

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

11 WEST 53 STREET, NEW YORK 19, N. Y.

TELEPHONE: CIRCLE 5-8900

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JAPANESE HOUSE RE-OPENS AT MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

The Japanese House and gardens, one of the Museum of Modern Art's most popular exhibitions, has opened to the public for the second summer at 4 West 54 Street, New York. Already hundreds of visitors, wearing the paper slippers provided by the Museum, are inspecting the sliding paper screens and wood columns, sitting on the broad shaded veranda overlooking the formal Japanese garden with its pool and miniature waterfall, peering in the tea house and looking at the fully equipped kitchen with its earth floor, ovens and utensils hanging on the walls.

This authentic reproduction of a 16th-17th century house was built in Japan two years ago and reassembled in the Museum's outdoor exhibition area last spring. It is a re-creation in New York of an example of Japanese architecture from a period particularly important to modern western architecture. The house was designed by Junzo Yoshimura, leading Japanese architect, and is sponsored by the America-Japan Society in Tokyo and private citizens here and in Japan and by the Museum. It will remain on view through October 16.

During the winter months the house was closed to the public and before it was re-opened in April, it was scrubbed, waxed and polished. New tatami mats were placed on the floors and the gardens were replanted.

In addition to a small leaflet describing the house which is given to all visitors, the Museum this year is publishing a major book, The Architecture of Japan, by Arthur Drexler, Curator of Architecture and director of this exhibition. Photographs of the house in the Museum garden are included along with more than 200 pictures of houses and gardens in Japan.

In the leaflet, and in more detail in his book, Mr. Drexler points out that there are four important characteristics which make Japanese architecture relevant to modern western architecture: post and lintel frame construction; flexible room arrangements; close relation of indoor and outdoor areas, and the ornamental quality of the structural system itself.

The house, which might have been built by a 16th or 17th century Japanese scholar, government official or priest, contains a main room called shoin, a second large room, a 4-mat tea ceremony room built of cryptomeria, pine, bamboo and ochre-colored Kyoto earth, a bath with a sunken wood tub, a kitchen with a stove made of earth and waxed plaster, galleries, verandas and a bridge connecting the tea ceremony room with the main section of the house.

Isolated columns of hinoki (Japanese cypress) support the massive curved roof which is covered with 20 to 50 layers of cypress bark. Sliding interior and exterior
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walls are fitted into the structural framework and can be removed entirely, thus making the house extremely flexible in plan. Interior wall screens made of paper, called fusuma, separate all the rooms. Sliding screens of white translucent paper, called shoji, together with sliding wood weather-doors, called amado, form most of the exterior walls.

Because the outer walls may be opened for the view or even removed completely, the garden around the house is surrounded by a plaster wall to insure privacy.

The Japanese garden is designed to be viewed from the house and is not intended as an outdoor living area. Therefore the broad verandas of the house are used as living space from which to view the garden. A waterfall is an important element in the plan because the sound of falling water is considered soothing and delightful.

The garden is executed in the sansui style, its theme being a Buddhist image of Paradise with heaven symbolized by a mountain in water. The garden is composed of stone formations in water, and cryptomeria, laurel, pine, moss and white sand. The stones were selected for their sculptural qualities by Mr. Yoshimura, the architect, from the mountains near Nagoya and shipped to New York with the house.

By Western standards, the house is barely furnished, as the Japanese, when not using such equipment as bedding, boxes, low tables and chests of drawers, remove and store them. Square cushions covered with orange silk are placed directly on the floor for chairs, and in the main room, there is a built-in desk, built-in cupboards with small decorative sliding doors and open shelves. Moreover, the structure itself is decorative, as Mr. Drexler points out:

The nature of its design and the meticulous craftsmanship with which it is built make a Japanese house seem like a huge piece of furniture. Incorporated in the structure itself are many minor functions for which the West traditionally requires furniture and decoration. Of course the Japanese use paintings and small decorative objects, which they place carefully and frequently change. But, significantly, the empty interiors of a Japanese house are made decorative by the structure itself. Except for the roof beams every part of the structural framing is exposed, and even those parts which are not entirely necessary for structural purposes are made to look as if they were. In reality the exposed structural framework of a Japanese house includes decorative elements, so that the entire structure itself acquires the richness and variety of an ornament.

Landscape paintings in black ink, made by Kaii Higashiyama, decorate the sliding panels in both of the main rooms, and changing displays of paintings or flowers will be on view in the tea ceremony room, as the tea ceremony ritual is designed to encourage the contemplative and intelligent appreciation of works of art, including the objects used in the tea service.

Admission to the house is 60 cents for adults, 20 cents for children. The house is open from noon to 6:30 on weekdays, from 1 to 6:30 on Sundays and holidays. Visitors may use the separate entrance at 4 West 54 Street or come in through the Museum at 11 West 53 Street.

Note: Photographs available from Elizabeth Shaw, Publicity Director,
Museum of Modern Art.