

Belgium-Japan Association  
Chamber of Commerce  
日白協会兼商工会議所



## TRADE FLOWS & CULTURAL NEWS

Number 141 - December 2023

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## *Belgian-Japanese investments - past, present and future*



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# EDITORIAL

By Noboru Ogasa, President of Sumitomo Benelux and BJA Board Member

I feel privileged and honored to join BJA as a member of the board of directors. Thank you for having me aboard. I will pledge to engage and promote BJA's important role, that is strengthening its ties between Belgium and Japan.

Since my arrival to this lovely country in late May this year, I have already participated in several BJA events and made friends with our fellow Belgian members. I immediately understood the value of the BJA, that, even it carries name as Chamber of Commerce, we meet and mingle at personal level, which naturally leads its way to relationships between organizations, and eventually to the national level. This is just like your King and our Emperor developed their friendship that contributes to this great relationship between our two countries!

My role in Belgium can be considered like a diplomat for my company. Collaborating with fellow Japanese companies who also chose to call Belgium as home, developing new business in the region with our fellow colleagues in Belgium, and collecting and analysing information about EU regulations and policies in the "Capital of Europe". BJA will definitely help me function better in my scope of work.

My career has been predominantly in agriculture and food business area where I volunteered when I joined the company because of my passion for food and beverage. So, my assignment to Belgium could have been a destiny.

Before landing here, I was on a low-carb diet, trying to counter my deteriorating medical check-up results. But

this was just impossible to continue, having all of your great beers, chocolates, waffles and hot, crunchy fries in front of me. So instead, I decided to try burning them off by more exercise, like many residents I observed and admired, running or cycling regularly in the town. Is there an aero bike that is not in use now? Anyone?

I am also happily surprised about the wines produced in Belgium. The sparkling and white wines are very enjoyable and reasonable. But at the same time, I must admit that I have a mixed feeling about global warming in this context, as I hear Belgian wines got better with this warmer climate. On the other hand, in our businesses, we support and promote countermeasures against global warming. Maybe, as a compromise to this complication, the warming can stop now and here.

I would love to share with my BJA fellows, how Japanese wines also evolved quite recently. Younger generations in the Japanese wine industry, have worked and studied abroad, and brought back the latest technologies and philosophy from leading wine countries. But, as in many case studies on how Japanese are good at "adopting and improving" new technologies, they did not stop there by just trying to mimic European wines. Some kept using old Japanese indigenous varieties and made superb modern style wine out of them (like a variety "Koshu" in Yamanashi prefecture), and another took Pinot Noir from Europe, but developed his own Japanese style subtle wine, that has "dashi" ("umami" rich broth) nuance in them, believe it or not! This might ring a bell to some of



Mr Noboru Ogasa

you foodies, about the fact that this wine made its way to the regular wine list of Noma, Copenhagen, the restaurant with 3 Michelin stars, and the "World's Best Restaurant" title in 2021.

Wine evolution in Japan did not stop at improvements in its production, but they kept stretching the value-chain further to generate revenue for the region as whole. Each wine regions is hosting events, and setting up infrastructure such as accommodation and transportation, to enable an enjoyable "wine-tourism" to flourish in Japan.

If anyone would like to have a tip or two for an extended weekend on your next trip to Japan, please let me know. You will be receiving an annoyingly long email from me.

Last but not least, I would like to share with you my ambition here, which is to move my company's European headquarter from London to Brussels.

To realize this, I would appreciate your continued support to BJA, to strengthen its role in further collaboration between Belgium and Japan, which shall eventually lead to bigger dynamics between EU and Japan that no one can ignore.

Once again, I am very much looking forward to working with you all.

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## BJA 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Golf Cup & Golf Initiation BJA 60 周年記念 ゴルフイベント

Saturday, 9 September 2023 – Hasselt Golf Club



(Left to right): Mr Busschaert, Partner of Liedekerke, Mr Ogasa, President of Sumitomo Benelux, and Mr Hazard, Vice President Finance of AGC Group, are getting ready for tee-off together.



Mr Ömer Turna, Partner of EY and Captain of the EU team holds his team winning trophy with HE Ambassador Masahiro Mikami of Embassy of Japan and Captain of the Japan team.



The Golf Initiation participants are excited to learn this fun game of golf.

Saturday 9 September was exceptionally warm, filled with bright sunshine – a perfect day to welcome the members and friends to a special BJA 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition of the Golf Cup & Golf Initiation at the Hasselt Golf Club.

Starting with a delicious lunch buffet kindly offered by the City of Hasselt, 30 enthusiastic golfers enjoyed playing 18 holes. Additionally, nearly 18 guests joined together to experience a complete golf initiation program, including a Scramble competition on a real golf course. Upon returning from their games, all participants enjoyed refreshments and had the unique opportunity to have their portraits drawn by artists Mr Serge Dehaes and Mr Vincent Riff, before the start of the networking cocktails, again kindly offered by the City of Hasselt.

The prize giving dinner was opened by Prof. Gilbert Declerck, Member of the Board, imec International and BJA President, followed by kind welcome words on the occasion of the BJA 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary by Mr Rik Dehollogne, Alderman of the City

of Hasselt and Mr Patrick Colemont, Board Member of the Hasselt Golf Club.

One of the highlights of the BJA Golf event has always been the 'EU vs. Japan' team competition. This year, after 4 consecutive years of victory, the EU team successfully snatched the victory again, and the symbolic replica landed on the hands of the EU team captain, Mr Ömer Turna, Partner at EY. The captain of the Japan team, HE Ambassador Mikami of the Japanese Embassy, extended his warm congratulations to the EU team and promised that he will do his best to contribute to Japan's victory next year!

The BJA would like to wholeheartedly thank once again the sponsors for their generosity and the enthusiastic participation of the members, partners and friends. Thanks to all of you, the BJA was honored to offer an exciting program with additional entertainment including portrait drawing, ample splendid prizes, lots of networking opportunities, and simply a memorable moment together.



To beat the heat of this day, the participants gathered at the terrace for refreshments.



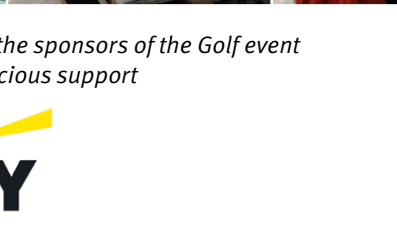
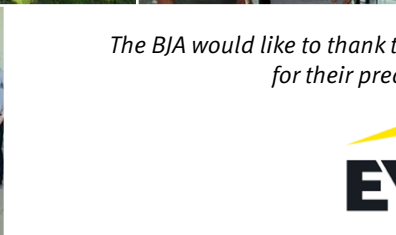
The guests eagerly are waiting for an exciting announcement of lucky winners during the prize giving dinner.



The pictures are by courtesy of Mrs Françoise Demeter of E. & H. De Beukelaer & Co.



The BJA would like to thank the sponsors of the Golf event  
for their precious support







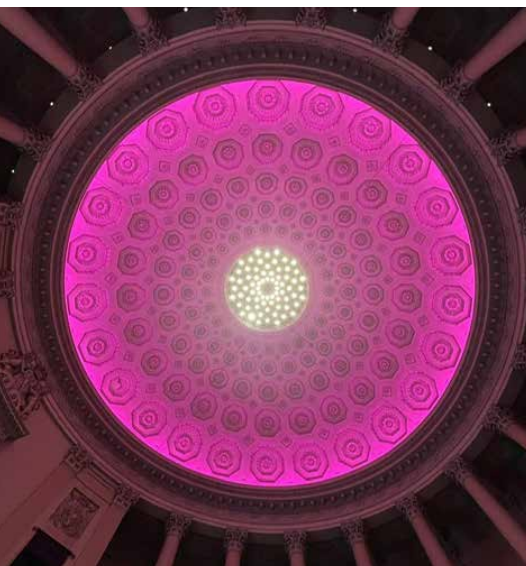
17<sup>TH</sup> INTERNATIONAL  
CONFERENCE OF

# THE EUROPEAN ASSOCIATION FOR JAPANESE STUDIES (EAJS)

By Prof. Dr Anna Andreeva and  
Prof. Dr Andreas Niehaus, Ghent University

The triennial EAJS conference in Ghent, hosted up to 25 parallel sessions in different fields ranging from economics and politics to literature, history, sociology, media studies, Japanese language teaching, etc. and by now has developed into the largest event for specialists in Japanese Studies. This year's conference attracted a total of 886 delegates, that joined face to face in Ghent, while additionally 242 researchers took the opportunity to follow the full-hybrid conference online. That the conference is by now important for researchers beyond Europe is proven by the fact that 43% of the delegates are employed by Japanese universities and that also 98 scholars from the US actively participated in the scholarly discussion. We were also glad to see that with 53 participants, Belgium was represented quite well. Next to the exchange of research results and scholarly discussions, the conference participants could also visit the Kimono exhibition "Kimono Today", which was opened by minister Ogawa Hidetoshi and dean Prof. Dr Gita Deneckere in the Vandenbrouck Pavilion and the film documentary series "Japanese Margins" in the Studioskoop. Very popular were the concerts of the American artists in residence Prof. Dr F. Rambelli, A. Lindsey, and T. Piercy, who charmed the audience with their musical performance of Japanese court music (gagaku) instruments.

