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IMPERIAL AND
ROYAL VISITS
IN RETROSPECT



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18 Imperial State Visit

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EDITORIAL

By Prof Gilbert Declerck, BJA President
and Member of the Board of imec International

The State Visit of Their Majesties the Emperor and Empress of Japan to Belgium was a remarkable moment in the long and close relationship between our two countries. For me personally, it was both an honour and a privilege to participate in several events that highlighted the depth of the ties connecting Belgium and Japan. Ties that extend from diplomacy and business to science, innovation and people-to-people exchanges.

As President of the Belgium-Japan Association & Chamber of Commerce (BJA), I had the honour of attending the State Banquet hosted by Their Majesties the King and Queen of the Belgians. Such occasions are much more than ceremonial events. They symbolize the mutual respect and friendship that have

characterized Belgian-Japanese relations for many decades. The banquet brought together representatives from government, business, academia and civil society, creating an atmosphere that reflected the broad and multifaceted partnership between our nations. It was inspiring to witness once again how strongly Belgium and Japan are connected through shared values, trust and a common commitment to international cooperation. The speeches by His Majesty the King and by His Majesty the Emperor were both a token of the deep friendship between their Families.

Another highlight was having the privilege of welcoming His Majesty the Emperor of Japan and His Majesty the King of the Belgians during their visit to imec. Returning to imec in the con-



Prof Gilbert Declerck

text of this State Visit carried a special meaning for me, given my former role as CEO of the organization. Over the years, imec has become the world's leading research and innovation hubs in nanoelectronics and digital technologies, and Japan has consistently been an important partner in that journey.

The visit demonstrated how scientific excellence and technological innovation can serve as bridges between countries. The very first partnerships with Japanese companies go back to the early 90's, when imec was working with JSR and Fujifilm on new photore-sists. The longstanding collaboration between imec and about 60 Japanese companies and 10 universities and research institutions illustrate the strength of our innovation ecosystems and our shared ambition to address global challenges through advanced technology. Seeing the interest shown by the Japanese delegation reaffirmed my conviction that cooperation between Belgium and Japan in research and innovation will continue to grow in importance in the years ahead.

When His Majesty the Emperor asked about the geopolitical situation, imec's



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CEO Patrick Vandenameele responded that imec is deeply concerned about it. He also pointed out that imec is launching an imec Japan R&D center on silicon photonics in Hokkaido in close collaboration with Rapidus and the Hokkaido and Tohoku universities. During the short Q&A, AI was a clear focus, along with imec's role in enabling next-generation computing, connectivity and further semiconductor scaling.

Perhaps the most memorable moment of the week was the opportunity, in my capacity as the BJA President, to meet His Majesty the Emperor of Japan personally at the Residence of His Excellency Ambassador Osuga, Ambassador

of Japan to Belgium. It was a rare and deeply appreciated honour.

Our conversation, though brief, reflected the warmth and mutual goodwill that characterize the relationship between our countries. I was particularly struck by His Majesty's genuine interest in Belgium and in the activities that contribute to strengthening Belgian-Japanese exchanges. His Majesty the Emperor referred to his very interesting visit to imec the day before, and he appreciated having spoken with a group of seven Japanese researchers representing the 111 Japanese coworkers at imec. When the Empress asked me when I had first visited Japan, I replied

that it was in 1984 and that I have since visited Japan more than 100 times. The Empress was also impressed to hear that I know the Tokyo subway much better than the one in Brussels.

The meeting reminded me that successful international relations are ultimately built not only through institutions and agreements, but also through personal connections, mutual understanding and respect.

The BJA has long been committed to fostering these connections. Through our activities, we seek to bring together businesses, academics, policymakers and individuals who share an interest in deepening the relationship between Belgium and Japan. This State Visit offered a powerful reminder of why that mission remains so relevant.

As I reflect on the events of the warmest week in June, I am filled with optimism about the future of Belgian-Japanese relations. The friendships that have been built over many years continue to evolve and strengthen. Whether through diplomacy, trade, technological innovation, cultural exchange or educational cooperation, the opportunities for collaboration are greater than ever.

State Visits are, by their nature, exceptional moments. Yet their true value lies in the momentum they create for the future. The conversations held, the relationships reinforced and the mutual appreciation expressed during this visit will continue to bear fruit long after the official programme has concluded.

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to all those who contributed to making this State Visit such a success. It was a week that celebrated not only the friendship between Belgium and Japan, but also the shared vision and trust that will continue to guide our partnership in the years to come.

Unlocking IP: Turning Innovation into Business Impact 知的財産(IP)の真価を引き出す:イノベーションをビジネスの成果へ

Thursday, 28 May 2026 – imec, Leuven



Kurt Leuridan, CEO of Tokai Optecs and Chair of the BJA Investment Committee



Ethan Humphreys, Senior Legal Counsel of IFORI



Suzanne Renes, Former Senior Dutch & European Patent Attorney and Business Developer at IFORI

On 28 May 2026, business leaders, legal experts, innovators, and policymakers gathered at imec in Leuven to explore how Intellectual Property (IP) can drive business growth and competitive advantage. Co-organized by the BJA Legal & Tax Committee and the BJA Investment Committee, the event examined how organizations can move beyond viewing IP solely as a protective tool and instead leverage it as a strategic business asset in an increasingly competitive innovation landscape.

The afternoon opened with remarks from Kurt Leuridan, CEO at Tokai Optecs and Chair of the BJA Investment Committee, followed by an introduction from Ethan Humphreys, Senior Legal Counsel at IFORI. Suzanne Renes, Former Senior Dutch & European Patent Attorney and Business Developer at IFORI, discussed the broader role of IP and its integration into business strategy. Wim Eynatten, Partner at Deloitte and Chair of

the BJA Legal & Tax Committee, highlighted how companies can translate IP assets into financial value, emphasizing their growing importance in valuation, investment decisions, and profitability. Prof Ivan Van de Cloot, Chief Economist and CEO at Stichting Merito, offered a thought-provoking perspective on the relationship between innovation, IP, and sustainable value creation.

Following a networking coffee break, attendees reconvened for a dynamic panel discussion moderated by Gert Bergen, Executive Vice President and co-CSO at imec. The panel brought together diverse perspectives from industry, research, healthcare, and advanced materials. The audience had the pleasure of hearing insights from the moderator together with Marc Sader, European Patent Attorney at Barco; Vincent Ryckaert, IP Manager at imec; Toon Digneffe, Head of EU Public Affairs & Partnerships at Takeda; and Marc De Baere, President &





Wim Eynatten, Partner at Deloitte and Chair of the BJA Legal & Tax Committee



Prof Ivan Van de Cloot, Chief Economist and CEO of Stichting Merito



General Manager at JSR Micro. The discussion explored practical challenges and opportunities surrounding IP management, innovation partnerships, regulatory developments, and the strategic role of intellectual property in creating business value. The interactive Q&A session further enriched the dialogue, allowing participants to engage directly with the panelists and exchange experiences across sectors.

The event concluded with closing remarks from Wim Eynatten and networking drinks, providing participants with opportunities to continue the exchange of ideas. The afternoon reaffirmed that IP is not merely a legal safeguard but a strategic resource that can unlock innovation, foster growth, and create lasting business impact.

The BJA extends its sincere thanks to all speakers, panelists, participants, and imec for hosting this successful event.



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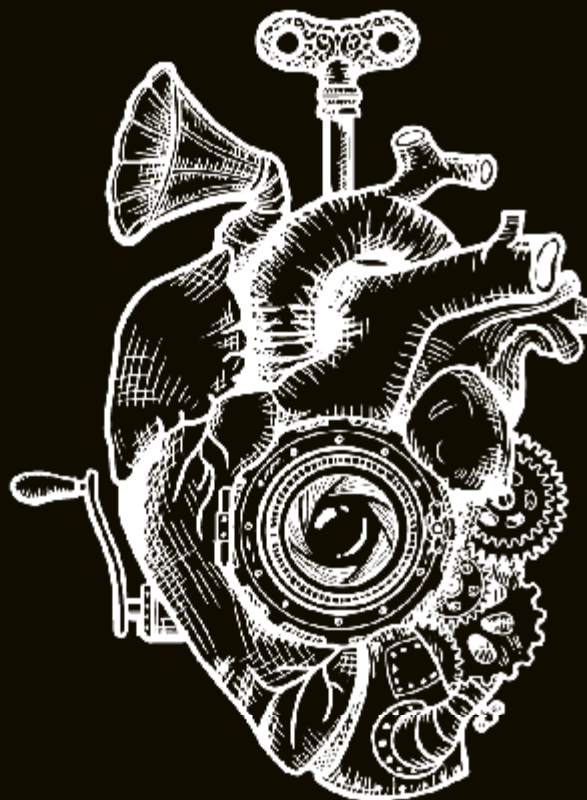
Deloitte.



TOKAI



Left to right: Gert Bergen, Executive Vice President and co-CSO of imec; Vincent Ryckaert, IP Manager, imec; Toon Digneffe, Head of EU Public Affairs & Partnerships, Takeda; Marc De Baere, President & General Manager, JSR Micro and Marc Sader, European Patent Attorney, Barco



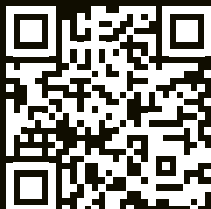
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BJA Friendship Committee Book Club

BJA友好委員会「ブッククラブ」

Sunday, 14 June 2026 – Brussels

“People-and I’m no exception-seem capable of forgetting almost anything, much as if our island were unable to float in anything but an expanse of totally empty sea.” On 14 June, the BJA Friendship Committee met at La Fleur en Papier doré - Het Goudblommeke in Papier, a cozy historic tavern in Brussels popular among artists and writers, for its second Book Club event. This time we had a lively discussion about the dystopian novel, ‘Memory Police’ by Yoko Ogawa (「密やかな結晶」小川 洋子). We welcomed both returning attendees and new faces alike who shared their thoughts and perspectives on this provocative parable about the power of memory and interpersonal connections.

The novel, originally published in 1994 but translated into English within the last decade, weaves together two narratives: one of an unnamed author living on an island where objects disappear and are made to be forgotten which is enforced by the fascistic Memory Police as well as the author’s latest story about a typist who loses her voice and her controlling relationship with her typist teacher. The inspiration Ogawa took from reading Anne Frank’s diary is very apparent as the author hides her editor in her house to protect him

from being rounded up by the Memory Police for remembering the things everyone should have forgotten. As the story goes on more and more is forgotten -- boats, books and even body parts -- until the protagonist is left as a voice with no body paralleling her own story of the woman trapped as a withering body with no voice.

Some of our attendees were dissatisfied with the lack of explanation of the wider political situation of the novel or resistance movement, and for some it brought up unpleasant memories. However, others found the novel’s parable nature appealing, allowing more room for personal interpretations and exploration of its themes. We could discuss the abusive relationship in the story within the story, mirroring the authoritarian regime in the main story as well as a distorted inversion of the author’s loving relationship with her own editor. The two stories work together to emphasize aspects of freedom and the intimate relationships between characters. While there is no political resistance movement, the author goes to great lengths for her editor and the old man she is friends with, making a trip to the Memory Police itself to check up on the old man and even awkwardly finishing her own story to make her editor

happy despite having forgotten books. Was the collective amnesia of the town a metaphor for real world authoritarian regimes, dementia making people forget their core memories, or the flow of time callously but inevitably stripping away everything? It struck me while reading, in our current age, the typewriter itself as mentioned within the novel has now been mostly forgotten, relegated to an obsolete historic piece of technology.

