

Homma Museum of Art

Summer is the perfect time to visit the Homma Museum of Art, which boasts a 200-year-old garden of beautiful abundant greenery. Julian Ryall enjoyed a leisurely look around.

It may brood many kilometers in the distance, but Mount Chokai is both the centerpiece and the backdrop to the traditional Japanese garden that complements the vacation villa built by the head of the wealthy merchant Homma family in the town of Sakata, Yamagata Prefecture. The garden is a work of art in its own right—and has been enhanced by the family's commitment to traditional arts that have grown into the impressive collection of scrolls, ceramics, *ukiyo-e* woodblock prints, statues and paintings that today make up the Homma Museum of Art.

“The people of the city of Sakata love that mountain and it has become a symbol of our region,”

says Akio Tanaka, curator of the museum. “And that is why it was important for the designer of the garden to incorporate it into the garden.”

The Seienkaku, the main building of the villa whose name translates to “palace view pure Mount Chokai,” and the gardens were constructed in 1813 by the fourth head of the Homma family. The Daimyo Sakai (1813–1873) often stayed at the villa when he inspected his holdings in the region, while nobles from the Imperial Palace and high-ranking government officials have also stayed here. The villa's most famous guest was the future Emperor Showa, who visited in place of his sick father, Emperor Taisho in 1925. Now on two floors after a

The 200-year-old Kakubuen garden and Seienkaku “palace,” which is now the main building of the Homma Museum of Art in Sakata, Yamagata Prefecture.





Left, visitors look at scrolls in the first-floor reception room of the museum's main building. Right, bronze work "Yorokobu shoji" (Elated Girl) by the revered sculptor Seibo Kitamura. The work was presented to the museum to commemorate the opening of the museum's annex in 1968.

second was added in anticipation of the visit of the Emperor Taisho in 1908, the building features spacious tatami mat floors and walls dusted with gold. Scrolls depicting scenery and animals are hung in the alcoves. On the ground floor is a tea room called the Rokumeiro, meaning six windows and a hearth, while the upstairs is spacious and bright with the scent of tatami in the air.

A pond sits in the middle of the carefully tended gardens, with orange and white carp occasionally breaking the surface as they feed. Dragonflies skip between the lily pads and a Japanese maple tree has taken root on a rock surrounded by water. There is the constant trickle of water falling over rocks.

From the villa, the viewer would look over the garden—which the feudal lord Sakai named the Kakubuen, meaning dancing crane garden, because one of the elegant birds had landed near the site of the gazebo—and to the mountain in the distance.

As the visitor explores the paths through the garden, surprises await around each corner. A stone lantern and a red *torii* gateway, a tiny shrine hidden amid a stand of bamboo, and two arched bridges that bisect the pond. Birds sing in the trees.

The villa and the garden were turned into an art

museum by the Homma family in 1947. The early displays included works loaned by other old local families in this area, but the collection soon grew as works were purchased or donated.

Of all the exhibits, the dolls are among the most popular. The Hakusen Bunko Collection was donated in 1964 and includes no fewer than seventy sets of precious classic dolls and more than 200 figures.

The number of works soon outgrew the space available in the villa, and a new exhibition building was completed in 1968. Over two stories, the annex rotates the more than 2,500 items that make up the collection, including celadon bowls that date back to the Koryo Dynasty in Korea, hand-thrown *raku* tea bowls created by the master potter Chojiro, and paintings by Kuroda Kiyoteru and Maruyama Oukyo.

When this writer visited the works on display incorporated the natural themes—fish, birds, plants, trees, rocks, waterfalls—that can still be seen in the neighboring garden. HD

Julian Ryall is the Japan correspondent for the Daily Telegraph and freelances for publications around the world.

The Homma Museum of Art

Address: 7-7 Onari-cho, Sakata-shi, Yamagata-ken, 998-0024, Japan

Phone Number: +81 234 24 4311 **Fax.:** +81 234 24 4312

Website: www.homma-museum.or.jp/ (Japanese)

Hours: Closed on Mondays and between December 22 and January 7.

Entrance: 900 yen for adults, 400 yen for students and free for junior high school pupils and younger children.