The conference was opened by the president of the EAJS Prof. Dr Verena Blechinger-Talcott (Berlin) as well as the rector of Ghent University Prof. Dr Rik Van de Walle. The welcome notes were given by the mayor of Ghent, Mathias De Clercq, Japanese ambassador HE Mikami Masahiro, vice president of the Japan Foundation, Dr Sato Yuri, and the president of the Toshiba International Foundation, Omori Keisuke. The opening lecture by Prof. Dr Sonoda Shigeto (Tokyo University), who spoke about the "Asianization of Asian Studies and its impact



on Japanese Studies". The opening event, which took place in the magnificent Aula Academica of Ghent University ended with a reception for all participants and sponsors.

The conference was preceded by a PhD workshop organized by Prof. Dr Jan Schmidt (Leuven), and a pre-conference workshop organized by the Flemish Research Council project "Creating Ethical Bodies" (Prof. Dr Anna Andreeva, Prof. Dr Angelika Koch (Leiden), Prof. Dr Andreas Niehaus). The highlight of the pre-conference activities in Ghent was next to a city tour certainly the well-attended workshop on presentation techniques by Prof. Dr Kuriyama Shigehisa (Harvard University). Main international publishers in the field of Japanese studies were also present and introduced their publications. At the same time authors had the opportunity to discuss their publication proposals and meet their editors.

During the evenings, research groups and Japan related organizations discovered the hospitality of the Ghentians in a more informal context and the Toshiba International Foundation organized a diner for their scholarship alumni that had come to Ghent. On Saturday evening, a party to celebrate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the EAJS in the histori-

cal buildings of the Vismijn attracted more than 450 participants, who danced into the night facing the old harbour and the castle of Ghent.

The conference was finished by the members meeting on Sunday evening at which it was also announced that Prof. Dr Andreas Niehaus (Ghent University) has been elected to be the next president of the European Association for Japanese Studies.







## A DAY AT THE 17TH INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE OF THE EUROPEAN ASSOCIATION FOR JAPANESE STUDIES WITH TAMARA

*By Tamara Latham Sprinkle, BJA Editorial Committee Member and BJA Friendship Committee Member*

Did you hear that the largest Japan-focused area studies conference in the world, held every three years, took place in Ghent, 17-20 August? As a Ghent resident, I couldn't resist the urge to check it out despite being out of the academic loop. Come join me for a unique day at the European Association of Japan Studies Conference.

The day starts off by arriving at Ghent University bright-eyed and bushy-tailed to pick up my event badge. The first thing that struck me the moment I arrived at the campus was the impressive crowds of Japan Studies scholars mostly from around Europe and Japan chatting away predominantly in Japanese. More than 1,000 attendees signed up for the conference in person, which was readily apparent from the crowds while walking through the Blandijn building.

From a quick glance at the conference programme, the sheer wealth of disciplines was remarkable. We have our choice of attending talks on anthropology, economics, history, linguistics, literature, philosophy, religion, media, visual arts, Japanese language teaching, and so-on. However, as a Japanese translator, I gravitated towards the talks about linguistics and language. To make the most of the conference, I decided to attend both sessions before lunch as well as the final two afterwards.



One highlight of the morning session was a particularly riveting discussion about the roles of interpreters in courts and local governments in Japan. Some of major problems are the instability of the profession and the treatment of interpreters as a 'mic', something that can be used once it's set up with assumption that there is one 'correct' translation as opposed to the reality that there is a range of possible correct translations. Another scholar noted the importance of interpreting professionals and NPOs informing civil servants about the realities of interpretation. Another impressive panel was the Japanese Language Teachers session on culture and communication, posing the question of whether culture can be taught in language classes without reducing it to stereotypes and focusing on the importance of treating culture as something dynamic as opposed to

a static fact. While immersion is the best way for students to understand another culture and develop language skills, during the pandemic Japanese Studies students were unable to study abroad. In response to this Ghent University's Japanese Professor, Rie Oguma incorporated kobanashi (小噺) or acted out and recorded short stories into her Japanese classes to give students more opportunities to use their speaking skills and learn about rakugo (落語) and other traditional Japanese artforms.

Unusual for academic conferences, lunch was catered by Ghent University, and I could enjoy my pick of sandwiches while navigating through the large crowd of scholars. I popped outside to enjoy the Gagaku music concert in the Japanese garden over the lunch break. Listening to the melodic sounds of the hichiriki (篳篥), a double reed flute, ryuuteki (龍笛), a bamboo transverse flute, and shō (笙), a free reed instrument was certainly a relaxing way to decompress between the fascinating yet complex academic papers.

To finish off the day, I attended panels about sociolinguistics and dialects. For me personally having lived in Akita, the talk on how Tōhoku and Kansai dialects are represented in Japanese literature was particularly enjoyable. Another interesting talk examined how the current Mayor of Nagoya used the Nagoya dialect, which is also stigmatized much like the Tōhoku dialect, when speaking in an official capacity. To change things up a bit, I also attended an art history session on innovative design for meisen kimono presented by a Belgian scholar based in Japan, Dr Saskia Thoelen, who I had previously met at the BJA Friendship Committee event.

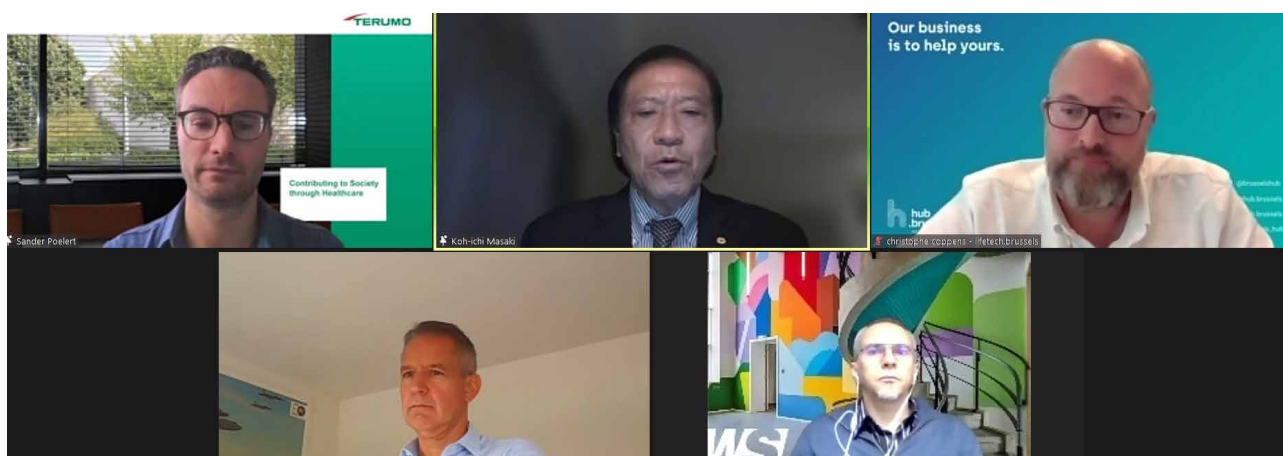
Speaking of kimonos, I headed over to the nearby Kimono Today exhibit curated by the Japan Studies Department at Ghent University to finish off the day. The exhibit showcased various modern kimonos for formal, casual, and work settings emphasising this traditional garment's relevance in modern Japan.

Due to time constraints, I was unable to view any of the Japan-focused documentaries screened at the Studio Skoop cinema. Likewise, there were several interesting panels that I couldn't attend without being able to time travel. However, one positive effect from the pandemic is increased digitalization. The EAJS conference was fully hybrid, so all the sessions could be viewed or presented via zoom and those recordings were then posted on the website, giving me a chance to view topics from other disciplines in the comfort of my own home. But for now, with the long and intense but varied day over, it's time for me to head home to mull over what I've seen and heard.

