

The Folk Customs Museum in Takayama (Hida, Gifu Prefecture)

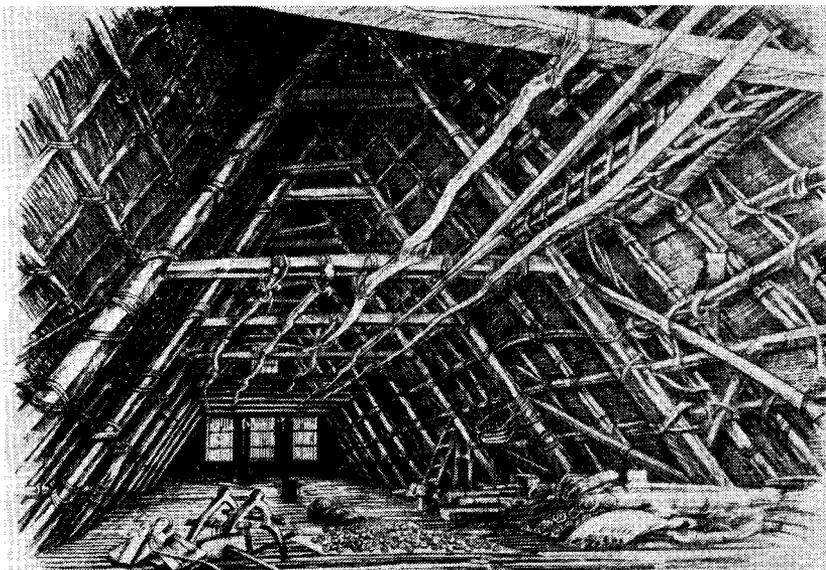
By
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Museum collections of cultural objects are found in every city of Japan. Many collections are housed in temples and shrines, others in Japanese style houses and quite a few in up-to-date buildings of modern construction. Big universities also have their museums, mostly for archaeological objects.¹ As can be expected, the local and regional museums exhibit mostly objects bearing on local or regional political and cultural history



1. Farmhouse in Shirakawa Village [the 4 drawings
by Akira Sato]

1. We find 208 museums described and evaluated in Laurance P. Robert: *A Connoisseur's Guide to Japanese Museums*. Tokyo, John Weatherhill, Inc., 1967. New ones may have been added meanwhile and very probably not all of the older ones are listed.

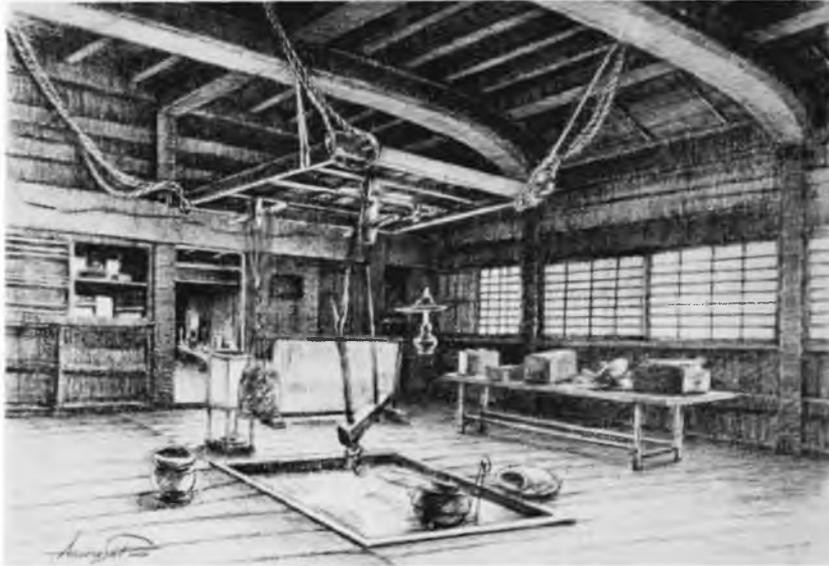


2. Room under the roof of a farmhouse in Shirakawa Village

or on old local industries, folk art and handicrafts, or customs. Most museums serve the general population as instruments of education and information. A few are under the direction of scholars in their respective fields and show objects of interest for research workers. There is hardly a museum which is in itself a research center complete with an adequately trained staff and a library, as we have them in Europe and in the U.S.A. and Canada. The predominant orientation of the local museums in Japan is prehistoric and historic. As far as our Folk Customs Science goes, folk art is given much attention in these collections. Many, perhaps most, museums are synthetic. Perhaps we can say that the best museums display folk art.²

