

Meiji Kotokan and Main Gate

The distinctive redbrick façade of the Meiji Kotokan, formerly the main hall of the museum when it was still known as the Imperial Museum of Kyoto, is a stately reminder of a bygone era. It was completed in 1897 when the idea of national museums has only recently been introduced to Japan. Although currently closed to the public in preparation for seismic retrofitting, the building remains the undisputed symbol of the Kyoto National Museum.

The building was designed by Katayama Tokuma (1854–1917), a leading student of British architect Josiah Conder (1852–1920) who helped introduce Western architecture to Japan. Katayama was employed by the Imperial Household Ministry and was responsible for designing the Akasaka Palace (the State Guest House in Tokyo, a National Treasure), as well as major buildings at the Tokyo and Nara National Museums. Katayama designed the building in the French Renaissance style with a slate-tiled mansard roof with glass skylights. The interior measures slightly over 3,000 square meters, with more than 2,000 square meters devoted to exhibition space. The floor plan includes a foyer and an elegant central gallery with columns arranged in the so-called Egyptian style as well as 10 exhibition rooms of varying sizes surrounding three central courtyards. Above the main entrance is a pediment with a chrysanthemum medallion flanked by images of two Buddhist divinities associated with the arts.

The original main gate, located on the west side of the museum grounds, is no longer used as the main entrance. Constructed in 1895, its ornate style matches that of the former main hall. The elaborate iron gate is flanked by two small, domed structures of red brick that once served various functions such as ticket sales. The gate offers a spectacular view of the West Garden and the Meiji Kotokan Hall against the rolling Higashiyama hills in the background.

Both the Meiji Kotokan and the former main gate were designated Important Cultural Properties in 1969.