CHAPTER 7

Forging a New Identity

THE MEIJI RESTORATION AND JAPAN'S ENTRY INTO THE MODERN WORLD

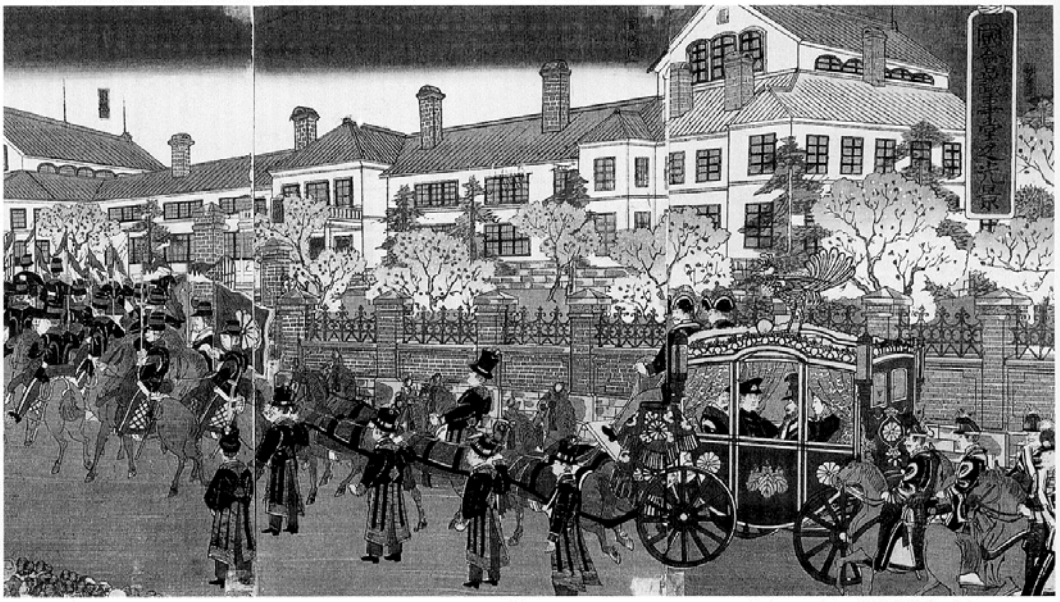
Following the official opening of Japan's ports to the American Commodore Matthew Perry in 1853, the Tokugawa bakufu *lingered on for a further fifteen years, trying to harness and direct the flood of change caused by the country's first unfiltered exposure to the rest of the world in two hundred and fifty years. Westerners set up a new settlement at Yokohama near Edo, and Europeans and North Americans of all descriptions began to appear on the streets of Japan's cities. The commodities and new technologies they brought with them would irrevocably change the Japanese way of life. Growing frustration with the moribund Tokugawa government was now also directed at the newcomers, whose presence was interpreted as an invasion and humiliation.*

The Meiji Restoration

To fill the power vacuum that existed at the heart of the *bakufu*, there stirred among the middle- and lower-ranking officials of the regional governments of the *han* a desire to secure once again for Japan an inviolate supremacy, and they took as their focus the emperor in Kyoto. At first these ***shishi*** (men of determination) had no very unified conception beyond the slogans *jōi* (expel the barbarians) and *sonnō* (revere the emperor). The remainder of the 1850s and the early 1860s were punctuated by assassinations of figures within the Tokugawa *bakufu* and of foreigners—both prominent and not so prominent. The latter responded with such actions as the British bombardment of the town of Kagoshima in 1863, but every effort the *bakufu* made to rein in rebellious daimyo and the *shishi* met ultimately only with failure. Finally, in January 1868, a well-organized coalition of *shishi* overthrew the *bakufu* and deposed the Shogun. The seventeen-year-old emperor Meiji (r. 1867–1912) and the imperial household accompanied them to Edo, and, renaming it Tokyo (Capital of the East), the leaders of the Meiji Restoration proceeded to set Japan on course for its greatest cultural, social, and political revolution since the Taika Reforms of 645.

In the next twenty years, the new leaders would completely alter the make-up of the nation from its system of government down to how the daily lives of the people were conducted. The Meiji government was nothing if not astute and practical, and, taking into consideration the significant military and economic superiority that the foreigners derived from their new technologies, it abandoned its original anti-foreigner stance. It promoted Westernization as the only path by which Japan could regain its glory, and in 1871 the Iwakura Mission, comprised of some of the Restoration's most powerful leaders, left Japan on a two-year tour to Europe and the United States to study foreign statecraft and economic development. By this point, however, they had completely dismantled the mechanisms of the *bakufu*, and pensioned off the daimyo ,whose 273 *han* were restructured into 75 prefectures governed by appointees from the central government in Tokyo and advised by local committees of citizens—the germ for the future representational government. The old Confucian-based class system that had held sway for more than a millennium was abolished, court aristocrat, samurai, peasant, and *chōnin* all being technically equal within the eyes of the emperor and government, and wealth and ability becoming the official indicators by which social status could be measured.

