Part 1: Prologue

The Prehistory of the Meiji Court: Emperor Kōmei, Princess Kazunomiya, and Empress Eishō

[SUBHEADINGS]
- Articles Related to Emperor Kōmei
- Articles Related to Princess Kazunomiya
- Articles Related to Empress Eishō

Emperor Kōmei was born in 1831, the second year of the Tenpō era and in 1845, he received Lady Asako (later known as Empress Eishō), the daughter of regent Kujō Hisatada, as his consort at the palace according to tradition. The following year, he succeeded to the imperial throne upon the death of his father, Emperor Ninkō.

The handling of the arrival of Commodore Perry's ships in Japan exposed the weakness of the shogunate and in order to rebuild, it became imperative to decide upon a successor to the sickly Shogun Iesada. Opinions were divided between the Nanki faction, which gave precedence to blood lineage and backed Tokugawa Yoshitomi (later Iemochi), and the Hitotsubashi faction, which aimed for the reformation of the shogunal administration by the clear-sighted Tokugawa Yoshinobu. After much maneuvering at the imperial court by both factions, in the end a resolution naming the next shogun was reached by proclamation of the emperor, whose authority had originally been mostly a formality. In matters of diplomacy as well, imperial sanction was solicited by the shogunate before the signing of the Japan-US Treaty of Amity and Commerce, and the emperor was gradually transformed from a figure who was deeply committed to ceremony and who singlemindedly devoted himself to scholarship and waka poetry to a figure who had a direct hand in politics. With this shift, the trajectory of history began to move away from Edo castle and toward the imperial palace in Kyoto.

Under pressure from an opposing faction, the chief minister of the shogunate, Ii Naosuke, signed a treaty of commerce with the United States without receiving imperial sanction. This action led to his assassination outside the Sakurada Gate of Edo castle by imperial loyalists, destroying any possibility of the restoration of power to the shogunate. Consequently, the shogunate sought out other ways to strengthen relations with the imperial court, and a plan was formulated to join the shogunal and imperial families through marriage of the emperor's younger sister Kazunomiya to the shogun. Fearing that foreign powers aimed to annex Japan, the emperor believed that the military might of the shogunate would be necessary to expel the foreign invaders from Japan and persuaded his sister to marry Iemochi. In 1861 (Bunkyū 1), Kazunomiya traveled to Edo and in the following year she officially entered the Shogun's inner palace after obtaining the promise that imperial court-style observances would be adhered to at her new home. In 1863, for the first official shrine visits by a reigning emperor since the imperial progress of Emperor Gokōmyō in the 17th century, Emperor Kōmei visited both the upper and lower Kamo Shrines as well as Iwashimizu Shrine to pray for the expulsion of the foreigners. Given that the imperialist nationalist movement that was behind the expansion of his imperial authority had been unable to stand up to the overwhelming military forces of the West and had retreated in defeat after the Coup of August 18, the emperor forgave the signing of the treaty without imperial sanction. Thereafter, political tide shifted toward reverence for the emperor and overthrow of the shogunate, but in December of 1866 the emperor died of smallpox and with him the history of the early modern imperial court came to a close. As for Kazunomiya, she directly became Empress without formally being pronounced empress and moved to Tokyo in 1872. Following Iemochi's death, she became a nun and took the Buddhist name Seikan'in, and after the Battle of Toba-Fushimi remained committed to the survival of the Tokugawa family even at risk of her own life until her death in 1878 (Meiji 10).

Part 2

The First Stirrings of the Meiji Court

[SUBHEADINGS]
- The Beggining of the Meiji Era
- Emperor Kōmei and the Owari Tokugawa Family
- Articles Presented to and Received from the Emperor
- Articles Related to Empress Shōken
- Articles Related to the Royal Family

On March 14, 1868 (Meiji 1), the Charter Oath of the Five Articles was proclaimed by imperial edict, signifying a new era for Japanese national policy. One week later, it was decided that the new emperor would pay an official visit to Osaka, a move heavily motivated by the beliefs of the statesman Ōkubo Toshimichi, who advocated following the example of foreign powers, where it was believed that the top responsibility of a nation's sovereign was to be a benevolent leader to its people.

