

MAGNIFICENT OBSESSION

Frank Lloyd Wright's Buildings and Legacy in Japan

DIRECTED AND PRODUCED BY KAREN SEVERNS
AND KOICHI MORI

DISTRIBUTED BY NEW YORKER FILMS
DVD, 126 MINUTES, COLOR, 2005

Reviewed by Elizabeth M. Owen

The celebrated modern American architect Frank Lloyd Wright (1867–1959) is less well known as an enthusiastic collector, exhibitor, and dealer of Asian art, Japanese *ukiyo-e* woodblock prints in particular. The recently-released documentary, *Magnificent Obsession: Frank Lloyd Wright's Buildings and Legacy in Japan*, contributes to the growing body of scholarship that explores Wright's profound engagement with Asian art and architecture.¹ This DVD's combination of rare film footage, plans, models, and photos with comments by leading Wright experts is sure to delight Wright aficionados, as well as students in high school and college courses.

Japan is the only country outside of the United States that is home to buildings designed by Frank Lloyd Wright. These reflect and symbolize close connections between Japan and the West. Wright's impact on Japan was so profound that thirty-two Wright-related terms appear in the Japanese architectural vocabulary. *Magnificent Obsession* highlights the connections between Japanese architectural traditions and Wright, his atelier, and early modern Western architecture. Moreover, it examines Wright's enduring legacy in Japan and how even today he continues to enrich Japanese traditions through architecture.

The documentary interweaves historical details, events in Wright's career, his soap-opera-like personal life, and fourteen buildings designed and/or constructed in Japan, as well as buildings by his followers. Japan's welcoming of foreign experts and technology in the later nineteenth century set the stage for Western-style architecture often built of imported brick and in eclectic combinations of Western styles.



The Imperial Hotel, still standing, after the great earthquake of 1923. Image source: Screen capture from the film. ©2007 Facets Multi-Media, Inc.

Thanks to his impressive collection of Japanese woodblock prints, Wright was familiar with Japanese art and architecture long before his first trip to Japan in 1905. According to *Magnificent Obsession*, Wright experienced a “second golden age” because of his engagement with Japan. From the prints and during several visits to Japan, Wright confirmed his own ideas as he absorbed and adapted Japanese timber-frame architectural features and ultimately developed what he called an “organic” architecture unifying man with nature. Details found in traditional Japanese buildings, such as the extensive use of natural materials, broad, overhanging roof eaves, open, flowing spaces, strong horizontality, and interior-exterior connections, among others, characterized Wright's quintessential Prairie and Usonian Houses. Likewise, these Japanese features appear in many of Wright's public and private buildings in the US and Japan.

The DVD outlines the saga of Wright's Imperial Hotel, Japan's first world-class hotel, from the initial negotiations and designs to the hotel's survival, nearly unharmed, of the Great Kanto Earthquake on opening day in 1923, and ultimately its heart-wrenching razing. Today, visitors to Meijimura, near Nagoya, experience only small portions of the once-grand Imperial in reconstructions of the main lobby and bar. Other extant Wright buildings in Japan are also open to visitors.

Magnificent Obsession explores Wright's interpersonal relationships with Japanese patrons, clients, associates, his students, and followers from around the world. Often overlooked, Wright's atelier and assistants on the Jiyu Gakuen in Tokyo, the Arinobu Fukuhara Villa near Hakone, and the Tazaemon Yamamura House near Osaka, among others, re-



Wright (center) in Japan with (from left to right): His son, John Lloyd Wright, Wright's assistant, Japanese architect, Arato Endo, and the Imperial Hotel manager, Aisaku Hayashi. Image source: Screen capture from the film. ©2007 Facets Multi-Media, Inc.

ceive deserved recognition. Followers, emulators, and imitators, including Antonin Raymond, Arata Endo, and Yoshiya Tanoue, preserved Wright's design philosophies in Japan for nearly a century.

Wright's impact on Japan was so profound that thirty-two Wright-related terms appear in the Japanese architectural vocabulary.



Wright (seated, left) visited the Great Buddha in Kamakura, Japan in 1921 with members of his team. Image ©2007 Facets Multi-Media, Inc.