The sign of a good book, whether one enjoys it or not, is that it leaves a deep impression and gives you plenty to discuss or think about. That was certainly the case for this novel, and we barely scratched the surface.

What novel should we explore next year? We’d love to hear your reading recommendations.

*By Tamara Latham Sprinkle,
Co-Chair of the BJA Friendship Committee*

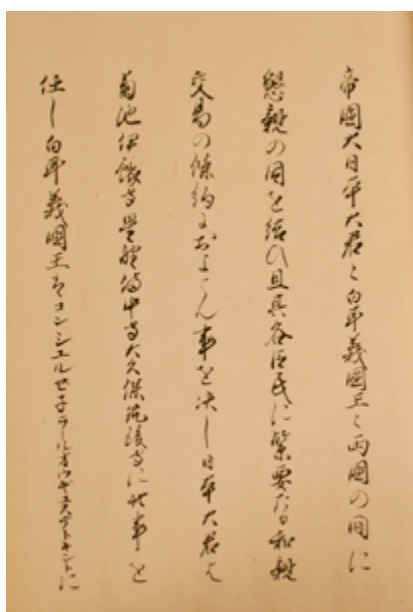


IMPERIAL AND ROYAL VISITS IN RETROSPECT

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



Signature and seal on the Dutch (official) version of the first treaty between Belgium and Japan (1866).



Opening page of the Japanese translation of the first treaty between Belgium and Japan (1866)

In June of this year, Belgium and the Netherlands hosted a state visit by the Imperial Couple of Japan. The visit attracted considerable media attention and prompted numerous publications recounting the long history of close relations between the Belgian Royal House and the Japanese Imperial Family. Rather than examining this state visit in greater detail - you can find an account on pages 18 to 20 of this issue -, the following pages provide a concise historical overview of one hundred and sixty years of relations between the Belgian Royal House and the Japanese Imperial Family, with particular attention to the features that distinguish that relationship from comparable relationships between other reigning dynasties.

Imperially Yours

In their coverage of the Imperial state visit, the Belgian and wider European press frequently described the Japanese Emperor as “the only reigning emperor in the world.” While technically correct, this statement can be misleading, as it suggests that several emperors once ruled simultaneously and that only one has survived. In reality, this impression largely results from a translation issue.

Historically, monarchs whose institutions possessed an especially ancient pedigree were often rendered in European languages as “emperors”, regardless of their original titles. Modern European history, for example, knew the German Emperor and the Austrian Emperor, whose titles were explicitly linked to the Roman imperial tradition. Beyond these cases, however, the situation was considerably more complex. The ruler of Russia bore the title “Tsar”, while the ruler of China was tradition-

ally designated the “Son of Heaven”. These titles are, in essence, unique and only imperfectly translatable. Their significance lies precisely in their uniqueness: they imply the existence of a single supreme ruler whose authority extends over a political order transcending ordinary kingdoms.

Such rulers typically exercised authority over multi-ethnic empires and occupied the apex of a hierarchical political system in which subordinate rulers acknowledged them as overlord. Imperial titles therefore often carried universalistic claims extending beyond ethnic or territorial boundaries.

The Japanese sovereign similarly bears a unique title in Japanese: Tennō. Like the already mentioned titles, it is fundamentally untranslatable and refers to a singular institution. Nevertheless, the Japanese Emperor differs significantly from other historical imperial rulers. Unlike many “emperors” elsewhere, the word Tennō etymologically does

not imply a universalistic claim but rather indicates his heavenly ancestry to justify his rule over the Japanese archipelago, nor has he exercised direct executive government in the modern period. Political authority in Japan has long been effectively exercised by other institutions and officeholders.

Equally distinctive is the remarkable continuity traditionally associated with the Japanese Imperial House. Unlike China, where a long series of successive dynasties replaced one another over the centuries, Japan has never experienced a complete dynastic rupture. The notion of an uninterrupted imperial succession occupies a central place in Japanese constitutional thought. Yet, as a matter of historical analysis, that notion requires a degree of qualification. During the fourteenth century, the coexistence of the Northern and Southern Courts created competing imperial lines, making the assertion of a perfectly continuous succession historically more complex than is sometimes acknowledged. Furthermore, the earliest generations of Japanese emperors belong largely to the realm of myth rather than verifiable history, with reliable historical evidence becoming substantially firmer only from the sixth century onwards.

The contemporary debate on imperial succession that presently rages in Japan, illustrates the enduring importance attached to the principle of dynastic continuity. Supporters of the existing succession rules argue that preserving an unbroken male lineage constitutes the very foundation of the Emperor's legitimacy. Opponents, by contrast, point to the existence of several reigning empresses in Japanese history and contend that the strict exclusion of female succession owes more to the Imperial House Law of the Meiji period than to an immutable ancient tradition. This latter claim, however, is sometimes overstated. Although women did occasionally occupy the throne, such reigns were generally regarded as exceptional rather than nor-

mative. Female sovereigns were never understood to establish an alternative principle of succession but instead represented extraordinary solutions adopted under exceptional circumstances, often accompanied by significant limitations upon their exercise and transmission of imperial authority.

However, whether or not the historical narrative of uninterrupted succession through the male lineage withstands critical scrutiny is, for the purpose of this article beside the point. The notion of dynastic continuity has profoundly shaped Japanese historical consciousness. For many Japanese, the Imperial House - or more precisely, the imperial institution itself - is perceived as co-eval with the Japanese state and with Japanese civilisation. Japan is therefore difficult to conceive independently of the Emperor. His significance extends well beyond the political sphere and belongs equally to the cultural foundations of the nation.

This understanding is reflected in the current Constitution of Japan, which defines the Emperor as "the symbol of the State and of the unity of the people." The notion of a "symbol" is fundamentally cultural before it is political. Although some commentators have regarded the constitutional terminology as unsatisfactory for that reason, it arguably captures the Emperor's contemporary role more accurately than any alternative constitutional designation.

This conception of monarchy differs markedly from that prevailing in Belgium. The Belgian monarchy rests upon a fundamentally different constitutional foundation. The Belgian dynasty was established only in 1831, when Leopold I, a foreign prince, accepted the invitation of representatives from Belgium that had recently proclaimed its independence, to become its king. His accession depended upon swearing an oath of allegiance to the Constitution and the laws enacted by the Belgian people. Many Japanese, although fa-

miliar with the Belgian King, are unaware of these constitutional origins. They often assume, almost instinctively, that Belgium has existed continuously in much the same way that Japan is commonly perceived to have done.

Again, in contradistinction to Belgium, under the Imperial Household Law, succession to the Japanese throne remains restricted to male descendants in the paternal line. Although legislative reform was briefly considered in 2005 to permit female succession, the proposal was abandoned following the birth of Prince Hisahito in 2006, who restored the prospect of male succession within the Imperial Family.

One of the most distinctive features of the Japanese imperial system used to be the existence of the *miyake* (or *ōke*), the collateral branches of the Imperial House. Eleven of these collateral branches were abolished during the Allied Occupation in October 1947. Ironically, this post-war reform has become one of the principal causes of the present succession crisis. The amendment to the Imperial House Law adopted by the National Diet as recently as 17 July 2026 was designed precisely to address the shortage of eligible members of the Imperial Family that indirectly resulted from the abolition of these collateral branches. The amendment seeks to ensure the long-term sustainability of the Imperial institution while preserving the principle of agnatic succession. Although presented as a pragmatic institutional reform, it has generated considerable constitutional, political and social debate. The legislation explicitly maintains the rule that only males descended through the paternal line may succeed to the throne. Rather than altering the succession rules themselves, the reform seeks to enlarge the Imperial Family by permitting princesses to retain imperial status after marriage and by facilitating the adoption or reintegration of male descendants from former collateral branches. These measures aim to en-

sure that sufficient members remain available to perform official duties while preserving the traditional principle of male-line succession.

Unsurprisingly, these reforms have raised significant constitutional and equality concerns. A detailed examination of those issues, however, lies beyond the scope of the present discussion. Suffice it to observe that the amendment represents a carefully negotiated compromise. While it may alleviate the immediate institutional difficulties arising from the declining size of the Imperial Family, it leaves unresolved the more fundamental question of whether female succession should ultimately be permitted in order to secure the monarchy's long-term stability and legitimacy.

Whatever one's assessment of these historical developments, the enlarged Imperial Family of the Meiji era provided a considerable number of princes capable of carrying out official functions. This becomes evident when examining relations between the Belgian Royal House and the Japanese Imperial Family during the reign of King Leopold II.

Royal and Imperial Relations during the Reign of Leopold II (1882–1909)

The close relationship between the Belgian Royal House and the Japanese Imperial Family did not originate in the twentieth century but can already be traced to the reign of King Leopold II. Although the Belgian sovereign was an enthusiastic traveller, he never visited Japan. Conversely, during the Meiji period it was inconceivable for the reigning Emperor to leave the Japanese archipelago. Diplomatic contacts therefore developed through visits by members of the Imperial Family, especially the collateral branches (*miyake*), received in audience by the King, and through an intensive exchange of telegrams, signed photographs, and ceremonial gifts. The archives demonstrate

that these media constituted the principal instruments of royal diplomacy at the turn of the twentieth century.

The existence of a relatively large extended Imperial Family during the Meiji period made such exchanges possible. Numerous princes belonging to the collateral branches represented the Emperor abroad, performed ceremonial functions, and cultivated diplomatic relations with foreign courts. Their visits to Belgium illustrate the practical importance of the *miyake* as an institutional resource for Japanese diplomacy.

The first Japanese imperial visitor to Belgium was Prince Arisugawa Taruhito (1835–1895), head of the Arisugawa branch of the Imperial Family, who visited Belgium in October 1882 and was received in audience by King Leopold II. A second visit followed in October 1889, when Prince Arisugawa Takehito, half-brother of the abovementioned Taruhito, travelled through Europe incognito (travelling under the alias of Count and Countess Sawa) while undertaking a military mission. The Arisugawa house, one of the oldest collateral branches of the Imperial Family, would eventually become extinct during the 1920s owing to the absence of a male heir.

Two years later, in April 1900, Belgium welcomed Prince Kan'in Kotohito, another member of a collateral imperial branch. Adopted into the Kan'in house by Emperor Kōmei, Prince Kan'in had already distinguished himself as a military officer during the First Sino-Japanese War and occupied a prominent position within the Imperial Family as the adoptive brother of Emperor Meiji. His visit further consolidated the growing ties between the Belgian and Japanese courts.

The diplomatic significance of these princely visits should not be underestimated. Although the Emperor himself remained in Japan, members of the collateral branches effectively functioned as his personal representatives. Their presence abroad allowed Japan to culti-

vate dynastic diplomacy while respecting the long-established convention that the sovereign did not leave the country.

