IT WAS APRIL, 1925 and Parisians were euphoric about the exhibition that had just opened in their city. It would be on view for the following six months until November. More than 4000 guests had attended the inauguration and thousands of visitors would come daily in the ensuing days and months. This International Exposition of Modern Industrial and Decorative Arts, would soon come to be known as the Art Deco Exhibition and the term “art deco” would come to represent, not only in France and Europe but worldwide, a new decorative style affecting architecture, interior design, painting, furnishings and all manner of crafts and industrial designs.

Just two years earlier, on April 1st, 1923, also in Paris, a tragic accident occurred that later would result in a unique gift to the Japanese people: a mansion, combining the ultimate in French art deco designs inspired by this exhibit, with the finest in Japanese architecture and craftsmanship, the Prince Asaka Residence.

In Japan, the sweeping reforms of the Meiji period (1878–1912) had established Shinto as the official religion while Buddhism became secular, losing much of its power base. At that time, in step with ancient custom, there were many abbots of Imperial lineage who headed temples in and around Kyoto and the emperor took steps to permit a number of them to establish branches of the Imperial family, or Princely Houses. Prince Kuni Asahiko, a former abbot of the Shoren-in temple in Kyoto, was one of these. In 1875 he became the first head of the Princely House of Kuni no miya. While elder sons continued the line of his branch, his eighth son, Yasuhiko, on March 31st, 1906 was granted by Emperor Meiji the authorisation to establish a new collateral branch of the Imperial family and given the title of Asaka no miya. A few years later, in May of 1909, Prince Asaka (1887–1981) married Princess Nobuko (1891–1933), the emperor’s eighth daughter (1, 3).

As Emperor Meiji promoted the idea that males of the imperial family should serve in some capacity in either the navy or army, in October 1922, Prince Asaka, who was serving with the Military Staff College, was sent to France to study military strategy. His half-brother, Prince Naruhiko Higashikuni and his cousin Prince Naruhsa Kitashirakawa were also studying there. In April of 1923, Prince Kitashirakawa and his wife Fusako (seventh daughter of the Emperor Meiji) invited him for a drive to the outskirts of Paris where there was an unfortunate and seri-
aneous automobile accident that took the life of Prince Kita-shirakawa and left Prince Asaka with a limp that stayed with him throughout his life. Princess Nobuko quickly arrived in France to nurse her husband and they stayed there until 1925. The Princess was well-versed in French art and culture. In Japan she had studied art under Toraji Ishikawa (1875–1964), a Western-style painter, and during their time in Paris, the Princess took lessons from the French sculptor Léon Blanchot who was a major contributor to pavilions at the 1925 art deco exhibit, as were Henri Rapin and René Lalique.

The couple visited the Art Deco Exhibition on July 9th, 1925 and were enchanted by all they saw in this new movement, returning to the exhibits several times (2). This world fair set a benchmark for the modern era, in its marriage of avant-garde architecture with the applied arts, succinctly described in the newly-coined term “art deco”. The royal couple were familiar with the florid lines of art nouveau so popular at the turn of the century, its subjects primarily based on nature, but they were immensely impressed with the clean new lines of the industrially inspired motifs with their geometric and linear forms, the allusions to cubism, and the incorporation of many new materials such as tempered glass, reinforced concrete, stainless steel, aluminum, alabaster, wrought iron, and silvered or gilded iron that were displayed in the art deco pavilions. They returned at the end of the year filled with enthusiasm and thoughts about how they might bring some of these new ideas home.

Upon their return to Japan they moved back into their old palace in the Takanawa district of Tokyo. Although the house had been repaired after the 1923 Great Kanto Earthquake, they decided that a new residence reflecting their own taste would be perfect for a large piece of land in the Shirokane area that had been given to them at the time of their marriage. Because of the devastation caused by the earthquake, new designs and construction materials had already been used for several royal residences with steel-reinforced structural concrete as a base. However, the exteriors of these new buildings continued to reflect previous styles, having Gothic, Renaissance and Spanish influences. The Prince and Princess decided that their new residence would be different; it would reflect the more progressive architectural ideas of the art deco movement that they had so admired at the Paris exhibit (4).

