

# The Historical Cities and Museums of Japan

Ratan Lal Chakraborty

While in Japan, I was very fortunate to have the opportunity to travel widely throughout the country and I always visited any historic sites and museums whenever they were close by. My long-cherished dream was fulfilled and I was able to gain some insight into the history, culture and traditions of Japan.

Japan has a long and chequered history dating back to remote antiquity. The diversity of the museological tradition is remarkable; most cities have museums of different kinds administered by the local government, and sometimes owned privately.

Nara is the most picturesque, peaceful and thoroughly Japanese city and its history goes far back. Founded in 710 as the capital, Nara still occupies an important position—Japanese art and literature could be said to have originated in Nara. Traces of the Paleolithic or Jomon culture can be seen in Nara and the presence of large burial mounds (kofun) demonstrates the existence of powerful regional rulers. The historical sites at Nara Palace, Kofukuji Temple and the Great Buddha Hall of Todaiji Temple—all present the remark-



Reproduction of Old Nagahama Railway Station

(City of Nagahama)

able development of Nara through the ages.

I was amazed by the exhibits at the Kyoto Imperial Art Museum. The museum, established in 1897, has a unique collection of wood statuary from the 8th to 12th centuries. The relics present a vivid pic-

ture of the fine arts and artisans of Japan. The Imperial treasures comprise some wonderful pieces of gold lacquer, bronzes, swords, embroideries, scrolls, ceramics and calligraphy from famous people. Documents referring to the assault on the British Minister in 1867 and a centuries-old manuscript of Buddhist literature also attract the attention of historians. The collection of Ming Dynasty Chinese lacquer is perhaps unrivalled for beauty and variety.

The Tohoku Historical Museum in Tagajo City, Miyagi Prefecture, presents a different scenario from the other museums I visited. Large shell mounds in the area, as well as the museum exhibits, throw light on the life of fishing communities in ancient Japan.

In addition to visiting traditional museums on general historical subjects, I also visited several specialized museums; the Old Nagashima Railway Station and Railway Museum in Nagahama City, Shiga Prefecture, has very interesting displays. The whole museum appeared like a living scene of the early communication culture of the Japanese railways. Old locos and



Beating Iron Billet for Gun Barrel—Kunitomo Gun Museum

(Author)

wagons, lifelike waxwork passengers in the waiting room, the clerk at the ticket window—all are arranged in a beautiful manner.

Amid mixed feelings, the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park and Museum are unique in content and arrangement. The Memorial Cenotaph, Memorial Peace Fire, Atomic Bomb Dome, and Peace Bell, all express Japanese feelings about the tragedy of Hiroshima in 1945. *Black Rain* by Masuji Ibuse (translated by John Bester) provides a vivid and convincing account of one of the greatest human tragedies. The Peace Memorial Museum and the huge collection of atomic bomb materials and pictures bear witness to the suffering.

The Kunitomo Gun Museum in Nagahama City is another example of the unusualness of Japanese museum culture. Guns and ammunition from the early days of Japan along with their production techniques are well exhibited. Special audio-visual techniques are used to show visitors practical gun manufacturing techniques. The Abashiri Prison Museum in Abashiri City, Hokkaido, gives a vivid picture of life in jail. The sleeping arrangements in the biting cold of Japan offer fresh clues about feelings of humanity and criminal punishment in Japan. However, the cells for prisoners convicted of serious crimes do not seem too bad when compared to cells in other countries.

The Nibutani Ainu Museum in Biratori Town, Hokkaido, highlights the lifestyle of the indigenous Ainu people who are physically much different from the other southern Japanese. The main roles of Ainu women were drawing water, cutting wood, growing crops, grinding millet, and taking care of children.

The exhibits at the Okura Sake (rice wine) Memorial Hall in Fushimi-ku, Kyoto, and the Sapporo Beer Museum in Sapporo City, Hokkaido, approach the subject of alcohol from quite different viewpoints, but are both very engaging.



*Passengers in Waiting Room at Turn of Century*

(Author)

Credit must be given to the Japanese for their deep consciousness of their history and culture. Large numbers of visitors, both Japanese and foreign, flock to these museums each day and most of the exhibits are easy to understand even if not labelled in English. Audiovisual aids are used extensively and there is usually a souvenir shop too. Often, the entry tickets make a spectacular souvenir in themselves.

Although Japanese customs, dialect and folk culture differ significantly between regions, there still seems a uniform love of tradition. Despite the tremendous growth and modernism, there is reverence for history and culture as evidenced by the candid attempt to preserve historical

relics in wonderful museums throughout the breadth of the nation.

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