

KIRYU MEIJIKAN

Welcome to Kiryu Meijikan. Before you begin your tour, please listen to a few words of introduction about the building:

Meijikan has become a symbol of the various cultural treasures of the city of Kiryu and was officially designated by the national government as an Important Cultural Property on February 3, 1976 with the title "Former Gunma Prefecture Health Office, Kiryu Meijikan." The building underwent partial restoration between January 1984 and March 1986, resulting in its current authentic appearance. The cost of restoration, including various disaster prevention measures, totaled 186 million yen paid for by the national government and Gunma Prefecture.

To get a good grasp of the significance of this building and why it is a National Important Cultural Property, it helps to know a little about the era in which it was constructed. The Meiji Era began in 1868 with the overthrow of the last Tokugawa Shogun and the restoration of the Emperor to full authority. The era ended in 1912.

During this tumultuous period, the government adopted a policy of modernization and began to introduce Western civilization into the country. Under the slogan, "A Rich Country and a Strong Military," the Meiji government abolished the feudal socioeconomic system, adopted modern production methods, and established universal conscription. It issued Western uniforms to the army and navy and encouraged government officials to wear Western clothes.

Under another slogan, "Civilization and Enlightenment," the government put into effect policies designed to educate the general populace. It encouraged people to eat Western foods, cut off their topknots, and stop wearing swords. The government adopted the Gregorian calendar, implemented telegraph and postal services, started constructing railways, and established a nationwide public school system.

Along with the political, social and cultural reforms of the Meiji Restoration, Western medicine was promoted as a national policy, and thus the way was opened for Japan's present system of modern medicine. Kiryu Meijikan was constructed as a medical school and public health office during this period of cultural upheaval in Japan. Let's tour the building now and see how the policies of the Meiji government influenced its architecture.

But first, please go through the entrance and proceed right to the Business Office. You can purchase an admission ticket there. Once you have your ticket, please return to the main entrance of the building. Follow the guide map and walk through the areas labeled 2 through 6. Be very careful as you ascend and descend the staircases because they are quite steep. Ready? Let's start...

General Description

As you tour through the rooms, listen to the following summary of Meijikan's history:

A classic example of western-style architecture, the elegant "Kiryu Meijikan," was constructed in 1878 in front of the prefectural headquarters in Maebashi on the present location of Gunma Kaikan. It served as the Prefectural Health Office and as a medical school for the instruction of Western medical practice. A short time later, however,

the Health Office was closed, having been absorbed by the prefectural health department. Because of low enrollment, the medical school closed in 1881.

In the years to come, the building served as a prefectural school for girls, a prefectural elementary school, as an exhibition hall for prefectural products and as the Chamber of Agriculture and Industry Headquarters. A decision was made to build Gunma Kaikan in 1928 on the same location, resulting in the removal of the building.

The village of Aioi, now a district of the city of Kiryu, planned to construct a town hall around the same time Meijikan became available, so the prefecture sold the building to the village for a nominal 600 yen. The cost of moving the building from Maebashi to Aioi was 12,000 yen. The work was completed by the following year and was opened in 1929 as the village town hall. In 1954 the village of Aioi consolidated with the city of Kiryu and in 1959, the building was converted to Aioi Kominkan or community center. Meijikan became the symbol of the Aioi district and was loved by the local populace.

Meijikan was designated a National Important Cultural Property on February 3, 1977 and underwent partial renovation and preservation.

We now turn to a description of Meijikan's unique architectural style, known as Giyofu Architecture. Please continue your tour through the rooms of the building as you listen to this description.

Kiryu Meijikan is a two-storey building, constructed in the "Giyofu" style typical of the early Meiji Era. "Giyofu" literally means "mimicked Western-style" architecture. Such buildings outwardly resemble Western-style structures, but rely on traditional Japanese craftsmanship for construction. As knowledge of Western techniques spread throughout the country, Giyofu architecture gradually disappeared.

After the Meiji Restoration of 1868, the government rapidly began to adopt Western technology and culture. Diet buildings, various government ministry buildings and factories all reflect the surge of Western influence at the end of the 19th century in Japan. Foreign technical experts were invited to come as consultants. In addition, there was a great push to foster the growth of Japanese technicians and experts. These trained professionals worked in large cities; in the countryside, however, buildings continued to be constructed by local craftsmen according to traditional methods. The work they were accustomed to, such as installing tatami mats to be used with floor cushions, did not prepare them for new assignments such as crafting desks and chairs for schools using wood flooring. As a result, local carpenters had to employ their traditional skills creatively to erect Western-looking buildings. This resulted in the unique style known as, "Giyofu" architecture, examples of which can only be found in the Japanese countryside.