Kiyoko Oguy, the second daughter of the royal couple, recalls that “the Prince and Princess often stayed up late discussing the house with Mr Gondo from the earliest stages of planning.” Yokichi Gondo was the architect who would be in charge of the overall design of the mansion and in coordinating its imported and native features, a challenging task. Fortunately, in 1925, as a member of the Imperial Household Ministry Construction Bureau, he had been sent by the Japanese government to “study aristocratic houses and museums” in the West, and had visited the Art Deco Exhibition. This became a great help in understanding and carrying out the wishes of the royal couple (5).

In 1929, Henri Rapin (1873–1939) was commissioned by Prince Asaka to design the interior of seven rooms in the new residence, the Great Hall, Grand Guestroom, Small Guestroom, Anteroom and Great Dining Room, all on the first floor, and on the second, the Prince’s Study and Living Room (6).

In 1925, at the time of the Paris exhibit, Rapin was fifty-two years old and well respected as a painter and interior designer. From the turn of the century to 1910 he took part in various salons, exhibiting furniture with clean, simple lines made of elaborate materials. By 1924 he had reached an apex in his career having been appointed head of both the famous Sèvres Porcelain Factory and the Art Department at the National School of Decorative Arts in Paris. His participation the following year in the 1925 Art Deco Exhibition as deputy chairman of the Association of Decorative Artists had much to do with the exhibition’s success as he took an active role in the design of many of the pavilions; designing as well a hall and dining room for the Ambassade de France pavilion and a garden for that of the Manufacture de Sèvres.

To accomplish this masterwork in the design of the rooms for the Asaka residence, Rapin was able to bring together a remarkable group of artist/craftsmen including
fine glass designer Max Ingrand, decorative metalworker Raymond Subes, and sculptor (and Princess Nobuko’s Paris art instructor) Léon Blanchot. It is believed that the Prince himself later added the tubular steel chairs for the third floor Winter Garden (16). They were designed by Dutch architect and furniture designer Mart Stam. Another famous designer of furnishings, Marcel Breuer, also claimed an almost identical chair design. All of these men were on the “cutting edge” of the art deco movement.

The famed glass artist René Lalique (1860-1945), the eldest member of this prestigious group, was commissioned to design a number of special artefacts in glass for the Asaka residence. In his earlier years he was best known for his art nouveau accessory and jewellery designs which he displayed at the Paris World Exposition of 1900. A commission from the firm of Coty in 1906 for perfume bottles led him into a new world of design where he developed techniques for frosted pressed glass, etched glass and blown glass in moulds that could be used for both small decorative objects or gigantic works of art. His own pavilion at the 1925 Art Deco Exhibition featured a monumental, illuminated glass fountain outside its entrance.

In charge of the overall design of the Prince Asaka Residence, Yokichi Gondo, in the exterior design, faithfully carried out the stark lines of the new art deco architecture that had its beginnings in Germany’s Bauhaus school (4). The mansion’s mellow cream colour is accented with black trim and the severity of line is softened by the voluptuous garden setting that surrounds it. Flowers of the seasons are plentiful and as it is now open to the public, it is especially popular in the Spring when the cherry trees are in full bloom.

Coming from beneath the port cochère through a set of outer doors, the grand art of Lalique is the first thing to greet the visitor. His set of inner glass doors at the main entrance lead to the Great Hall and the Grand
Guestroom and set the mood for the extraordinary art to follow. Each of the frosted doors, 2.5 metres in height, picture an elegant, elongated female figure in relief (7, 8). A cascade of delicate flowers flows downward from their hands and embossed wings in a stylised pattern spread out like a nimbus behind each figure, with breathtaking effect.

Entering the Great Hall one sees a low, wide mantelpiece of black Italian marble veined in gold with a towering mirror rising above it. The mirror reflects a grid panel of forty squares holding recessed lights that spread a soft glow across the lofty ceiling (9). In the distance one can also see a reflection of Lalique’s beautiful glass doors. A marble relief, “Children Playing”, by Léon Blanchot decorates the wall on the right beside stairs leading to the second floor (10).

The Anteroom, just off the Great Hall, features a Rapin masterpiece of art deco design, a white porcelain water fountain produced at the Sèvres porcelain factory in 1932 (11). It was also called the “Perfume Tower” as when guests were assembled in the Grand Guestroom it would emit a lovely fragrance. Illuminated spiral forms on top of the fountain glowed with soft lighting while a small pump inside the base provided a gentle flow of water down its fluted sides. The artificial orange stone walls in the room contain platinum foil and are separated by a bank of windows featuring black lacquered posts interspersed by transparent sash draperies that fall in gentle folds. A mosaic pattern decorates the floor, its fresh colours repeating those of the room.

