

§1 Introduction

Strategy of the “Nation of Sorrow”

This exhibition introduces some of Japan’ s modern and contemporary architecture from the viewpoint of a structural understanding of the mechanism of Finland’ s national romanticism.

This project revisits the design environment’ s origins that surrounds us today to reconstruct an ideological platform of design that paves the way for the future of society.

Finland became independent in 1917 and is one of the world’ s younger countries. Furthermore, Finland increased its international presence in the 1950s and 1970s by creating the design industry; as such, the country has been a significant driving force for creating the global design market. In fact, the whole society of post-war Finland was shaped by the viewpoint of exporting designs.

Today, Finland’ s design industry, which was once prosperous, has reached a period in which a powerful strategy is needed because other less-developed countries’ design industries want to take on its hegemony. Additionally, many similar products to Finland’ s are produced more cheaply in other parts of the world.

Until now, national romanticism has been understood as the Finnish zeitgeist that emerged in the 1910s and 1920s at the dawn of the design industry. While shaping Finland's national identity, its style of expression (which was distinct from Western countries at the time), led to the interpretation of national romanticism as peculiar to one region of Northern Europe.

While it is true that the style of expression itself is still worth seeing, I would like to ask at this exhibition what kind of mechanism (including the historical background of repeated wars), created national romanticism. If this were made clear, then national romanticism could become an idea in design (expressive culture) that could be universally shared by people from different religions and countries. Furthermore, it could be a new concept and should be called by a name distinct from national romanticism.

From this perspective, it is interesting to review how Finland's national romanticism was not created gradually by an unconscious will of the masses but was created deliberately by a few identifiable expressionists.

A painting of the same name as its artist, Akseli Gallen-Kallela, lets us imagine that the concept of national romanticism was born at an evening party called "Symposion" attended by the artist Gallen-Kallela, the musician Jean Sibelius, and the conductor Robert Kajanus. But no architect was included in the painting.

Eliel Saarinen's architecture, which was an essential element of establishing national romanticism, was influenced by his client, Gallen-Kallela. However, the "coincidence", or "necessity", that an architect was not present at the "Symposion" shows the possibility of opening the future of architecture up, which is currently blocked by the specialization of architecture.

The modern significance of national romanticism is that it does not use the peculiarities of Finland's design to develop new methods, and the design concepts of "architecture made by design not in the language of architecture."

As a result, we have decided to redefine the style expression of national romanticism in this exhibition with the following three characteristics:

1. The design replaces the attitude of accepting external pressure with one's own expression.
2. The design does not have a single mode of expression or a particular field of expression.
3. An idea that accepts oneself as a global minority.

It is important to note that the nationalism of self-display, which excludes others, is actually the same mechanism as the external pressure to be resisted. Therefore, nationalism should be exposed to a mechanism that is defeated by a stronger nationalism; rather, nationalism that will survive must conform to globalism. This definition clarifies that national romanticism is a different mechanism than nationalism.

In this exhibition, we restored forged nails used in the five-story pagoda of the Horyuji Temple built in the sixth century (which is Japan's oldest existing wooden building) and made the forged nail a concrete milestone in understanding Japanese architectural culture from the mechanism of national romanticism. The pagoda is a modern skyscraper, and in ancient times it required advanced technology, especially in earthquake-prone Japan. Even after fourteen hundred years, the tower's structural principle has been adopted in Tokyo Skytree, which is Japan's tallest tower. The wooden frames supporting the five-story pagoda contain forged nails that cannot be seen from the outside.

Imagine the workplace where the forged nails were made. Not only were there no craftsmen with experience constructing such buildings, but also there must have been many craftsmen who usually made swords and ritual equipment. This suggests that building truly unknown architecture requires skills and craftsmen that do not specialize in known architecture. Meanwhile, as can be seen from the fact that each restored forged nail has a unique shape, the standardization of manufacturing methods is not necessarily a useful method for mass-producing identical products (you can still see it in products such as iittala, in that it rarely appears in industrial design). These differences are not of quality, but of the individuality that can occur in industrialization.

Architecture that was constructed using a logic other than architecture (i.e., skill and craftsmanship) naturally shows its design that has not been seen before. Thus, the forged nails of the five-story pagoda of the Horyuji Temple are regarded as "Individuality that emerged in industrialization in other fields"; this exhibition introduces some different methods and forms of modern and contemporary Japanese architecture in which similar properties to the forged nails can be seen consistently.

My home country, Japan, was defeated in World War II, being on the side of the Axis powers, like Finland. Just as Finland lost to the Soviet Union, Japan lost to the United States. As such, after World War II, Tokyo was reconstructed as a huge commercial consumption city like New York. Japan was able to avoid a military occupation, except the Okinawa region; however, post-war Japan was reconstructed politically and economically by the logic of victorious countries. Despite the reconstruction,

Japan has an old history with a traditional culture. Its national system centered on the emperor for more than on thousand years, and Japan' s traditional performing arts give non-Japanese this awareness. Additionally, many Japanese people regard Japan as a historical and traditional country. However, because many traditional performing arts have their roots in China and Korea, traditional Japanese design may not necessarily be seen as encompassing Japan' s national identity.

Despite this, the thoughts and expressions of national romanticism did not actually emerge in post-war Japan, much less were they formed by a collective will involving many people. This is because even though the things and ideas around us in Japan are completely influenced by foreign values, we still believe that our national and ethnic identities are secured by history and traditions. In light of this historical circumstance, it can be assumed that even if cultural nationalism could have risen to prominence in Japan, it was difficult for Japan to foster national romanticism.

However, because the post-war landscape was rebuilt by the stronger nationalism of victorious countries (which is now called globalism), there is no doubt that Japanese people, who were minorities around the world at the time, might have a similar spirit to the “Sisu” of Finnish people. Most modern and contemporary Japanese designs introduced in this exhibition were created based on Japan' s landscape at that time. They also show the process of trial and error in how they explained and created its design identity without reference to Western Europe. However, it has also been pointed out that the stream of Japanese designs was so small and hidden that it was difficult to recognize unless it was intentionally cut out and presented again as designs independent of the mainstream.

In this way, it seems that Japan, like Finland, is a potential place where the mechanism of national romanticism could be born. Furthermore, we may find many other places in the world where similar mechanisms could work. I would like to label such countries, regions, and groups as “Nation of Sorrow.”

In this case, the word “Sorrow” does not refer to the physical destruction caused by war or disaster; rather, it is a positive form of “sorrow,” such as “Sisu.” “Sisu” is deep enough to accept pain but translates the pain into actions for the future and is different from the kind of recovery that comes from optimism and forgetting. People cannot live in places where there is no real sorrow; furthermore,

sorrow is always a creative source.

This concept of a “Nation of Sorrow” is a strategy for creating a new perspective about design that can emerge from superimposing the mechanism of national romanticism that still underlies Finland onto places and situations considered to be minority in the world. Therefore, the existence of people living there is essential for Nation of Sorrow. I hope that not only people in Finland, but also people from all countries and regions, will observe the different architectural methods and expressions produced in other countries (such as Japan) and compare them to the environment in which they were born and raised.

I also aspire for this exhibition to be an opportunity for people to reexamine the structure of national romanticism, which is the cultural basis of Finnish society, and examine a universal design strategy for the future.



Gallen-Kallela, Akseli (1865-1931), Symposium, 1894, Oil on canvas © Gösta Serlachius Fine Arts Foundation. From left, Akseli Gallen-Kallela, Oskar Merikanto, Robert Kajanus and Jean Sibelius.