated with contemporary ornamental motifs and there was a fountain in the form of a vast tower of glass by Lalique. But with everything lit up at night the whole exhibition took on an even more festive atmosphere.



Photo 1; A view of the Art Deco Exhibition from near the Alexander III Bridge

There were, however, a number of Japanese connected with the exhibition, who became more and more despondent as they walked around the gaily decorated grounds. The official name of the show was *Exposition Internationale des Arts Decoratifs et Industriels Modernes*, and took the “blending of functional beauty and decorative beauty in modern society” as its theme. The official title was abbreviated to Art Deco and this was the name by which the exhibition later became known and the name that was subsequently used to refer to the internationally recognized style of decorative art and design. Although the first Great Exhibition was held in London in 1851, up until 1925, five other exhibitions had been held in Paris. After the one in London, the first Paris World Fair was held in 1855 followed by one in 1867 and another in 1878. Then there was one in 1889 when the Eiffel Tower was built on the exhibition site. The fifth was the 1900 fair that came to be called the Art Nouveau exhibition because of the



Photo 2; The Pavilion of Japan at the Art Deco Exhibition

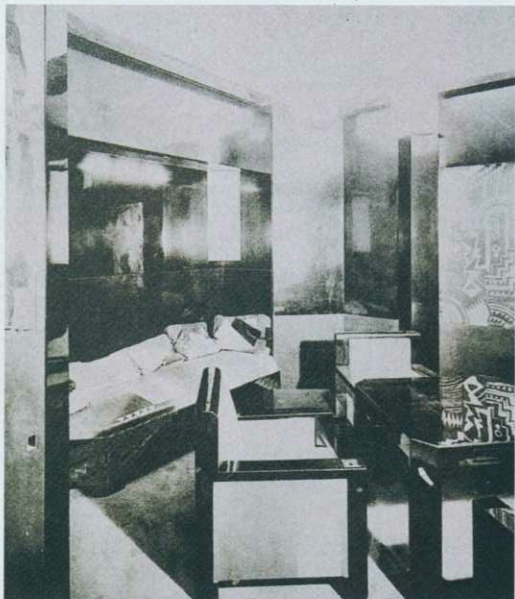


Photo 3; The smoking room in the Pavilion of the French Embassy, Art Deco Exhibition

opportunity to show the international community that the country had recovered from the effects of the First World War.

Participation in this exhibition for Japan, too, was especially significant both politically and from the point of view of international relations. The Government of Japan received a formal invitation to participate two years before in August 1923. However, the following month Tokyo was devastated by the Great Kanto Earthquake and the country was in no position to think about participating in any exhibitions on foreign soil. National concerns with recovery took precedence over

degree to which the style was used.

The exhibitions that were held early on in Paris during the 1850s and 60s were especially significant because of the attempt that was made to emulate the success of the exhibition held in London and to compete in terms of national and economic strength, international status and advancement in the area of art. The 1878 exhibition was held in order to show the foreign community that France had recovered from her defeat in the war against Prussia.

The Art Deco exhibition in Paris in 1925 was the first such exhibition to be held in the capital since the Art Nouveau exhibition 25 years earlier. It had actually been scheduled to take place ten years earlier but was put off because of the Great War. The promoter of this exhibition was the *Société des Artistes Décorateurs* established in 1901. After its postponement, however, the French government which had great hopes for the exhibition gave it its full support. This was simply because the government felt it was an ideal

everything. Tokyo recovered much more quickly than had been anticipated, however, and although participation had at first seemed an impossibility, it quickly became a reality. As well as being an expression of international friendship between the two countries, Japan's participation in the exhibition in Paris provided her with a stage from which to show the world that she was back on her feet after the earthquake.

South of the centrally located *Place des Invalides* set within the extensive grounds of the fair and beyond the Lalique fountain stood the pavilion of the French Embassy. It was quite natural that the technical officers from the Ministry of Commerce and Industry representing the Japanese Government should first want to see the representative pavilions erected by the French Government. The French had laid down detailed terms for submission to the exhibition, stipulating that exhibits should fall under five separate headings, namely architecture, furniture, deco-

orative items, handicraft related to the theater, the street and gardening, and finally education. Both the pavilions and exhibits had to be of a modern, original design, and the display of any items in a traditional style was strictly prohibited. A further requirement was that everything should be of a consistent style, so that a building, its interior and everything in it was coordinated. The terms of submission allowed very little leeway and the display of "pure art" items such as paintings and pieces of sculpture was only permitted if they formed part of the interior decor. Everything also had to be connected in some way with modern industry and industrial manufacturing. This was one reason why the job of making a submission had fallen to the Japanese Ministry of Commerce and Industry. In order, therefore, to show what a modern house and interior were like in Japan, those in charge of the project at the Ministry decided to erect an ordinary two-story, timber-framed house with a tiled roof typical of the 1920s as the Japanese pavilion, and carpenters were