This DVD is an excellent resource because it combines early modern Western architecture familiar to most students with traditional Japanese cultural and architectural features that may be less well known. Viewing *Magnificent Obsession* in Western and/or Japanese art and architectural history classes, as well as in studio and design courses, would highlight meeting points between East and West. Instructors may refer to detailed information available on the companion Web site, www.magnificentobsession.org. Another related Web site, www.wrightinJapan.org, provides invaluable information on current preservation efforts, news, and other features related to Wright and Japan. Thanks to *Magnificent Obsession* and its related resources, even the most enthusiastic fans will learn something new about Frank Lloyd Wright and his passion for Japanese art and architecture. ■

NOTE

1. See Julia Meech, *Frank Lloyd Wright and the Art of Japan: The Architect's Other Passion* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2001) and Kevin H. Nute, *Frank Lloyd Wright and Japan: The Role of Traditional Japanese Art and Architecture in the Work of Frank Lloyd Wright* (New York: Routledge, 2000), among other publications. See also *Frank Lloyd Wright & Japanese Art*, DVD written by Maia Rutman and directed by Kenneth Love (Kenneth A. Love International LLC, 1997).



DVD cover.
©2007 Facets Multi-Media, Inc.

ELIZABETH M. OWEN, PhD is Assistant Professor of Asian Art History at the University of Denver, where she teaches courses on Chinese, Japanese, and Silk Road visual and material culture. She is currently working on a book entitled *Love Lost: Qian Xuan (c. 1235–1307) and Images of Emperor Ming Huang and Yang Guifei*, which focuses on perhaps the most famous love story in Chinese history, and its representations from the eighth to the fourteenth century in literature and painting.

STILL LIFE (*Sanxia haoren*)

DIRECTED BY JIA ZHANGKE
DISTRIBUTED BY NEW YORKER FILMS
DVD, 108 MINUTES, COLOR, 2006

Reviewed by Xurong Kong
and Sue Gronewold

In contrast to the so-called “Fifth Generation” filmmakers who used only 35mm cameras, Jia Zhangke, perhaps the most prominent of the “Sixth Generation,” prefers to use digital equipment, which seems less professional but also more convenient. This equipment is ideal to carry on Jia’s cinematic mission: to focus on the gritty life of the lower classes in China. Jia feels it regretful that China, with its rich continuous civilization, lacks detailed records on the history of its ordinary people. *Still Life* aims at reflecting this group’s life and work—in a China undergoing great change.

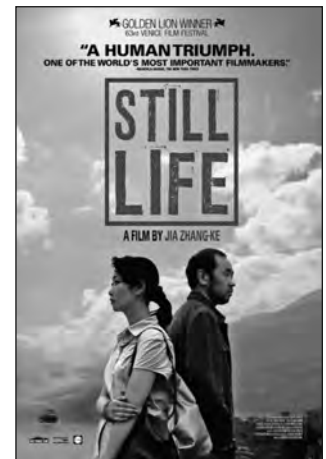
Like many people in modern societies with memories of an older world, or like China with its long history, these ordinary people face an old problem: how to balance traditions of the past with conditions of the present.

The movie takes place in Fengjie, Sichuan, a historical town, which appears on the back of 10 *kuai* Chinese bank notes and was depicted by the great Chinese poet Li Bai (701–762) in his poem “Early Departure from White Emperor Fortress”:

*At dawn I took leave of the white Emperor
In the middle of luminous clouds,
The thousand miles to Jiangling,
I have returned in a single day.
With the voices of gibbons on both banks
crying incessantly,
My frail boat had already passed
Ten thousand towering mountains.¹*

The Three Gorges Dam floodwaters, however, may cause this ancient town to disappear forever, as present threatens past. Given this backdrop, the film depicts two separate lives: a man, Han Sanming, and a woman, Shen Hong, both from far-off Shanxi, who go to this historic river town in search of their absent spouses.

Sixteen years earlier, Han, a poor villager, bought his wife. Soon after their marriage, police sent her back to her hometown. When Han belatedly tried to track her down using an address she left for him, he found her home already submerged. He decides to stay and keep looking for her, finding work in the only available occupation: dismantling the city before its final flooding. Thus the insistent sound of hammering and the



Poster for Still Life. ©2006 New Yorker Films.