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NATIONAL MUSEUM  
OF WESTERN ART IN TOKYO  
– THE ONLY WORK  
BY LE CORBUSIER IN JAPAN

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NARODOWE MUZEUM  
SZTUKI ZACHODNIEJ W TOKIO  
– JEDYNE DZIEŁO LE CORBUSIERA W JAPONII

**A b s t r a c t**

The article discusses the history of the Museum of Western Art in Tokyo, designed by Le Corbusier, presenting its architectural design values and analysing its exceptional resistance to subsequent extensions and alterations. The functional and spatial solutions are critically investigated in retrospect.

*Keywords: Le Corbusier, béton brut, museum architecture*

**S t r e s z c z e n i e**

W artykule omówiona została historia powstania Muzeum Sztuki Zachodniej w Tokio zaprojektowanego przez Le Corbusiera, wartości architektoniczne tej budowli, a także przeanalizowana jej wyjątkowa odporność na kolejne przebudowy i modernizacje. Z perspektywy czasu poddano krytyce rozwiązania funkcjonalno-przestrzenne.

*Słowa kluczowe: Le Corbusier, béton brut, architektura muzeów*

## 1. Introduction

Near the entrance to Tokyo's museum district in Ueno Park lies the National Museum of Western Art. Constructed in 1959 according to a design by Le Corbusier, it is his only work in Japan and one of only three museum buildings in the world constructed according to his concept of the *Museum of Unlimited Growth*. The idea of a museum, which grows over time, has come true in this case: the building of the National Museum of Western Art has been extended twice so far, with a new wing constructed in 1979, and an auditorium hall and an

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underground gallery for temporary exhibitions added in 1997. While not very popular in Poland, this work by the master of *béton brut* is worth a mention for its architectonic design values, the influence of Le Corbusier's works on contemporary Japanese architecture, and the fascinating history of the museum.

The exceptional resistance of the building to alterations is another interesting topic, and an extremely important one in terms of museum architecture, as museums tend to go through constant renovations and extensions. In some cases, this leads to miserable results: *Towards a New Museum*, a monograph about the transformations in contemporary museum architecture by Victoria Newhouse, an expert on the subject, who has a whole chapter entitled *Wings That Don't Fly* that discusses a series of failed efforts to add new wings to major museums<sup>1</sup>. At this point, it is worth quoting Professor Zdzisław Żygulski Jr.: "A museum is a kind of an ideological and material structure, and like any other ideological structure in the world, such as libraries, archives, theatres, philharmonics and universities, or even macrostructures, such as the state, it is subject to evolution, which involves a cycle of birth, development, heyday, decadence and dying off. [...] Its material continuity depends on the power of the ideological elements holding the structure together. Its destruction can be due to external forces, yet it can also occur due to internal ones"<sup>2</sup>. Potentially destructive actions certainly include a failed renovation, alteration or extension of museum buildings. It seems, however, that the subsequent extensions to the Museum of Western Art in Tokyo have neither threatened the identity of the original building nor destroyed its bonding forces. Examining why this has not been the case is a worthwhile endeavour.

## 2. History of the collection

The history of the Museum of Western Art dates back to the early 20th century and is associated with Kojiro Matsukata (1865–1950), president of the Kawasaki shipbuilding company. He was born to an influential aristocratic family: his father was Masayoshi Matsukata (1835–1924), an eminent politician who served as Japan's minister of finance and prime minister. This allowed Kojiro Matsukata to receive a thorough education: after graduating from a secondary school in Tokyo, he was sent to the United States, where he first studied at Rutgers University and then earned his law degree from Yale University. In 1896, he became the president of the Kawasaki dockyard in Kobe. Thanks to the prosperous economic situation in the shipbuilding industry before World War I, he managed to make a vast fortune, most of which he spent on artworks. From 1916 onwards, he collected more than 10,000 items during his travels to Europe, including a priceless collection of Japanese woodblock prints that he acquired from a Parisian jeweller, Henri Vever (now part of the collection of the Tokyo National Museum).

Matsukata acquired most of his works in Paris, with Impressionist paintings and the monumental sculptures by Auguste Rodin forming the core of the collection. His motivations were not egoistic: rather than collecting artworks for his own pleasure, he wanted to build

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<sup>1</sup> V. Newhouse, *Towards a New Museum. Expanded Edition*, Monacelli Press, New York 2006, p. 138–189.