Large glass doors lead into the Grand Guestroom, designed by the glass artist Max Ingrand, with metal fittings by Raymond Subes (12). Ingrand at the time was only twenty-two years old, had attended the National School of Decorative Arts in Paris, and was already well known for his work in interior furnishings and decorative glass. Among more than forty commissions listed in his later achievements is the chapel of the Chateau de Chenonceau where in 1954 he replaced a trio of monumental stained glass windows that had been destroyed by bombs in 1944. Also in the 1950s, in the town of Yvetot in the Normandy region of France, for “The Round Church”, in an explosion of gold, blue and crimson, he created a stained-glass window said to be the largest in Europe at over 1000 square metres. It portrayed Christ, the Virgin Mary and many saints including Joan of Arc in her shining armour.

In 1962, the steamship SS France was launched, its interiors displaying the finest in French art and design. In its luxurious Versailles dining room was a mural wall by Ingrand with fourteen engraved glass panels while around the walls of the First Class swimming pool were more engraved panels, lit from behind, softly illuminating the rippling water.

Henri Rapin, recognising this young talent, in 1930
asked him to design etched glass panels for the doors of the Grand Guestroom of the Asaka Residence. The patterns that he chose present a playful mixture of the linear and geometric forms that were the essence of the art deco movement at that time. Fellow artist Raymond Subes designed the ornamental iron decoration of the doors into which the glass panels were fitted. His work too was prevalent in many of the pavilions of the 1925 Art Deco Exhibit and he was being commissioned for many important new Parisian banks and buildings such as the National City Bank aux Champs-Élysées, and the Musée des Arts d’Afrique et d’Océanie. Another exciting venue for his art deco designs were government commissions he received for several large ocean liners of the day, including L’Île de France in 1927, L’Atlantique in 1931, and Le Normandie in 1932.

The interiors of the SS Normandie were sumptuous and epitomised the art deco, ultra-modern style. The most prestigious room of all was the First Class Dining Room. It could serve as many as 700 at one sitting with the most imaginative and delicious French cuisine of the day. Twelve sky-bound light pillars of Lalique glass illuminated the interior and guests entered through a set of monumental doors 20 feet tall that were adorned with bronze medallions created by Subes. The medallions featured designs of cathedrals and castles and still survive at Our Lady of Lebanon Maronite Catholic Church in Brooklyn Heights, New York.

Lalique also designed two stunning light fixtures for the Grand Guestroom of the Asaka Residence (14). They are a pair of chandeliers called “Bucharest”, the top half inspired by art nouveau flower forms and the lower half gear wheels, a popular art deco motif. They illuminate the mural painted on canvas by Rapin that circles the top one third of the walls above warm sycamore paneling that separates between the decorative glass doors. The mural pictures an imaginary villa garden and courtyard.

The Great Hall and Grand Guestroom lead into the Great Dining Room, its tall, elegant bay windows offering a panoramic view of the luxuriant south garden (15).

Three avant-garde chandeliers by René Lalique decorate the ceiling. They are flat and rectangular in shape and their covers are embellished with relief designs of pomegranates and pineapples. The radiator metal grilles below the windows are alive with a mixture of swimming ocean fish and shellfish. Warm tones of yellow marble decorate the walls and are interspersed with silver grey panels etched with a perfusion of floral motifs, designed by Blancot. At the north end of the room, above the marble fireplace mantel, Rapin has created a deco garden mural with stylised tall trees and a red trellis dripping flowers. The black and white chequerboard tiles of the mural’s terrace mirror the same design used in multiple ways throughout the Asaka residence, such as on the second floor veranda and in the third floor Winter Garden (16). It was a signature motif of the art deco movement.

