

Old Kanazawa Army Armories: Historic Brick Buildings of the Ishikawa Prefectural Museum of History

The Ishikawa Prefectural Museum of History is housed in three long red-brick buildings that served as armories for the Japanese Imperial Army in the early twentieth century. They were originally constructed in 1909, 1913, and 1914. The buildings are important examples of both turn-of-the-century military architecture and Japan's short-lived use of brick as a building material.

Historical Context

Early twentieth-century state-built architecture was heavily influenced by Western models. After a two-century period of isolation, Japan's borders were forcibly opened to trade in 1854 following the arrival of a United States Navy squadron possessing far superior firepower. Newly aware of a power imbalance with Western countries, Japan kicked off a period of rapid modernization. At the time, many Japanese leaders felt the fastest route to closing that gap was adopting elements of Western culture—including architecture. Foreign architects were sometimes invited to design buildings, and in other cases, domestic architects worked independently to replicate the appearance of Western buildings. Because red brick was associated with European architecture, it came into vogue in the late nineteenth century. This launched a flurry of domestic brick production to meet the demand for ambitious government projects, such as the original Tokyo Station. Unfortunately, the material proved poorly suited to a country with frequent earthquakes. It fell out of use after only a few decades.

Key Features

In a renovation project that ran from 1983 to 1990, the exteriors of the three red-brick buildings were restored to their original state. Each of the two-story buildings measures about 90 meters in length and has a steep gable roof covered in Japanese-style clay tiles with ornamental finials. Like many Western-style buildings of the period, the long sides are bilaterally symmetrical. From the double-doored main entrance in the center, each side mirrors the other with pairs of arched windows on both floors interspersed with thick pilasters. The presence of heavy, black iron grates and solid steel shutters on the windows attests to both the value and danger of the artillery and munitions once stored inside. By the time of restorations, all of these steel shutters had been removed—likely smelted down for other uses—but the restoration team was able to recreate them based on a surviving pair found in the attic of Building Three.

Much of the original interiors had to be replaced during the renovations to improve earthquake resistance and allow for adequate housing of the museum collections. However, some original elements were deliberately preserved. In Building Three, visitors can see high into the rafters and spot the rope and pulley system that was used to lift heavy armaments onto the second floor. A display in the lobby of Building Two has preserved parts of the original support structures, such as a brick pile and wooden support beam, to show how the buildings were constructed.

Current Use

After World War II, the structures were used by the Kanazawa College of Art before coming under the management of the prefectural government in 1972. The Ishikawa Prefectural Museum of History took up residence in 1986. Now, the three buildings house the museum's exhibits and offices, as well as the Kaga-Honda Museum, which displays treasures from the collection of a powerful samurai family.

The Old Kanazawa Army Armories were designated Important Cultural Properties in 1990.