

Overview of Kyoto National Museum

When the Kyoto National Museum first opened its doors in 1897, Japan had just experienced a cultural revolution. The concept of a museum open to the public was a product of a wave of Westernization that threatened to eclipse traditional Japanese culture. The notion that a national government should operate such an institution was still new, as was the idea that works of fine and decorative art that had been preserved in temples and shrines as sacred treasures could be treated as objects of aesthetic appreciation. Soon, the designation of highly important works as National Treasures was also adopted. These changes in popular thinking underlay the creation of the museum.

At this early stage, Kyoto National Museum became one of only three national museums in Japan, a distinction shared with the Tokyo and Nara National Museums. Its first mission was relatively simple: to protect traditional works found in temples and shrines in and around Kyoto. Many temples in Kyoto and around the country lost their basis of economic support due to the restructuring of society after the Meiji Restoration in 1868, and then suffered a severe blow from the anti-Buddhist movement that raged early in the Meiji era.

For more than a century, the museum has collected, conserved, and preserved works of art that could be exhibited to the public. It has evolved into a leader in the field, with a professional staff serving not only its community and nation but the world as well.