<sup>2</sup> Z. Żygulski, *Dwieście lat Muzeum Czartoryskich*, [in:] *Spotkania z Muzeami*, supplement to *Spotkania z Zabytkami*, Ministerstwo Kultury i Dziedzictwa Narodowego, Warsaw, March 2001, p. III.

a collection of Western art, which he could then share with the Japanese nation by establishing a public museum like the ones in Europe and America. He even had a name for this museum of his dreams: *Sheer Pleasure Fine Arts Pavilion*<sup>3</sup>, and entrusted the design to British painter Frank Brangwyn (1867–1956), his friend and adviser. He bought a building plot for the museum in Tokyo, but his construction plans went away due to the Japanese economic crisis of 1927, resulting in the bankruptcy of the Kawasaki dockyard's bank. Matsukata was forced to step down as president of the company and dispose of some of his private property to cover the debts of the distressed company. Most of the artworks he had collected in Europe were sold and, as a result, became scattered. Another part of the collection, stored in London, was destroyed in a fire in 1939, while only a small number of the original artworks hidden in the Musée Rodin made it through World War II. With almost 400 works, the collection was taken over by the French government and nationalised as the property of a citizen from an enemy country under the 1951 treaty of Los Angeles. Several years later, however, after Matsukata's death, the majority of the collection was returned to Japan, where it formed the nucleus of the National Museum of Western Art<sup>4</sup>. The museum was opened on the 10<sup>th</sup> June 1959 as a symbolic token of goodwill accompanying the restoration of diplomatic relations between France and Japan, which had been broken during World War II.

### 3. History of the museum construction

Negotiations regarding the return of the Matsukata Collection began right after signing the 1951 treaty. In 1953, the French government adopted a memorandum on the conditions for the return: these included the construction of a suitable museum, provisionally referred to as the Museum of French Art. The request was accepted by the Japanese government and a museum construction committee was formed in December 1953. In 1954, the site of the museum was determined: it would be located in Ueno public park, near the monumental edifice of the National Museum (Honkan), constructed in 1938.

In 1955, a French architect was commissioned to design the museum building: it was Le Corbusier, assisted by three Japanese associates who had studied in Europe: Kunio Maekawa, Junzo Sakakura and Takamasa Yoshizaka<sup>5</sup>. Le Corbusier designed the building in his Paris office, while his Japanese colleagues were responsible for the working drawings and specifications as well as for supervising the construction works.

Kunio Maekawa (1905–1986) was a leading representative of modernism in Japanese architecture<sup>6</sup>. After graduating from Tokyo University in 1928, he left for France and worked as Le Corbusier's assistant for two years. His long career consisted of three stages: after returning to Japan in the 1930s, his designs, more or less, followed the official imperial style

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Oya, Mina, *Venice, Ghent and Paris: Designing the Kyoraku Bijutsukan (Sheer Pleasure Arts Pavilion)*, Frank Brangwyn [exh. cat.] (Tokyo: The National Museum of Western Art, Tokyo and Yomiuri Shimbun, 2010), p. 229–33.

<sup>4</sup> See: Matsukata Collection, The National Museum of Western Art., <https://www.nmwa.go.jp/en/about/matsukata.html> [date accessed: 9/04/2017].

<sup>5</sup> U. Meyer, *Architectural Guide Tokyo*, DOM Publishers, Berlin 2011, p. 209.

<sup>6</sup> J. M. Reynolds, *Maekawa Kunio and the Emergence of Japanese Modernist Architecture*, University of California Press, Berkeley-Los Angeles 2001.



(Hinamoto Hall and Dairen Town Hall); in the 1950s he worked in the style of his Paris-based master using the aesthetics of raw concrete (Fukushima Educational Centre, Harumi flats in Tokyo, Setagaya Community Centre, and a concert hall and cultural centre in Ueno Park, Tokyo); finally, at the end of the 1950s and beginning of the 1960s, he developed a more personal and complex style, often using locally-made red bricks and referring to local traditions (Saitama Cultural Centre and Hayashibara Museum of Art)<sup>7</sup>. In a catalogue published in 2005 to accompany a retrospective exhibition of his works, it was emphasized that Maekawa viewed modernism as a necessity for constant exploration rather than a set of formal rules, which enabled him to adapt it to the Japanese cultural climate and context<sup>8</sup>. It is also worth noting that Kunio Maekawa was a mentor to Kenzo Tange, perhaps the most eminent Japanese architect of the 20th century, whose early career was also based on Le Corbusier's ideology. He won international acclaim with projects, such as the Tokyo City Hall from 1957, Totsuka Golf Club House and the fascinating Olympic hall complex in Tokyo from 1961–1964<sup>9</sup>.