The exchange of official telegrams reveals the remarkably personal character of these relations. In 1901, the birth of two future sovereigns - Prince Hirohito, later Emperor Shōwa, and Prince Leopold, later King Leopold III - prompted reciprocal messages of congratulations between the two courts.

On 18 July 1902, leaving Belgian territory, Prince Komatsu Akihito sent a telegram from the border town of Mennin, to thank King Leopold residing at the time in Ostend. Later that year the Japanese cruisers *Asama* and *Takasago* paid a ceremonial visit to the port of Antwerp, where they received a particularly warm welcome from King Leopold II. These naval visits reflected Japan's emergence as a modern maritime power following the reforms of the Meiji era and symbolised the growing mutual respect between the two monarchies.

The correspondence exchanged during the same period illustrates how closely both courts followed each other's fortunes. Following the death of Queen Marie Henriette on 19 September 1902, Emperor Meiji immediately sent a telegram expressing his condolences. Two months later, after the failed assassination attempt against Leopold II on 15 November 1902, the Emperor again telegraphed his concern and relief. Likewise, on the sixty-fifth anniversary of Belgian independence in July 1905, the Japanese sovereign sent official congratulations to the Belgian King.

One of the most illustrative examples of this dynastic diplomacy occurred during Prince Arisugawa Takehito's visit to Brussels in June 1905. After their departure from Ostend to London, Leopold II personally thanked the prince and his spouse not only for their visit but also for the signed photographs that had been presented to him, describing them as "très ressemblantes," together

Visit of Prince Takamatsu (brother of Emperor Hirohito) and his spouse at a gala dinner offered by King Albert I and Queen Elisabeth on 26 July 1930



with an elegant ornamental vase. The following day Emperor Meiji himself transmitted a telegram thanking the Belgian monarch for the reception accorded to his relative.

Another important visit followed in June 1909, when Prince Kuni Kuniyoshi (1873-1929) and Princess Kuni travelled to Belgium. Prince Kuni belonged to a newly established collateral branch authorised by Emperor Meiji. At the time of his visit, he was pursuing military studies in Germany and was attached to a Prussian regiment. King Leopold awarded him the Grand Cordon of the Royal Order of Leopold, with Swords, on 22 June 1909. The couple would later become the parents of Princess Nagako, the future Empress Kōjun and consort of Emperor Hirohito. Their visit therefore acquired additional historical significance in retrospect, linking Belgium to the family of Japan's future wartime and post-war Emperor.

These repeated exchanges demonstrate the central role played by the collateral branches of the Imperial Family in Japanese foreign representation before the First World War. They also illustrate the remarkable continuity of personal relations between the Belgian Royal House and successive generations of the Japanese Imperial Family. The pattern established during the reign of Leopold

II combined ceremonial visits, military exchanges, naval diplomacy, personal correspondence, and the symbolic exchange of gifts. Although modest in appearance, these contacts laid the foundations for a bilateral relationship that would later become exceptional in both its intensity and its continuity. They also explain why, when the constitutional role of the Emperor changed fundamentally after the Second World War, the personal ties between the two royal families nevertheless remained remarkably resilient.

From the First World War to the Second World War

The First World War marked an important turning point in Belgium's international standing and left a lasting impression in Japan. Belgium's resistance to the German invasion in 1914, and particularly the conduct of King Albert I, attracted widespread admiration among the Japanese public. Numerous charitable initiatives were organised in Japan to collect funds for Belgian refugees, reflecting a sympathy that extended beyond official diplomacy and contributed to a favourable image of Belgium within Japanese society.

The first direct personal contact between the Belgian Royal Family and the

Japanese Imperial Family occurred in 1921, when Crown Prince Hirohito, the future Shōwa Emperor, visited Belgium during his celebrated tour of Europe. The journey itself represented a historic event. Never before had a Japanese heir apparent undertaken such an extensive visit to Europe, and Hirohito's itinerary reflected Japan's increasing engagement with the international community following the First World War. During his stay in Belgium, he was received by King Albert I and Queen Elisabeth, thereby inaugurating a tradition of personal relations between the two dynasties that would endure for more than a century. It is worth noting that Belgium was not originally included in the Crown Prince's itinerary. Despite repeated efforts by Belgian diplomats to have the country added to the programme, these attempts initially proved unsuccessful. King Albert I therefore took the unusual step of asking his ambassador in London, where the Japanese delegation had already arrived, to directly intervene. At a state banquet held there, the diplomat conveyed the King's strong desire to receive the Crown Prince in Belgium. Hirohito's enthusiastic response prompted the diplomatic and protocol officials accompanying him to reconsider their position. After consulting the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Imperial Household, they agreed to revise the itinerary, and Bel-



Crown Prince Akihito with former King Leopold III, King Baudouin, Princess Lilian, and Prince Alexander at the Château in Laeken, in 1953. The white horse was reputedly called 'Silver Lining'.

gium was subsequently added to the Crown Prince's European tour.

Belgian contacts with Japan were not limited to reigning sovereigns. In 1922 Prince Charles of Belgium (1903–1983) became the first known member of the Belgian Royal Family to visit Japan. Having completed his initial training at the Royal Naval College, Dartmouth, he served as a midshipman aboard HMS Renown during the voyage of the Prince of Wales, the future Edward VIII, to East Asia. The vessel entered Yokohama harbour on 12 April 1922, after which the royal party travelled to Tokyo and other parts of Japan. During the visit, Prince Charles participated in official engagements that brought him into contact with members of the Japanese Imperial Family. His journey therefore constituted the earliest documented presence of a Belgian royal at the Japanese imperial court on Japanese soil.

In July 1930, Prince and Princess Takamatsu visited Belgium during their European tour, at a time when the country was celebrating the centenary of its independence. On 26 July, King Albert I and Queen Elisabeth entertained the Japanese princely couple at a gala dinner at the Château de Laeken. Those present included Crown Prince Leopold, Princess Clémentine of Belgium and her son, Prince Louis Napoléon.

This promising development was interrupted by the deterioration of Japan's international position following the invasion of Manchuria in September 1931. The military occupation of north-eastern China, the subsequent establishment of the puppet state of Manchukuo, and Japan's withdrawal from the League of Nations fundamentally altered Western perceptions of Japan. The Belgian court was not immune to these developments. Prince Leopold and Princess Astrid had been preparing a journey to the Far East in 1932, but the Japanese leg of the itinerary, regarded as a return visit following Crown Prince Hirohito's visit to Belgium in 1921, was cancelled in light of the changing political circumstances. As Japan moved towards an increasingly militaristic foreign policy, dynastic diplomacy inevitably suffered. After the outbreak of the Pacific War in 1941, diplomatic relations between Belgium and Japan, like those between Japan and the other Allied powers, were suspended.

The Restoration of Relations after 1945

The Second World War profoundly transformed both countries, albeit in very different ways. Belgium emerged as a liberated constitutional monarchy, whereas Japan underwent a comprehensive political and constitutional reconstruc-

tion under Allied occupation. The entry into force of the Treaty of San Francisco in 1952 restored Japanese sovereignty, and Belgium was among the forty-eight signatory states that recognised Japan's return to the international community.

The restoration of diplomatic relations was accompanied by the gradual revival of personal ties between the two royal houses. A decisive moment occurred in 1953 when as the representative of Emperor Shōwa, Crown Prince Akihito attended the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in London. There he met Prince Albert of Belgium, one year his junior. What began as an acquaintance soon developed into one of the most remarkable personal friendships between members of reigning dynasties in the post-war world. Following the coronation, Crown Prince Akihito visited a number of European countries and subsequently travelled to North America. During the Belgian stage of the journey, King Baudouin received him at the Château de Laeken, where he stayed as a guest of the Belgian Royal Family. The visit marked the beginning of the close personal friendship between Akihito and Baudouin. The hospitality extended to the young Crown Prince left an enduring impression. Akihito repeatedly declared in later years that he had felt less like an official guest than as a member of the Belgian Royal Family.

The friendship established in 1953 would profoundly influence bilateral relations for decades. On 10 April 1959, Crown Prince Akihito married Shōda Michiko, the daughter of businessman Shōda Hidesaburō. As the first commoner to marry a Japanese Crown Prince in modern times, Michiko's marriage symbolised the post-war transformation of the Imperial House and was celebrated by hundreds of thousands of spectators lining the streets of Tokyo. Shortly before their engagement, Michiko travelled to Europe, where she also attended an international conference of the Alumnae of the Sacred Heart held in Brussels, she herself being an alumna of a Sacred Heart school in Tokyo. On that occasion, she stayed at the Château d'Aertrycke near Bruges, enjoying the hospitality of Baroness de Maere, a sister of Michiko's French-language tutor. According to a later account, repeated in Belgian sources, especially the one confirmed by the Belgian Foreign Minister Willy Claes, King Baudouin played an indirect role in facilitating correspondence between Akihito and Michiko before their engagement. Because all communications to and from the Crown Prince were monitored by the Imperial Household Agency, personal letters could allegedly be exchanged privately only through correspondence addressed to a foreign sovereign. Although no official sources corroborate this anecdote, it is supported by personal recollections that are sufficiently consistent and credible to warrant its veracity. It reflects the degree of trust that had developed between the Belgian King and the Japanese Crown Prince.

State Visits and the Consolidation of a Special Relationship

The friendship between Baudouin and Akihito was accompanied by an increasingly intensive programme of official visits.

Prince Albert first travelled to Japan in May 1962 at the head of a Belgian economic mission as Honorary President of the Belgian Foreign Trade Agency. During this visit he was received by Emperor Hirohito and Empress Nagako, inaugurating what would become a long tradition of Belgian economic missions led by members of the Royal Family. The May 1962 mission contributed significantly to boosting Belgo-Japanese relations, boosting Japan's positive image in Belgium and vice versa, and generating a fair number of goodwill initiatives, including the creation of the Belgo-Japanese Association (BJA) in Brussels. The 1962 mission equally stimulated the reform of the Belgo-Japanese Society in Tokyo, which had shown few signs of activity since its reconstitution in 1952.

Two years later, in January 1964, King Baudouin and Queen Fabiola paid the first Belgian state visit to Japan. The itinerary included Tokyo, Kyoto, Nara, Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Arriving from Hong Kong, the royal couple were welcomed at the airport by Emperor Hirohito and Empress Nagako, together with Crown Prince Akihito and Crown Princess

Michiko. For Queen Fabiola, the visit marked the beginning of her own close relationship with the Japanese Imperial Family. Empress Nagako presented her with a length of silk woven from thread produced by silkworms raised on the Imperial Palace grounds, while the Belgian sovereigns reciprocated with an eighteenth-century Tournai porcelain service, typically exemplifying the importance of carefully chosen symbolic gifts.

The exchange of visits continued throughout the 1960s. Prince and Princess Hitachi visited Belgium in 1965, while Prince Albert returned to Japan on further economic missions in 1966 and 1969. During the latter visit he officially invited Emperor Hirohito to undertake a state visit to Belgium. Prince Albert also attended the Belgian National Day at Expo '70 in Osaka, where he was once again received by the Imperial Couple.