In July of the same year, Edo was renamed Tokyo; in August the enthronement ceremony for the new emperor was held at the Kyoto Gosho palace; and in September the era name changed from Keiō to Meiji. On September 20th, the emperor set out for Tokyo and arrived there by palanquin on October 13th. In December, he departed Tokyo for Kyoto and at the year's end he honored the third anniversary of the death of his royal father, the 121st emperor Kōmei, and prepared for his wedding to Lady Ichijō Haruko. The year of Meiji 1, now 150 years past, ended with a great flurry of activity.

In March 1869, the emperor once again departed Kyoto for an official visit to Tokyo. On the 12th, he paid homage at Ise Shrine for the first time as sovereign and reported to the deity on the reform of political affairs and the restoration of imperial rule, with prayers for the advancement of the national fortune. In October, the Empress Shōken moved from Kyoto to Tokyo.

Over a long period starting in 1872, Emperor Meiji made six imperial progresses—known as the "Six Great Imperial Tours"—around all the regions of Japan, accompanied by several hundred high government officials. These began with Kyūshū and Shikoku in 1872 and followed with the northeastern Ōshū province and Hakodate in 1876, the northwestern Hokuriku region and the Tōkaidō route in 1878, Kōshū in Yamanashi and the mountainous Tōsandō route in 1880, the Hokkaidō, Akita, and Yamagata regions in 1881, and the San'yōdō route west of Kyoto in 1885.

The primary aim of the imperial tours was the cultivation of Emperor Meiji, who had come to decide all affairs of state personally, as a virtuous and benevolent monarch. He visited the prefectural governments that administered the rural areas, the garrisons that were the bases of military affairs, the various modern facilities that supported industry and scientific scholarship in the new era, and the elementary and normal schools of the various regions. Through these visits, he strove to more fully understand the current situation of his country and gathered research for his role as emperor.

Like the emperor, the empress also stood at the forefront of Japan's modernization efforts. From early on, she took up sericulture at the Imperial Household and in 1873 she visited the Tomioka Silk Mill in Gunma prefecture. She also frequently attended the various exhibitions that were held for the purpose of promoting domestic industry and she worked continuously to promote national prosperity through the encouragement of new industry in Japan.

Part 3

The Meiji Palace and the Age of the Rokumeikan

[SUBHEADINGS]
- The Enryokan
- The Rokumeikan
- The Meiji Palace
- Tōgū Gosho, The Crown Prince's Palace
- A Gorgeous Pageant of Dresses
- Banquets in the Meiji Palace
- Banquets of the Imperial Houses
- Bonbonnieres — Imperial Culture in the Palm of the Hand

After Emperor Meiji moved his residence to Tokyo, the government—under the emperor's authority—implemented various policies for the construction of a modern nation state based on the example of the West. Communication and transportation systems were introduced and implemented following Western European models, resulting in an increase in the amount of information and commodities and the speed by which they were exchanged throughout the country. Westernization was rapidly adopted among people seeking freedom and a fashionable lifestyle. It was a so-called Age of Enlightenment.

The Rokumeikan building is widely considered to be a symbol of this period of Japanese enlightenment. Completed in 1883 (Meiji 16), it was planned by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to be a public facility for the reception and lodging of foreign guests. The two-story Western-style brick building was designed by Josiah Conder, who had come to Japan to be a professor at the College of Engineering in the Ministry of Public Works in 1877 (Meiji 10). This social space, where distinguished people and government officials from Japan and abroad gathered and attended parties and balls, was used by Foreign Minister Inoue Kaoru and others as a diplomatic space. However, it became widely criticized as serving only a limited elite group rather than bringing Westernization policies broadly to the people, and conversely contributed to a tide of interest in re-examining the merits of traditional Japanese culture.

Amidst this controversy, it was decided in 1876 to construct a new palace to replace the old palace (formerly Edo Castle) that had gone up in flames in May 1873. A Western-style palace made of brick that required bringing in several groups of foreign workers was planned. However, in 1883, it was decided that the outside would be made of traditional Japanese-style wood construction and the interiors would be Western-style spaces, and construction spanned approximately five years before being completed in October 1888. In January of the following year, Emperor Meiji moved into this new palace and on February 11, it was inaugurated as a proper center of the national government with the proclamation ceremony of the Meiji Constitution. This structure was known as the Meiji Palace (destroyed by fire in May 1945).