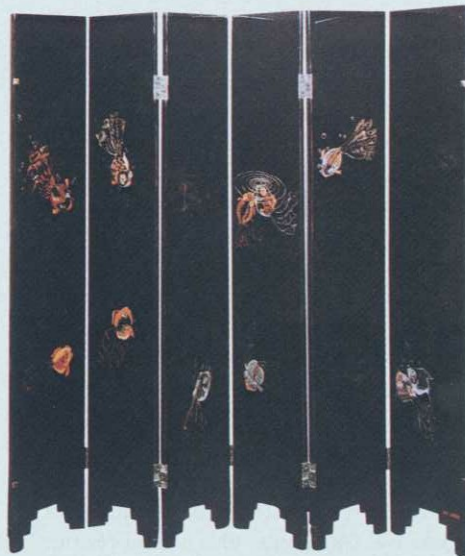


Plate 1; Jean Dunand, Lacquer Panel with Japanese Fish Design, 1930, Galerie J-Point, Paris

duly commissioned (Photo 2). But it was immediately plain to anyone that the Japanese pavilion looked somewhat out of place among all the coordinated styles of all the other pavilions with their free use of glass and various metals, and thoroughly coordinated building designs, interiors, furniture and fittings.

When the delegation from Japan entered the Pavilion of the French Embassy and walked into the room called the “smoking room”, they were met with a surprise (Photo 3). In the center of this small room of about 40sqm in area stood what looked like a square games table for mah-jongg. Around it were four geometric boxlike chairs, each with an attendant stand beside them. All the furniture, a screen and a bench as well as all the walls of the space were finished in glossy black with a red line here and there.

It was obvious to any Japanese that the finish was natural lacquer. This was particularly surprising to the delegation from Japan and two men in particular. One was Tsuda Shinobu (1875-1946), the metalwork craftsman and professor at Tokyo School of Art, who was studying in France at the time and who was on the adjudicating committee for the exhibition. The other was Sasaki Shigee, Secretary of the Ministry of Commerce and Industry. The sheer amount of decorative art and highly contemporary, decorative style of Art Deco architecture from France had already overwhelmed these two and the other delegates from Japan. Added to this they were greatly embarrassed by how conspicuous the Japanese pavilion looked. But they had never imagined they would see an example of a completely new form of lacquer art done by someone who was French. Here was something that exceeded the parameters of what contemporary Japanese decorative artists took for

granted, what they had been accustomed to doing and the traditions they had followed. On top of which, here was something that incorporated Cubism and abstract art in an original, advanced piece of design. No one from Japan had ever expected to be shown the limitations of Japanese lacquer art, least of all in Paris, where Art Deco reigned supreme. Two of the special features of Japanese art, namely its simplicity and unaffectedness, had been adapted by French artists. But the Japanese admiration for what had been achieved gradually turned to embarrassment. As soon as the officials from the Ministry of Commerce and Industry returned to Japan, stress was put on the importance of design; and Tsuda, along with his followers, established *Mukei*, a completely new kind of avant garde craft movement. What all of these people had seen and learned at the Art Deco exhibition in Paris became the foundation of modern Japanese decorative art and design.

The design of the smoking room with all its lacquerwork had been entrusted to the Swiss-born decorator, Jean Dunand (1877-1942). Until 1902, Dunand, who had moved to Paris, had been studying sculpture but then followed in his father's footsteps and started doing decorative metalwork. Although he had always aimed to become a sculptor, he was quick to grasp the essence of Modernism embodied by Cubism that had been in ascendancy since the end of the century and the Neo-Classicism that emerged after the First World War. What he did was to attempt to adapt these styles to working in metal. In 1900, the lacquer artist Sugawara Seizo went to Paris to see the



Plate 2; Jean Dunand, *Fish*, 1925, Red and black lacquer inlaid with eggshell and highlighted with silver

exhibition that year and stayed on. It was he who gave just five lessons in the techniques of lacquering to Dunand. This Swiss-born artist acquired the skills required to apply natural lacquer remarkably quickly and went on to develop his very own style combining lacquer and metalwork (Plate 1, 2). During the same period the Irish-born architect and decorator Eileen Grey also had instruction from Sugawara and developed her own way of working with lacquer.

It seems reasonable to suggest, therefore, that based on the simplicity and unaffected nature of Japanese art in general, Japan's lacquer art was partly responsible for fostering the development of 20th-century Modernism in the West. In addition, the kind of aesthetic sense and design of this new “20th-century Japonism” when introduced to Japan, in turn became the fountain head of Japanese Modern Art. This in itself is a significant aspect of cultural exchange.

MTI

Okabe Masayuki is an Associate Professor of Art History at Teikyo University. He specializes in the study of artistic exchanges between the East and the West.