Emperor Hirohito's Historic Journey to Europe

A major constitutional and symbolic milestone occurred in 1971 when Emperor Hirohito became the first reign-



First state visit of King Baudouin and Queen Fabiola to Japan, posing with Emperor Hirohito (Shōwa) and Empress Nagako (Kōjun in 1964)

ing Japanese Emperor ever to leave Japanese territory. His European tour represented a decisive break with centuries of tradition, and Belgium was deliberately chosen as the first official destination.

At the State Banquet held at the Royal Palace in Brussels on 29 September 1971, King Baudouin emphasised the exceptional significance of the occasion by declaring that Belgium considered it a great honour to be the first official stage of the Emperor's European journey. During the visit the Imperial Couple travelled to Antwerp Zoo, Charleroi, Waterloo—already familiar to Hirohito from his visit as Crown Prince in 1921—and Liège, where they were accompanied by Prince Albert and Princess Paola before continuing their European tour. The visit symbolised not only Japan's complete rehabilitation within the international community after the Second World War but also the extraordinary confidence that had developed between the Belgian and Japanese courts.

Friendship Beyond Protocol

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of Belgian - Japanese royal relations after the war was the gradual transformation of formal dynastic diplomacy into genuine personal friendship.

In October 1973, Crown Prince Akihito and Crown Princess Michiko visited Belgium and were received privately by King Baudouin and Queen Fabiola at the Château of Laeken. In subsequent years, the Japanese Crown Princely couple made further private or semi-private stays at Laeken, sometimes accompanied by their eldest son, Naruhito. King Baudouin and Queen Fabiola likewise combined official journeys to Asia with private visits to their Japanese friends. These repeated encounters gradually established a pattern of personal hospitality extending well beyond the requirements of diplomatic protocol. The relaxed atmosphere of these private meetings contrasted sharply with



At the state banquet offered by King Baudouin and Queen Fabiola to the Emperor and Empress of Japan at the Royal Palace (29 September, 1971)



Dinner offered by the Japanese Emperor and Empress to the Belgian King and Queen, Prince Albert and Princess Paola, at the Royal Museums of Art and History, Brussels (1 October 1971)



Emperor Hirohito and Empress Nagako greeting the crowd from the balcony of the Brussels Town Hall in the company of Prince Albert and Princess Paola and the mayor of Brussels during their state visit of 1971.



Crown Prince Akihito and Crown Princess Michiko on a private visit to King Baudouin and Queen Fabiola, posing in the Rotunda at the Château of Laeken (1973)

the strict formality normally associated with the Japanese Imperial Court.

This friendship soon extended to the next generation. In 1976 the young Prince Naruhito made his first visit to Belgium. During that journey he stayed at the d'Aertrycke Château near Bruges, where his mother had previously been received by the De Maere d'Aertrycke family. He subsequently travelled to Spain at the invitation of King Baudouin and Queen Fabiola. At their villa in Motril, he was welcomed, to quote his own words, as a member of the family. While studying at Oxford from 1983 to 1985, Naruhito returned to Belgium on several occasions at the invitation of the Belgian sovereigns. He attended the wedding of Princess Astrid and Archduke Lorenz in Brussels in September 1984 and accompanied Queen Fabiola to the Queen Elisabeth Competition in 1985. He also met Prince Philippe in Japan in 1986, when the two princes visited the temple Engaku-ji in Kamakura together. These encounters helped establish close personal ties between the future sovereigns of Belgium and Japan.

By the late 1980s the relationship between the Belgian Royal House and the Japanese Imperial Family had become exceptional among contemporary monarchies. It rested not merely upon formal diplomatic exchanges but upon decades of genuine personal friendship spanning three generations of both dynasties. This unique relationship would acquire particular significance after the accession of Emperor Akihito in 1989 and would shape the evolution of bilateral relations during the Heisei era.

The Heisei Era and the Institutionalisation of an Exceptional Bilateral Relationship (1989–Present)

The death of Emperor Hirohito on 7 January 1989 marked the end of the Shōwa era and inaugurated the Heisei era with the accession of Emperor Akihito. For



Private visit to the Château in Laeken, Crownprince Akihito, Crownprincess Michiko and their eldest son Naruhito, received by King Baudouin and Queen Fabiola.

Belgium, the transition was not merely an event of international significance but also one of personal importance. King Baudouin and Queen Fabiola travelled to Tokyo to attend the State Funeral of Emperor Shōwa on 24 February 1989, thereby reaffirming the close relationship between the Belgian Royal House and the Japanese Imperial Family.

The same year also witnessed another important symbolic event. Crown Prince Naruhito visited Belgium to inaugurate *Europalia Japan*, the first edition of the prestigious cultural festival devoted to a non-European country. His visit demonstrated that bilateral relations had evolved beyond dynastic diplomacy and economic cooperation into the broader sphere of cultural exchange.

On 12 November 1990, King Baudouin and Queen Fabiola attended the formal enthronement ceremony of Emperor Akihito at the Imperial Palace in Tokyo. The Belgian sovereigns were among the numerous foreign monarchs and heads of state present for the occasion. The ceremony formally proclaimed and celebrated an accession that had already taken place on 7 January 1989, following the death of Emperor Shōwa. For Baudouin and Fabiola, the event also had a strongly personal dimension, since their close friendship with Akihito and Michiko dated from the 1950s.

The Death of King Baudouin and the Depth of the Personal Relationship

The exceptional character of Belgian - Japanese royal relations became particularly apparent following the sudden death of King Baudouin on 31 July 1993. Emperor Akihito and Empress Michiko travelled to Brussels to attend the King's funeral on 7 August, an extraordinary departure from established Japanese imperial practice. Their attendance is generally regarded as the first occasion on which a reigning Japanese Emperor and Empress attended the funeral of a foreign sovereign abroad. The journey attracted some criticism in Japan because it coincided with the formation of a new government and delayed the Emperor's performance of the formal constitutional acts associated with the appointment of the new prime minister and cabinet. The decision to attend the funeral nevertheless

reflected the exceptional importance that Akihito and Michiko attached to their long personal friendship with King Baudouin and Queen Fabiola.

Emperor Akihito composed a waka poem in memory of his Belgian friend. It ran as follows:

*Yonjūnen o mutsumi sugoshishi
Berugī no kimi masazu shite miya
tazunekeri.
For forty years
we were friends,
the King of Belgium and me.
But when I called at his palace,
he was no longer there.*

Such gestures illustrate that the relationship between the two sovereigns had transcended conventional diplomatic courtesy and acquired a genuinely personal dimension.



Emperor Akihito and Empress Michiko posing with King Albert II, Queen Paola, Prince Philippe and Princess Astrid at the state banquet in their honour in September 1993.

The First State Visit of the Heisei Emperor

Barely one month after King Albert II ascended the Belgian throne, Emperor Akihito and Empress Michiko undertook a state visit to Belgium from 9 to 12 September 1993. Although the invitation had originally been issued by King Baudouin, the visit proceeded



King Baudouin and Queen Fabiola on a private visit to the Japanese Imperial Family in 1992.

under the new reign, thereby symbolising the continuity of relations between the two monarchies despite the sudden change of sovereign. Upon their arrival at Melsbroek Military Airport, the Imperial Couple were welcomed by King Albert II and Queen Paola. The programme included a luncheon at the Château de Laeken in the presence of Queen Fabiola, an official reception at Brussels City Hall, a state banquet at the Royal Palace, and visits to Mons, Antwerp - then European Capital of Culture - and Genval. Particularly noteworthy was the private weekend spent by the Imperial Couple at the Royal Castle of Ciergnon, together with Queen Fabiola and Princess Sayako. Following the Belgian programme, Emperor Akihito and Empress Michiko continued their European tour with a visit to Germany.

The State Visit of 1996

Three years later, King Albert II and Queen Paola paid a state visit to Japan from 21 to 25 October 1996. Crown Prince Philippe had arrived in advance and joined his parents at the beginning of the official programme, during which they were received by Emperor Akihito and Empress Michiko together with other members of the Imperial Family, including Crown Prince Naruhito and Crown Princess Masako. One of the

highlights of the visit was a journey aboard the specially refurbished Imperial Train between Oyama and Ashikaga on 24 October 1996. The *No. One imperial carriage* formation had not been used for an imperial journey since 1987, and its return to service attracted considerable public attention. The journey also inspired Emperor Akihito to compose a waka, which ran as follows:

*Berugī no kimi to noriyuku ressha
yori minori yutakeki aki no ta o miru*

*“From the train
on which I travel
with the King of Belgium,
I look upon the richly ripening
autumn fields.”*

The poem linked the shared royal journey to the seasonal landscape through which the two sovereigns travelled.

The concluding reception at the Belgian Embassy brought together virtually the entire Imperial Family, while Crown Prince Philippe remained in Japan for an additional day to promote Belgian trade and investment.

From the late 1990s onwards, economic diplomacy became an increasingly important component of Belgian - Japanese relations. Prince Philippe under-

took successive economic missions to Japan in 1997, 1999, 2005 and 2012. Each visit combined trade promotion with meetings involving members of the Imperial Family. During these missions he regularly met Emperor Akihito, Crown Prince Naruhito and Prince Hitachi, illustrating the close interaction between economic cooperation and dynastic diplomacy. In 1999 the Japanese Crown Prince and Crown Princess travelled to Belgium to attend the wedding of Prince Philippe and Mathilde d'Udekem d'Acoz.

The Passing of One Generation

The death of Queen Fabiola on 5 December 2014 provided another striking illustration of the depth of the personal ties between the Belgian and Japanese ruling families. Empress Michiko travelled alone to Belgium from 11 to 13 December to attend the funeral, following a decision by Emperor Akihito that her presence was appropriate in view of their long friendship with King Baudouin and Queen Fabiola. This was only the second official overseas journey that she had undertaken without the Emperor. On 12 December, she attended the funeral Mass at the Cathedral of St Michael and St Gudula in Brussels. A short service at the Church of Laeken, following Queen Fabiola's funeral Mass

in the cathedral, was attended only by close family members. The members of the foreign royal families proceeded directly from the Mass in the cathedral to the Royal Palace of Laeken for lunch. During remarks issued on the occasion of her eighty-first birthday in October 2015, Empress Michiko recalled Queen Fabiola as someone “who had been like an older sister to me for over four decades,” an unusually personal expression.

The 150th Anniversary of Diplomatic Relations

The celebration of 150 years of diplomatic relations between Belgium and Japan culminated in the state visit of King Philippe and Queen Mathilde to Japan from 10 to 15 October 2016, with the formal state programme taking place from 11 to 14 October. The anniversary celebrations were placed under the joint honorary presidency of King Philippe and Emperor Akihito. On 11 October, the Belgian sovereigns were formally welcomed by the Imperial Couple and attended a state banquet at the Imperial Palace together with Crown Prince Naruhito, Crown Princess Masako, Prince and Princess Akishino, Princess Mako, Princess Kako and other members of the Imperial Family.

