Touring the Many Landmarks of Otaru

From the Unspoilt Landscapes of Shukuzu to the Microcosm of Modern Architecture

The Incorporation of Brick and Construction of the Temiya Railway

In 1870, the Meiji Government sent exchange students to the United States to learn modern engineering technology, and upon their return, hired them to become the main technicians for the construction of the Horonai Railway commissioned by the Hokkaido Development Commission. The first to study abroad was Soichiro Matsumoto, followed by Seijiro Hirai who studied civil engineering at the Rensselare Polytechnic Institute in Troy, New York, and each assumed administrative positions in the Hokkaido Development Commission's mining department in 1878 and 1881. The railway did not open until after J. Crawford, the railway construction advisor who was invited from the U.S. to assist in the construction, returned home (1881), but the fact that it was completed without any major difficulty is owed to the hard work of both Matsumoto and Hirai.

Both of these men incorporated the use of brick for the buildings and bridges of the railway. Seijiro Hirai is especially known for utilizing knowledge and technology learned in the U.S. to design the Temiya Railway Engine House(Designated as an Important Cultural Asset of Japan in 1885) and the Former Hokkaido Government Building in Sapporo(Designated as an Important Cultural Asset of Japan in 1888). Hirai's ability to foresee the future is evident in the fact that the Temiya Railway Engine House was built 29 years earlier, and the Red Brick Hokkaido Government Building 26 years earlier than the construction of Tokyo Station with red brick. In fact, Hirai, as Vice Minister or the Ministry of Railways, commissioned the construction of the new Tokyo Station Building, and gave orders and advice as an expert and forerunner for brick construction, to the architect, Kingo Tatsuno.

The Meiji government treated graduates of American institutions quite differently than those who graduated from local institutions. If you compare the salaries paid to the men in 1884, Soichiro Matsumoto, who helped design the railway in Hokkaido after graduating from the Rensselare Polytechnic Institute in New York received ¥250, Seijiro Hirai was paid ¥170, and Kingo Tatsuno, who after graduating from the Imperial College of Engineering taught as a professor at his alma mater, received only ¥100. The government showed warm hospitality toward Matsumoto and Hirai who they considered forerunners in technology. Later both men became influential persons within the national railway world, Matsumoto rose to the position of Minister of Railways(1893), and Hirai assumed a position in the House of Lords, and became Minister of the Imperial Government Railways(1907)

Approximately forty years after the Temiya Railway was constructed with American technology in the early years of the Meiji Period, Yoshiya Tanoue, who was greatly influenced by American architect Frank Lloyd Wright, began designing residences for businessmen in Otaru during the early years of the Showa Period. One of these is the Sakaushi Residence built in 1927, which is now preserved and utilized by the NPO Otaru Works.

Sadamasa Komaki Phd, Architectural History (Engineering)