# Opportunities for Belgium-Japan Cooperation in Digital MedTech

## 日本・ベルギー間のデジタル医療技術に関する相互協力の可能性を探る

Thursday, 28 September 2023 – Digital Platform



Koh Ichi Masaki, Fabrizio Giannotta, Dieter Vansteenkiste, Christophe Coppens and Sander Poelert exchanging their views on cooperation

With ageing populations, rising medical costs and increasing societal demand, healthcare systems everywhere face unprecedented challenges in terms of quality of service and cost. By harnessing the power of AI, IoT and health data, digital MedTech can create a paradigm shift to address these challenges.

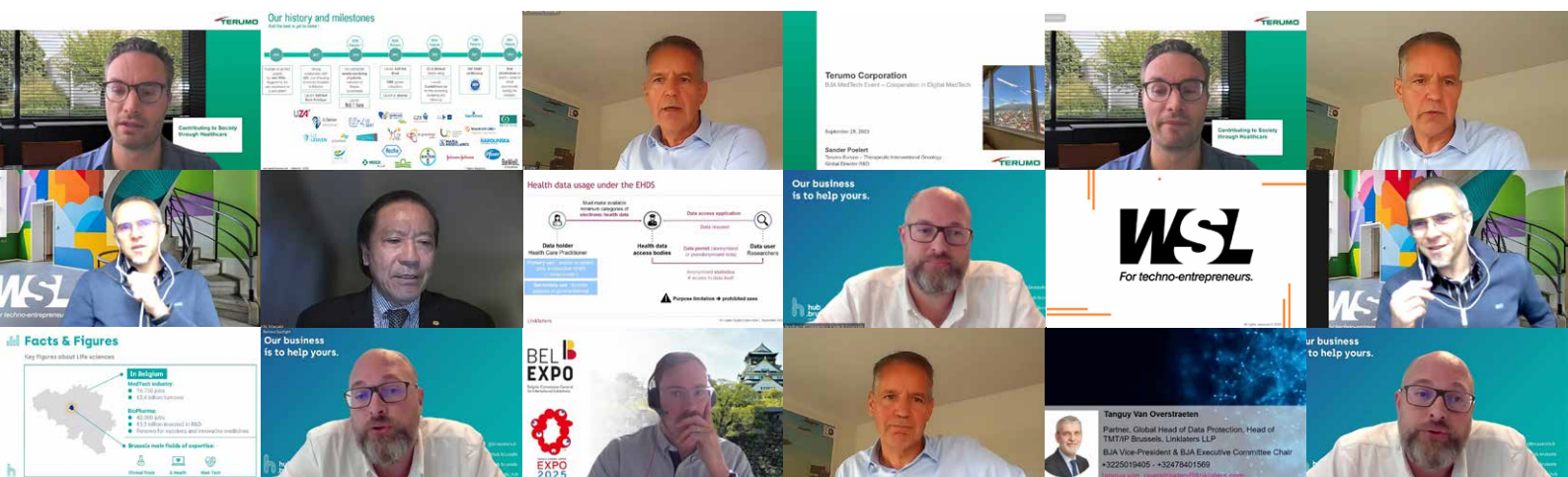
With this in mind, the BJA IPT Committee organized an insightful webinar to build a bridge between Belgium and Japan in order to share initiatives and strategies to develop digital MedTech and address the opportunities for industrial and innovation cooperation in these fields.

Koh Ichi Masaki, Head of European Affairs at Japan Management Association and BJA IPT Committee Co-Chair, welcomed the participants and opened the webinar by introducing Tanguy Van Overstraeten, Partner at Linklaters LLP, BJA Vice-President & BJA Executive Committee Chair, who addressed the

audience via a pre-recorded video to give an overview on the data related EU regulatory landscape and EU-Japan relations.

Once the regulatory aspect had been explored, Fabrizio Giannotta, MedTech Business Coach at WSL Techno-entrepreneurs, explained how this innovative incubator was helping Walloon companies develop their products and scale-up. He was followed by Dieter Vansteenkiste, Co-CEO of BeWell, who presented his company and their state-of-the-art MedTech solutions and products. Christophe Coppens, Advisor at LifeTech Cluster then gave a presentation on the Brussels Region's cluster and their initiatives for MedTech companies.

The seminar ended with an inspiring testimonial from Sander Poelert, Global R&D Director at Terumo Interventional Oncology, on the company's approach to MedTech when it comes to treating cancer, from the patient to the health provider.





## BJA 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Event: Belgian-Japanese Investments - past, present and future BJA 60 周年記念イベント: 日本・ベルギー間の投資- 過去・現在・未来

Tuesday, 10 October 2023 – imec



Mr Wim Eynatten, Partner at Deloitte and BJA Legal & Tax Committee Chair is introducing the extensive program of the day



Mr Kurt Leuridan, CEO, Tokai Optecs & BJA Investment Committee Chair warmly welcomes HE Ambassador Mikami of the Japanese Embassy to Belgium at imec.



Prof Jo De Boeck, Executive Vice President and Chief Strategy Officer of imec is expressing his delight at hosting the BJA 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary event at imec.

Founded in 1963, the BJA celebrates its 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary in 2023, a very auspicious age indeed! To mark this exceptional milestone, the BJA Investment Committee and the BJA Legal & Tax Committee jointly organized a high-level seminar focused on the future of Belgian-Japanese investment relations while looking back to where it all started. More than 100 guests joined and enjoyed an insightful program with inspiring speakers and highlights from innovative business players, enhancing opportunities for great networking and exchanging ideas.

The event was opened by Wim Eynatten, Partner at Deloitte and BJA Legal & Tax Committee Chair overviewing the extensive program of the day. He handed then the microphone in the hands of Master of Ceremony, Journalist and VRT News Anchor Hanne Decoutere, who welcomed all the guests.

The first speakers were the BJA President and former CEO of imec, Prof Gilbert Declerck, currently Member of the Board at imec international, and Prof. Jo De Boeck, Executive Vice President and Chief Strategy Officer of imec, who shared their delight at hosting the event and stressed the great collaboration between imec and Japanese companies.



They were followed by our Guest of Honour, HE Ambassador Mikami of the Japanese Embassy to Belgium, who highlighted Belgium-Japan relations in general and the excellent economic and political ties between the two countries in particular.

The opening keynote was delivered by Masaya Wakuda, President of Honda Motor Europe Logistics. As the first Japanese investor in Belgium back in 1962 and longtime BJA member, Honda holds a special place in Belgium-Japan relations. Mr Wakuda recounted the history of Honda's establishment in Belgium, and gave the audience a peek at their current and future projects.

Before the guests enjoyed a coffee break, Mrs Decoutere invited Daan De Vlieger, Partner, Deloitte, Global Trade Advisory, to the floor for a very insightful presentation on Belgium-Japan trade relations, from the impact of the EU-Japan EPA to the double tax treaty, as well as on what can be expected for the future.

After the break, the participants listened to the inspiring forward-looking presentation from Geert Noels, CEO & Chief Economist of Econopolis, who explained how Japan as a trend-setter nation and as an economic powerhouse, was experiencing and tackling many challenges, such as the declining of population and changing economic landscape – something Belgium will face in the future as well - and how we can learn from Japan in that respect.

His thought-provoking intervention was the perfect jumping board for Mrs Decoutere to open the panel discussion, composed of Emmanuel Hazard, VP Finance at AGC Group, Yoshihiro Nakata, CEO & President, Toyota Motor Europe and BJA Vice-President, Olivier Renson, Vice President – Business, Kaneka Belgium & Member of the Board, Kaneka Europe Holding, Fried Vancraen, CEO, Materialise and Dr Yohei (Hachi) Yagi, Scientist, Corporate R&D, Umicore.









Mr Masaya Wakuda, President of Honda Motor Europe Logistics, the first Japanese investor in Belgium back in 1962, is delivering the opening keynote.



More than 100 guests are eagerly listening to many inspiring speakers and highlights from innovative business players.



Mr Daan De Vlieger, Partner, Deloitte, Global Trade Advisory, is giving a very insightful presentation on Belgium-Japan trade relations as well as on what can be expected for the future.

This high-level panel discussed the past, present and future challenges for their respective companies, including managing Belgian and Japanese business cultures, current and future economic and trade trends, the impact of AI, but also the many advantages of Belgium as a place for Japanese to do business in.