On the return of the Iwakura Mission, the government instituted a regime for its brave new world. The intention was two-fold: Japan should achieve complete industrialization and "modernization" as quickly as possible and simultaneously gain standing equal to that of the Western powers. Given the absence of any successful coup d'etat or popular revolution in



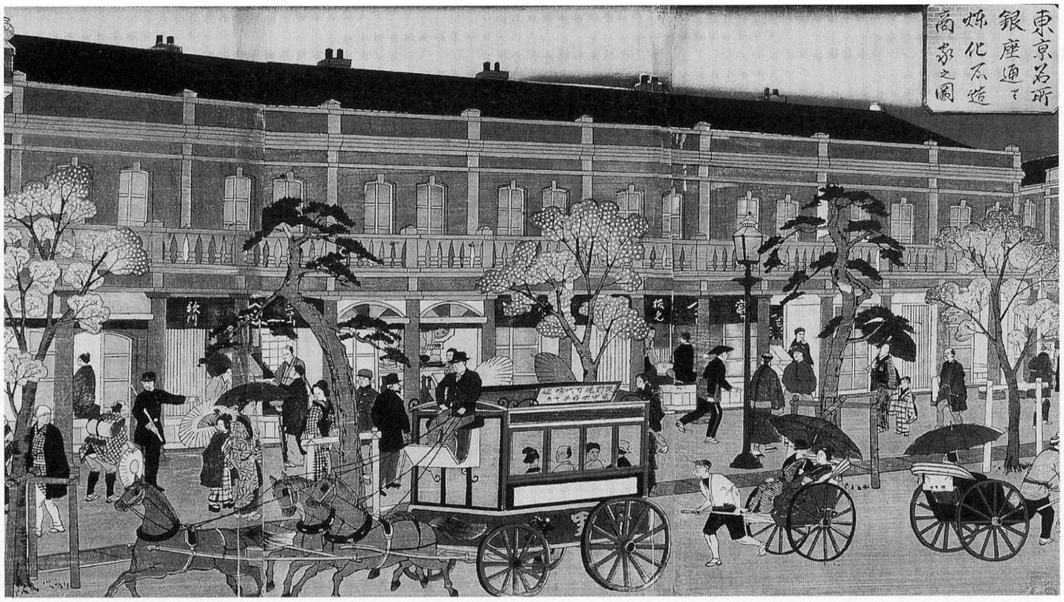
401 *Tōkyō fuka Kōjimachi-ku Sawaishō Kokkai Gijidō no kōkei (Spectacle of the Imperial Diet Building at Sawai-chō in Kōjimachi Ward, Tokyo)*, by Kunitoshi. 1890. Woodblock print; *oban* triptych: ink and color on paper; 14 ½ x 28 ¾ in (37 x 73 cm). Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC. Gift of Ambassador and Mrs. William Leonhart. (S.1998.39a–c).

the following decades, the decisions of the Meiji government must be credited as well judged. During the 1870s, Western-style universities were established and the government invited Western experts to chair their departments and teach a generation of Japanese students who would in the years to come pave the way in the arts and sciences. These students were also encouraged to travel to Europe and North America to continue their studies, not infrequently with government sponsorship and funding. By the 1880s, the government could afford a brief reaction against the intensive "Westernization." This it neatly turned into a rediscovery of Japanese culture, shepherding Japanese society to a combination of the familiar and old with the foreign and new in the creation of a smoothly operating modern identity that was uniquely Japanese. In 1889, the emperor proclaimed the new constitution, and in the following year he opened the Diet building, home to the newly established legislative branch of the government modeled on the British parliament (Fig. 401).