Another student of Le Corbusier was Junzo Sakakura (1901–1961), who practised in his office for eight years and advanced to the position of the chief architect before returning to Japan in 1936. While working with Le Corbusier, he was involved in the design of Villa Savoye and the Swiss Pavilion for the World Exposition in Paris. These experiences had a formative influence on his career. Sakakura designed the Japanese Pavilion at the 1937 World Exposition in Paris. Due to the stagnation of investments during World War II, it was only in the 1950s that his first designs were constructed in Japan. These included the Kamakura Museum of Modern Art (1951), the town hall in Gifu (1959), Hiraoka City Hall (1964), the Kanagawa prefectural office building in Yokohama and Odakyu Department Store in Tokyo<sup>10</sup>.

Takamasa Yoshizaka (1917–1980) went on a scholarship to Paris in 1950 at the invitation of the French government, where he worked as Le Corbusier's assistant for two years. He supervised the construction of the Marseilles unit, and was involved in designing a law school in Chandigarh and the Nantes-Rezé habitation unit. Yoshizaka returned to Japan in 1952 and where after several years he began work on the design of the National Museum of Western Art. In 1959, he was appointed the professor of architecture at Waseda University.

Construction of the museum commenced in March 1958 and was completed soon afterwards, in February 1959. The Matsukata Collection arrived in Japan aboard the liner Asama Maru in April 1959, and the museum was opened to the public in June of the same year<sup>11</sup>. Unfortunately, not all of the objects remaining in the Matsukata Collection were returned:

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Maekawa-Kunio>

<sup>8</sup> [http://www.dnp.co.jp/artscape/eng/focus/0605\\_02.html](http://www.dnp.co.jp/artscape/eng/focus/0605_02.html)

<sup>9</sup> T. Barucki, *Architektura Japonii*, Arkady, Warsaw 1988, p. 89–94.

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Sakakura-Junzo>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.nmwa.go.jp/en/about/history.html> [date accessed: 16/04/2017].

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- Ill. 1. The National Museum of Western Art in Tokyo – general view. Picture by the author
  - Ill. 2. Detailed view of the ceiling beams over the main hall. Picture by the author
  - Ill. 3. Bird's eye view of the museum – original state from 1959. From the collection of the National Museum of Western Art – picture by the author



several valuable canvases by French impressionists remained in France, as well as the original sculptures by Rodin; copies being cast using the original forms and sent to Japan instead.

The National Museum of Western Art underwent a number of functional and spatial alterations: the adjoining auditorium and administrative office building were constructed according to the design by Sakakura Associates in 1964; the ticket office was added in 1969, and in 1975, the design of a new wing was commissioned to Maekawa Kunio Architects & Engineers. The new wing was completed in May 1979. Subsequent expansion stages were completed in 1997: the underground gallery for temporary exhibitions was opened under the courtyard, and the original building structure was renovated and fitted with a seismic isolation system. The museum was reopened in March 1998. The research centre and library were opened in 2002, followed by more alteration works and adaptation of the museum for the disabled in 2003–2006.

In 2017 the National Museum of Western Art building, along with 17 other works by Le Corbusier, was listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

#### 4. Architecture

Designing museum buildings was one of Le Corbusier's obsessions. In his Mundaneum design from 1929, he departed from the classic pattern of a museum building, with a central rotunda and an external square of exhibition halls grouped into enfilades around the internal courtyards. The Mundaneum (Musée Mondial) in Geneva proposed by Le Corbusier was a pyramid-shaped structure with exhibition rooms forming a path around an empty plaza. It is uncertain whether Frank Lloyd Wright, while he was working on the Guggenheim Museum in New York, knew of Le Corbusier's unexecuted design from 1929, where the visitor followed a spiralling route towards the centre<sup>12</sup>. Le Corbusier's spiral-museum plan recurred in 1939 in his utopian project for the Museum of Unlimited Growth. The Musée de Croissance Illimitée was raised on pilotis and only had a single level. The visitor's path started in the central room, accessible from below, and then spiralled outwards, so the building could be expanded infinitely<sup>13</sup>.

The spatial organisation scheme used in the Museum of Unlimited Growth recurs in subsequent art museum designs by Le Corbusier. A total of three of them, designed almost simultaneously in the 1950s, were constructed: in Ahmedabad (1956), Tokyo (1957) and

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<sup>12</sup> After: C. Storrie, *The Delirious Museum. A Journey from the Louvre to Las Vegas*, London-New York 2007, p. 150–151.