This building is one of only a few remaining examples of early western architecture in the Kanto area. The rooms have many Japanese stylistic features while the external ornamentation is completely western. In this sense, the building is truly pseudo-western in construction. The splendid harmony of western architectural motifs and traditional Japanese craftsmanship is one of the building's most unique aspects.

As you continue your tour, please listen to the following detailed description of the building:

Building Description

The total floor area of the building is 255.74 square meters. The total area of the property is 511.48 square

meters. The rooms are situated symmetrically to the left and right of the main entrance, with two wings on each end of the building, making a squared U formation. The first floor is fronted by a porch, the second floor by a balcony.

The extension of the building to the left and right of the main entrance contributes to an air of spaciousness. The staircases on each end of the building lead directly from the first floor porch to the second floor balcony, allowing direct access to each of the rooms on the second floor from the balcony. Until the Meiji Era, Japanese architecture did not usually place importance on independent access to rooms. The effort to construct rooms each with separate access from the balcony or porch allows for more privacy for each room.

The round pillars to the left and right of the main entrance are carved with vertical grooves. Similar carving is often found on classical Western pillars, however, this is also the type of pillar found in Buddhist architecture called “goma-gara-jakuri” and which is similar to Grecian or Roman columns. The front porch and balcony pillars have decorated bases and elaborate cap pieces carved with leaves on all four sides. The four round pillars to the immediate left and right of the main entrance have large roses carved on their cap pieces. The roses look more like peonies than roses because, at the time, the wood carvers were working from imagination rather than experience, roses being uncommon in Japan during the Meiji Era. A gold leaf chrysanthemum can be seen on the center gable at the front of the building.

A document has been preserved addressed to the Meiji government asking permission to place the imperial chrysanthemum crest on the building. Because this building was to play an important role in the government’s program as a medical school introducing Western medicine and as a prefectural health office spreading proper hygiene to counter contagious disease, permission to use the imperial chrysanthemum crest was given. This crest on the exterior of the building demonstrates the authority which resided in its offices.

The building has a Western exterior while the interior exhibits many typically Japanese characteristics. The front central roof is constructed in the traditional “irimoya” or semi-gabled style while the side wings are “yosemune” construction or hipped (pyramidal) roofs. The roof is tiled with interlocking ceramic tiles and features gargoyles on the corners. At the time of restoration, tiles identical to the original style were produced to completely retiling the roof. The gargoyles were reproduced based on photographs of the originals. Lightning rods are placed on each of the gables.

The framework of the building is constructed using “shakkanhou” or the Japanese system of measurement, making its dimensions Japanese, but appearing Western. In this way, Meijikan is truly representative of Giyofu or pseudo-Western architecture. The building has been designated an Important Cultural Asset since February 1976. Partial restoration of the building took place between January 1984 and March 1986.

The building is painted around the eaves and cornices with a plaster coat. The building itself is painted white and has wood clapboard siding. The front face of the building is plastered.

Here are some other details about the features of the rooms and building:

The interior walls and ceilings are papered with white paper speckled with gray mica. The originally imported wallpaper can still be seen. The ceilings in some of the rooms are papered with handmade indigo-dyed Kiryu *washi*.

The doors to the various rooms are approximately 120 cm. wide. The doors of the main entrance and guest

parlor are double, French-style doors.

Unlike traditional Japanese windows which slide horizontally, all of the windows in the building open and close vertically..

The First Floor Exhibition Room

Since its construction as a public health office and medical school in Maebashi, the building has been employed over the years in various capacities. Signs, wallpaper fragments, and documents relating to the relocation and preservation of the building are exhibited in this room.

The Conference Room

Various antiques are displayed in this room. In addition, black lacquer furniture of the same style used by the Meiji Imperial Household Agency and the Imperial Family is exhibited here.

The Second Floor Parlor

This room is furnished with elegant black lacquer tables and chairs, inlaid with gold leaf. The chair cushions are padded with horse hair. This room is often used by Kiryu citizens for taking commemorative pictures of family members.

The Second Floor Conference and Exhibition Rooms

There are two conference rooms on the second floor, one large and one small. The Exhibition Room is used for regularly scheduled exhibits and can also be used by the public free of charge to exhibit private collections.

The Coffee and Tea Room

Visitors can enjoy cake and coffee while listening to nostalgic tunes played on the gramophone or antique music box.

This is the end of the tour. We hope you have enjoyed your visit... please tell others about the Kiryu Meijikan and urge them to visit as well!