A Cultural Exchange: Westernization and Japonisme

At the time of the construction of the Western-style Diet in 1890, Tokyo and Japan's other major cities had already experienced twenty years of change determined by "modern" Western fashion (Fig. 402). The frontages of the shops and homes in the smarter areas had taken on appearances recognizable from the vocabulary of Western nineteenth-century commercial and domestic architecture, just as the streets that they flanked carried horse-drawn omnibuses, rickshaws imported from British India, and citizens dressed in purely Western costume, purely Japanese costume, and combinations of the two. Soon would be added the tracks for trams and the wires for electricity and telephones, but behind these façades the essential pattern of a traditional Japan continued, exemplified by the floor-based, tatami-carpeted environment of domestic life. In the public arena, however, the Western architects invited by the government, and their Japanese students, were beginning to transform the face of the Japanese city. In the decades leading to World War II, Japanese architects would continue to look to the West for inspiration. They would master both the classical and modernist vocabularies of Western architecture, but ultimately these would be added to a very Japanese sense of design and proportion. Western architects also visited Japan, most notably Frank Lloyd Wright (1867–1959), and the impressions they gained from the harmonic but simple functionality of *shoin*-style interiors and exteriors would have an important influence on the minimalist strains within twentieth-century Western architecture, out of which the German Bauhaus developed in the 1920s. The philosophy of the latter would prove to be the guiding principle behind the International Style that has transformed the concept of the urban landscape throughout the world since the 1950s.

As part of its efforts to improve Japan's status in the world the Meiji government also engaged in the passion for international exhibitions and fairs that had swept the Western world. Held in the major European and American cities, they promised the visitor the innumerable wonders and commodities on offer within the newly conceived world community. The Japanese pavilions at these events offered a glimpse of the nation to a greater number of people than could afford the luxury of actually visiting the country, and the second half of the nineteenth century witnessed the phenomenon of Japonisme, which influenced many of the major art movements in the West including impressionism, postimpressionism, symbolism, art nouveau, and the British arts and crafts movement. The intention of the Meiji government was to


東京名所
銀座通り
煉化石造
商家之圖

402 *Tōkyō meisho Ginzadōri renga ishizukuri shōka no zu* (*Famous Views of Tokyo: Picture of Brick and Stone Shops on Ginza Avenue*), by Hiroshige III. 1876. Woodblock print; *oban* triptych: ink and color on paper; 14 ⅞ x 28 ¾ in. (37.5 x 73.1 cm). Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC. Gift of Ambassador and Mrs. William Leonhart. (S.1998.32).

demonstrate to foreign powers the sophistication of Japan's traditional crafts and the integrity of their craftsmanship. Therefore, many of the Japanese pavilions showcased only virtuoso works by carefully selected master craftsmen in the fields of ceramics, lacquer, and metalworking. But, although only a very small minority of artisans ever managed to secure a place on an exhibition stand, still the official sponsorship of Japanese crafts helped not only to garner praise for them abroad, but to also maintain an appreciation for them within the "industrializing" society at home.

Painting and Sculpture Re-defined

At the same time that Western artists were getting excited about traditional Japanese concepts of design and color, an influential school of Western-style painting—or *yōga*—grew out of the initial tutoring by European painters and sculptors in the 1870s. The young artists soon took themselves off to Europe to study with painting masters there, and also formed into study and exhibition societies at home to explore modernist developments in Western painting. By the beginning of the twentieth century, they were writing their own commentaries and critiques on Western-style painting, with several publications serving as forums for their debates and as showcases for new developments in the West. Until after World War II, Western-style painting and sculpture would always remain a few steps behind movements in the West, in part due to the fact that those Western masters who would take on students rarely came from the avant-garde themselves. Therefore, within *yōga* circles the last decades of the nineteenth century were characterized by the academic history painting of the French Salon, and the first two decades of the twentieth century by impressionism, postimpressionism, and symbolism. The 1920s and 1930s saw the emergence of fauvist and cubist styles. In sculpture the guiding lights would be first academic realism, and then the expressionism of Auguste Rodin (1840–1917).

The reaction in the 1880s against intensive Westernization did set the cause of *yōga* back temporarily, but it is primarily notable for the birth of a new style of traditional painting that came to be characterized as ***nihonga***. Drawing initially on the Kanō and Tosa school traditions of Chinese-style and *yamato-e* painting, in the twentieth century it would increasingly look to the Rinpa tradition, which had also influenced Western movements such as symbolism and art nouveau. However, *nihonga* artists made a conscious effort to adapt these traditional styles to a modern ethos, and as such competed directly with *yōga* artists in terms of contemporaneity. Of the pre-Meiji painting traditions, only *bunjinga*, *haiga*, and *zenga* continued to develop relatively unaffected by the great changes. As a result, they came to be largely preserved within a kind of aspic of "heritage" in the course of the twentieth century, although a few masters have arisen in the past 150 years to challenge the achievements of the great eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century masters and keep these traditions alive and vital.

Mingei: Japan's Folkcraft Movement

While the refined and virtuosic works sponsored by the government for international expositions helped to sustain traditional crafts and feed a sense of national pride and achievement, at the beginning of the twentieth century advocates of Japan's more subtle and less glamorous beauties began to formulate their reaction to the exuberant glitz of the Meiji period. Foremost among these thinkers was Yanagi Sōetsu