<sup>13</sup> M. Pabich, *O kształtowaniu muzeum sztuki. Przestrzeń piękniejsza od przedmiotu*, Muzeum Śląskie, Katowice 2007, p. 77–78.

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Ill. 4 Bird's eye view of the museum – current state. From the collection of the National Museum of Western Art – picture by the author

Ill. 5. Old European painting gallery on the first floor. Picture by the author

Ill. 6. Gallery of Horyuji Treasures, designed by Yoshio Taniguchi. Picture by the author

Chandigarh (1950–1965)<sup>14</sup>. These projects share considerable similarities: they are based on the same functional and spatial plan, with the visitor's route beginning in the central courtyard and the surrounding exhibition rooms following a spiral; all three are windowless concrete boxes rested on low pillars, which means that the walls in the top-lit rooms can be used exclusively for artwork display. On entering the building, the visitor first ascends a ramp and then goes around, meandering through the exhibition rooms. The parallel corridors are linked together every now and again to enable shortcuts or to open alternative routes<sup>15</sup>. Despite the economic advantages, however, the visitor's orientation in space is more difficult with this interior layout. Le Corbusier's museum designs also did not include the spaces necessary for administrative, research and storage purposes, either; the architect's focus being solely on the building structure and the organisation of the exhibition space<sup>16</sup>.

At that time, Le Corbusier paid much attention to the technological aspects of casting concrete. He experimented with different types of shuttering and moulds for diversified concrete surfaces with various textures, marks and shapes. While the original term *béton brut* includes the adjective "brutal," which may suggest imperfection or coarseness<sup>17</sup>, Le Corbusier strived to achieve perfectly shaped structural elements from concrete. He worked intensively on eliminating random formwork defects and any flaws occurring in the course of construction works. In letters to his friend and fellow architect, José Luis Sert, he wrote, "*béton brut* is not concrete coming from the brute; it is simply concrete taken directly from the mould"<sup>18</sup>. To emphasize this difference in meaning he sometimes used the term *béton brut lisse* instead, which can be translated to "smooth raw concrete". The only traces he would always accept were the lines left where shuttering elements came together, on the edges of the expansion gaps.

The Japanese experience proved particularly useful in this case: with the impeccably made wooden formwork, it was possible to cast perfect circular columns and tightly fitting concrete prefabricates. Initially, Le Corbusier planned to use steel shuttering for the columns and to impress the flanges as capitals, especially as the design involved a whole range of columns, both round and elongated ones, with rounded ends topped by straight inserts of various lengths. Their shapes were unique for Le Corbusier's works: they roughly resembled Japanese pictograms. Persuaded by his Japanese assistants, however, he agreed to have all the concrete components cast using carved wooden shuttering. Le Corbusier did not oversee the construction works in person: his associates contacted him by mail. In this way, using pictures, they agreed on the size and layout of the gravel for filling the prefabricated wall panels, for instance<sup>19</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*. p. 78.

<sup>15</sup> The same spatial organisation scheme can now be found in IKEA stores: the customer follows a rectilinear spiral of the store, with shortcuts available at several points. The Mercedes-Benz Museum in Stuttgart (Ben van Berkel, 2006) uses a similar plan but with a three-dimensional spiral.

<sup>16</sup> M. Pabich, *op.cit.*, p. 83.

<sup>17</sup> Le Corbusier first used the term *béton brut* in 1952 during the construction of the Marseilles Unit (*Unité d'Habitation*), when he became fascinated with the aesthetic values of cast-in-place concrete structures after removing wooden shuttering.

<sup>18</sup> R. Gargiani, A. Rosellini, *Le Corbusier: Béton Brut and Ineffable Space 1940–1965. Surface Materials and Psychophysiology of Vision*, EPFL Press, Lausanne 2011, p. 544.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 546.

Based on the experiences with Asian museum construction, Le Corbusier came to the conclusion that there was no single universal concrete specification, and that the quality of concrete components always depended on the capabilities of the local construction industry and craftsmanship. In a note written after constructing the Japanese museum, he remarked: “The forms for the reinforced concrete were made of wood, the quality of which only the Japanese possess, with impeccable craftsmanship, with the most admirable professional consciousness. The Japanese construct their houses, which are so beautiful, out of wood; they therefore know what it is possible to do with the grain of the wood and poured concrete, if one so desires, to achieve the finest imprint of the wood fibres in the concrete”<sup>20</sup>.