The seminar was closed by Kurt Leuridan, CEO, Tokai Optecs & BJA Investment Committee Chair who summarized the main points discussed throughout the afternoon and thanked the participants and speakers, before Mrs Decoutere invited everyone to enjoy the networking cocktail.

During the cocktail, the participants had the rare opportunity to enjoy a guided tour of imec's famous cleanroom, where major R&D on the field of nanotechnologies happens.

The BJA would like to thank all participants and speakers to this wonderful event, and all the members for their dedicated support for 60 years. We are looking forward to the next 60 years to offer you with even more exciting events and business opportunities.

*The BJA would also like to express the gratitude to the sponsors of the event: AON, Deloitte, imec, Marilofund, Tokai Optecs.*



(Left to right): The Master of Ceremony, Journalist and VRT News Anchor Hanne Decoutere leads the high-level panel discussion with Mr Olivier Renson, Vice President – Business, Kaneka Belgium & Member of the Board, Kaneka Europe Holding, Mr Emmanuel Hazard, VP Finance at AGC Group, Mr Yoshihiro Nakata, CEO & President, Toyota Motor Europe and BJA Vice-President, Mr Fried Van Craen, CEO, Materialise, and Dr Yohei (Hachi) Yagi, Scientist, Corporate R&D, Umicore.

# BELGIANS IN JAPAN

## SAMUEL BLONDEL

By Geert Benoit, Managing Director, Yamagata Europe, and BJA Editorial Committee Member

*I had the honour of interviewing Samuel Blondel, a young Belgian who has been active in Japan for almost 10 years and has worked in different procurement and cost optimization related functions for large international corporations: Volvo, Ikea and now Tiffany & Co.*



**Q: Hello Samuel, nice to meet. You have been working and living in Japan for quite some time now, but I saw that your first steps in the Far East were taken in China?**

A: Indeed, but that was a long time ago. I stayed in Beijing in 2008 and worked at the Belgian Embassy for a month. I did speak some Japanese already at that time and I could use some of my skills and knowledge of Japanese because they needed somebody who could recognize Chinese characters and quickly identify names. Basically, they did not need someone who was perfectly bilingual in Chinese but, with my level of Japanese at the time, it worked out fine.

**Q: So, before you went to China, you studied Japanese in Belgium?**

A: That is correct, I started studying Japanese in 2007 through evening classes at Marie Haps, now part of the UCL.

**Q: And when you decided to go to Japan, was that an educational move or a professional move?**

A: Both I would say. From very early on, I wanted to go to Japan. I remember I always had an interest in the country and when I visited for the first time in 2010, I really enjoyed it.

Later on, after working hard academically, I finally got to be sent to the destination I wanted and I managed to do my exchange program at Waseda University. I really liked being here as a student and decided to extend my stay with an internship at Mitsubishi FUSO after my studies.

**Q: You didn't have any "Amelie Nothomb-like" experiences as a young**

**intern in such a large Japanese company?**

A: No, no. It is interesting because, looking back, I think my manager was tough, but very fair. She actually went out of her way to give me interesting tasks, she appreciated my presentation skills, and I got more and more challenging tasks within finance and controlling. As I mentioned, I remember having a tough time, and my manager's expectations were high. However, in six months' time, my mindset really made the transition from that of a university student to that of a "sarariman" [laughs].

**Q: And then you went to a European company, did you immediately start to work for Volvo in Japan? Or did you first start in Sweden, or perhaps in Belgium?**

A: No, I was sent to Japan to work for Volvo through the VIE programme. The VIE programme (Volontariat International en Entreprise or Volunteer for International Experience) is a French international corporate placement programme for young European professionals between the ages of 18 and 28. When I arrived in Japan, I already had experience with finance and controlling and I was put in the logistics team, where I was taking care of spare parts logistics. I later moved to indirect procurement.

When I first joined, there were 15 people in the logistics team and I was the only foreigner, although my VP was American. I was also the only person that was under 40 years old. One day, my manager asked me to prepare some kind of comprehensive status report related to our total stock level and the inventory management strategy, prob-



ably because it had to be in English. He liked my presentation and synthesizing skills, so he asked me to present to the upper management. I was maybe 26 years old, so that was an incredible opportunity. I am deeply thankful for that. My colleagues also liked it, maybe because they were relieved that someone was taking over the task to present in English on behalf of the entire team. Suddenly I had the honour to be in a position to “represent” my team, acting as a bridge between my Japanese colleagues and the top management.

Some months later, one of the managers to whom I was presenting was particularly satisfied with my work, and he invited me for lunch and asked me if I would be interested in joining his department. And this is how I quite quickly transitioned to procurement, the same department I am technically still working in now, albeit in a different company.

**Q: Would you say that, as a foreigner working in a Japanese environment, you get more possibilities to rise in the ranks than a Japanese person of 26 years old who started in the same team would?**

A: Well I am not sure... First of all, I was lucky to have a few excellent managers, and at the same time, I was never afraid to take responsibility and ask questions, to go to the work floor and talk to the people on the field to check if my assumptions were right. This is what I did for a few years at Volvo, talking to the engineers in the factory, solving their issues, discussing with them, going to lunch together... After gathering insights from the field and talking to the local team, I was able to communicate my findings and recommendations to the top management, helping them make informed decisions. I believe that habit has served me well.

Being able to have access to both environments really was a plus. Others might not have had the chance to or been able to build such connections

due to language barrier.

**Q: However, to work in this Japanese environment, there must be some hard aspects that make it difficult for a young Belgian, from time to time?**

A: That is true of course, but I would say that I chose the companies I worked for, and I always found myself in a role where I was acting as a bridge between Japan and global, either between Japanese stakeholders or suppliers and foreign manager, or vice versa. If I had been working for -say- a large traditional Japanese corporation, I don't think I would have had the same opportunities to act as a bridge and learn as much as I did. My individuality and specific skills would probably not have been put to use and appreciated in the same way. It would also have been more difficult to stand out, to learn, and even then, I would probably never have been given the chances to prove myself and develop in the way that I have. Of course, every company is different, but I think there still is a prevalent mindset of “you're too young, therefore you don't know” and “the nails that sticks out gets hit by the hammer”.

**Q: Recruiting as a foreign company in Japan is of course also a big issue for our readers.**

A: I believe there is a big opportunity

with the younger generation and also with the way the market is evolving. Being a foreign company also gives the image of being more flexible and having a more international mindset – which may or may not be true but can definitely be attractive to many applicants.

I remember reading somewhere that, for example, in the past few years foreign consulting firms have consistently ranked at the top of the list of the most desirable employers for young graduates, surpassing more “traditional” Japanese companies, which truly surprised me.

**Q: What other big changes do you see in Japan? Is Japan a different country since COVID or is there a return to the old ways and no revolution has taken place?**

A: The one big change of course is the acceptance of the work-from-home mindset. Think about a job opportunity where working from home is not allowed, and you have to come to the office every day, that is almost unheard of nowadays, even in Japan.

And I think right now after COVID, job-mobility has also increased dramatically. People start to think: “do I really need to stay for years at a job that is not





rewarding me in the ways I want it to?” For recruiters, it adds a risk, of course. It is not only about attracting talents, but also about keeping the talents. That being said, this might not only be due to Covid, but also linked to a generational difference; the next generation of Japanese people are less committed to one company.

**Q: Based on your experience with foreign companies in Japan, can you advise on how far you have to go in the adaptation of your products for the Japanese market? How is this “market adaptation” perceived at the huge companies you’ve worked for? Do they have completely different product ranges for Japan?**

A: I can answer from the perspective of different industries... The reality is that the expectation from the customer in terms of quality is very high in Japan. This translates into specific expectations for the product as well as for the service, both during the sales process and after the sale, basically throughout the whole customer journey.

As for adaptations, on the one hand you have purely product adaptation. When it comes to IKEA for example, the first time the company tried to come in Japan they failed to establish themselves

because they failed to adapt their product and their range. Apartments are smaller in Japan, so you need smaller furniture, and so the product and the range needed to be adapted.

On the other hand, you have to adapt the service. If you look at IKEA again, there is the tradition that the customer builds their own furniture, right? Once the customer buys a table, he or she will build it themselves. However, in Japan, people did not like that. They wanted to have someone build the furniture for them. The customer did not want to have to think too much about how to move things around in their apartment, and they did not want to make an assembly mistake. They would rather have the furniture built at their place by someone else and pay extra for that. This is also linked to the idea of “full service”.

I mentioned it a few times already, but I think there is a notion of “full service” in Japan that goes beyond the level of service in other countries.

