

# The Art Museum Story that Reads Like a Screenplay

There's a prince and a princess, a beautiful place and beautiful people, art and fashion, turbulent times and machinations. It's a love story, but it's more than just a walk in the park.

The former residence of Prince Asakano-miya Yasuhiko is now the Tokyo Metropolitan Teien Art Museum. The gardens (or *teien*, which give the museum its name) are splendid. The Japanese Garden remains from when this was an imperial residence, and there is now also the Lawn Space. The Koka teahouse in the Japanese Garden, deemed an Important Cultural Property, has begun sponsoring a popular series of tea ceremonies. The tea ceremony with English guidelines is very popular. However this story is more about the wonderful Art Deco villa.

## “Art Deco is about materials, beautiful materials”

While in France in the 1920s, fascinated by the beauty of Art Deco, Prince Asaka and Princess Nobuko decided to incorporate its glories into their new residence. They commissioned the French artist Henri Rapin to design the interiors of the principal rooms. Architectural design and construction were realized by the Imperial Household Ministry's Construction Bureau. The residence is itself a work of art—the result of the enthusiasm of the prince and princess and the combined abilities of Japanese and French designers, architects, and craftsmen.

Museum Director Toyojiro Hida explains. “Art Deco is about materials, beautiful materials, and skilled production or manufacture. Look at the details. And consider the passion and sense of the main director of the project, Princess Nobuko. She designed and made many specific requests herself.”

The Anteroom and the astonishing Perfume Tower that predominates the space were designed by Henri Rapin. It was due to the princess's creativity that the purpose of this piece was changed from a fountain, to that of a perfume diffuser. The glass relief doors of the entrance hall were specially designed by René Lalique, to Nobuko's stipulations. The entire structure was developed in this way with her advocacy. There are few Art Deco villas remaining in the world, but the Asaka Residence, in one of Tokyo's luxury residential areas, Shirokane, is a stunning example.

## a dazzling array of iconic monuments epitomizing the style appeared

Art Deco, one of the first truly international styles, is named after the International Exposition of

Modern Decorative and Industrial Arts held in Paris in 1925. It had a major influence in the design of fashion, jewelry, furniture, glass, metalwork, textiles and other decorative arts. In the years immediately following the exposition, the art and design shown there were reiterated around the world. Almost overnight a dazzling array of iconic monuments epitomizing the style appeared. These include the Academy Award statuette known as the Oscar® (1928), the Empire State Building (1931), and the Los Angeles City Hall (1928).

## Princess Nobuko was the ultimate modern girl

And the Roaring Twenties were dazzling times. There was social and political turbulence. There was modern technology such as automobiles and telephones, radios and airplanes. There was jazz. It was into this world that the eighth daughter of the Emperor Meiji, Princess Nobuko, ventured, and she loved it. She was the ultimate modern girl.

And this is a love story! Like most royalty, Prince Asaka was a soldier. In 1923, while the dashing, then lieutenant colonel was in France studying, he was badly injured in a terrible automobile accident, and Princess Nobuko went to Paris for a number of years to nurse him. It was during this time the couple visited the 1925 Art Deco Exposition and the rest is history. But dark clouds were gathering. Tragically, Nobuko would pass away, just six months after the residence is completed. As a soldier, the prince had already fought in two wars, and his battle days were not yet over, but that, dear readers, is his story.

The glass relief doors of the entrance hall designed by René Lalique.



The view from the Anteroom and Perfume Tower through to the Salon, all designed by Henri Rapin.

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