The following day, Emperor Akihito and Empress Michiko personally accompanied their Belgian guests on a cultural excursion to Yūki in Ibaraki Prefecture, an unusual distinction reflecting the warmth of the relationship between the two dynasties. King Philippe and Crown Prince Naruhito also reportedly went jogging together during the visit.

On 13 October, King Philippe and Queen Mathilde hosted a return concert at Tokyo's Kioi Hall, attended by numerous

members of the Imperial Family. Among the works performed as an encore was *Omohi-go* (“Beloved Child”), a lullaby composed by Empress Michiko. The performance added a particularly personal touch to the anniversary celebrations.

Continuity Across Three Generations

The next milestone in this history was the state visit of the Imperial Couple in June 2026, which marked the 160th anniversary of diplomatic relations between Belgium and Japan. As the visit remains fresh in the public memory and has already received extensive media coverage, I have not examined it here. The preceding pages have sought to demonstrate that the remarkable success of the 2026 state visit was not an isolated event but the latest expression of a long-standing and exceptionally close relationship between the Belgian Royal House and the Japanese Imperial Family - a relationship that has continued to deepen and flourish over successive generations.

Viewed over the long term, relations between Belgium and Japan reveal an unusual combination of constitutional continuity and personal friendship. Beginning with the visits of members of the Meiji collateral branches during the late nineteenth century, strengthened by Crown Prince Hirohito's European tour in 1921, transformed by the lifelong friendship between King Baudouin and Emperor Akihito, and continued today by King Philippe and Emperor Naruhito, these relations have evolved into one of the closest bilateral relationships maintained by either monarchy. This continuity is reflected not only in the frequency of state visits and economic missions but also in repeated private stays at the Château of Laeken, attendance at weddings, funerals and

enthronements, and the reciprocal exchange of personal hospitality extending over more than a century. Few relationships between reigning dynasties exhibit such a sustained combination of institutional cooperation and genuine personal friendship.

From a constitutional perspective, this history also illustrates the enduring importance of monarchy as an instrument of international relations. Although both the Belgian King and the Japanese Emperor today exercise primarily ceremonial functions, their personal relationships have repeatedly facilitated political, economic and cultural cooperation. These long-standing personal ties are widely known to the Japanese and the Belgian public, and the prestige and goodwill associated with them have undoubtedly influenced the favourable perception of Belgium in Japan and of Japan in Belgium. In that sense, the Belgian - Japanese experience demonstrates that constitutional monarchies, notwithstanding the limited formal powers of their sovereigns, may continue to perform a significant diplomatic function through the cultivation of long-term personal trust between royal houses.



The author of the present article explaining to the Japanese Emperor and the Belgian King the history of the Japanese Book Donation (23 June 2026)

Note: this brief overview is based on Belgian and Japanese archival sources, official sources such as the Imperial Household Agency, the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Embassy of Japan in Belgium, the Belgian Royal Palace, as well as contemporary newspapers. The first and second photographs featuring the 1866 treaty were taken by the author. The photograph dated 23 June 2026 is reproduced by courtesy of KU Leuven, Dienst Mediarelaties en Interne Communicatie. All other photographs reproduced here are courtesy of Archives of the Royal Palace (Brussels). I wish to express my gratitude to Mr Baudouin D'hoore, archivist of the Archives of the Royal Palace for graciously providing the digital versions of these photographs for reproduction in this article, as well as some additional data.

STATE VISIT

Belgium and Japan, a reunion under the sign of friendship and cooperation

Press release by FPS Foreign Affairs, Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation

This year, Belgium and Japan are celebrating 160 years of diplomatic relations. On this occasion, Their Majesties the King and Queen welcomed Their Imperial Majesties the Emperor Naruhito of Japan and his wife Empress Masako for a two-day state visit to Belgium, from 23 to 24 June 2026, under the sign of friendship and cooperation in many fields.

Japan and Belgium share similar values, visions and interests, such as the preservation of the international order based on the rule of law and on international law, the maintenance of peace and security, and the fight against climate change. In a world marked by instability and great change, Belgium and Japan underline this crucial and lasting cooperation to face common threats.

Japan is also a major economic and trade partner for Belgium. More than 280 Japanese companies are based in our country and contribute to nearly

30,000 jobs, in sectors such as automotive, industry, logistics, chemicals and biotechnology. In addition, Japan is also a key market for Belgian exports outside the European Union: the country of the Rising Sun is Belgium's 25th largest customer and its 4th largest non-European supplier.

This State visit is therefore an opportunity to reaffirm the close ties between our two countries, which are also reflected in the special ties between the Belgian Royal Family and the Japanese Imperial Family.



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DAY 1

Tuesday, 23 June, the first day of the visit, was marked by the welcoming ceremonies. The Emperor and Empress were first welcomed by the King and Queen at the Royal Palace in Brussels. This was followed by a meeting with the mayor of Brussels, Philippe Close, at City Hall.

In the afternoon, the Emperor was received by Prime Minister Bart De Wever at the Lambermont, in the presence of Foreign Minister Maxime Prévot. This was followed by a meeting with representatives of the Chamber and the Senate in the Federal Parliament.

The day ended with the traditional State banquet at the Castle of Laeken.



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DAY 2

Wednesday, 14 June, began with a visit to the Castle of Namur, followed by a visit to the Citadel. The King and the Emperor were welcomed by the Governor of the Province of Namur, Denis Mathen, and the mayor-in-title and Minister of Foreign Affairs, Maxime Prévot. Located at the confluence of the Sambre and Meuse rivers, the Walloon capital is a place steeped in history, with a unique biotope. River transportation has, for centuries, played a crucial role in the economy and development of the country. Even today, inland waterways make it possible to create European transport corridors and play an important role in the energy transition and sustainable cross-border logistics. This theme is of particular interest to the Emperor, who, following his studies at the University of Oxford, specialised in the history of river transportation and inland waterways.

The afternoon began with a visit to imec, the Belgian innovation centre and world leader in microelectronics. The semiconductors that are developed there, are part of our daily lives: smartphones, cars, artificial intelligence, etc. They shape the world of today and tomorrow. Japan has been investing heavily in the development and production of cutting-edge electronic chips, making it a preferred partner of Imec for nearly 40 years. As such, Imec has developed more than 100 partnerships with Japanese research centers and companies.

The afternoon continued with a visit to KU Leuven, the oldest university in Belgium, which brings together more than 60,000 students and 8,000 researchers. Thanks to numerous academic cooperation agreements, student and researcher exchanges between Belgian and Japanese universities are particularly dynamic. During the visit, a special interest was paid to the East Asian Library. Indeed, after the university's general library was burned down during World War I, Japan made a major contribution to international efforts to rebuild and replenish the library's collections. Thousands of ancient Japanese works – dating from the 12th to the 19th century – were donated at the time and still stand today alongside the greatest masterpieces of Flemish culture.

The day ended with a visit to the Royal Greenhouses of Laeken and the Japanese Tower. This iconic tower was erected following the 1900 World Expo, with materials coming directly from Yokohama (Kanagawa Prefecture), with some elements even dating back to the Edo period. It was also an opportunity to show the botanical richness of the park and the greenhouses to the Imperial Couple.

On Thursday 25 June, the King and Queen officially bid farewell to the Imperial Couple at the Castle of Laeken, before they took off from Melsbroek Airport.

This visit underlines the close ties between Belgium and Japan as privileged partners for 160 years. It is an opportunity to confirm and strengthen our cooperation in many areas, both bilaterally and multilaterally.

Source: <https://diplomatie.belgium.be/en/news>

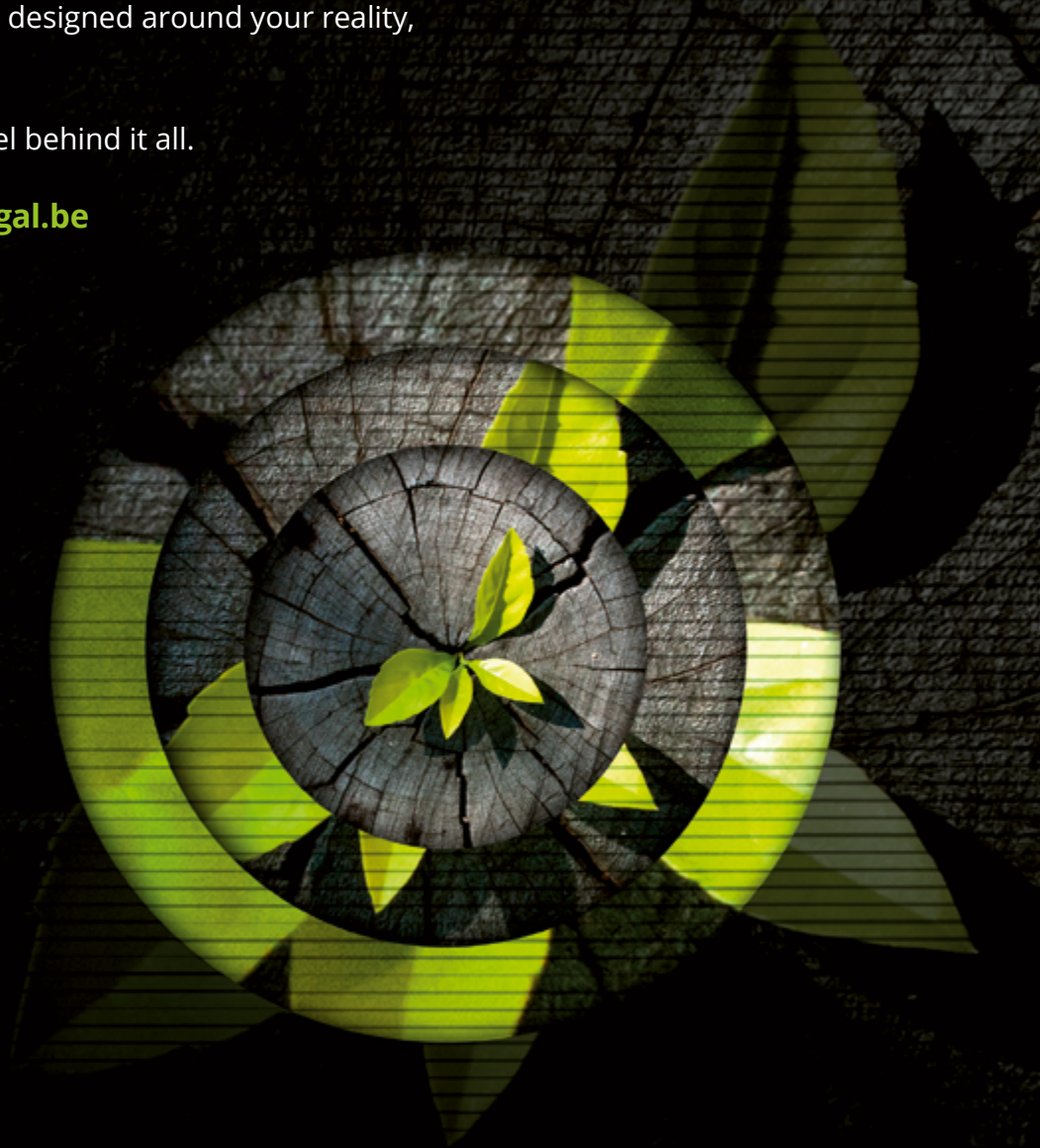
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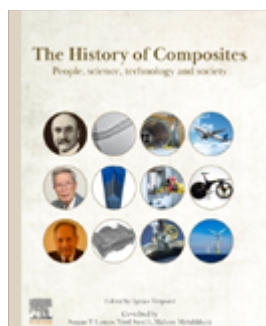
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A few months ago, I published, together with three co-editors from KU Leuven ⁽¹⁾, a book on “The History of Composites. People, science, technology and society.”, a first of its kind and a rather substantial book (almost 1000 pages and more than 500 figures). The front cover features images of a Japanese and a Belgian inventor, a deliberate choice given the crucial role both played in the development of these revolutionary materials, which have become indispensable in dozens of applications over the last few decades. This provides a good opportunity for a short article in the BJA Magazine, which you are reading right now.