This idea of full service and proximity to the customer is also clear in the case of IKEA, because IKEA was very much based on the concept that the consumer comes where store is, which is outside of the city centre, where the

rent is cheaper. Japan forced this idea to change. Japan was one of the first countries to have IKEA shops in the city centres. Now you have these IKEA “city shops” not only in Japan, but in all larger cities around the world.

**Q: As a procurement manager, you’re of course driven to look at the figures. How can this huge cost of the focus on extremely good service be valued?**

A: Yes, it’s a very good point. But I am convinced that any money spent on the best customer experience is money well spent. I’m not just saying that diplomatically, I really believe that. In procurement, we usually talk about Cost, but for me, I talk about QDCER (Quality, Delivery, Cost, Efficiency, and Risk). Quality always comes first, it is the most important. Cost is at the centre, but you have to take a holistic approach.

So I will look at Quality, in alignment with our needs, the Efficiency of the whole process: could we do more with less (or the same)? Synergies and leverage are also important... I think it is like cooking, if you buy high quality ingredients, make sure you know how to sublimate them, and make the most out of them [laughs].

**Q: Working in Tokyo for international**



**companies, do you still feel Belgian? Are you active in the Belgian community in Japan?**

A: Yes absolutely, I am a member of the board of directors at the Belgian Luxembourg Chamber of Commerce in Japan (BLCCJ). We have launched the “BLCCJ starters” where I have taken the responsibility to bring in more young professionals, business people and students to the BLCCJ and our Belgian community in Japan. I am organising events for the young Belgian community in Japan. We also work in close relationship with the Embassy, and their representatives are present to nearly all our events.

Among other things, we recently started reaching out to the main Belgian universities, because we are currently working on a project to welcome incoming exchange students in Japan.

Our mission is to gather together among Belux friends, extend our network, share our knowledge and experiences, and have young (and less young) Belgians and Luxembourgers in Japan realize that they’re not alone. We have people joining who are young professionals, students, people who have their own company, and bringing these different worlds together has value.

**Q: Do you manage to break the wall between Flemish and French speaking people?**

A: All of our activities are in English, so language was never an issue. When it comes to Flanders-Wallonia-Brussels member parity this used to be a challenge, most of the member were coming from Brussels but today less so. As stated, my mission is to bring in “Belux and friends” together, so we have a lot of Japanese people who are also attending our events who have a strong link with our community, either because they have studied or worked in Belgium, have Belux friends, or work for a Belgian company.

Also, I am very satisfied with the gender balance. We now have on average 40%

female attendance, which is significantly above similar networking events in Japan.

**Q: Do you have a final word, or something that you really want to share with the readers?**

A: For foreigners who want to have career in Japan, I think it is important to recognize that this is a very unique country. I’m thankful for all of the opportunities that I had so far in my career because it does take a long time to get accustomed to the Japanese way of doing things. It can be frustrating, and sometimes you may feel like you’re trying to move a brick wall because you’re pushing and pushing, and nothing seems to change. Even if you manage to push the wall -in the end- it moves back the way it was. Well, I think the biggest lesson is that sometimes it’s good to understand why the brick wall is there in the first place. Once you understand why it is there, then you can start to have a discussion and use your strengths in a more adequate way.

I think that something that has served me well so far is, as Stephen Covey said, “seek first to understand, then to be understood”. What I mean is not to simply listen to what people say, but also understand what they are not saying. I think this is key. That is of course applicable everywhere, but this is especially true in Japan, because people will not always tell you directly what they think. You have to read between the lines, understand the “Why”, you have to be a bit humble and also patient.



**Geert:**

**Thank you, Samuel. I wish you all the best with your future career, as well as your efforts to bring the Belgian/Luxembourg community in Japan more closely together, and with this strengthening the ties between our countries and people.**

## BJA Friendship Committee Gathering among the Chrysanthemum

By Tamara Latham Sprinkle, BJA Friendship Committee Member and BJA Editorial Committee Member

To soak in the beauty of the season, on 27 October 2023 the BJA Friendship Committee went on an excursion to the Japanese Garden in Hasselt during the Chrysanthemum Festival (菊祭り) in which the entire garden was carpeted in colourful Chrysanthemums. From every angle of the garden, our eyes were filled with the gorgeous floral displays contrasted with the striking crimson and auburn autumn hues, lush green flora, and tranquil rocky stream running throughout the space. There is something refreshing about exploring the exquisite simplicity of nature while catching up with friends and getting to know new people.

This Japanese Garden, built in collaboration between Hasselt and its sister city Itami, is unique as one of the largest of its kind in Europe since its inauguration in 1992. In addition to workshops on Ikebana, Tea Ceremony, Calligraphy and other aspects of Japanese traditional culture, the garden hosts seasonal events throughout the year. The 2023 Chrysanthemum Festival was brought to life by a local flower artist Els Geerdens and other dedicated volunteers, transforming the garden with innovative displays of flowers. The cherished chrysanthemum is

a symbol of the autumn season and for longevity and has been a central figure of seasonal celebrations dating back to 910 in the Heian period.

After admiring the massive hungry koi fish in the stream and looking out at the still reflective pond, we crossed the rock path along the Dragon Gate Waterfall (竜門の滝) and made our way to the picnic area. During our stroll through the garden, fortune smiled on us as the rain let up. However, as the benches under the trellis were too soaked to sit, we had our picnic of Japanese and Belgian treats in a covered area. Between those provided by the BJA and other members, there were options for everyone whether they preferred sweet or savoury food—onigiri, strawberry mochi, takuan pickled radish, rice crackers, Chestnut KitKats, fruit gummies, Belgian waffles, salted popcorn, Fanta, and Oolong tea. Surely enjoying the company and conversation of lovely people while snacking on good food in nature is one of the joys of this life.

Afterwards, we explored more of the garden, dropping by the Shinto Shrine (神社) before ringing the peace bell, wishing for peace and goodwill to re-

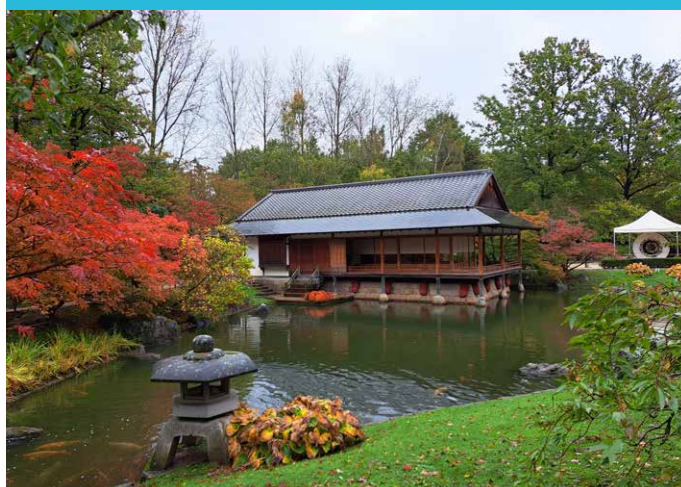
sound throughout the world. Across the wooden bridge, we peaked into the tea house, to see a tatami room to conduct tea ceremony (茶道) and a display opposite a space to learn the art of Ikebana (生花), both of which are cultural activities that would be fun for the Friendship Committee to host at a later point in time. From there we approached the exit of the garden, and like the seasons all good things must eventually come to an end.

With that I'd like to share with you a fitting haiku from Matsuo Basho (松尾芭蕉):

秋をへて  
蝶もなめるや  
菊の露

*Deep into autumn  
A butterfly sipping  
Chrysanthemum dew*

(Translation by David Landis Barnhill)







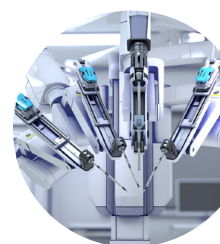
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## EUROPALIA 1989: JAPAN IN BELGIUM, FINAL PART 4 OF 4

By W. F. Vande Walle, Professor Emeritus KU Leuven, and BJA Board Member

In part 3 we have dealt at some length with the arts of the stage, including classical and modern theatre, opera, and dance. In this fourth and final instalment we will pick out some salient items from other segments of the programme. Some of them were remarkable either due to their rarity, novelty, or their ability to shed light on lesser-known facets of Japanese culture and society.