In the following article we wish to give information about

2. About the Folk Art Museum in Komaba, Tokyo, cf. L. P. Laurance P. Roberts, l.c., p. 63-65. Background information on the folk art movement in Japan is offered in M. Eder: Notes on Japanese Folk Art. On Münsterberg's book 'The Folk Arts of Japan' [Tokyo, Charles E. Tuttle Co., 1958] and relevant matter. In: [Folklore Studies, Vol. XVII, 1958; pp. 228-236. Dr. Yanagi Soetsu, in collaboration with the artists Kawai Kanjirô and Hamada Shôji, founded the Japanese Folk Art Society (*Nihon Mingei Kyokai*) in 1931. The Japanese Folk Art Museum (*Nihon Mingeikan*) was established in 1936, with Yanagi Soetsu as its first director. Similar museums were established in Kurashiki and Osaka. Yanagi also started the journal *Mingei* [Folk Art].



3. Kitchen and living room in a Hida farmhouse (now in the Folk Customs Museum in Gero, Hida)

one of the most interesting local museums, The Museum of Hida Folk Customs (*Hida minzokukan*) in Takayama (56,000 inhabitants), Gifu Prefecture. The immediate purpose of its erection was the preservation of farmhouses in Shirakawa Village which would otherwise have been to be destroyed by the construction of the Mimoro Dam in the Shōgawa Valley, about 60 Km. distant from Takayama. These farmhouses are unique in Japan in so far as they are multistoried, some up to five tiers, and had to house families which in former times, that is until the middle of the last century, comprised up to 20 or 30 members. The first house dismantled there and then rebuilt in Takayama belonged to a Wakayama family. Specimens of Shirakawa farmhouses were also taken to Tokyo, Kawasaki (halfway between Tokyo and Yokohama), and Yokohama.

When we visited Takayama on the 13th of March in 1971,³ the Folk Customs Museum consisted of 8 buildings, of which 4 represent the unique farmhouse construction of Shirakawa, known as *gasshō-zukuri*, or saddle-roof construction. This con-

3. The author acknowledges with gratitude a travel grant from the Anthropological Institute of Nanzan University, Nagoya.



4. Old lodging houses in Takayama

struction is sporadically found also in other places of Japan,⁴ but the houses in Shirakawa are remarkable for their size and the purpose they serve. Mr. Takahara, the Director of the museum, told us, that many more farmhouses of this kind, about 20, will be moved away from the Mimoro Dam area and re-assembled on the ground of the Folk Customs Museum, so that an entire Shirakawa Village will be rebuilt in Takayama.⁵ The main exhibits of the Folk Customs Museum there will thus be the museum buildings themselves. They are reminiscent both of a farmhouse construction of a long, but not yet forgotten past⁶ and of the social phenomenon of the enlarged family living in them, for whose living conditions they were an adaptation.

4. cf. M. Eder: Die Kulturgeschichte des japanischen Bauerhauses, Folklore Studies, Monograph No. 2, Tokyo, 1963, *passim*. Saddle-roof houses are, for instance, found in the district of Ika in Shiga Prefecture and around Enzan in Yamanashi Prefecture.

5. The museum supports itself by charging entrance fees. It belongs to the municipality of Takayama City and is subject to the Department of City Development. The opening ceremony took place on July 14, 1959. The public was admitted from the next day on. In March, 1971, the Director, Mr. Takahara, told us that on ordinary days the average number of visitors is about 200, but that there are days with about 4000 visitors.