CARBON FIBRE COMPOSITES

The crucial role of a Japanese and a Belgian inventor

By Ignace Verpoest, Em. Prof. Composite Materials Group, Department of Materials Engineering, KU Leuven

For people interested in sports, and naturally in cycling, “carbon” is a very well-known word, because all professional cyclists (and many amateurs too!) ride a “carbon” bicycle. In fact, the word “carbon” refers to only one component in these materials used for making very light, ultra stiff and strong bicycle frames. The lightness comes from the “matrix”, the polymer (or plastic) that glues the tiny fibres together (typically only 1/100th of a millimetre thick). These carbon fibres are extremely strong and stiff, a property that is highly relevant for many sports applications, as well as for airplanes and Formula 1 cars. Polymer matrix composite materials therefore combine the lightness of plastics with the strength and stiffness of carbon or glass fibres, or even natural fibres like flax and hemp.

Towards the end of the 19th century, biobased resins/plastics, like celluloid, parkesine and cellulose acetate became available, but these were rather brittle and highly flammable. It was not until the first decade of the 20th century that the scientific and technical base for synthetic polymers had been laid. Leo Baekeland, born in



Leo Baekeland
(1863-1944)

Belgium, obtained a degree in chemistry and immediately moved to the USA, where he invented a process for making photographic paper (Velox) and founded the company Nepera Chemical. Baekeland became a wealthy inventor-entrepreneur when he sold his patents and his company to Eastman-Kodak in 1899. He did not invest his fortune in real estate or luxury goods, but in setting up his own private laboratory. There, starting in 1903, Baekeland focussed on phenol-formaldehyde reactions, hoping to develop an alternative for the existing celluloid and parkesine materials. Together with four collaborators, he invented the process for the production of phenolic resins and filed two patents in 1907. Since then, phenolic resins have also been called “bakelite”, after its inventor.

“Bakelite” is considered the first industrially available “synthetic polymer”. It is non-flammable but still rather brittle. So, Baekeland added different kinds of fillers “*wood fibre, other fibrous or cellular materials, mica, mineral powders...*” in order “*to yield various valuable products*”, as he writes in his patent. Baekeland gradually discovered that these fillers increased the “stability” of the phenolic resin (likely by reducing the thermal shrinkage during cooling) but also reduced the cost of the product. Furthermore, fibres like cotton or flax could act as crack stoppers. Baekeland was the very first to explicitly exploit the “composite reinforcement effect”. Two of his co-workers later invented “Formica” (in 1913), a bakelite-based laminate still in production today. They were the first in history to use the term “composite material” in their patent.

So, the Belgian inventor Leo Baekeland has been crucial in the history of composite materials, and still his “bakelite” phenolic resin is used as a matrix (reinforced with mainly glass fibres) in interior panels in almost all commercial airplanes: they are fire-retardant and light! Think about Baekeland the next time you enter an airplane cabin ...

It took another fifty years before the next revolution in composites took place... in Japan! Midway through these five decades, namely in the 1930s, both glass fibres and “low pressure resins” like polyesters and epoxies ⁽²⁾ had been invented. Glass fibres are strong but not very stiff and somewhat heavy (like aluminium), which is why you do not find them in aircraft structures or bicycle frames. For a real breakthrough, composites needed a stiffer and lighter fibre!

And then came Shindo Akio (進藤 昭男)!

In the early 1950s, the Government

Industrial Research Institute in Osaka (GIRIO, Japan) had a particular interest in textile research, but also in carbon materials (amongst others for nuclear reactors). When Shindo Akio joined GIRIO in 1952, he was assigned to the carbon R&D division. From the very beginning of his research, Shindo was looking for “*research that would lead to industrialization*”. Coincidentally, on 29 May 1959, Shindo’s attention was drawn to an article in the Japanese business and technology newspaper “Nikkan Kogyo Shimbun” (日刊工業新聞), concerning some early developments in the USA on carbon felt and fabrics. This article referred to an article in the USA magazine “Machine Design” presenting a brief description of “*the method to thermochemically process fibres such as rayon to graphite by heating at 3000°C*”. With this process, American inventors at Union Carbide C° had succeeded in producing carbon fibres for thermal insulation applications.

This article inspired Shindo to also focus his research on the use of polymeric fibres as a “precursor” for making carbon fibres. Just three months later (7 September 1959), *which is really exceptional*, he filed his patent on using polyacrylonitrile (or PAN) fibres as a precursor for carbon fibres. The crux in Shindo’s patent was that he applied a controlled oxidation of the PAN fibres during heating, so that this “plastic” fibre would not melt upon further heating: “*that polyacrylonitrile be heated in an oxidizing atmosphere up to 350°C and then to 800°C or higher.*”

For reasons beyond the scope of this article, PAN precursors proved superior to rayon precursors. Only five years later, researchers in the UK (at the Royal Aircraft Establishment) switched towards using PAN precursors, while researchers in the USA at UCC continued to use rayon precursors, until they started some collaboration with Japa-



Shindo Akio
(1926-2016)

nese companies.

Immediately after his patent filing, Shindo began collaborations with Japanese companies, such as Nippon Carbon (日本カーボン株式会社) and Tokai Denkyoku (東海電極, currently Tokai Carbon), for applications in thermal insulation. It took him a while to realize that his carbon fibres were not only strong but also *at least three times stiffer* than glass fibres. This made them an excellent reinforcing fibre for composites in applications where stiffness is crucial, like in aircraft or... golf clubs!

In the ten years between Shindo’s invention (1959) and Toray’s first investment decision to build a carbon fibre production plant (1969-1970), many further technological developments took place. The most important was the 1968 patent by Toray (東レ) for a new copolymerised PAN-compound, which would reduce the oxidation time of the PAN precursor fibres by a factor of 10, thereby drastically reducing the production cost of carbon fibres!

From that moment on, Toray played a crucial role in the further industrial development of carbon fibres. In June 1970, it was decided to invest in a production plant at Shiga Prefecture, with a capacity of 1 ton per month. In 1971, Toray increased the capacity to 10 tons per year. At the time of that investment decision, the actual demand for carbon fibres was small, making that decision a daring one. Only a small amount of carbon fibres could be sold, particularly to manufacturers of fishing rods. Therefore, Toray used

the sales capacity of UCC in the USA (with which they had already started a technology exchange) to commercialise Toray's carbon fibres for use in golf club shafts. Fortunately, as early as in 1973, Gay Bowers did win the Pacific Ocean Masters with a carbon fibre golf club, causing the demand for carbon fibres to suddenly skyrocket and thereby, in retrospect, justifying Toray's initial investments in 1971, and the construction in Ehime Prefecture (1973) of a new production line of 60 tons per year (*more detailed information in the book*).

This and next year we celebrate two anniversaries: the 100th anniversary of Shindo Akio respectively the 120th anniversary of Baekeland's invention. Japan and Belgium have indeed played a crucial role in the history of composites and continue to do so. Japanese companies such as Toray, Teijin and Mitsubishi Rayon dominate the global market for carbon fibres, while at KU Leuven we collaborate intensively with the Japan Carbon Fibre Manufacturers Association (JCMA) and with researchers at University of Tokyo and various other leading universities in this field. For many years, Toray funded a "Toray Chair in Composites" at KU Leuven, and projects with Toyota and Itochu are other examples of the close ties between the Composite Materials Group at KU Leuven and Japan.

To conclude, one more nice detail: about three months ago, an article appeared in Nikkan Kogyo Shimbun about the presentation of the "History of Composites" book during the Japanese Society of Materials Science's JCOM congress in Osaka, with photos taken during my lecture. It was in the same newspaper that, in 1959, Shindo Akio read an article about an invention in America, which gave him the idea to

conduct his own research into carbon fibres and (only) three months later file his groundbreaking patent for the production of carbon fibres based on PAN precursors! A nice coincidence...

For more information:
www.composites-kuleuven.be

The book:
 "The History of Composites. People, Science, Technology and Society".



1. Em.prof. Stepan Lomov, prof. Yentl Swolfs and dr. Mahoor Mehdikhani

2. Making composites with Baekeland's phenolic resin required high pressure and temperature, which limited the application to rather small objects like the well-known bakelite telephones, radios and other electrical equipment (bakelite is electrically insulating).

CLARA SPILLIAERT / SOIL MATE*Gaasbeek Castle, from 26 June to 15 November 2026*

Gaasbeek Castle welcomes artist Clara Spilliaert (b. 1993, Tokyo) for her first solo museum exhibition. She interweaves a selection of her existing works and a newly created work with this unique setting and its rich history.

Spilliaert's work as an artist links personal experiences with reflections on history and elements of nature. Relocating from Japan to Belgium led to the creation of thousands of intimate drawings in her journal that formed the seed of her visual language. Nowadays, she works with a wide range of media – from drawings and murals to ceramic sculptures and site-specific installations. Inside the castle, you will discover this diversity in works created over the past decade. They unfold as subtle interventions, entering into dialogue with the castle rooms and their stories.

Clara Spilliaert creates images that achieve a fine balance between the everyday and the allegorical and are rooted in attentive observation. In *Calendar* (2017) – itself a nod to ancient books of hours – her urban garden and the way it moves and changes with the seasons reflect an inner world. The work can be seen in the Gallery, where it is reflected against the castle's Inner Garden that is visible through the window. Spilliaert delves more deeply into the relationship of humans with their bodies and their surroundings. She explores how fixed forms and symbols can dissolve into new, fluid narratives in which people, animals and plants merge, as in the amorphous Coat of Arms in the Archive Room.

For this exhibition, Clara Spilliaert created *Soil Mate*: a short, stop-motion film, in which a picnic blanket acts as a stage. Based on her personal experience picnicking in the castle's parterre garden, she turns her gaze to what is going on beneath the surface. We then descend into a world that operates to a rhythm of its own, largely independent of any human presence. The film traces the story of an imaginary patch of land, month by month, in twelve recurring scenes. Within this cyclical journey, processes taking place above and below ground become intertwined. Passing through tunnels and along food chains, you are eventually led back to your own body.

Spilliaert explores the tension that exists between private and public, control and rebellion, surface and depth.