### Demonstrations and Performances

Within the Demonstrations section, the most spectacular feature was the *Budō* (martial arts) spectacle at Forest National/Vorst Nationaal in Brus-

sels. No less than twelve disciplines of Japanese martial arts, showcased by 120 masters from the Nippon Budokan, captivated the audience. Rooted in a blend of physical strength, correct posture, and moral fortitude, exemplify traits such as modesty in victory and magnanimity in defeat. In seven presentations the audience could enjoy demonstrations of *jūdō*, *kendō*, *kyūdō*, *sumō*, *karatedō*, *aikidō*, *shōrinji-kenpō*, *naginata*, *jūkendō* (art of bayonet fighting) and three disciplines of *kobudō* (allegedly archaic martial arts): *Daitō-ryū aiki-jūjutsu* (self-defense techniques), *Shintō musō-ryū jōjutsu* (the art of wielding the short staff) and *Morishige-ryū hōjutsu*. The latter discipline was one of the more remarkable and rare features, it being a ritualized form of firearms shooting, using antiquated matchlock guns embodying technology that basically extends back to 17th century Japan, complete with practitioners wearing Edo period samurai armour. Their practice is somewhat akin to what we know as a historical reenactment, but then zoomed in on an individual or limited group, removed from the setting of a real-life battlefield.

If *budō* represents one pole of the traditional arts (*dō*) spectrum, on the opposite side we find *kōdō*. No *dō* could be further removed from the martial arts than this “Way of Fragrance,” i.e., incense ceremony. *Kōdō* is indeed the highly codified art of appreciating Japanese incense, involving elaborate procedures encompassing the entire process of incense evaluation. Particularly notable are the ritualised incense-comparing game *kumikō* and the incense identifying game *genjikō*. *Kōdō* ranks as one of the three classical Japanese arts of refinement, the other two being *kadō* or flower arrangement, and *chadō* or tea ceremony. At the Europalia Japan

Center members of the Shino school of *Kōdō*, founded by Shino Sōshin five centuries ago, gave demonstrations of these ritualised games, inviting members of the audience to actively participate in and have a try at it themselves. This was and still is a rare art that is hardly known in the West, in contrast to flower arrangement and tea ceremony, of which sessions were regularly staged during the festival.

A unique occurrence was the first ever overseas performance of *sekkyō-bushi*, a traditional form of narrative recitation with roots tracing back to the practice of explaining sutras for the illiterate in medieval Japan. Initially, it was performed by itinerant beggar performers, but it subsequently evolved into a more elaborate theatrical presentation, using the *shamisen* as accompanying instrument, culminating in its definitive form during the Edo period (1600-1868). Around the year 1700, more sophisticated forms of storytelling, specifically *gidayu* (a type of narrative music) closely associated with *bunraku* (a form of puppet theatre), emerged with the rise of popular culture. Consequently, *sekkyō-bushi* gradually waned in urban areas, surviving solely as entertainment country folk provided by itinerant storytellers until the 19th century. In the Meiji period, a new storytelling tradition rooted in rural culture, known as *naniwa-bushi*, emerged from the countryside. Influenced by *naniwa-bushi*, Wakamatsu Wakatayū I (1874-1948) established a novel form of *sekkyō-bushi*, that gained significant popularity in the initial four decades of the 20th century, disseminated through radio broadcasts, recordings, and extensive nationwide tours. His son, Wakatayū II (1919-1999), accompanied his father on tours from his early years as an apprentice. Following his father’s demise just after the conclusion of World War II,



Sumō wrestlers and members of the Morishige-ryū hōjutsu in full attire, on the stage after the demonstration of their martial art.



Practitioners of four different disciplines of martial arts on the stage after the demonstration of their martial art.



Wakatayū II faced a diminished interest in traditional entertainment among the Japanese populace, leading him to pursue a conventional occupation. However, in 1980, he revitalized his art. In this period Masatayū became Wakatayū's apprentice. Having previously acquired skills in various fields of Japanese traditional music, Masatayū, succeeding the name of his master, assumed a crucial role in preserving and propagating *sekkyō-bushi* to subsequent generations. Characterized by a straightforward and unembellished storytelling approach, *sekkyō-bushi* narratives, while not inherently religious, often depict episodes of miraculous births, resurrections, and reunions. The majority of these stories revolve around individuals of noble lineage who, compelled by adverse circumstances, are forced to wander and endure significant hardships. Wakamatsu Wakatayū performed in the AB and the Palais des Beaux Arts in Brussels as well as in Charleroi.

If *sekkyō-bushi* is an expression of the way Buddhism has penetrated deeply into the fabric of popular culture, then the music and dances of *Takachiho kagura* echo the ancient mythological world of Shinto. Being a polytheistic belief system, Shinto encompasses diverse genres of Shinto dance (*kagura*). The *Takachiho kagura*, a winter festival, narrates the tale of gods praying and singing to coax the sun goddess out of hiding in a cave. Supported by the Ja-

pan Foundation, the Takachiho Kagura Ensemble performed the Palais des Beaux-Arts entrance hall of Charleroi, in Brussels, and in Wierde.

From *kagura* it is only a small step to *matsuri*. Without the taiko or drum, a Japanese matsuri (traditional festival) is unthinkable: they set the rhythm, animate the event, and accompany the ritual dances. It is in that tradition that the art of the ensemble Ō Edo Sukeroku Taiko was rooted when it was founded by Kobayashi Masamichi in Tokyo in 1959. It was the first exclusive ensemble of Japanese drumming (*wa-daiko*) in Tokyo. Their performance is always a pleasure for the eye and the ear but at the same time it is suffused with the quality of *iki*: marked by sustained rhythm and gestural dynamics it resonates with the aesthetics of the Edo period: refined technique, vibrating and penetrating sounds, precise, sharp and smooth movements. That explains why the popular Edo period hero Hanakawa Sukeroku was chosen by the group as its emblem: a famous character from the Kabuki theatre, a brave but charming and talented samurai. They performed in Charleroi, at the opening of the exhibition *Japanese Prints* at the Palais des Beaux-Arts, and in Brussels, during the spectacle evening on the Grand' Place Square, providing with their electrifying drumming added thrill to the arrival of the Nebuta procession and the Motoko Ishii Laser Art Performance.

## Films

The Brussels Film Museum offered a *Panorama of Japanese cinema* in 150 films (1925-1988). The retrospective held by the Film Museum as part of Europalia '89 Japan covered the entire history of Japanese cinema. The selection revolved mainly around four vantage points: the First Great Masters (Mizoguchi Kenji, Naruse Mikio and Gosho Heinosuke), with an entire separate retrospective devoted to the work of Ozu Yasujiro; the Humanists of the post-war period (Kurosawa Akira, Kinoshita Keisuke, and Kobayashi Masaki, with a special tribute to the little-known Shimizu Hiroshi); the *New Wave* and later (including young ambitious directors who emerged in the 1960s, such as Ōshima Nagisa, Imamura Shōhei, Shinoda Masahiro and Terayama Shūji). More specific genres within Japanese cinema were also highlighted, such as the ghost film, the Yakuza film (Japanese mafia film), the fantastic film with its legendary monsters, the popular melodramatic 'Tora-san' comedy, as well as the *Roman porno* (from 'romantic pornography') films, a series of theatrical softcore pornographic films produced by the movie studio Nikkatsu from November 1971 until May 1988. In addition, Japanese films were screened on many locations throughout the country, while the 16<sup>th</sup> *Internationaal Filmgebeuren van Vlaanderen*, Ghent, echoed Europalia '89 Japan with a special 'Focus on Japan', which included a series of experimental films from 1970

Kōdō:  
two contestants poised for a incense sniffing game.



Kōdō:  
Ritually sniffing the fragrance of incense.



Kōdō:  
Members of the public probing the mysteries of incense.



to 1980. This programme, curated by the 'American Federation of Arts Films Program' offered a selection of films shown for the first time in Belgium.

### Colloquia and Lectures

Never before had Europalia organised such an important programme of colloquia and lectures in association with various European organisations. The colloquia were chaired by top-level scientists from Japan and Europe and the lectures were followed by public debates. While a majority took place in Brussels, other venues included Toulouse, Varese, Berlin and Lisbon. The discourse surrounding these events extolled Japan as an economic superpower, the most important international creditor and a nation at the vanguard of scientific and technological innovation. In hindsight, the unreservedly optimistic portrayal of Japan might appear surprising, yet it epitomized the prevailing sentiment of the time. Despite Japan being nearly as affected as the United States by the October 1987 financial crisis, the Nikkei 225 index rebounded to its pre-crisis levels within a mere five months. This swift recovery solidified confidence in Japan's economy and financial system. Little did observers anticipate the impending "lost decade" of the 1990s.

