

The Museums of the Far East, Brussels, Belgium

By Jane Standertskjold

'Are they real?' asked my visitor, gazing up at a red, 64-metre high, wooden Japanese tower and an ornate, golden Chinese-style pavilion. The surprise at seeing such exotic buildings in the north of Brussels is matched by delight in discovering that they house fabulous collections of Japanese and Chinese artefacts, including thousands of pieces of export porcelain. Take a peek at the *famille rose* dishes in the Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM) and imagine a glittering salon lined with cabinets of such porcelain, made in China in the 17th and 18th centuries for export to the western market.

They have found the perfect home, displayed in buildings which are themselves products of the late 19th century European fascination with *japonisme*, *chinoiserie* and the Far East. King Leopold II of Belgium, inspired by Alexander Marcel's *Le Tour du Monde* at the 1900 Paris World Exhibition, commissioned Marcel to build the Japanese Tower and Chinese Pavilion at the edge of his estate in Laeken.

The buildings are an eclectic mix of Japanese, Chinese and European design, craftsmanship and materials. The only genuinely Japanese part of the tower is the entrance porch, made by Tokyo carpenter Komatsu Mitsushige, and moved from the *Tour du Monde* in Paris. The rest was built by Belgian carpenters and decorated by French craftsmen, using designs taken from Japanese woodblock prints and incorporating architectural and decorative items ordered from Japan. Similarly the Chinese Pavilion (built as a luxury restaurant, but never used as such), has many external decorations



The Japanese Tower and Garden Kiosk that stands in front of the Chinese Pavilion



The Chinese Pavilion

commissioned from China (stone lions, glazed roof tiles, sculpted woodwork) and a gilded, mirrored interior in the style of *rococo chinoiserie*.

Commencing the tour at the tower, we passed a walled Japanese garden and

entered a richly decorated wooden interior. Glowing cabinets display lacquer, bronze and ivory objects, 17th and 18th century brocade Imari porcelain and high quality *cloissoné* pieces. My favourite is a large bowl in *cloissoné* enamel on a stamped silver ground (*tsuiki-jippo*) by Ogasawara Takikiro, depicting carp swimming between aquatic plants. A wide staircase flanked by stained glass panels leads to the base of the tower itself, and a display of official gifts including two

from the Meiji Emperor.

At the Chinese Pavilion we found glittering reception rooms with mirrors, marble, gilded stucco and decorations of Chinese figures, dragons and paintings of exotic landscapes



The main reception room on the ground floor of the Chinese Pavilion

and *singeries* (monkey tricks) in the style of 18th century French artists. Of the large collection of porcelain on display, particularly appealing is a small *famille rose* dish with a kingfisher, plum blossom and camellias. My Singaporean visitor marvelled at the many *famille verte* pieces and recognised Cornelius Pronk's fourth design, The Arbour, for the Dutch East India Company, although this version is larger and in different colours from the one in the ACM.



Large bowl in cloisonné enamel on a stamped silver ground (*tsuiki-jippo*), created by Ogasawara Takikiro, circa 1900-1905.



Large dish in blue and white porcelain and gold. The dish is rare on account of its size and colours, since The Arbour was more commonly executed in polychrome enamels over the glaze. 1740. Purchased in 1844.

And finally to the Japanese Museum, to view the rich collection of art, chiefly from the Edo period (1600-1868). There are scroll paintings, screens, kimonos, armour and sword ornamentation, lacquered boxes, *inro* (seal-baskets) and *netsuke* (miniature sculptures). Particularly exciting is the world-class collection of prints – some 7,500 by 362 different known artists. A small selection is rotated regularly. In 2013 the Museum will show Hokusai prints of Japanese landscapes and the wonderful suite of *Thirty-Six Views of Mount Fuji* (1830-32).

These Museums of the Far East are unexpected, exotic and very real. For more information please consult the website www.mrah.be.

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