

Fujiwara Yoshie Memorial Museum (former Ringer residence)

The Fujiwara Yoshie Memorial Museum, known also as the Kōyōkan, sits on a south-facing hill that overlooks the Kanmon Strait. The museum is dedicated to the memory of its eponymous male vocalist and operatic superstar, Fujiwara Yoshie. It is also the site of the former employee residence of the British trading company Holme, Ringer & Co.

Kōyōkan

In 1890, Holme, Ringer & Co. began trading in Shimonoseki through a company named Uryū Shōkai. A Scotsman named Neil Brodie Reid (1868–1920) was hired as a local manager in 1895.

By 1901, maritime trade was booming in Shimonoseki, and a British consulate was established there, paving the way for enterprising companies looking to do business in the region. In 1908, a single-story wooden cottage was converted into a residence for the British employees of Holme, Ringer & Co. This first company residence was named “Kōyōkan,” meaning “house of autumn leaves.” By some accounts, it was at the Kōyōkan that the future world-renowned operatic tenor Fujiwara Yoshie was born.

By 1915, operation of Holme, Ringer & Co. had passed to Sydney A. Ringer (1891–1967), second son of the company’s founder. Sydney built a three-story reinforced concrete house in Shimonoseki for his sons, Michael (1913–1978) and Vanya (1916–1942). This structure, which stood behind the wooden bungalow, was originally called “Rinkyōkan” (literally, “house overlooking the strait”). In 1959, Kōyōkan was demolished after being badly damaged by a typhoon, and the concrete residence was rechristened under the same name. The new Kōyōkan was reopened as a memorial hall in 1983.

Fujiwara Yoshie (1898–1976)

Fujiwara Yoshie rose from a broken family and impoverished beginnings to become a world-famous opera star. At the height of his fame, Fujiwara’s beautiful tenor voice was heard in many of the great opera houses in Europe and America.

Born out of wedlock to Neil Brodie Reid and a *biwa*-playing entertainer named Sakata Kiku (dates unknown), Fujiwara discovered his talent for opera while living in Tokyo in 1918. He gained an opportunity to perform at London’s prestigious Steinway Hall through a chance meeting in 1921 with future prime minister Yoshida Shigeru (1878–1967). By

1923, the *New York Times* had described Fujiwara as “the Japanese Rudolf Valentino.” In 1926, Fujiwara signed a recording deal with Victor Records, at the time the most prestigious recording company in the world.

After World War II (1939–1945), he founded the Fujiwara Opera Company, one of Japan’s oldest opera companies, which is still active today. Fujiwara died on March 22, 1976, at the age of 77.

The Museum Collection

The museum is a treasure trove of memorabilia from the opera star’s life. A portrait of a stern, mustachioed Neil Brodie Reid sits alongside a sepia-tone image of a kimono-clad Sakata Kiku and her beautifully preserved *biwa* lute. Countless magazine and newspaper clippings in Japanese detail Fujiwara’s performances at home and abroad.

In the living room-turned-exhibit space, a working Victrola VV-X VI Type D gramophone plays one of Fujiwara’s early hits. Its original fireplace, period furniture, ornate chandelier, and Fujiwara’s own piano give the museum a homelike feel and provide a glimpse into the private life of a once very public star.