

Inuyama - A Western Yen

Story and photo by Bill Tingey

Although architectural styles often cross national boundaries, there can be few examples of an active, intentional, government sponsored adoption of a stylistic approach to building design. But this is just what happened in Japan in the second half of the 19th century.

After a period of almost three-hundred years of enforced seclusion under the Tokugawa Shogunate, the new Meiji Restoration government actively promoted the introduction of a Western style of architecture. In some cases, local carpenters were engaged to build under the supervision of foreign engineers. In other cases the government commissioned foreign architects to design and build such things as government and public offices in a Western style. But almost without exception, it was the desire to "catch up" with the West that drove the Japanese government to take these measures.

It was not until the 1920s or later that ordinary people felt the need to adopt Western elements of architectural style for their own homes, usually by adding a Western-style study complete with a fireplace next to the entrance of what was otherwise a conventionally planned, timber-built house in a vernacular style. Many people, however, ardently resisted any adoption of Classicism, Romanticism, or even Eclecticism - the foremost styles in 19th century Europe - from the outset of this drive toward Westernization.

Sadly, there is now very little evidence of this initial phase of Westernization remaining along the streets of Japanese cities but a trip to Meiji Mura near Inuyama in Gifu Prefecture reveals much of this interesting story.

This open-air museum has many examples of buildings in an adopted Western style as well as others in a pure Japanese vein. Still others display interesting leanings toward the imported style, while essentially retaining a distinctive Japanese character. Inevitably, the eclectic

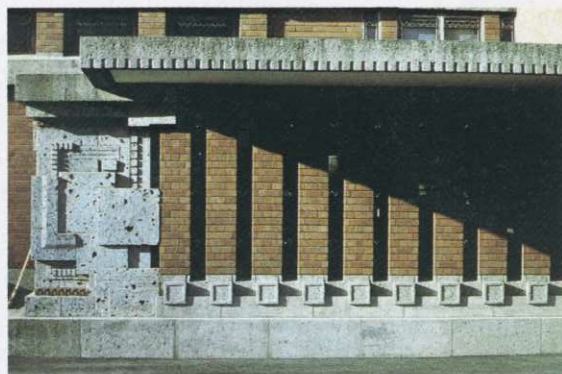
nature of some of the design teases our perception of style.

One particularly noteworthy relic of this long process of adoption is the Main Entrance to the Imperial Hotel designed by the illustrious American architect, Frank Lloyd Wright (1867-1959). Originally the hotel stood in central Tokyo and was completed in August, 1923. Miraculously it survived the Great Kanto

Earthquake which hit the capital on 1st September that year. The waves of change and necessity, however, eventually swept it away and it was dismantled in 1967, and partially rebuilt in Meiji Mura.

In some respects Wright's style could be called "Japanesque", which may explain the affinity that was felt for his work in Japan. The strong symmetry of his planning and use of the local green tuff, however, were personal trademarks that local architects would probably have found difficult to adopt, had it not been for their adoration of the style and the ideologies implied.

However sympathetic Wright's design was to the national character, his hotel could not be much further from the kind of "wood and paper" teahouses that can be found at the Uraku-en museum in Inuyama. All the teahouses display



Even a detail of Wright's Imperial Hotel bears his trademark

an apparent random arrangement of elements carried out in rustically appointed materials that epitomize a style so characteristic of Japan.

A hill-fort built in 1440, Inuyama castle is also highly representative of the national style. It stands high above the Kiso river where cormorant fishing takes place in the evenings between June and October.

The traditional place of paper in Japanese life and craft is further confirmed by the paper lanterns and umbrellas made in nearby Gifu. They are now two of the beautiful indigenous trappings of a life-style dominated by the adopted and adapted paraphernalia of Western culture. Strangely, however, that is part of the appeal of Japan.



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Take the Meitetsu Railway Inuyama line from Nagoya to Inuyama. For Meiji Mura take a bus or taxi. For Inuyama castle, the Kiso river and the Uraku-en Teahouse Museum (0568-61-4608) go on to Inuyama-yuen station. Also try visiting <http://www.city.inuyama.aichi.jp/inuyama>. For Gifu lanterns and umbrellas go to local outlets, or to the Japan Traditional Craft Center, Minami Aoyama, Tokyo Tel: 03-3403-2460.