The Prince’s Study on the second floor is octagonal in shape with the carpet, desk and chairs designed by Rapin. The innovative design of the desk allows it to turn to any direction (17). Adjoining the study is the Prince’s Living Room where a vaulted ceiling lends a feeling of spaciousness. It features a marble fireplace with a tall, rounded mirror that reflects a hanging deco light fixture. The wall trim in the room is a burnished lemon wood. Originally the wallpaper was a bold, geometric design but has now been replaced, as is true of most of the other rooms in the mansion. Princess Nobuko took part in the original selection of wallpaper, whose colour and design was different for each room. It was ordered from the famous Swiss firm Salzbrer. The Princess also did preliminary sketches of natural and Japanese motifs for the metal radiator covers used in her and her daughters rooms. Even today, most of the metal traffic guard rails in metropolitan Tokyo are painted green and feature a stylised tengu (crane) motif in their centre, harmonising with a nature theme that, for the most part is now lost in the crowded bustle of that modern city. Perhaps their inspiration was fostered by these early metal works of the deco period.

The other rooms in the former Asaka Residence were designed and furnished by the Imperial Household Ministry’s Construction Bureau staff members under the lead-
ership of Yokichi Gondo. They themselves were an illustrious group of men and it is to their great credit that they were able to match the spirit and the high quality of the art works provided by the French art deco designers in their work throughout the many additional rooms of the mansion. It is even more striking to realise that not one of the French designers ever visited Japan during the project. That their work was manufactured in France and shipped to Tokyo to be installed by the Japanese staff is barely believable when one views the perfection of the results.

The Prince Asaka Residence was completed in May of 1933 to great acclaim. Sadly Princess Nobuko had fallen ill during its construction and on November 3rd, barely six months after its completion, passed away (18). In keeping with tradition, five years later in 1938, Prince Asaka built a teahouse (19, 20, 21) that he named Kōka (luminous flower). It was designed by the Kansai region teamaster Nakagawa Shason. A one-storey building featuring three tearooms, one is in the ryurei style for entertaining foreign guests. In this room visitors could enjoy a ceremony performed with tables and chairs, a rare experience at that time. The Urasenke teamaster Gen Gensai had introduced the idea at an exposition in Kyoto in 1872 but it was only after World War Two that many of the teamasters added a room of this style to their teahouses.

A small shoin-style garden, a garden for strolling long preferred by the nobility and feudal lords, surrounds the teahouse. Stones from many parts of Japan were gathered to fashion its lanterns and stepping stones and the wash basin, made of granite from Mt. Kurama in Kyoto, was a gift from Emperor Meiji. The roof of the teahouse is covered in tiles coated in oxidised silver; their endings are impressed with the Imperial household seal, the sixteen-petal chrysanthemum.

In 1946, the new Constitution of Japan formally abolished the peerage and in 1947 the Princely Houses lost their Imperial status, their members becoming commoners. Prince Asaka moved to the town of Atami. The former Asaka Residence was first used by former Prime Minister Shigeru Yoshida and later, under the ownership of Seibu Railways, as a state guesthouse. In 1981 the property was purchased by the city of Tokyo and on October 1st, 1983 was reopened as the Tokyo Metropolitan Teien Art Museum.

The museum’s French influences have been highlighted in intermittent years with exhibits such as “Perfume Bottles by René Lalique”, 1990, “Masterworks of Louis Comfort Tiffany”, 1991, “Costumes de l’Opéra de Paris”, 1997, and “Marie Laurencin: A Retrospective”, 2003. It has also featured art from Asian sources such as its exhibit, “Journey to the Far East—George Chinnery and the Art of Canton, Macao and Hong Kong in the 19th Century”, in 1996–1997.

More recently, in 2007, the Teien hosted the exhibit “Taisho Chic, Japanese Modernity, Nostalgia and Deco”, a collection from the Honolulu Academy of Arts. Perhaps because the paintings and objects in this exhibit reflected the same world as the French art of the building itself, it exceeded all prior attendance records. For many Japanese visitors, it represented a part of their living history.

The Teien Museum continues to be an innovator. Its current exhibit, “Summer Villa: The Sculpture, Drawings, and Prints of Katsura Funakoshi in an Art Deco Space”, features the art of this internationally known, avant-garde artist from July 19th—September 23rd, 2008. The exhibit will focus on his sometimes controversial art in an encounter with the art deco interior of the museum. His early to recent works will be “woven into the architecture of the building...to create a rare and unusual experience of time and space. The museum will be transformed into a ‘summer villa’, inhabited by the sculptures of Katsura Funakoshi and filled with magical surprises.”

The Tokyo Metropolitan Teien Art Museum is located at 21-9 Shirokanedai 5-Chome, Minato-ku, Tokyo, Japan. For more information call (03) 3443-0201 or visit www.teien-art-museum.ne.jp.