6. The architectural side of the large Shirakawa houses has been given professional treatment by the architect Ishikawa Kenji, in: *Nihon*

About this peculiar family system in Shirakawa several essays have been published by students of social anthropology.⁷ The size of this family is one of the largest known in Japan. In our time such large-sized families have dwindled down to a fraction of what they have been before. In Meiji 43 (1910) the largest family in the hamlet Nakagiri still comprised 44 persons, one had 42, another one 40, in four houses lived over 30 persons. In the summer of Shōwa 5 (1930) the largest family had 22 members, but there were not more than twenty houses in the hamlet in which more than 20 persons were accommodated. No exact data are available for the time before Meiji 9 (1876). From the known statistics of 1876 we learn that the families consisted of agnates and cognates, the number of cognates (333) coming close to that of the agnates (353). A formal marriage was allowed only to the head of the household and his eldest son. The females either were married outside to a household head elsewhere, or they stayed in their family of origin. It was an established fact that they had sexual relations with men from outside and got children, without however incurring social censure. Their children belonged to the household of their mother. The average size of such an enlarged family was with 15.95 persons not so extraordinary, only its composition was remarkable. In a population total of 686 persons 89 persons were brothers of a household head, sisters were 94. In 10 cases the eldest son had his wife with him in the family of his father. In normal conditions the family would have been divided and head-and-branch-family relations established, as it is customary everywhere else, but in mountain villages extreme cases happen and no property splitting is possible.⁸ The economic basis for

nōmin kenchiku [Japanese Farmhouse Construction], Vol. 9 (for the prefectures of Ishikawa, Toyama, Gifu). Tokyo, Shōwa 9 (1934), p. 25, ff., with many photos and architectural drawings.

7. For instance, Nakayama Zennosuke: *Hida no Daikazoku* [The Enlarged Family in Hida], in: *Nihon chiri daikei* [Geographic Handbook of Japan], Vol. 6: *Chūbu* [Central Japan], part 2, pp. 167-170. Koyama Takeshi wrote the article *Daikazoku* [Enlarged Families], in: *Nihon Shakai Minzoku Jiten* with further bibliographical references. A monograph on the enlarged family of Shirakawa Village has been published by Ema Mieko: *Shirakawamura no Daikazoku*, Tokyo, Shōwa 18 (1943).

8. When Ema Mieko had published her monograph in 1943 (see footnote 7), the Mimoro Dam was not yet constructed and all these typical houses could still be seen *in situ* and the families therein interviewed. Both with interviews and old registers Ema traced the histories of the enlarged families back to the Genroku period (1688-1703). This does of course not

the up-keep of the enlarged families in Shirakawa was the silk-worm industry. The staple food was millet, very little rice was produced. In Shirakawa the adult agnate and cognate family members got for their work three meals a day and in summer new hempen clothing. On the fourth or fifth of the month they had a day off on which they could start a new field by burning the scrub and clearing still uncultivated ground. They could also be permitted to plant beans in a corner of the family field for their own benefit. The little income acquired they used for buying tobacco or for making presents to their children.

The first and the second floor of the high house was used as the living quarters of the family members of the head of the household. In the higher floors there was no room partition, this was the working space for all kinds of home tasks, such as making straw sandals, baskets, agricultural tools of wood, etc., but their main purpose is to serve as space for the shelves on which the baskets with the silkworms are kept. Somewhere under the roof the family members beside the head of the household and his wife and children had to find a place to sleep. The smoke rising from the fire-place and the kitchen interfered with their comfort, though part of it escaped, in summer at least, through slightly opened windows.

