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| **Japanese Secession** |
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| In 1920, a group of Japanese architects interested in Art Nouveu or '*Jugenstil'* created a society sharing a common approach concerning the future of architecture in Japan. Taking inspiration in the Austro-Hungarian version of *Jugenstil* (known as the *Vienna Secession*) they decided on the name *Bunriha* (literally, *‘Secessionist Group’*), becoming known as *Japanese Secession*. They were trying to secede from certain practices in the architectural profession at the time, which made them feel obligated to use exclusively traditional styles and to manipulate ornament. Like the Austro-Hungarian *Secession* (1897–1939), Japan was also trying to come to terms with the issue of identity. *Bunriha*’s foundation included a manifesto, claiming that architecture should not be exclusively about engineering but also was a form of artistic expression. The *Secession* respected architecture’s functionalism but defended a broader interpretation of what that could mean, and was adamant about not disregarding aesthetics.  *Japanese Secession* was started by a group of architects who had recently completed their studies at Tokyo Imperial University: Horiguchi Sutemi (1895–1984) and Yamada Mamoru (1894–1966), Ishimoto Kikuji (1894–1963), Mayumi Takizawa (1896–1983), Keiichi Morita (1895-1983), and Shigeru Yada (1896-1958). Later, Yamaguchi Bunzo (1900–1978) and Kurata Chikatada (1895–1966) joined the group. Officially presented as *Bunriha Kenchiku kai* (*Bunriha Architectural Society*), the formation of the group marks the beginning of the modern movement in Japan.  Up until the 1850s, Japanese architecture, regarded each new style as a minor variation of an older form, and never a complete rejection of an existing style: old and new co-existed harmoniously. After centuries of isolation, Japan started promoting contact with other countries in 1853–1854, rupturing Japan’s sense of identity. While some welcomed it, others criticized or feared it. During the 1860s and 1870s, in order to prove its administrative efficiency, and cultural progressiveness, the Japanese Government commissioned a number of foreign architects to plan public buildings, schools, and factories, welcoming architects to exercise the prevailing styles of their own countries. An English architect, Josiah Conder (1852–1920), was invited to start lecturing at the Faculty of Architecture of Tokyo Technical University in 1877, training many Japanese architects in European style architecture bringing significant changes to the way architecture was conceived. Conder replaced wood for brick and later established a system that proved effective against earthquakes, using steel frame construction or composite brick and steel frame structures. In the mid-1890s, Rikichi SANO developed the use of reinforced concrete, which became an essential feature in Japanese architecture for many years to come. By 1889 Japan had transitioned from a feudal system to a constitutional monarchy.  Conder’s approach led to the prevalence of an eclectic style where some buildings were either fully Western or Eastern looking. Against Conder’s school, the *Secession* group stood for creation opposed to imitation. Frank Lloyd Wright’s (1867–1959) *Tokyo Imperial Hotel* (1923) was a strong example of how West and East could be successfully harmonized, proving to be a key reference. Many celebrated Western influence, others strongly opposed it — some defended a synthesis between Western and Japanese architecture, while others aimed at a preservation of the prevailing use of wood, which many considered to be a marker of national heritage. Struggling to find an identity, and trying to come to terms with its newfound openness, the period between 1889 and 1912, known as the Meiji period, was characterized by a general strong nationalist appeal. By the 1920’s, Japan was political and economically stronger and the ‘national spirit’ was not so pressing, and movements like the *Secession* played an important role in Japan’s new identity.  [Image: ImperialHotel.jpg]  Figure 1 Frank Lloyd Wright, *Tokyo Imperial Hotel* (1923)  *Japanese Secession* defended the artist’s right to freedom of expression, regardless of nationhood or the influences of the East and/or West. Prior to this, the nation had strived for a concrete identity, and in the 1920s, architects fought for the right to express their own identity. Between 1920 and 1928, the *Secession*, promoted exhibitions of plans and models that envisioned how the country could look like. A series of buildings took form, all in the Tokyo area: Hiroguchi’s *Memorial Tower* at the Peace Exhibition (1922) — modelled after Joseph Maria Olbrich’s *Wedding Tower* in Darmstadt of 1907–1908, Yamada’s *Central Telegraph Office* (1926), reminiscent of the French Gothic, and Ishimoto’s *Asahi Newspaper Building* (1927). Not only *Jungenstil* but also German Expressionism proved to be a big influence, allowing Secessionists greater freedom to develop their structural ideas. Features from Japanese traditional architecture, however, were still frequently included.  [Image: Asahi.jpg]  Figure 2 Kikuji Ishimoto, *Asahi Newspaper Building* (1927)  Around this time, another movement was inaugurated in 1925: the Japanese avant-garde. Japanese avant-garde was highly receptive to international architectural movements and willing to directly embody and communicate with other movements like the Bauhaus, De Stijl and Esprit Nouveau. Furthermore, by that time, several Japanese architects had been working and collaborating in Europe, for example, with Le Corbusier. Modernism, joined architecture and urbanism, and social housing was of particular interest to Japanese architects — which some viewed as a key instrument to promote social change. Change through architecture proved useful following the 1923 Great Kantō earthquake and several wars, which all seemed to force Japan to constantly rebuilt and reinvent itself.  The new Japan avant-garde movement was joined by *Japanese Secession* members Horiguchi and Yamada, and it could be said that it was this movement that continued the *Secession* principles. It stood for individual freedom in the arts, including architecture, and defended the right to artistic expression, independent of any social constrictions or any kind of governmental or organizational — and perhaps in that sense it can be said that a correspondence exists between *Secession* and what the West classifies as ‘Modernism.’ |
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