

The National Museum of Western Art and World Heritage Status

The National Museum of Western Art became a World Heritage site in 2016, when it was included as part of a transnational designation made up of 17 sites across seven countries. Called “the Architectural Work of Le Corbusier, an Outstanding Contribution to the Modern Movement,” this inscription highlights buildings designed by the French architect Le Corbusier (born Charles-Édouard Jeanneret-Gris; 1887–1965). A pioneer of Modernist architecture, Le Corbusier developed a variety of innovative concepts and techniques in response to the social challenges of his time. He argued for standardized, “human-sized” buildings in which function comes before appearance, breaking with the classical focus on aesthetics in favor of minimal, “rational” designs, and uniting architecture with urban planning to design entire cities, such as Chandigarh in northern India.

Le Corbusier incorporated several of his groundbreaking ideas into the National Museum of Western Art, which opened in 1959. Its architectural characteristics and appearance have been preserved nearly unchanged since then, prompting the French government to recommend the museum building for World Heritage status as part of the Le Corbusier designation, which was first proposed to UNESCO in 2008 and approved eight years later. The building is, to the extent that is practical, maintained in accordance with Le Corbusier’s design and the original blueprints, the development of which Le Corbusier left to his Japanese protégés Maekawa Kunio (1905–1986), Sakakura Junzo (1901–1969), and Yoshizaka Takamasa (1917–1980). All three went on to have successful careers of their own, with Maekawa designing an annex for the museum in 1979, as well as two other major buildings in Ueno Park, the Tokyo Bunka Kaikan (1961) and the Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum (1975).