The Meiji Palace was a majestic structure covering an area of approximately 42,000 m^2 in total and comprised of an Outer Palace, which was a public space centered around an audience hall for formal state ceremonies and other public events, and a private Inner Palace, which included the official residence. The individual buildings of the Outer Palace were primarily Japanese-style buildings, incorporating a blending of Western and Japanese styles to decorate the space. The rooms were illuminated by the use of glass doors and the floors were surfaced in parquetry and furnished with chairs, emulating Western interiors where it would be possible to hold standing-style events. At the same time, traditional Japanese elements of coffered ceilings and ranma transoms, horizontal beams and other decorations were combined with chandeliers and wall surfaces and curtains made from Western-style textiles.

In a country in the midst of rapid advancement through Westernization in various fields, specifically the political system and industry, the construction of the Rokumeikan and the Meiji Imperial Palace and the existence of these structures also served as symbols of a modern Japan and its resolute progress through the assimilation of various Western cultural products, while at the same time integrating them with exceptional attributes of traditional culture.

Part 4

Technique and Aesthetic in the Adornments of the Meiji Court

[SUBHEADINGS]

- Paintings
- Carvings
- Ceramics
- Cloisonne
- Textiles
- Lacquer
- Metalworks

The Japanese imperial court has long preserved and cultivated traditional culture, however, the role it played in promoting and developing an art world that had for a short time declined amidst the disorder accompanying the Meiji Restoration was particularly significant.

Beginning early in the Meiji period, international and domestic exhibitions and fairs were held as part of a plan for the promotion of industry accompanying the policy of Westernization. Attendance by members of the imperial family at such events and the acquisition of exhibited works by the Department of the Imperial Household provided a major source of opportunity for artists' advancement. In addition, whether in the form of decorations for imperial ceremonies or the imperial residence, to be presented as commemorative gifts in conjunction with various auspicious events, or other uses by the imperial court, demand for artworks at the highest level rallied the art world and greatly incentivized artists to receive such honors.

In 1877, it was proposed that the Imperial Household be tasked with the stewardship of native Japanese handicrafts and an organization for the promotion of the protection of the arts named the Ryūchikai was launched in 1879 (renamed Japan Art Association in 1887). With Imperial Prince Arisugawa Taruhito serving as its president and various government officials among its membership, the Ryūchikai fulfilled a role equivalent to that of a government agency at the time. The association periodically hosted exhibitions to introduce Japanese art domestically and abroad, including hosting a Japanese Fine Arts Exhibition in Paris in 1883. Also, in 1888, the society president Sano Tsunetami presented a report to the Imperial Household Minister on the necessity of the protection of artists and craftsmen, which led to the appointment of seventeen Imperial Craftsmen (*kōgei-in*), launching a practice that would later develop into the Imperial Household Artists (*gigei-in*) system.

Policies for the preservation of culture by the Imperial Household reached full steam in the early 1880s and in 1884 the Shōsōin Treasury and in 1886 the museum (now Tokyo National Museum) that were under the control of the Ministry of Agriculture and Commerce were transferred to the purview of the Imperial Household Department. In 1889, the museum was renamed the Imperial Museum and, under the Imperial Craftsmen system that was initiated in 1890, ten artists, including painters, sculptors, metalworkers, lacquer artists, and textile artists were appointed by the director of the Imperial Museum as the first generation of Imperial Household Artists. These artists produced works for the Imperial Household and also responded to inquiries and proffered advice related to handicrafts. It was understood that the individuals chosen for this position possessed both the highest skill as well as character, making such an appointment the ultimate honor in the art world of the day. This system came to represent imperial recognition of artists in each field of the art world and a total of seventy-nine artists were appointed over the years.

This section of the exhibition present numerous works demonstrating the ultimate perfection of art and technique in this period, focusing on works by forty Imperial Household Artists appointed in the Meiji era.

Part 5: Epilogue

The End of Meiji and the Dawn of the Taishō Era

[SUBHEADINGS]

- Nogi Maresuke — The Meiji-era General
- The Enthronement of the Emperor

The emperor who had constructed the court culture of the Meiji era passed away on July 30, 1912, at the age of 61. From this day forward, the era name changed to Taishō and he became known by his posthumous title of Emperor Meiji. The art and craft objects that surrounded the Meiji Emperor were gifted as treasured relics of the deceased to various people who were close to him and have been passed down to the present.

