

Sankirō

Constructed in 1931, Sankirō is one of Moji's most beloved historic buildings. Perched on the hillside above Mojikō Station, the large, three-story wooden building overlooks the Kanmon Strait and presents its handsome countenance to the bustling port below. During the early Shōwa era (1926–1989), Sankirō rose to prominence as Moji's leading luxury restaurant. Not merely a place to dine, it functioned also as a social salon for artists, entertainers, socialites, and executives of some of the nation's largest companies and financial institutions.

Architecture

Sankirō is one of the largest restaurant buildings in Kyushu, with a total floor area of more than 1,200 square meters and more than 20 rooms. Its chandelier-bedecked, 116-square-meter banquet hall on the second floor is fronted by a 29-square-meter stage.

One of Sankirō's most notable features is the beautiful craftsmanship of its windows and accompanying transoms, each designed to resemble an image of nature. The Fujikatō-mado (literally, "Mt. Fuji Window") is a bell-shaped window whose outline resembles Japan's most iconic mountain. The Tenkū e no Kaidan, or "Stairway to the Stars," is a staircase flanked by windows that have been named *matsu* (pine), *yama* (mountain), *tsuki* (moon), and *kumo* (cloud).

On April 5, 1931, a correspondent for the local newspaper *Moji Shinpō* praised the building's elegant, bold construction and its blend of old and new, writing, "The view is lovely. The Japanese-style restaurant has a magnificent exterior that is without equal in Kitakyushu."

Miyake Asa: Geisha and Entrepreneur

Sankirō owes its existence to one person: an industrious, enterprising, and slightly mysterious former geisha named Miyake Asa (1854–1937). In her youth, Asa apprenticed as a female entertainer (*geiko*) in Kyoto's Gion district. There, she developed an appreciation for traditional culture and the performing arts. But, feeling hampered by the physical and intellectual constraints of her situation, Asa chose to escape her apprenticeship and pursue her ambitions as a restaurateur. She made the 560-kilometer trip to Moji, and by 1906 she had founded Sankirō.

Asa was in the right place at the right time: the rapid growth of Moji's port jump-started a multitude of commercial enterprises. The city's newly wealthy merchants and traders wanted to dine and be entertained in style, and Sankirō catered to their desires. Asa's fledgling business boomed. Within twenty-five years of leaving Kyoto, Asa had built Sankirō into a pillar of the community, and when she passed away at the age of 83, she left behind an entrepreneurial and artistic legacy that continues today.

Playground of the Rich and Famous

Asa died childless, but her successors, Iseko (1899–1986) and Tamejirō (1895–1988), took over the Miyake family name. Sankirō continued to thrive under their stewardship. The pair enthusiastically supported and participated in the performing arts, staging Noh plays, dances, and *nagauta* (traditional music) to accompany the restaurant's lavish banquets. The venue attracted both literati and glitterati who came to Moji just to visit Sankirō.

Following those heady years, during which Sankirō was the very embodiment of Moji's prosperity, the restaurant went into decline after World War II (1939–1945) and closed its doors in 1955, becoming the private residence of Asa's grandson. On his death in 2004, with his family unable to maintain the building's upkeep, Sankirō seemed headed for demolition, but the residents of Moji rushed to its aid. Local volunteers formed the Association for the Preservation of Sankirō, and within a year they had collected 16,000 signatures and 19 million yen to buy the building and donate it to the city. Today, the building operates as Sankirō Saryō Kaito, a restaurant specializing in puffer fish cuisine. An exhibition room on the ground floor explains its storied history.

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