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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 from the Austro-Hungarian version of Jugenstil (known as Vienna Secession), they decided on the name Bunriha (literally, *‘*Secessionist Group’), becoming known as Japanese Secession. Central to the group was the attempt to secede from certain practices in the architectural profession at the time that, they felt, obligated them to use exclusively traditional styles. Like the Austro-Hungarian Secession (1897–1939), Japan was also trying to come to terms with the issue of identity. Bunriha’s manifesto claimed that architecture should not be exclusively about engineering, but should also be considered a form of artistic expression. The Secessionistsrespected architecture’s functionalism, but defended a broader interpretation of what that could mean, and were adamant about not disregarding aesthetics. |
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The Secessionistsrespected architecture’s functionalism, but defended a broader interpretation of what that could mean, and were adamant about not disregarding aesthetics.  Japanese Secession was started by a group of recently graduated architects from Tokyo Imperial University: Horiguchi Sutemi (1895–1984), 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 (trans: 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. In 1853-1854, after centuries of isolation, Japan started promoting contact with other countries, rupturing Japan’s sense of identity. While some welcomed this shift, 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, and welcomed architects to exercise the prevailing styles of their own countries. An English architect, Josiah Conder (1852–1920), was invited to lecture at the Faculty of Architecture of Tokyo Technical University in 1877, and trained many Japanese architects in European style architecture. In doing so, he brought significant changes to the way architecture was conceived in Japan. Conder’s teachings encouraged the replacing of wood with brick, and, sing steel frame construction or composite brick and steel frame structures, established a system that proved effective against earthquakes. 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.  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, and proved to be a key reference. Many celebrated Western influence, while 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 issue of ‘national spirit’ was not so pressing — an identity, in part, had been located thanks to movements like the Secession.  [Image: ImperialHotel.jpg]  Figure 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 what 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), for example, was modelled after Joseph Maria Olbrich’s *Wedding Tower* in Darmstadt of 1907–1908, while Yamada’s *Central Telegraph Office* (1926) was reminiscent of French Gothic architecture. Not only *Jungenstil* but also German Expressionism proved to be a significant influence, allowing Secessionists greater freedom to develop their structural ideas. Features from Japanese traditional architecture, however, were still frequently included.  [*No File—In Print]*  Figure Takizawa Mayumi, *Mountain House* project (1921) (p.26)  [Image: Asahi.jpg]  Figure 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, the relationship between architecture and urbanism, and social housing were of particular interest to Japanese architects, and many considered these factors as key instruments 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 Secessionmembers Horiguchi and Yamada, and in many ways this movement continued Secessionist 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 in that sense it can be said that a correspondence exists between Secession and what the West classifies as modernism. |
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