

Uroko House and Observation Gallery

Uroko House is one of the best-known *ijinkan* (“foreigner houses”) in Kobe, and has become emblematic of Kobe’s *ijinkan* architecture as a whole. Primarily of two-story wood construction, it features a cylindrical, castle-like three-story tower that has made the house a prominent local landmark. The name of the house derives from the thousands of scalloped slate tiles covering the exterior, which resemble fish scales, or *uroko*. This technique is traditional in parts of Germany but was totally unfamiliar in Japan during the late Meiji era (1868–1912), when the house was built. Due to this distinctive design, it became a nationally designated Tangible Cultural Property in 1998 and was named by Hyogo Prefecture as one of its “100 best modern houses” in 2009. It was lived in until 1968, and in 1977 it became the first *ijinkan* opened to the public. The house now serves as a museum with historical exhibits that change periodically.

The entryway is located at the base of the centrally placed tower. A central

hall containing the staircase opens onto a spacious parlor to the left. This room is stylishly appointed with large stained-glass windows flanking a fireplace. Beyond it is the dining room, now furnished with museum-quality antiques that aim to recreate the atmosphere of the original residence. Antique sideboards and glass cabinets display an impressive collection of European ceramics and serveware. A small watercolor by the early modernist painter Marc Chagall adorns one wall. The ground floor also has utility and reception rooms, as well as a service wing with a

kitchen. The second-floor library opens onto the generous sunroom, which has a semicircular sitting nook formed by the tower. The windows have delicate triangular tracery, and they provide excellent views of the city and port of Kobe. There is also a parlor and two bedrooms; the smaller of these has been outfitted with antique sports equipment, as if for a young man of the early twentieth century. A short interior balcony connects the bedrooms and provides a view all the way to the downstairs entry. An intriguing seventeenth-century suit of Japanese armor is displayed inside a former closet. To the rear of the second story is the servants' room, located above the ground-floor kitchen.

Next door to Uroko House is the three-story Observation Gallery, which opened in 1982. A modern concrete structure, it has a tower and “fish-scale” tiles modeled after those of the house itself. On the second-floor walls are paintings by the nineteenth-century Barbizon school painter Troyon, and others by Matisse, Denis, Utrillo, Dubuffet, and other popular European painters of the early and mid-twentieth century. The other floors are devoted to changing exhibitions by contemporary artists. A wide picture window on the third floor provides the most expansive view of any Kitano *ijinkan*, encompassing Kobe, the port of Osaka, and Awaji Island. Uroko House and the Observation Gallery are operated by the Uroko Group.