While an exhaustive overview of all colloquia and lectures is beyond the scope, one illustrative example encapsulates the prevailing perspective. The *Financial Colloquium*, jointly organized by major universities in Belgium, convened Japanese and Belgian experts to discuss Japan's banking and financial institutions, Japanese contributions to global financing, investments abroad, Japanese banks' roles in the European banking market, international financial imbalances, fluctuations in exchange rates, and financial cooperation between Japan and Western Europe. Supported by entities like the Federation of Bankers Associations of Japan, the National Bank of Belgium, the Belgian

Bankers' Association (now called the Federation of the Belgian Financial Sector), and other financial stakeholders, this colloquium exemplified the collaborative discourse between European and Japanese experts.

Understanding Japan's economic and financial prowess necessitated delving into its core social structures and cultural values, including its education system, the traditional reverence for knowledge and religion, work ethic, and the role of women. Colloquia addressed these topics. One colloquium, organised in collaboration with the Europalia Ladies Association in Japan, highlighted the ongoing redefinition of women's roles in Japanese family and society amid societal shifts. The reflections stemmed from the general recognition that, while Japanese women have supported post-war efforts for peace and prosperity from the side-lines, now, with the emergence of a post-industrial society, increased education for women, the reduction in the number of births, and the ageing of the population, their roles in the Japanese family and society were in the process of being redefined. Another colloquium spotlighted Japan's educa-

tional system, underscoring its pivotal role in the nation's economic success. Ninety-seven percent of the population has received a formal education. While Japan's complex writing system coexists with remarkably low illiteracy rates, the rigid selection process for universities shapes individuals' professional trajectories. On the obverse side, the participants also noted that the country's educational system is highly regimented both for the children and their parents, and the selection which leads to university - the ultimate goal - is extremely rigorous. University studies determine a person's professional life. These colloquia underscored the mutual learning opportunities between Europe and Japan.

Furthermore, Europalia explored two culturally significant themes: musical education and contemporary literature in Japan. Colloquia, workshops, panel discussions, and demonstrations delved into these topics, which were attracting wide international interest and were able to give us an insight into the cultural climate of modern Japan.

The colloquium on *Musical Education in Japan*, chaired by Robert Wanger-



Gunners of the Morishige-ryū firing blanks from their matchlock guns on the stage during the martial arts demonstration.





Ō Edo Sukeroku Taiko in action.



Minbunren (Japanese Folk Arts Association), sponsored by The Min-on Concert Association, Tokyo, presented a varied programme which included classical dance, folk musical instruments, folk songs and folk dances, in nine different cities.

mée, chairman of the Music Council of the French-speaking Community of Belgium, focused on Japan's public and private music education systems. Japan has evolved a robust musical education system inspired by the Western model. After a continuous learning curve of a few decades, young Japanese musicians started scooping up prizes in various international contests. This jolted the West into discovering the revolutionary teaching methods used to instruct Japanese children in music. The Suzuki method is an excellent example. The master advocates that practice of the violin or cello should begin when a child is three or four years old. Starting in 1954, Yamaha established a network of music schools where piano and other instruments are being taught, as well as composition. The best music composed by pupils is selected every year among thousands of scores. The Junior Original Concert organization then enables the young composers, mostly aged between twelve and fourteen, to perform their works in Japan and abroad.

Special attention was paid to the dichotomy and interplay between tradition and modernism. Japan has some-

how miraculously preserved its musical heritage. Traditional music on instruments like the *koto*, the *shamisen* and the *shakuhachi* are taught at the Tokyo University of the Arts, and forty percent of the students follow these courses. A number of masters still pass on their centuries-old musical knowledge to private pupils. Topics ranged from instrument-making and publishing to the status of orchestras and concert halls, etc.

The most convincing proof of the successful musical education could be enjoyed in the stunning number of performances of (Western and Western style) classical music the Europalia programme offered, highlighting Japan's rich musical landscape. It included among many others symphonic orchestras such as the Tokyo Philharmonic Orchestra, Saito Kinen Orchestra and Orchestra Ensemble Kanazawa, a 'recitals' series, an 'ensemble' series, and a 'concerto' series featuring Japanese soloists and Belgian orchestras. Classical jazz was represented by Toshiko Akiyoshi Jazz Orchestra, while modern jazz enthusiasts relished the performances of Yamashita Yosuke and Hayashi Eitetsu and Kondo Toshinori & Ima.

## Literature

Written language came relatively late to Japan. Once it was adopted, however, poetry and prose flourished, and Japanese literature is now considered to be among the richest and most prolific in the world. Approximately a millennium ago, numerous established literary forms had already taken root, and their adaptations continue to endure. One such form is the *waka*, which is prominently featured in the *Manyōshū*, the earliest Japanese poetry anthology, dating back to the mid-eighth century. In the mid-1980s Tawara Machi, a high school teacher in her twenties, chanced upon the traditional poetry form known as *tanka*, the most popular and enduring variety of *waka*. Although still boasting a considerable following, *tanka* was perceived as old-fashioned and stale, but she breathed new life into it by infusing contemporary vocabulary and modern imagery, thereby rendering it more applicable to contemporary life. She dashed off a string of *tanka*, compiled them and published them under the title *Sarada kinenbi* (Salad Anniversary) in 1987. The collection achieved instant popularity in Japan, garnering millions of enthusiasts, while also gaining recognition from the realm



Master Wakamatsu Wakatayū gave a performance in three different locales of the last section of 'The Tale of Oguri Hangan', one of the most famous stories in the sekkyō-bushi repertory. The last section is known as the 'Arrow Catching Scene,' in which Oguri's father tests his son by shooting three arrows at him. If he catches the arrows with his two hands and teeth, he is the real Oguri.

of “serious” poets, with Machi receiving several national awards. The central theme of this collection revolves around the romantic disappointments of a young woman, yet some poems touch upon her experiences in her daily role as a teacher, her interactions with her parents, and her journeys.

In the West, the *haiku* has exerted a profound influence, fostering a trend toward “Japanisation” and experimentation with these concise, concentrated poems. The surge in translations of haiku ensued as a consequence of this vogue.

The translation of the 11<sup>th</sup> century *Tale of the Genji* sparked substantial interest in classical Japanese novels. Renowned for its intricate observations, this monumental novel has drawn comparisons to the writings of Marcel Proust and served as a catalyst for Western exploration of classical Japanese literature. Western audiences have been consistently captivated by its original ideas, rich imagination, and the diverse styles and formats

that adapt to context. While several modern Japanese authors, including Natsume Sōseki, Mori Ōgai, Kawabata Yasunari, Tanizaki Jun'ichirō, Mishima Yukio, Endō Shūsaku, and Ōe Kenzaburō, had already seen their works translated into select Western languages, many remained untranslated, and the literary talents of several others remained obscure beyond Japan's borders.

Europalia presented a unique opportunity to raise awareness among Western readers regarding the wealth of Japanese literature and the remarkable transformations within Japanese culture throughout the twentieth century. Given the absence of the internet at the time, the establishment of a bookstall at the Palais des Beaux-Arts/Paleis voor Schone Kunsten, offering Japanese literature alongside French and Dutch translations of novels, poetry, art books, and works in the social sciences, served as a pertinent initiative.

Europalia also took on the role of co-

publisher for *Littérature japonaise contemporaine*, an overview of Japanese contemporary literature from 1945 to 1989 (Paris & Brussels: Ed. Labor & Ed. Philippe Picquier, 1989), with contributions from approximately fifteen experts from Europe and Japan, each delving into salient aspects of the literary output of the last 45 years.

Japanese literature also received substantial backing from Europalia thanks to a special Europalia Literature Prize offered by the European Community. The jury, comprised of European specialists in the study of Japanese literature and chaired by W. Vande Walle, awarded Ōe Kenzaburō (1935-2023), who would later receive the Nobel Prize in Literature (1994). The award presentation took place in the presence of the jury and the laureate, who was also expected to take part in public discussions and panels. Incidentally, Ōe Kenzaburō passed away this year (3 March 2023).

Europalia extended invitations to various other authors who engaged in panel discussions, dialogues, and reading sessions alongside numerous critics, collectively exploring significant facets of Japanese literature. The literary works of these contemporary authors frequently straddled multiple literary styles. Discussions encompassed not only the disparities and comparisons in styles and eras but also the position of Japanese literature within the contexts of Asia and Europe. Exchanges of ideas occurred between Japanese literary specialists, Belgian, and other European writers and critics. In addition, several meetings were held for a specialised audience, where specific problems, such as the translation of Japanese poetry, were discussed.