Practical information

- › From 26 June to 15 November 2026
- › At Gaasbeek Castle, the exhibition is part of the museum tour
- › <https://www.kasteelvangaasbeek.be/en/clara-spilliaert-5>

MANGATOPIA – 30 YEARS OF MANGA BY KANA

For the past thirty years, the publisher Kana has played a leading role in introducing manga to French-speaking audiences. Through landmark titles and an extraordinary diversity of stories, the publisher has enabled generations of readers to discover a medium that has grown into a global cultural phenomenon.

To celebrate this anniversary, the **Comic Art Museum -Brussels** presents **MANGATOPIA**, an immersive exhibition inviting visitors to step into the fascinating world of manga. Through a **thoughtfully crafted exhibition design**, audio-visual installations and exclusive interviews with renowned manga artists and key figures from the Japanese publishing industry, visitors are invited to explore the many dimensions of an art form that continues to reinvent itself.

Conceived as a fully original museum exhibition, **MANGATOPIA** brings together in Brussels an exceptional collection of heritage pieces, original manga artwork and exclusive testimonies, offering a fresh perspective on the richness and diversity of manga. **For the first time in Brussels**, an outstanding selection of original pages, historical documents and significant artefacts from the history of manga is presented within a single exhibition, giving visitors a rare opportunity to experience this remarkable cultural heritage.

Designed for devoted fans as well as newcomers, **MANGATOPIA** celebrates the creativity, narrative power and universal appeal of manga. More than an anniversary exhibition, it is an invitation to explore a boundless imagination and discover why manga has become one of the world's most influential cultural languages.

With the exhibition opening soon, the **Comic Art Museum - Brussels** continues to welcome **sponsorship opportunities and partnership projects**, offering companies and institutions the opportunity to associate their name with a major international cultural event.

For more information:

- › <https://www.comicscenter.net/en/home>
- › Contact: Isabelle Debekker, CEO, Comic Art Museum – Brussels; isa@comicscenter.net

To mark the 160th anniversary of diplomatic friendship between Belgium and Japan, I organised, between 28 March and 30 May 2026, a constellation of events dedicated to Japanese culture, weaving together my lectures, traditional, classical and contemporary music, and Butoh dance. Beyond official discourse, the friendship between the two countries is lived in everyday life, through art and shared emotions. With Roots in resonance. I brought to light Japanese artists based in Belgium, their roots and their resonances within our culture, offering audiences a deeply felt experience. Let's meet them!

Aki Sato - koto & jiuta-shamisen
Yoko Kikuchi - piano
Chikako Hosoda - violin
Yuri Matsumaru - butoh

ROOTS IN RESONANCE

響きあう根

HIBIKIAU NE

Celebrating 160 Years of Belgian-Japanese Friendship Through Culture

By Adina Mazzoni-Cernus of Japontheway and BJA Cultural Committee Member

BETWEEN TWO WORLDS

What attracted you when you first arrived in Brussels?

Aki Sato: I first came to Brussels 35 years ago. Everything was new and fascinating to me as a young person arriving from Japan. Of course, Brussels has changed in many ways since then.

Yoko Kikuchi: To be honest, I came to Belgium knowing very little about the country itself. My sole purpose was to study with a particular professor. Somehow, I felt that it would be an environment where I could learn calmly and at my own pace.

Chikako Hosoda: I happened to go to a quartet concert he held in Tokyo. That's how I met my violin professor, who teaches at a conservatory in Belgium, and after that meeting, I decided to pursue my studies in Belgium.

Yuri Matsumaru: What struck me most was the presence of people from so

many different nationalities. Having lived in countries such as Romania, Russia, the United Kingdom and Spain, and having grown up surrounded by diverse cultures, I immediately felt at home.

How did you experience the cultural transition between Japan and Belgium?

Aki Sato: There are many differences between monotheistic Christian Europe and Japan, where countless deities co-exist. I find these different approaches to spirituality and morality fascinating, as they introduce me to new values, perspectives and interests.

Chikako Hosoda: Because I did not speak French, there were many things I struggled to understand—daily life, my studies and administrative procedures among them. Yet every time I faced a difficulty, someone was there to help me. Adapting and understanding took time, but it was also a wonderful experience to discover so many new things alongside others.

Yoko Kikuchi: Rather than experiencing a transition, I found myself living in a form of balanced coexistence between the two cultures.

Yuri Matsumaru: Because of my upbringing, I did not experience any culture shock in Belgium—it felt familiar from the start. The real culture shock came when I moved to Japan after spending my early childhood in Romania. I had dreamed of Japan for so long that, once I arrived, everything felt new. I constantly observed and imitated those around me in order to fit in. Interestingly, I still carry that same sense of wonder and longing for Japan today.

ART SHAPED BY PLACE

Has living in Brussels changed the way you create or interpret your art?

Aki Sato: Absolutely. Exposure to various European cultures has gradually deepened my understanding of Japanese music and lyrics, allowing me to connect more profoundly with universal expressions of beauty and suffering. I hope my interpretations will continue to evolve.

Yoko Kikuchi: It brought about a major transformation in my life. However, I did not immediately realise how deeply it influenced my artistic inspiration. In fact, it was only several years later—perhaps five years after my arrival—that I truly became aware of its impact.

Chikako Hosoda: I believe so. Living in Europe, the birthplace of classical music, listening to different languages, feeling the wind, observing everyday landscapes, breathing in the air and tasting the local cuisine have all helped me understand music more deeply through the use of all my senses.

Yuri Matsumaru: Yes, living in Brussels changed everything for me. It was here that my artistic path shifted from flamenco to Butoh. I originally moved to Brussels because of marriage, but

the loss of my husband later became a profound turning point. This experience transformed not only my art but also my entire outlook on life.

IDENTITY AND TRANSMISSION

How does your Japanese identity manifest itself in your artistic practice today?

Aki Sato: I often think of the masters who continue to guide me to this day, and of the lessons they have taught me—not only about music, but about life itself.

Yoko Kikuchi: I feel that Japanese spirituality is deeply rooted within me. Whenever I focus on the creative process, I sense a strong connection to the metaphysical essence of wabi-sabi. At the same time, I am also aware of my appreciation for the structural beauty of Western culture.

Chikako Hosoda: I have now spent as many years in Europe as I did in Japan. I do not know exactly how my Japanese identity and the experiences I have absorbed through my senses in European daily life blend together within me. I have never tried to separate and analyse them. I believe there is a form of music that only this blended version of myself can express.

Yuri Matsumaru: To be honest, I do not often think about being Japanese, probably because of the way I grew up. Yet from time to time, I feel a deep sense of gratitude and emotion when I realise that my body and heritage have been passed down through generations of Japanese ancestors

INDIVIDUAL VOICES

AKI SATO - Koto & Jiuta-shamisen

What do you hope to convey to Belgian audiences through your art?

I hope to share not only the beauty and



Aki Sato @ Malou Van den Heuvel

enjoyment of Japanese music, but also a sense of gratitude for the friendship and peace that allow us to make music together.

What is your earliest memory of the koto or shamisen?

I took my very first koto lesson at the age of six and immediately began attending weekly classes. I started learning the shamisen a few years later. I remain deeply grateful for the years of dedicated training and guidance I received from my sensei.

How do you introduce your instruments to someone discovering them for the first time?

The koto is a traditional Japanese string instrument approximately 180 centimetres long, usually made from paulownia wood, known in Japanese as kiri. The most common koto has thirteen strings stretched over movable bridges, which are adjusted to change the tuning. The instrument is typically played using three finger picks, or tsume, worn on the thumb, index and middle fingers of the right hand.

The shamisen is a traditional three-stringed Japanese instrument played with a large plectrum known as a bachi. Its distinctive sound comes not only from striking the strings but also from the resonance of the instrument's skin-covered body. Traditionally, shamisen strings were made of silk.



Yoko Kikuchi



Chikako Hosoda © Joanna Van Mulder



Yuri Matsumaru ©Thierry Wieleman

YOKO KIKUCHI - Piano

What do you hope to convey to Belgian audiences through your art?

Through Japanese culture—which differs from Western culture in many respects—I hope to broaden the audience’s awareness and perception.

When did the piano become an indispensable part of your life?

From a very early age.

How does your journey between Japan and Europe influence the way you perform or compose?

It is essential to my inner balance. Whenever I return to Japan and breathe the air of my homeland, I feel the ten-

sions of life abroad gently fade away. The impressions I gather there are absorbed over time and eventually become sources of inspiration for my creative work.

CHIKAKO HOSODA - Violin

What do you hope to convey to Belgian audiences through your art?

I would like to share the unique sensitivity that emerges from the meeting of Japanese and Belgian cultures. Through my music—a fusion of Japanese delicacy and European sensory experiences—I hope audiences will feel the connections that unite us within our diversity.

Why the violin rather than another instrument?

When I was four years old, I saw a woman playing the violin on television and told my mother, “I want to do that.” I have never grown tired of the violin since.

Does your playing change when performing for Japanese or European audiences?

I believe music is a language that transcends words. Wherever I perform, I am grateful to those who come to listen, and I play with the hope of offering them a memorable and meaningful experience.

YURI MATSUMARU - Butoh

How did you discover Butoh?

It all began when someone attended one of my flamenco performances. He felt that my dancing already shared a deep connection with Butoh and invited me to attend a workshop led by Hironobu Oikawa. That experience became my gateway into the world of Butoh.

What would you like audiences to feel or take away from your performances?

I believe a performance is created jointly by the performer and the audience. I would be delighted if we could resonate together in beautiful moments and create a meaningful space together.



Adina Mazzoni-Cernus © Michel Mazzoni

Adina Mazzoni-Cernus helps promote Japanese culture to French-speaking audiences through japontheway.com, a monthly cultural newsletter, lectures, articles for Tokyo-based lepetitjournal.com, and her involvement with the Cultural Committee of the Belgium-Japan Association & Chamber of Commerce (BJA).

Digital Sovereignty in Europe Reaches a Turning Point

By Erik Francq, Head of Public, Fujitsu Benelux

What was once primarily a matter of compliance or infrastructure has evolved into a strategic challenge for executive leadership. Europe's digital transformation has delivered unprecedented speed, scalability, and access to innovation. At the same time, it has created new dependencies on suppliers, jurisdictions, and technologies that organizations do not always control.

From Convenience to Control

Cloud services and global platforms have generated significant economic value. However, they have also made organizations structurally dependent on external providers—and this dependency is only now becoming fully apparent.

The pressure is no longer theoretical. Geopolitical developments and regulations such as the U.S. CLOUD Act and FISA have exposed tensions between global service models and European expectations regarding control, accountability, and data protection.

For European enterprises, control can no longer be taken for granted. It must be intentionally designed, managed, and protected.

More Than Compliance

Digital sovereignty is best described as the ability to maintain meaningful control over data, technology, and operations. Increasingly, it is also proving to be a prerequisite for resilience, strategic autonomy, and long-term competitiveness.

The reasons are clear: growing data- and AI-related risks, increasing regulatory pressure, stricter oversight of supply chains and software integrity, and a growing desire to reduce dependence on non-European suppliers.