The funeral rites of Emperor Meiji began at 11:00 pm on September 13 at the Aoyama Funeral Hall. At around that same hour, Nogi Maresuke, who was an army general and also the president of the Peers' School Gakushuin, took his own life along with his wife Shizuko at their private residence in Akasaka Shinmachi, Akasaka-ku, Tokyo. General Nogi had led the attack on Port Arthur as commander of the Japanese Third Army in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905, and had lost many soldiers as well as his own two sons in the war. Later, Nogi was highly respected and beloved by the people as a commander who embodied the tragedies of war. Nogi had long pondered his own death ever since suffering the disgrace of losing his regimental battle flag to the enemy during the Satsuma Rebellion in 1877 and, after the passing of Emperor Meiji, he prepared himself for death, writing up several final letters and sharing some wine he had received from the emperor with his wife before they committed suicide together. The Nogis' suicide was interpreted as *junshi*—following one's master in death—and shocked people not only in Japan, but the world over. The novelist Natsume Sōseki was inspired by it in writing the book *Kokoro* and Mori Ōgai, who was an acquaintance of Nogi's, completed writing *The Last Testament of Okitsu Yagoemon* in just two days and submitted it to the publisher Chūō Kōron before attending Nogi's funeral.

General Nogi had enjoyed the deep confidence of Emperor Meiji and had been entrusted with the education of Crown Prince Hirohito when he entered the peers' school of Gakushuin, where Nogi assumed the post of principal in 1907. Gakushuin was a full boarding school and Nogi himself lived with the students in the dormitories. In photographs taken with the students, Nogi was often smiling and appears to have passed his final years pleasantly.

On November 10, 1915, the enthronement ceremony of Emperor Taishō was celebrated at the imperial Shishinden Hall in Kyoto. Emperor Meiji's enthronement had been celebrated inside the Kyoto Imperial Palace and was restricted to a limited number of people, but now, for the first time, all of Japan became wildly enthusiastic for this modern-style enthronement that was made visible to all. With it, the people could tangibly feel the curtain rising on a new era. The style of the Taishō enthronement ceremony was later followed by the Shōwa and Heisei emperors as well.

Emperor Taishō had traveled throughout all of Japan as Crown Prince and was well-known and in touch with the Japanese people. The Meiji period, which had built up the image of a resolute imperial family had ended and Taishō marked the inauguration of a more open imperial household.

NOTES

- This Exhibition is produced by the Executive Committee of "The Blossoming of Imperial Culture" Exhibition, and will tour to Akita Senshū Museum of Art, the Museum of Kyoto, and Sen-oku Hakukokan Museum (Tokyo) after The Tokugawa Art Museum.
- While the contents of this leaflet are extracts from the official catalogue of the touring exhibitions, some of the artworks appearing in the catalogue may not be exhibited at the current exhibition.
- English text is translated by Maiko Behr and the curatorial staff of the Tokugawa Art Museum.

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Spring Special Exhibition
Commemorating the 150th Anniversary of Meiji

The Blossoming of Imperial Culture

— Technique and Aesthetic in the Adornments of the Meiji Court —

The Tokugawa Art Museum Entrance Hall and Exhibition Rooms 7 to 9,
Hōsa Library Exhibition Rooms 1 & 2
From April 17 (Tue) to May 27 (Sun), 2018



To commemorate the 150th anniversary of the Meiji Restoration in 2018, this exhibition shines the spotlight on the court culture of the Meiji era. As a reconciliatory measure toward the United States and European countries, the Meiji government and emperor focused the aesthetic tastes of the time in the Rokumeikan Hall, where they not only received foreign envoys from many nations, but also from whence they introduced uniquely Japanese artistic works widely overseas. This kind of activity on the one hand raised the global status of Japan and at the same time also played a major role in the preservation and cultivation of Japanese arts and crafts that had continued unbroken since the Edo era. This exhibition brings together brilliant interior furnishings and textiles that adorned the Meiji Court, as well as paintings, calligraphies, and fine craft objects by official artists of the imperial household. We hope you will take this opportunity to appreciate the essence of Japanese beauty and technique.