#### Europalia Nippon Kinen

The Europalia programme encompassed approximately 40 exhibitions and 170 events, with nearly every one



of these activities being supported by Japanese sponsors, including the Japan Foundation. Furthermore, a substantial number of Japanese companies and corporations, consisting of 267 entities, among which 75 were banks and insurance institutions, contributed to a joint sponsorship fund. This fund was collected and managed by the Belgo-Luxembourg Market Council (established in 1979 as a follow-up to the “Benelux Import Promotion Mission” dispatched by the Japanese government to Belgium



Ōe Kenzaburō in 1988, during a visit to Belgium

and Luxembourg in that year), chaired at the time by Uemura Mitsuo.

The total capital raised by the Belgo-Luxembourg Market Council added up to a considerable sum, so considerable indeed that, when the festival officially closed on 17 December 1989, surplus funds remained. Rather than distributing the surplus pro rata among the sponsors, a decision was made to allocate it to a project aimed at preserving the memory of the festival or extending its benefits for several years. The Japanese committee resolved to employ the remaining

funds for the provision of scholarships to Belgian students and artists over a decade. This fund was christened *Europalia Nippon Kinen* (Europalia Commemorative Fund). During its initial years, the selection committee was led by former Belgian ambassador to Japan, Marcel Depasse. Following his resignation due to health concerns, I assumed the chairmanship until the program’s conclusion. Over nine cycles, the selecting committee awarded approximately 45 scholarships, ranging from three months to one year, to Belgian artists, scholars, and students. The final Belgian beneficiaries departed in 2002.

The concept for *Europalia Nippon Kinen* originally stemmed from the vision of Ueda Taizō, the secretary-general of *Europalia Japan 1989*. During a meeting with King Baudouin in 1988, the king expressed a fervent desire for more young Belgians to have the opportunity to study in Japan. Ueda Taizō wholeheartedly embraced this royal wish and felt morally obligated to fulfill it. The establishment of the fund provided a means to at least partially honour this commitment. Although the number of recipients sent to Japan by *Europalia Nippon Kinen* was limited, it undeniably made a valuable contribution by increasing opportunities for aspiring young Belgian artists and scholars. As such, the fund stands as one of the more enduring legacies of *Europalia ‘89 Japan*, as many of its former beneficiaries maintain strong connections with Japan and continue to explore various facets of Japanese culture and society.

### Epilogue

During the height of *Europalia*, it seemed as though we were observing and partaking in an evolutionary process. We believed it was an ascent towards even greater achievements, a time of boundless promise. However, *Europalia Japan* marked a zenith, and nothing of comparable magnitude

has transpired since. It became the benchmark, setting an unparalleled standard. The Japanese term “*kūzen zetsugo*,” meaning “unprecedented and never equalled since,” aptly characterizes the festival. While we recognized its unprecedented nature at the time (*kūzen*), we did not foresee that it would remain unrivalled (*zetsugo*) in the years that followed, at least not until now. Reviewing the program, one cannot help but reflect on the unique privilege we enjoyed during that period. We should have savoured it even more than we did, as it was an extraordinary experience. We saw works of art, witnessed performances and witnessed phenomena that we had never seen before, not even in Japan. The entirety of Japanese culture seemed to unfold before our eyes and ears. Regrettably, time did not permit us to fully immerse ourselves in all the exhibitions and events. It is also regrettable that not more people from within Belgium and the neighbouring countries had the opportunity to witness, listen to, enjoy, experience, savour, and relish this cornucopia of exhibitions and events.

### References

This account is based on my personal archives as well as on the booklets, brochures and catalogues that were published by *Europalia International Foundation* before and during the festival. In 1990 the Japanese *Europalia* committee had a photographic album titled *Europalia ‘89 Japan in Belgium Sept.-Dec. 1989 (yūropalia 89 japan shashinshu)*. This album provides a concise yet excellent overview of nearly all events, although it is regrettably not available for purchase.

## BJA Friendship Café and Visit to the Art Nouveau in Japan Exhibition

By Tamara Latham Sprinkle, BJA Friendship Committee Member and BJA Editorial Committee Member

On 12 August in the height of the Belgian summer heat, the Friendship Committee visited the Art Nouveau in Japan Exhibition in the trendy Saint-Géry neighbourhood of Brussels. The event was fully booked with both familiar faces of members and first-time attend-

ees alike. The curator of the exhibition, Dr Saskia Thoelen, a Belgian scholar of Japanese Art and Design working at Bunka Gakuen University, graciously offered to guide our group around the exhibition hall.

As she explained, the nineteenth century Art Nouveau movement in Europe influenced the art and fashion in Japan, and Japanese art itself or Japonisme, in turn, influenced the movement internationally. The exhibit displayed the colourful paintings and graphic works of prominent Japanese artists depicting natural scenery and idealised feminine beauty, as well as bright, bold kimono fabrics illustrating this epoch-making style. Perusing through these eye-catching images, it is easy to see how important this movement was to the development of modern Japanese craft design.

A portion of the exhibit displaying full-sized kimonos was in the Japan Information and Culture Centre, which was, unfortunately, not open during weekends. Several of the attendees indicated their interest in visiting this section of the exhibition during the upcoming weeks before its closing on 22 September. Though, personally I have not yet had time to return to Brussels to see the second section myself.

After exploring the exhibition and thanking Dr Thoelen for her fascinating tour, the large group relocated to a steam-punk inspired café next door, La Machine. Here, we were able to catch up with each other and get to know other members in a flurry of different languages – English, French, Dutch, and Japanese – while sipping on a selection of Belgian beers, cocktails, and juices in a relaxed environment.





The BJA would like to extend a warm welcome to its newest members:

#### Individual Members

#### Individual Regular Member

Poorva Bhagwat  
Arlette Damiaens  
Dominique Demeulemeester  
Ludovic Urbain

#### Individual Couple Member

Mr & Mrs Hanh Nguyen  
Benjamin Schuurmans & Yuko Kaneko

We would also like to express our appreciation to our [BJA Sponsor Members](#) >









The BJA thanks the Marilo Fund for financially supporting this newsletter



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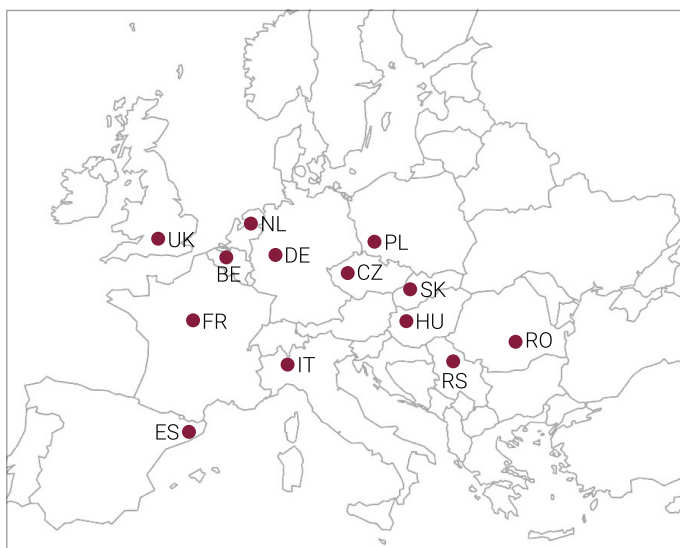
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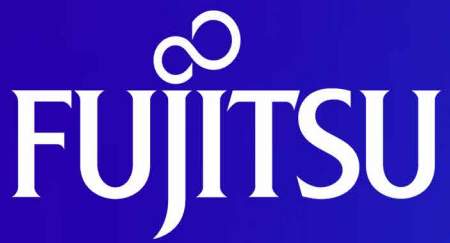
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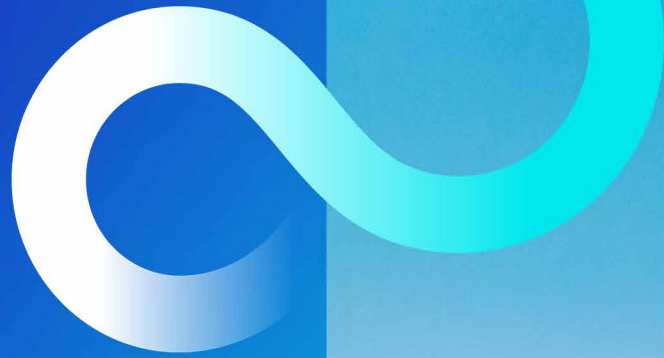
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