

From Daimyo's Castle to Duke's Mansion

Until the late nineteenth century, the Mohri clan were feudal lords (daimyo) who controlled all of modern-day Yamaguchi from their family seat at Hagi Castle on the Sea of Japan. As Japan moved towards a more modern, centralized form of government with the Meiji Restoration, most of the daimyos' castles were destroyed to prevent them from revolting. Along with many other castles throughout Japan, the Mohri clan's Hagi Castle was torn down in 1874 because it was a relic of the old regime that the new Meiji government was intent on sweeping aside.

That meant that when political stability finally returned to Japan, the Mohri family—despite having a mansion in Tokyo—had no suitably grand house to live in in their own ancestral lands. Duke Mohri Motonori decided to build himself a new main residence in Yamaguchi in 1892, but construction was delayed by a series of wars. Building work finally got under way in 1912, and the mansion was finished by 1916.

The mansion was designed by the Japanese architect Hara Takesaburo. A large and complex structure, the way it combines traditional, high-quality materials with all the most up-to-date conveniences defines it as a masterpiece of modern Japanese architecture. Of a total of sixty rooms, just two are Western-style.

Two Family Crests

Throughout the mansion, you will encounter the two crests of the Mohri clan. If you look up as you enter the porte-cochère, you will see both the *ichi-ni-mitsuboshi* (a single horizontal line above three circles) and the *omodaka* (three-leaf arrowhead). These crests are repeated throughout the house on everything from lighting fixtures to sliding door pulls.

Precious Woods and Ancient Trees

The ceiling panels of the porte-cochère are made of zelkova with a beautiful grain, and the whole house is full of rare and precious woods that communicate the wealth and status of the Mohri family. The floor of the first corridor in the house, for example, is made of two slabs of Taiwanese zelkova, each around eight meters long and 1.5 meters wide. For the pillars and the lateral beams, *hinoki* cypress from Kiso is used. Meanwhile, the sliding doors in the reception rooms are made of Yakusugi, 1,000-year-old cedar from the island of Yakushima.

A Guest Wing Fit for an Emperor

The grandest section of the house—and the only part that is two stories high—is the guest wing (*kyakuma-to*), which was built specifically to host visits from important people, including even the emperor. It consists of three linked reception rooms (*obiroma*) with intricate coffered ceilings. A discreet passage leads from the reception room to the guest bedroom behind enabling the emperor or other important visitors to move from private to public space without encountering anyone else. The mansion was inhabited for fifty years, from 1916 to 1966. Over that time it received a total of three imperial visits, one from Emperor Taisho and two from Emperor Showa (Hirohito).

Room with a View

The second story of the guest wing is reached by way of a massive staircase, with three landings and steps made of a single block of *hinoki* cypress each. More modest in scale and casual in design, this upper floor with its magnificent view over the garden is where the guests came to relax.

More things to look out for in the Mohri Principal Residence ([Link to #10.](#))