## 5. Criticism

One’s first and dominant impression on seeing the Museum of Western Art building is the sense of its great weight. This is emphasized by the building’s proportions, with the low-lying slit of the glazed ground floor below the imposing concrete façade punctuated with a single window opening, and by the dark colour and the raw, patinated texture of the concrete walls. The sense of heaviness is further intensified by the concrete plaza with its monumental sculptures by Auguste Rodin and Emille-Antoine Bourdelle. The same impression persists inside the building, with the imposing, austere entrance hall and the low, overwhelming perimeter of the painting gallery on the first floor.

These qualities are even more perceptible when compared to the delicate forms of Japanese architecture. For example, there is a striking difference between the Museum of Western Art building and the light, delicate Horyuji Homotsukan (Gallery of Horyuji Treasures) by Yoshio Taniguchi located nearby. While the two buildings are similar in terms of their purpose and size, they evoke colossally different impressions.

Another issue of contention is the symbolism hidden in the Museum of Western Art building: according to Le Corbusier’s biographers, his associates provided him with an iconography of traditional Japanese architecture while he was working on the project. For example in November 1955, as he was starting the conceptual work on the Tokyo building, he received drawing documentation with variants of Torii, the traditional Japanese gate found at the entrance of Shinto shrines. Allegedly, the pillars found in the entrance hall of the Museum of Western Art are a Torii metaphor<sup>21</sup>. In the author’s opinion, however, the geometry of the columns and ceiling beams clearly evoke striking associations with the cross, the primary symbol of the Christian Western world. To view this as a simple coincidence is not a viable explanation, as there are no coincidences in Le Corbusier’s works.

The imposing character and monumental austerity of the museum building seem to be exactly what defines its strong identity and makes up its genetic code, which has made the building resistant to the passage of time and the conversions designed by Le Corbusier’s students and associates – albeit with noteworthy restraint and sensitivity. However, the strong, indeed dominant identity speaks in favour of the building itself, but not the museum. The austere interiors work well with powerful forms, such as massive figurative sculptures and

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<sup>20</sup> Le Corbusier, *Euvre complète, 1957–65* p. 184, as cited in: R. Gargiani, A. Rosellini, p. 549.

<sup>21</sup> R. Gargiani, A. Rosellini, *op.cit.*, p. 547–549.

abstract art, and yet the monumental architecture overwhelms the paintings by old masters displayed in the first-floor gallery. This is also the case with other original museum buildings, where the architecture dominates the artworks collected inside. Marek Pabich, who studies contemporary museum architecture, refers to this phenomenon as “space more beautiful than the object.” One famous example is the Guggenheim Museum in Manhattan, designed by Frank Lloyd Wright, considered an icon of 20th-century architecture, where many artworks cannot be displayed due to the narrow corridors and the spiral-shaped geometry of the interior.

Still, there are remarkable contemporary museum buildings, which, rather than dominating the collection, provide a balance between the art, exhibition space and architecture. Examples of these include a group of American museum buildings designed by Renzo Piano and New York’s Whitney Museum building, designed by Marcel Breuer, which was constructed in 1966, several years after the Museum of Western Art opened in Tokyo, and which is equally massive and imposing<sup>22</sup>. It betrays some formal similarities with Tokyo’s Museum of Western Art, with an equally heavy façade punctuated with a single asymmetric window like a “cyclops’ eye,” and the main entrance that is equally low and overwhelmed by the imposing façade. The interiors of Breuer’s exhibition galleries, however, with their smooth white walls, the regular grid of the concrete ceiling structure and the warm wooden floors, are more subdued; whereas Le Corbusier’s exhibition galleries are narrow, almost oppressive, dominated by raw reinforced concrete and a black painted floor. The master of *béton brut* was consistent: he seems to have paid more attention to the architectural cohesion of the museum building than what conditions it would offer for experiencing the artworks within.

Some functional shortcomings of the museum have been eliminated with the subsequent expansions, by adding a range of auxiliary functions necessary for the proper operation of a contemporary museum, such as the auditorium hall, library, museum store, café and restaurant, as well as museum laboratories, custodian rooms and storerooms. The exhibition space has been significantly expanded as well, and it now houses a part of the permanent exhibition and temporary exhibitions. The expansion works, however, have erased neither the novel character nor the architectural consistency of the original museum edifice designed by Le Corbusier.

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<sup>22</sup> Currently leased by New York’s Metropolitan Museum and known as MET Breuer.

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