Some Japanese anthropologists were inclined to think that the enlarged family system, as it existed until recently, is a survival of a previous generally practiced system. Such an assumption however is not borne out by documentary evidence. The oldest family registers, kept in a collection in the *Shôsôin bunsho* (正倉院文書) in Nara date back to the eras of Daihō (701-703) and Yôrō (717-723). They do show large families of agnates together with cognates, but we cannot make out that they together formed a living unit under one roof, only the head of the family enjoying the privilege of concluding formal and patrilocal marriage. We must keep in mind that throughout the entire Tokugawa regime (1603-1867) the farming population was burdened with taxes and levies to such a degree that the raising of children became almost a luxury, and in fact the population of the country remained stationary throughout the 250 or so years of Tokugawa rule. This rule cut deep into the private life

mean that none of them is older than Genroku. Ema also heard of some family divisions (*bunke*) in the late Tokugawa time. Her data on family size are perhaps more reliable than others since she takes the fact in account that later figures are sometimes misleading because in some family registers (*koseki*) family members living outside are not marked as such.

of its subjects. Much depended on the will of the territorial Lords. Though we do not know the details of the governance of the Hida farmers, the Lords determined the rhythm of their life. Not far away from Shirakawa is the village of Gokayama. It now lies in Toyama Prefecture, close to the boundary of Hida, now part of Gifu Prefecture. The geographical and the living conditions are the same as in Shirakawa. The second and third sons and many girls had to spend their whole life unwed in their family of origin, so that many elderly and old people lived there together. But still their number rarely exceeded 10, which means of course that child rearing was out of question for them. Such conditions were not limited to the narrow mountain valleys of Hida and adjacent Toyama, but could be found elsewhere under analogous conditions.⁹

On the other hand there are, or were, places where food supply was plenty, but where people had, because of lack of space, to live in overcrowded settlements. Such a case is the fishermen's village of Shimmizutani in Kunimura, Niu District, Fukui Prefecture. These fishermen had migrated from outside and found only limited space available for building their houses. Additional houses for new families could not be built and brothers with their wives and children lived together in the same house, all together up to 20 or 30 persons.

In the Tōhoku (Northeast) prefectures there are, or were, many cases in which a family division (*bunke*) can, or could, only be made when a man had completed his fortieth year of age. During the lifetime of the family head, father and children, as a rule, lived together, a family type similar to the Chinese enlarged family. Thus often over 20 persons, mostly agnates, lived together.¹⁰ In Amakusa in Kumamoto Prefecture in Meiji 21 (1888) there still existed an enlarged family with 75 members, then it broke into 10 small families.¹¹

In Shirakawa there are some rudiments of the traditional family type left. Nowadays the up-keep of the large houses poses a financial burden. No wonder that Shirakawa houses are used for museum purposes and even as restaurants and find their way to big cities. The Folk Customs Museum in Takayama is most outstanding in so far as in its Shirakawa houses a rich collection of all kinds of agricultural tools has been brought together. They testify to the industry and inventive-

9. cf. *Nihon Shakai Minzoku Jiten*, Vol. 2, p. 862, f.

10. *ibid.*

11. *ibid.*

ness of the farmers who tried to make the best of the scarce means of subsistence nature put at their disposal.

Tourism is a great business also in Japan. Takayama in Hida has much to offer to visitors with a sense for the traditional culture of the country. Besides the Folk Customs Museum there are some more collections which deserve to be visited. There is the Kusakabe Folkcraft House (*Kusakabe Mingeikan*) in which we find how the towns' people of feudal Takayama embellished the scene of their daily life. Then there are the City Museum of Special Local Products (*Takayama-shi Tokusankan*), the Hirata Memorial Hall (*Hirata Kinenkan*), built in 1781 and repaired in 1834, with some furniture and household utensils of the Tokugawa time.

Takayama furthermore boasts its *Takayama matsuri* (festival), celebrated April 14 and 15 and October 9 and 10. It was started as a shrine festival to pray in spring for a good harvest and a thanksgiving festival in autumn. Huge floats with artistic carvings and gorgeously decorated with embroidered drapery are pulled through the streets, accompanied by paraders in old costumes. An intricate puppet show performed on top of one of the floats is registered as a Cultural Asset with the Government Bureau for the Preservation of Cultural Monuments.