The Imperial Hotel, Tokyo

In 1915, the Imperial Household of Japan extended an invitation to Frank Lloyd Wright to build the Imperial Hotel in Tokyo. The hotel would be situated on a plot of reclaimed land from the Tokyo Bay that was located across from the Imperial Palace. The building was to signify Japan’s arrival as a fully modern society. Wright accepted the commission in March 1916 and arrived in Tokyo in January 1917 to begin work in earnest on the designs and oversee its construction. During the six-year period of its construction, the Imperial Hotel project was Wright’s primary focus that required him to live in the country for the majority of those years. The hotel was to be Wright’s testament to the principles of what he called “organic architecture,” which promotes harmony between human habitation and the natural world. Concerned about the possibility of earthquakes that had plagued the capital in the past, Wright designed a floating foundation system that acted like a movable foundation. This ingenious approach was to garner Wright immeasurable praise after the hotel’s completion by surviving the Great Kantō Earthquake which remarkably occurred on the exact day of the scheduled grand opening on September 1, 1923.

The Great Kantō Earthquake of 1923 and Its Aftermath

On September 1, 1923, the Imperial Hotel survived the Great Kantō Earthquake which left the vast majority of Tokyo in ruins. The earthquake was estimated to have had a magnitude between 7.9 and 8.6. The quake and subsequent fires cost at least 105,385 lives and with an additional 37,000 missing, presumed dead. Over 570,000 homes were destroyed, leaving an estimated 9.1 million homeless. Despite initial reports it had been destroyed, the Imperial Hotel survived the earthquake with only minor damage and became a refuge for hundreds of the city’s inhabitants who were left homeless. On September 13, twelve days after the earthquake, Frank Lloyd Wright received a telegram from Tokyo that reported the Imperial Hotel stood undamaged. The news rapidly spread and soon Wright was hailed a hero and architectural statistic and a source of great pride for Frank Lloyd Wright. Although Wright insisted that neither the art nor the architecture of Japan had any direct formal influence on his work, his indebtedness to this country and its culture cannot be underestimated. As demonstrated through his work of building the Imperial Hotel in Tokyo—one of his finest architectural achievements—and his self-professed obsession with Japanese prints and art, many of Wright’s successes and failures in life were often inextricably connected to Japan.

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Taliesin: Bringing Japan to Wisconsin

Taliesin, which means “shining brow” in Welsh, was the name of Frank Lloyd Wright’s Summer home and winter estate in Spring Green, Wisconsin. Construction on the site began in 1911 and renovations and additions at this location continued throughout his life until his death in 1959. There were three major periods of building that occurred, the second spurred by damage suffered from major fires: Wright named the three versions of his home Taliesin I (1911-1914), Taliesin II (1914-1925), and Taliesin III (1925-1959). Even before his inaugural visit to Japan in 1905, Wright surrounded himself with Asian art and filled his homes with pieces he had acquired. Taliesin was no exception, and Japanese art filled the walls, tables, shelves, and alcoves that appeared throughout the interior and exterior of the house. Japanese prints, elaborately painted gilded screens, and pieces of Buddhist sculpture were some of his favorite objects. By the time Frank Lloyd Wright had finally returned from Tokyo after completing the Imperial Hotel in 1923, he had amassed an impressive collection of Japanese prints that numbered in the thousands. It was during this period that Wright made a great deal of money buying prints in Japan and bringing them back to the United States to sell to wealthy collectors and museums. To house his large collection and keep it safe—the prints represented a major financial investment—he built a specially designed print vault with an elaborately designed shelving system in his home at Spring Green.

Wright as Collector, Connoisseur, and Dealer

Japanese woodblock prints called “pictures of the floating world” or ukiyo-e, played a central role in Frank Lloyd Wright’s relationship with Japan. They were the impetus that led to his inaugural visit to Japan in 1905, and they were a much-needed distraction during the long months he spent in Tokyo overseeing the construction of the Imperial Hotel. He wrote in An Autobiography, “The pursuit of the Japanese print became my constant recreation while in Tokyo.” A new failing avocation in fact. …Some said obsession.” (pg. 204) He became an avid collector, connoisseur, and most surprisingly a dealer of Japanese prints during his lifetime. At various periods in his career, profits from his prints greatly subsidized, if not fully financed his architectural work. Unfortunately, his relationship with Japanese prints was not without difficulties. Beginning in the year 1919 while still hard at work on the Imperial Hotel, Wright became embroiled in a nasty print scandal where many of the prints he had sold in the United States were identified as retouched with fresh inks, or later reproductions. To save face, Wright took back many of the questionable prints in exchange for ones that were deemed authentic. Japanese prints were a constant source of creative and spiritual inspiration for Wright and he often held print viewing parties and talks on Japanese prints while living and working at Taliesin for his friends and apprentices. As he writes in An Introduction to Antique Colour Prints from the Collection of Frank Lloyd Wright in 1937:

But still the precious original is all too sacred to the few who, chosen by it, are enslaved by it. Because it is not secret that the prints whom they love and there is then no salvation but surrender. (pg. 3)

As with many of his love affairs, Wright’s relationship with prints did not end on a happy note. In 1926, the Bank of Wisconsin confiscated more than 5,000 prints of his collection from the print vault at Taliesin, which had been put up as collateral on a loan that Wright had been delinquent in repaying. Two years later in 1928, the bank sold off the bulk of his beloved print collection to Edward Burr Van Vleck, a professor of mathematics at the University of Wisconsin—Madison. Wright’s passion for Japanese prints and legacy as a collector, connoisseur, and dealer can still be witnessed today in the many masterpieces that originally came from his collection and now make up the majority of the Van Vleck Collection of Japanese Prints at the Chazen Museum of Art.
The Dane County Regional Airport hosts over a million travelers a year. Business and leisure travelers, and those waiting for family, friends and guests to the community have the opportunity to enjoy diverse and exciting displays in the art court. The exhibitions program is designed to introduce airport visitors to a broad range of visual and cultural treasures drawn from the Dane County community.

This exhibit represents a very small part of the tremendous cultural assets we have in Dane County and is intended to encourage visitors to seek out the many cultural riches in our community.

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Dennis O’Laughlin, Vice Chairman

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David de Felice
Diane Everson
Duane Gau
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Paul Rusk

Citizen Members
Perry J. Armstrong
Diane Enstrom
Judy Sidran*

Art Committee Members
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Selected Bibliography and Suggested Readings


James, Cary, Frank Lloyd Wright’s Imperial Hotel (New York: Dover Publications, 1988)


Wijdeweld, H. Th., The Life-Work of the American Architect, Frank Lloyd Wright (Santpoort, Holland: C. A. Mees, 1925)


Wright, Frank Lloyd, Antique Colour Prints from the Collection of Frank Lloyd Wright (Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago, 1917)


Traveling East: Frank Lloyd Wright & Japan

Curated by Laura J. Mueller

In 2006, art historian Laura J. Mueller was a guest curator at Tandem Press and the Van Vleck Curatorial Intern at the Chazen Museum of Art. Prior to that, she spent six years living in Japan where she conceived the idea “Traveling East: Frank Lloyd Wright and Japan.” She is currently living and working in New York City.

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Traveling East: Frank Lloyd Wright & Japan

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