



Rice Field (Tokusa, Yamaguchi city)

Rustic houses and rice fields in Yamaguchi

Kitagawa Chiori

Prologue

So what does Japan have to offer the world from its corner of Asia? There are many aspects to this question, but in my opinion the most significant offering we can make is the Japanese aesthetic, its eye for beauty backed by a long history of development. This ability to see through to the underlying beauty of things should receive much more attention.

Yanagi Soetsu (2018). *The Japanese Perspective*, in: *The Beauty of Everyday Things*: 146. (M. Brase, Trans.). Penguin Classics. (Original work published in 1957). (*1)

During my October 2019 stay in Yamaguchi prefecture, the westernmost prefecture of Honshu, Japan's main island, I had the opportunity to visit the Doigahama archaeological site and its museum (*2), and to stay at two different traditional Japanese style houses. Yamaguchi's rich tradition of textile handicrafts was well detailed in one of the other essays (*3). Here I would like to mention another traditional craft by introducing two houses, one built around 50 years ago and the other over 400 years ago (then rebuilt 200 years ago), both by experienced carpenters/craftsmen. Those houses were recently restored and renovated by a general incorporated association "Onnatachino Kominka おんなたちの古民家 (*4)", which has been taken on the challenging activity of maintaining old houses and evaluating if they need conservation, restoration and/or renovation. "Onnatachino Kominka" also pairs owners who want to maintain and restore or renovate old houses with hard-to-find expert carpenters and craftsmen who still have the traditional craftsmanship needed to be able to work on such old houses.

Rustic Houses

Having passed through several tunnels and mountainous views with dark green trees, the Shinkansen (the Bullet train) reached Yamaguchi prefecture which is famous for its fisheries, Hagi ware (pottery) and hot springs. Yamaguchi is also known as a place that witnessed historical events at significant turning points throughout the history of Japan.



“Ranma 鸞家” is about 50 years old, built in the style of traditional Japanese architecture typical for houses of that time (Yuta Onsen, Yamaguchi city).



Tea room in Ranma: looking into the Ro 炉 (sunken hearth).

“Ranma 鸞家”, one of the rustic houses, is located in Yuta-Onsen (a hot spring town) in Yamaguchi city (the prefectural capital). It is about 50 years old, built in the style of traditional Japanese architecture typical for houses of that time. The house has a graceful tea room built by Takaaki Yamamoto, master carpenter of the tea ceremony house/architecture. Apart from that, it was designed with a traditional floor plan with a beautiful garden.

The other one, “Dengakuan 田楽庵”, is much older and was originally built 400 years ago as a sake (Japanese rice wine) storehouse. Two hundred years ago it was relocated and reconstructed where it stands today, in Tokusa, Atou-cho, Yamaguchi city. Eventually, it was restored/renovated in 2013 by “Onnatachino Kominka”. It was delightful to have the opportunity to stay at such quaint houses, as one does not often encounter some of the architectural characteristics of older houses in modern Japanese dwellings. These features include a floor plan of four rooms with tatami mats, laid in the auspicious Tano-ji shape representing fertile rice field, a hinoki (cypress) bathtub and an outdoor bath, an earth floor in the house, and Yukimi shoji screens (screens of panels that slide up and down). The house retains the original building materials including very robust, dark coloured cross beams from the 400 year-old sake storehouse.



Dengakuan 田楽庵, a house with traditional architectural features, originally build as a sake storehouse 400 years ago (Tokusa, Yamaguchi city).



Inside of the Dengakuan with an Irori fireplace and 400 year-old cross beams.



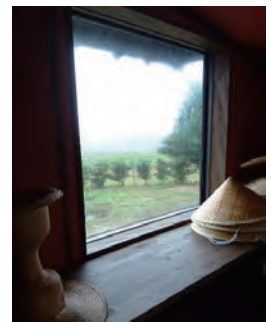
A room with tatami mats, laid in the auspicious Tano-ji shape representing fertile rice field, and Yukimi shoji screens (screens of panels that slide up and down).



Hinoki (cypress) bathtub and an outdoor bath.



View of the rice field from a window in Dengakuan.





“Dengakuan” stands at the foot of the mountains and is surrounded by a rice field. Rice was brought from the continent to northern Kyusyu (Japan’s third largest island, immediately southwest of Honshu) at the end of the Jomon Period (14,000BC-300BC) and spread eastward, including Yamaguchi prefecture, during the Yayoi Period (300BC-300AD).

At some places near “Dengakuan”, the rice was already harvested, but elsewhere golden-brown rice plants were still standing and swaying in the breeze. This rice once stood in the Yayoi Period and now stands majestically in the present. For those who can return to Japan only from time to time, such ambience can evoke feelings of pleasure and nostalgia for my homeland.



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Ranma (Yuta Onsen, Yamaguchi city)

Epilogue

Both houses I stayed in Yamaguchi city were collectively called “old houses 古民家”, but they were built in different periods and for different uses; “Ranma” purely as a dwelling in the middle of the 20th century, and “Dengakuan” both as a dwelling and a sake store house in the 17th century, followed by its reconstruction in the 19th century. Hence it is not surprising that they had, indeed, different characteristics. The first was called a house with feminine features, while the other was described as having a more masculine appearance. Be it true or not, the former showed sensitive features with fine details, while the latter was robust and imposing. The subtle commonality between the houses is that both were built with master craftsmanship with expert techniques and experience. The beauty and the knowledge of the houses should remain and be transferred to coming generations.



Dengakuan (Tokusa, Yamaguchi city)



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Kitagawa, C. (co-authors: Kahl, J./Vittmann, G.) 2016, The Tomb of the Dogs at Asyut: Faunal Remains and Other Selected Objects, The Asyut Project 9, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag.

The Asyut Project website (English, German and Japanese):
<https://www.aegyptologie.uni-mainz.de/das-projekt-lage-der-stadt-und-ausgangspunkt-the-project-location-of-the-city-and-the-starting-point/>

Information

- *1 Yanagi Soetsu (2018). The Beauty of Everyday Things: 146. (M. Brase, Trans.). Penguin Classics. (Original work published in 1957).
<https://www.amazon.com/The-Beauty-of-Everyday-Things/dp/0241366356>
- *2 See the following essay in Japan-Insights.
Culture, Tradition and innovation along the Rice-Road:
Doigahama site from the Yayoi Period in Yamaguchi Prefecture
https://doc.japan-insights.jp/pdf/JIN_TOPIC_20200526175243.pdf
<https://topics.japan-insights.jp/#prehistorylandscapes>
- *3 Meeting local craft in Yamaguchi
<https://topics.japan-insights.jp/#kimonoorigami>
- *4 Onnatachino Kominka
<http://yamakomi.com/cn32/pg265.html>



Web-Site
japan-insights
<https://www.japan-insights.jp>