

***The Imperial Museums of Meiji Japan: Architecture and the Art of the Nation.***  
**Alice Y. Tseng. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008. 304 pp.\***

Reviewed by Claire Cuccio

Japanese art and architectural historian Alice Tseng deftly merges the history of art and architecture in late 19th century Japan in her first book on the formation of the nation's Imperial Museums. Documenting the interplay between the art of museum building and the art displayed within, Tseng examines Japan's emerging public museums as expressions of nation building that epitomized the Meiji period (1868-1912). In vivid narrative style, the author recounts the ideals, dilemmas and debates laid out by the architects, bureaucrats, intellectuals, and critics that shaped the Imperial Museums, tracing their self-conscious construction from building design, site, and materials to their interior galleries and exhibition formats.

The aptly titled opening chapter, "Encounters and Translations," describes the dynamic backdrop that sets the scene for the Imperial Museums project. Detailing Japan's survey of Western European and American models of cultural institutions in the 1870s, Tseng explores the neologisms *hakubutsukan* for "museum" and *bijutsu* for "art" as the linguistic benchmarks for the nation's pursuit of "civilization and enlightenment" (*bunmei kaika*). The study unfolds thereafter in perfect progression, punctuated by encapsulating epigraphs, with each chapter advancing the realization of the Imperial Museum institution. The 1882 completion of what was named the Museum (Hakubutsukan) in Tokyo's Ueno Park marked Japan's first interpretation of standards set by the spate of late 19th century international industrial expositions and world's fairs. Merging East and West in the museum's design, English architect Josiah Conder (1852-1920) honed a transnational style that spoke to Meiji-period anxieties over native and foreign. Ensuing chapters document in meticulous detail the Imperial Household Ministry's (*Kunaishō*) later establishment of the Imperial Kyoto and Nara Museums and the Hyōkeikan Art Museum of Tokyo, all predecessors to extant national museums.

Tseng's historiography simultaneously crosscuts socio-cultural concerns of broader import. Indeed, the book tells the tale of three cities—of Japan's historic imperial capitals, Nara, Kyoto, and Tokyo—that conveys as much about how cities came to define the nation during the Meiji period as it suggests that localized city-building (*machitsukuri*) today is undoing this national unity.

Tseng also schools us in the material aspects of architectural design. Long celebrated in popular woodblock prints and photographs, images of Meiji architecture are hardly new. What is new, however, is the author's perspective on these buildings from the ground up. For the unacculturated eye, she captures the sheer novelty for the Japanese populace of red brick masonry over traditional timber construction. She also explores ramifications of spatial area and layout, building costs, and physical conditions such as the amount of daylight and humidity. Most interesting is the deliberation on seismic standards for museum construction after the Nōbi Earthquake in 1891.

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The masterminds behind museum construction are, of course, the architects. Besides Josiah Conder whose contributions are highlighted in the first chapter, we are also introduced to his pupil Katayama Tōkuma (1854-1917) who oversaw the major buildings of the Imperial Museums project as state architect for the Imperial Household. Fellow architect Mamizu Hideo (1866-1938) who also enjoyed a prolific career as an architecture critic conveys the vitality of the field in Meiji Japan. Influential voices in the Meiji period, Okakura Kakuzō (1862-1913) and Ernest Fenollosa (1853-1908) need no introduction, except to elucidate the lesser-known ways in which they participated in the development of the Imperial Museums. Experts and amateurs alike affecting museum construction, they raise interesting questions about the development of architecture as a formal discipline in Japan; this story is a natural outgrowth of Tseng's study and would pose an interesting corollary for future research.

Tseng's critical approach avoids a common pitfall in which the breadth of the immediate material seems to require so much background, eliding a broader comparative perspective. Growing out of an era of empire and competition among nations, the creation of the Imperial Museums is necessarily comparative in nature. But Tseng goes further than simple mention of the aims of other nations for their own cultural constructions and elaborates on international architectural trends. Her lucid explanations of transnational architectural styles do not subordinate those of Japan, but position them as part of a wider international discourse. Moreover, she addresses the little discussed parity of 19th century American society with Meiji Japan in their shared cultural inferiorities vis-à-vis Europe. This global contextualization is challenging when the subject at hand is so dense. Nevertheless, Tseng's study represents the kind of scholarship needed to move Japanese studies further into comparative discourse.

Perhaps conscious of her introduction of new research into English language scholarship, Tseng's book includes resources beyond the primary text itself. An extensive bibliography cites architectural sources from archives to publications by the book's principal architect. The appendix includes documents from the Ernest Francisco Fenollosa Papers at the Houghton Library of Harvard University revealing circumstances behind the creation of the Imperial Nara Museum that, while available in Japanese translation, otherwise remained unpublished in their original English. This illuminating sample of Fenollosa's less mainstream writings prompts the thought that a compilation of his work in the form of the Japanese *zenshū* (anthology) is in order.

The visual material between the book's covers runs rich and wide, and invariably, is provocative both for its freshness in the eye of the viewer and for the multiple angles it provides on the entire Imperial Museum undertaking. Images span various modes of representation from building plans, sketches, and models to print matter collected from Meiji-period architectural magazines and from woodblock prints showcasing the new edifices to period photographs of interior exhibition galleries and others spotlighting architectural façades. Images also include selections culled from the architectural portfolios of the museum architects, perhaps the most intriguing being pages from Josiah Conder's sketchbook that illustrate his receptiveness to multicultural architectural styles. While examining the circumstances surrounding these images falls beyond the scope of this study, there are times when further explanation of the images themselves would enhance the points made in the book, and in themselves again, these images offer their own revealing story about the Imperial Museums and the Meiji interest in architecture.

While Tseng's focused study may at first attract those who have a direct interest in the topic, the book's engrossing, eloquent narrative works it into a volume of uncommon general appeal. Comprehensively viewed, the book moreover addresses issues not only advancing architectural and museum studies in Meiji Japan, but also straddling the far-reaching concerns of empire, nationalism, modernization, westernization, cultural heritage, and cultural policy at the same time that it delves into localized concerns of the administration of the Imperial Household, the formation of the Imperial Museums' collections and the evolution of their treatment of object-artifacts. It further paves the way for future Japanese museum studies—from the establishment of Japanese colonial museums in places such as Korea and Taiwan not long after the completion of the last Imperial Museum in Tokyo to the proliferation of regional museums during the economic bubble in the 1980s and their subsequent struggle to survive. For now, however, Tseng has delivered a study with texture and depth that sustains us.

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