

## **Bank of Japan Otaru Museum**

The Bank of Japan's Otaru Branch was designed to reflect the wealth of the city and the financial power of the national bank. By the mid-1920s, some twenty-five banks were operating in Otaru, compared with thirteen banks in Hokkaido's capital, Sapporo. Otaru was the gateway to Hokkaido in the late nineteenth century; goods and settlers arrived through the port, and commodities such as grain were shipped to various destinations in Honshu, as well as Russia and Europe. The banks facilitated financial transactions and international currency exchange, for the growing port city.

### *Currency reform*

Under the regime of the Tokugawa shoguns (1603–1867), gold and silver coinage was used for international trade. Unequal trade treaties between the shogunate and foreign powers in the mid-nineteenth century undervalued Japanese currency and large quantities of gold were taken out of the country as a result. In response, the Bank of Japan was founded in 1882 to issue banknotes and reform Japan's monetary and financial systems. It came a year after the Meiji government (1868–1912) introduced the yen as the official currency.

In 1885, the Bank of Japan issued its first notes, which were guaranteed in exchange for silver. Then, in 1887, Japan followed many Western countries in adopting gold as the standard for its currency. A branch of the Bank of Japan opened in Otaru in 1893 to facilitate financial transactions in Hokkaido. As well as handling the storage, receipt, and circulation of treasury funds, the Otaru Branch, as it became known, purchased gold panned in Hokkaido to build up its gold reserves.

### *Symbols of success*

A new building for the Bank of Japan in Otaru was constructed over three years from 1909 to 1912. It was designed in the Renaissance Revival style by Tatsuno Kingo (1854–1919), and his protégé Nagano Uheiji (1867–1937). Tatsuno was one of Japan's most famous architects at the time and is best remembered for designing the Bank of Japan

Head Office (1896) in Tokyo's Nihonbashi and the red brick Marunouchi building of Tokyo Station (1914). He was one of the first students of British architect Josiah Conder (1852–1920) at the Imperial College of Engineering (now the Faculty of Engineering at the University of Tokyo).

The two-story Otaru Branch building used new construction methods, including a steel-frame structure and concrete-coated floors and roof for fire prevention. Steel roof trusses made it possible to create a large open space for the banking hall without support pillars. A mezzanine gallery overlooks the banking hall, allowing bank managers to observe the activity below. Throughout the interior, Tatsuno incorporated the symbol of the Bank of Japan—a stylized yen motif. The circular design is printed on Japanese banknotes to this day.

The building's brickwork exterior is covered with cement to resemble stone and protect the bricks from rain and snow. The building has four domes along the roof on the north side, and a four-story watchtower overlooking Otaru Port on its southeast corner.

In operation until 2002, the bank was restored and opened to the public as the Bank of Japan Otaru Museum in 2003. Exhibits include scale models of Otaru's financial district and the original bank vault. Admission is free.