

A Tiny Church Becomes a Work of Art: Takubo Kyoji

By Iseki Masaaki



The chapel before restoration.

A Japanese contemporary artist is receiving attention because he gave new life to a small, obscure church in the French countryside.

Following four years of preparation, Takubo Kyoji began his project, "Projet pour la chapelle de Saint-Vigor de Mieux par Takubo," in 1992.

The idea was hatched in 1987 when Takubo first glimpsed the forlorn chapel. Born in 1949, Takubo is known as one of Japan's eminent avant-garde artists of the 1970s. Following his activities in the "mono-ha" group (a materialist group recognized as Japanese conceptual artists), Takubo was one of many young artists who put the spotlight

on problems shared by society and art in Japan. At the Paris Biennale exhibition for youth in 1975, Takubo displayed a new method of self expression that broke away from established, conventional modes. From 1986 to 1989, Takubo worked with colleagues on various projects and began clarifying the sheer joy and necessity of creating. He happened on this tiny chapel in Normandie, and understood that using the chapel as the material to create a masterpiece would be his personal mission.

La chapelle de Saint-Vigor de Mieux stood abandoned in the picturesque countryside of Saint-Martin de Mieux, a French village located about 200 km northwest of Paris, and near Falaise, in Normandie. The chapel's cross-shaped basilica was built by English nobles in the late 15th century and the chestnut block belfry features Viking-style woodworking craftsmanship. The building covers about 198 square meters, and the entire grounds about 1,320 square meters.

Enchanted by the vacant chapel's unaffected beauty and the streams of sunlight streaming magnificently through its windows, Takubo resolved to make the structure a piece of art. He

defines his purpose as not to recreate the chapel, but to revive it into a unified work that incorporates the interior, exterior and grounds. The result is nothing less than Takubo evoking an altogether new world, through which can be seen the existing, ancient material.

After completion, the chapel will become a beacon of new culture for the people of St. Martin de Meux, a place where visitors can enjoy concerts and other artistic events. As of July 31, 1996, both the building's interior and exterior were nearly finished, and on Aug. 2, an on-site completion ceremony was held for Japanese and French project supporters.

Although Japanese firms sponsored the bulk of the more than ¥300 million funding required, the success of the project would have been impossible without the financial contributions of French people and their invaluable assistance with complicated bureaucratic approval procedures. Also, although local residents did leave their beloved chapel's renewal in the hands of a foreign artist, the villagers' love for this traditional and sacred structure necessitated Takubo's constant striving to maintain clear understanding and open communication.

Takubo reflects, "I gained a renewed understanding of the fundamental rela-



Exterior. Photo by Saito Shuzo.



Detail. Photo by Takubo Kyoji.



Interior. Photo by Saito Shuzo.

La chapelle renouvelée.



Chapel light-up. Photo by Studio ALEMANY.

tionship between people and culture, in the sense that despite varying methods of expression, people need art that is "alive" and that lasts. People breathe new life into art when they feel an affection for the piece."

Takubo faced various setbacks in his effort to achieve this cooperation and interaction with the villagers. The decision to leave their chapel in the hands of a foreigner who had limited knowledge of its character was a difficult and controversial decision for them. Besides concern over finance, some expressed fear that the project was simply another example of Japanese economic invasion. Thus, the journey from initial encounter, through constant discussion and interaction, and finally to achieving mutual trust and understanding, proved long and hard. Takubo's perseverance, flexibility, and bright outlook on life as well as his obvious ability as an artist and his evocative vision for the chapel's renewal gradually gained people's open-hearted acceptance.

Takubo's first challenge was finding a perfect balance between the chapel building and its ceiling, roof, window surfaces and materials, sunlight, wind and air. By trial and error in his "first"

and "second" plan, he gradually found how to harmonize the chapel's many assets. However, progress was hampered by interrupted financial support, etc., and this phase alone took three years to complete.

For the chapel's roof, Takubo chose to replace some unglazed tiles with six shades of glass tile. Paying keen attention to how sunlight fell through the newly installed tiles, Takubo wove the roof with glass as if stitching a tapestry. The result; a gentle shower of sparkling sunlit color and an interior united with the expansive heavens above. The roof was completed in September 1994. Inside, Takubo accounted for Normandie's winter chill by installing a heated floor and bolstered the floor's presence and definition with a 25mm-thick corduroy covering laid over one section.

Along with a new bird weather vane design for the belfry, other details were finished, and on July 31, 1996 all fundamental aspects of the church were complete. Takubo presented a completely new, wonderfully beautiful feature to the naturally blessed, cool Normandie landscape. Although wall decor is yet unfinished, this area touches closest to home

for Takubo the artist. He is currently exploring a wall theme based on the village symbol; the apple. There is no mistaking that his final work will fit perfectly within its exquisite encasement.

For Takubo, the eight years of hardship, following his first glimpse of the chapel and his family's move to the village, were extremely valuable years filled with irreplaceable experiences. Beyond this, however, what first seems simply an insignificant event created by a single man in a tiny country village was actually a project including a wide range of participants, from tile craftsmen to the French President himself (permission was granted by the president for tax free import of the corduroy covering). Takubo's project is proof that individual systems of government, economy and culture can function fully (albeit not always perfectly) when people unite in goodwill and hope to attain a culture that reaches far beyond national boundaries. We should consider deeply the significance of such a concept.

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