

Welcome to the Former Kaichi School Building

The Former Kaichi School Building is a characteristic example of the pseudo–Western style architecture that was popular during the 1870s. The building now serves as a museum, but it was originally one of the first public elementary schools in Japan. In 2019, the Former Kaichi School Building was the first modern-era school building to be designated a National Treasure.

Origins of the Kaichi School

Following the Meiji Restoration in 1868, Japan abandoned its closed-border policy after nearly 250 years of isolation. The government introduced concepts and technologies from the West as part of a modernization movement under the slogan “civilization and enlightenment” (*bunmei kaika*). This Western influence changed daily life considerably: a constitution was ratified, a public education system was established, and horse-drawn carriages, cameras, and Western clothing all became commonplace in the span of just a few years.

As part of these social reforms, the Chikuma Prefectural School was founded in 1872 and renamed the Kaichi School the following year. Classes were originally held on the former grounds of a Buddhist temple on the bank of the Metoba River. However, residents were eager to build a school building that would match the new, modern curriculum.

At that time, the national government had very little funding available for new educational infrastructure, and the funds for the new building had to be raised locally. Seventy percent of the costs were covered by donations, and the remaining 30 percent was raised through alternative means, such as dismantling defunct temple buildings and selling off the lumber.

Tateishi Seijū (1829–1894) and *Giyōfū* Architecture

Matsumoto-born master carpenter Tateishi Seijū was chosen to design the new Kaichi School building. He was known for both his skill as an artisan and his strong desire to learn more about Western architecture.

Before construction began, Tateishi made trips to Tokyo and Yokohama to study the latest Western-style buildings. The museum in the Former Kaichi School Building has collected more than 200 of Tateishi’s notebooks, which he filled with sketches, blueprints, and commentary on what he saw during his travels.

The Kaichi School's pseudo-Western (*giyōfū*) architecture was considered the cutting edge of design in the 1870s. With the opening of the country, photographs and illustrations of buildings in the West had begun to enter Japan, but technical knowledge of their actual construction methods was still limited. Carpenters who had been trained only in traditional woodworking nonetheless imitated the appearance of these buildings using the techniques that were familiar to them.

The resulting architecture is a curious blend of Western and Japanese elements, and this idiosyncratic style can be seen at the Former Kaichi School Building. The façade was designed to resemble stone or brick but is actually wood and stucco. Similarly, the main entrance is decorated with an unusual combination of a dragon and two cherubs.

After completing the Former Kaichi School Building, Tateishi oversaw the construction of many other civic facilities in the area, such as the Former Matsumoto Courthouse, which once stood in the second bailey of Matsumoto Castle.

Education in the Meiji Era (1868–1912)

The educational system underwent various reforms during the late nineteenth century. Education during the Edo period (1603–1867) consisted mainly of reading, writing, and arithmetic. These basic skills were taught through the study of Confucian texts and other classical writing from China. The new Meiji-era system was instead modeled on educational programs in Western countries, and it emphasized the study of technology and the sciences alongside literacy and math. The Kaichi School was the only school in the prefecture to also include “English language and culture” (*eigaku*) as one of its core subjects.

The Kaichi School opened to an enrollment of 1,051 students. Although the school enrollment ratio in the 1870s was only around 30 percent of eligible children nationwide, enrollment at the Kaichi School was closer to 60 percent. The prefectural governor (*gonrei*) at the time, Nagayama Moriteru (1826–1902), was an ardent supporter of education, and it seems his enthusiasm was shared by the residents of Matsumoto. The Kaichi School soon had to establish branch locations to accommodate the growing number of students. However, the students at all locations were part of the same “Kaichi School,” with the same curriculum, school rules, and motto. The motto for the boys’ division was “Devotion, Equity, Fortitude” (*ai sei gō*).

From School to Museum

The Kaichi School continued to operate as an elementary school until 1963. However, repeated flooding of the Metoba River had damaged the building, so it was decided that

a new one should be constructed. The old building was designated an Important Cultural Property in 1961 and was moved to its current site in 1964. The Former Kaichi School Building now serves as a museum dedicated to the modern history of education in Japan and includes displays of textbooks and classroom equipment.

Timeline

1872	The Chikuma Prefectural School opens on the grounds of the former Zenkyūin Temple. Unlike earlier domain schools or private academies, all children are allowed to attend, regardless of social status.
1873	The Chikuma Prefectural School is renamed the Kaichi School.
1876	The new, Western-style school building designed by local master carpenter Tateishi Seijū (1829–1894) is completed.
1880	Emperor Meiji (1852–1912) visits the Kaichi School. A classroom on the second floor of the main building is converted to a sitting room for the emperor.
1890	The class structure and teaching curricula at Kaichi are revised to address education gaps by placing similarly skilled students together and forming special classes for students with disabilities.
1891	A library is established at the Kaichi School. Its collection is later used as the basis for the Matsumoto City Central Library.
1896	The Kaichi School buildings are heavily damaged by flooding of the Metoba River. Many of its pseudo-Western design elements are removed.
1906	A small museum is built on the school grounds and opens on September 21 as the “Russo–Japanese War Memorial Museum” (<i>Meiji sanjū-nana-hachi-nen sen’eki kinenkan</i>). This museum was the precursor to the modern Matsumoto City Museum.
1921	The Kaichi School publishes the first issue of <i>Little Flowers</i> , a literary magazine of student work. Publication of the magazine continues until 1935.
1961	The Former Kaichi School Building is designated an Important Cultural Property.
1964	Relocation of the Former Kaichi School Building is completed, and the original pseudo-Western design elements are restored.
2019	The Former Kaichi School Building is designated a National Treasure. It is the first educational building to receive this designation and the second National Treasure in Matsumoto.

