

Japan's Museums— Their Architecture and Interior Design

Wang Zhi Hou

I was lucky enough to visit Japan from 26 January to 13 April this year while accompanying the exhibition of *The Historical and Cultural Relics from Shandong* displayed at the Tokyo Station Gallery, and at Sendai Station Building, sponsored by the East Japan Railway Culture Foundation.

While in Japan, I took the opportunity to visit a number of museums in my capacity as a staff member of the Shandong Provincial Museum.

I was impressed at the extraordinary amount of attention given to museum architecture, including architectural style, structure, shape and floor plan, as well as the relationship to the immediate environment. The western-style buildings were elegant and luxurious, and the eastern-style buildings were traditional and refined. Some incorporated eastern elements in a thoroughly-modern design with superb results, such as the Edo-Tokyo Museum. Likewise, Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum in Ueno Park left a deep impression. As I followed the signs to the museum, my first reaction was that something must be wrong because I could not see any large building in the area. It wasn't until I saw the Chinese *kanji* characters reading Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum that I realized I had reached the front of the museum without noticing it! The entrance to this cleverly-designed underground museum is via a staircase disappearing into the depths of contemporary art.

A spacious underground plaza and glass door create the illusion of not being underground at all. Yet at ground level there is no indication of such a big structure. The top-notch planning and superb execution help preserve the natural view of Ueno Park.

Another feature of the Japanese museums I visited is diversity: there is both a wide variety of design and a high degree of flexibility in how space is used. In China, museums tend to be highly symmetrical

and predictable—things are done according to a set pattern. Some new museums are trying to break out of this mold, but with only limited success.

Some Japanese museums are symmetrical, but the buildings are either old or deliberately designed to reflect a certain cultural aspect. A typical example is the Hyokeikan at the Tokyo National Museum, a building completed in 1908 and now designated as an important cultural property.

However, most of the new museums are built according to modern designs and the exhibits are housed in a rational layout. The exteriors are handsome and the floor plans allow flexible exhibition space. Exhibit rooms are connected in interesting and unusual ways—some are adjacent, while others are separated by halls and rest areas. I found myself enjoying both the art on display, and the buildings themselves.

The National Museum of Japanese History in Sakura, Chiba Prefecture is a most successful example of this architecture. Not only is the architectural style rich and

diverse, but the exhibits are fresh and original. Some spaces are clearly set up to differentiate between the primary and secondary exhibits, others are not as clearly demarcated. Some displays are meant to be viewed from left to right, others are designed to be viewed from right to left. The viewing patterns depart from convention in the same way as the exterior and interior designs. I really liked to be able to wander around going where the fancy took me. This alleviates the mental and physical fatigue that comes from following a monotonous path and I was energized by the diversity of displays. However, it is also easy to get confused or distracted in this type of open flexible arrangement and some important exhibits might get missed altogether, especially for someone like me who doesn't understand Japanese. By contrast, most Chinese galleries are organized more for viewing from left to right, which is rather peculiar since traditional Chinese art is painted for viewing from right to left!

In order not to miss anything, I sometimes took the trouble to walk through twice,



Edo-Tokyo Museum at Ryogoku

(Edo-Tokyo Museum)

although I wouldn't have minded missing the abstract art!

I learned many other things from Japanese museums. For example, it is important to get a firm grip on the main theme of each and every exhibit. Japanese museums use a wide variety of techniques to highlight the displays and put things in an interesting perspective, making the items come alive for the visitor.

Most historical museums rely on subdued neutral colours such as light green and light grey. The galleries are simple and modest, which has the advantage of not competing for attention with the displays but allowing them to stand out and appear more precious. But in some special exhibits, unconventional colours are put to effective use to create a special atmosphere. *Wisdom and Compassion: the Secret Art of Tibet*, an exhibition of esoteric Buddhism at the Tobu Museum of Art is a good example. The exhibition rooms were decked in red as a theme, effectively communicating the mysterious, serious and intense atmosphere of the display.

In general, pottery and stone relics unearthed from prehistoric periods are so numerous and unadorned, that an exhibit of such relics is monotonous and boring if not properly set up. Japanese museums are quite good in this respect and the objects are displayed in novel ways to heighten interest. Another way to appreciate archeological artifacts is to use drawings, charts and models to show how the objects were produced and used, putting the items in perspective and making them more engaging, real, and lively.

Many of the Japanese museums I visited had China-related exhibits. My most lasting impression was the depth of friendly cultural exchange between China and Japan, going all the way back to the Yayoi Period (ca. 300 B.C.–A.D. 300). These beautiful objects portray the unfolding history and ancient cultural exchanges between China and Japan. I found these



Exhibit at Edo-Tokyo Museum showing Ryogoku Bridge in Edo Era

(Edo-Tokyo Museum)



Hyokeikan

(Tokyo National Museum)

exhibits educational, stimulating and encouraging and I hope that my work in Chinese museums will help further our friendship. ■



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