Europe's challenge is to strengthen its competitiveness in the short and medium term: compete directly with hyperscalers, focus on markets where it already has—or can build—a clear advantage, or combine both approaches.

The Key Lies in Strategic International Partnerships

Neither the EU nor European industry can achieve these objectives alone. As outlined in the [European Commission's Tech Sovereignty Package](#), published in June 2026, the EU aims to strengthen its digital autonomy while deepening cooperation with trusted international partners such as Japan, Canada and the United Kingdom through Digital Partnerships and other strategic cooperation frameworks. These efforts will be supported by both existing and future strategic agreements, including Digital Partnerships with these countries and government-to-government partnerships in which businesses and industries play a leading role.

Japan is emerging as one of Europe's most important strategic partners in the pursuit of digital sovereignty. While sovereignty is often perceived as reducing dependencies, Europe increasingly recognizes that resilience is built through collaboration with trusted nations that share common values around innovation, security, reliability, and the rule of law. Through the EU-Japan Digital Partnership, both regions are working together on cloud, data governance, semiconductors, AI, cybersecurity, and next-generation connectivity.

The Real Question Is Execution

For executives, the question is not whether to take action, but how far and how fast they are prepared to go. There is no universal model. Some organizations will strengthen their position within existing cloud environments, while others will adopt sovereign or hybrid architectures. The right approach depends on factors such as risk profile, regulatory requirements, and strategic objectives.

Control, Cost, and Innovation

Every option involves trade-offs. Public cloud environments can provide agility and scalability, but they may also expose organizations to the reach of external jurisdictions. Sovereign cloud models can enhance compliance and control but may increase contractual complexity and

limit access to certain innovations. Hybrid strategies offer flexibility, but only when supported by strong governance and operational discipline.

These should not be viewed as isolated technology decisions. They are leadership decisions concerning control, cost, innovation, and risk.

Boards Do Not Always See What Matters Most

Boards and executive teams are increasingly being held accountable for digital risks. Yet dependencies related to jurisdiction, supplier concentration, and operational agility are often not fully understood or reflected in governance models. As a result, a gap emerges between perceived control and actual control.

Not Just an IT Concern

Digital sovereignty sits at the intersection of technology, risk, and business strategy. It should no longer be regarded as a back-office responsibility.

This is not an argument against transformation or innovation. Rather, it is a call to ensure that both are sustainable, resilient, and aligned with Europe's strategic priorities.

Organizations That Act Now Will Be Better Prepared

In an increasingly uncertain world, the ability to maintain control over critical digital assets will distinguish resilient organizations from the rest. Those that take sovereignty seriously today will be better positioned to balance innovation with control, risk management, and trust.

Structured assessments help organizations understand their exposure, prioritize the right actions, and build a pragmatic roadmap without slowing transformation.

Digital sovereignty is not a call for isolation. It is a call for clarity, control, and strategic decision-making in a world that is becoming increasingly unpredictable.

Read more here: [Digital Sovereignty Advisory Services | Fujitsu](#)

Sovereignty you
can See, Score
and Strengthen



FROM THE IWAKURA MISSION TO MODERN MOBILITY

Integration in Belgium for Japanese Nationals

By Joke Braam, Director, Vialto Partners & BJA Editorial Committee Member and Laurens Spinoy, Senior Associate, Vialto Partners

移住（マイグレーション）は人類の歴史そのものと同じほど古く、人々が国境を越えて移動することは、長い間、文化・思想・知識の交流に大きく貢献してきました。その顕著な例の一つが、1871年から1873年にかけて実施された岩倉使節団です。この使節団は、日本の代表団がヨーロッパおよび北米を広く訪問し、西洋の政治制度、法制度、教育制度、産業システムについて調査・研究を行ったものです。この使命は主として外交および教育を目的としたものでしたが、同時に日本が国際社会との関わりを深めていく象徴でもあり、その後数十年にわたる日本人の国際的な移動の拡大に向けた基盤を築きました。

今日、国際的な移動はグローバル化した世界において不可欠な要素となっています。人々は、仕事、留学、家族などの理由により、かつてないほど容易に国境を越えて移動する一方で、母国とのつながりを維持しています。その結果、移住とは単に居住地を移すことだけを意味するものではなく、新たな社会において自分自身の生活基盤を確立することも含むようになりました。したがって、新しい国に定住するということは、単に到着すること以上の意味を持ちます。それには、現地の言語、制度、社会的価値観を理解するとともに、地域社会の一員として積極

的に関わっていくことが求められます。そのため、統合（インテグレーション）は、個人が受入国において持続可能な将来を築くための重要な要素となっています。

このような背景のもと、各国政府は国際的な人の移動がもたらす利益と、社会的結束を促進する必要性とのバランスをますます重視するようになっていきます。ベルギーでは、移住および統合が引き続き政治的・社会的に大きな関心を集めており、ますます多様化・多文化化する社会に対応するため、統合政策も段階的に発展してきました。こうした変化は、ベルギーへ移住する日本人にも特に関係するものであり、現在では、移民手続きの一環として統合に関する要件に直面する可能性があります。

Migration is as old as humanity itself, and the movement of people across borders has long contributed to the exchange of cultures, ideas, and knowledge. One notable example is the Iwakura Mission (1871–1873), during which a Japanese delegation travelled extensively throughout Europe and North America to study Western political, legal, educational, and industrial systems. While the mission was primarily diplomatic and educational in

nature, it symbolised Japan's increasing engagement with the international community and laid the foundations for the broader international mobility of Japanese nationals in the decades that followed.

Today, international mobility has become an integral part of a globalised world. People move across borders more easily than ever before for work, study, or family reasons, while remaining closely connected to their home countries. As a result, migration is no longer solely about relocation, but also about successfully establishing oneself in a new society. Settling into a new country therefore means more than simply arriving; it requires understanding the local language, institutions, and societal values, as well as actively participating in community life. Integration is consequently an essential element in enabling individuals to build a sustainable future in their host country.

Against this backdrop, governments increasingly seek to balance the benefits of international mobility with the need to foster social cohesion. In Belgium, where migration and integration con-

tinue to receive significant political and public attention, integration policies have gradually evolved in response to an increasingly diverse and multicultural society. These developments are particularly relevant for Japanese nationals relocating to Belgium, who may now encounter integration requirements as part of their immigration journey.

Civic integration programs

In Belgium, integration rules depend on where a person resides. As integration is a regional competence in Belgium, integration policies are not governed at the federal level but are determined by the individual Regions. Consequently, Belgium does not have a single, uniform integration system. Instead, there are three distinct frameworks: one applicable in Flanders, one in Brussels, and one in Wallonia, each with its own legal requirements and procedures.

Currently, civic integration is mandatory for most non-EU nationals aged 18 to 65 who register for the first time in Belgium for a stay longer than three months.

Across all regions, exemptions to the integration requirements apply. For example, family members of Belgian or EU citizens, long-term residents, workers and students, and people who have already completed an integration program may not have to participate.

For those who must follow the program, the core elements are similar in all regions. Participants attend an intake session, take language classes, and follow a course on living in Belgium, covering rights, duties, and daily life. However, each region adopts its own approach, setting slightly different criteria for successfully completing the integration program, for example, by assessing language skills based on proficiency levels or by requiring a minimum number of class hours.

Upcoming policy changes in Flanders

In May 2026, the Flemish government took a first step towards reforming its integration system, turning the goals of the 2024–2029 cooperation agreement into concrete measures. The reform clarifies the role of organisations running integration programs and adjusts the retribution system, linking the fees for integration programs to a person's income rather than their legal status.

One of the key changes is the introduction of pre-departure integration courses. These courses will enable newcomers to begin preparing before arriving in Flanders, particularly third-country labour migrants, who were previously exempt, and individuals arriving through family reunification. For many, this preparation will become mandatory. Japanese nationals will have to complete this pre-departure course whilst they will be still in Japan or their actual country of residence. At the same time, language requirements are being tightened, with newcomers expected to reach spoken Dutch at B1 level instead of A2.

Amongst other updates, they also put stronger emphasis on finding work. The current participation element will be replaced by a broader activation track designed to help newcomers enter the labour market more quickly. In addition, responsibilities are streamlined, giving integration agencies a central role and simplifying enforcement. Administrative procedures are also being made easier, resulting in a system that is more structured, more demanding, and more focused on results.

Once the changes have been implemented in the Flemish region, we can only speculate whether the other regions will follow their lead. Only time will tell whether the other regions will pursue a similar course.

Key considerations for companies

When sending Japanese nationals and their family members to Belgium, today a thorough assessment will be required to determine whether any integration requirements must be fulfilled.

Due to legislative updates, the procedure will be evolving over the coming months and therefore it is important that you, as a company, pay attention to these upcoming changes.

In this context, it should also be noted that integration requirements may have a direct impact on the immigration process, including the potential extension of Belgian residence permits. As such, it will become important for employers to ensure compliance with regard to these integration requirements.

Delicious Life of Japan – Exclusive Tea & Sushi Experience

日本茶と寿司のワークショップ

Monday, 6 July 2026 – Antwerp



Japanese tea specialist, Mr Yoshikazu Matsumoto demonstrates how to make authentic Japanese green tea, 'Matcha'



The participants thoroughly enjoyed the afternoon, gaining hands-on experience in making delicious tea and sushi.



Creative Sushi Master, Mrs Junko Kawada shows how to prepare rolled 'Maki' Sushi.

On Monday 6 July 2026, the BJA Cultural Committee had the pleasure of welcoming its members and friends to an exclusive Japanese Tea and Sushi Workshop at Azumaya Antwerp and Ko'uzi.

The event was opened by Mr Koh Ichi Masaki, Chair of the BJA Cultural Committee, who welcomed the participants and highlighted the workshop as part of the celebrations marking the 160th anniversary of diplomatic and friendly relations between Belgium and Japan.

Participants were divided into two groups to enjoy parallel workshops. During the tea workshop, Mr Yoshikazu Matsumoto, Japanese tea expert and owner of Azumaya Antwerp, introduced participants to the world of premium Japanese teas. Guests learned about the characteristics and prepara-

tion of authentic matcha and sencha while tasting different varieties, including matcha latte and other unique Japanese tea selections.

During the sushi workshop, Mrs Junko Kawada, sushi master of Ko'uzi, introduced the fundamentals of authentic sushi-making. After demonstrating sushi rice preparation, Japanese knife techniques, and fish cutting, she guided participants in creating their own temaki (hand rolls), hosomaki (thin rolls), and gunkan-style sushi. Savoring the sushi prepared was a highlight for many.

The event was truly memorable for all attendees, leaving with a unique and immersive experience of Japanese craftsmanship, culinary traditions, and culture.



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

Corporate Member

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Aftermath (official name Riposte SRL) is a Belgian communication coaching and training practice founded by Muslim Kasumov, based in Brussels and Dubai.

We work with professionals and organisations on the communication skills that determine how effectively people lead, collaborate, and deliver — public speaking and executive presence, stakeholder management, conflict navigation, cross-cultural communication, and agile collaboration.



Aftermath is also the maker of Pulse, an easy-to-use team-communication platform that takes just two minutes a week. It measures how well a team communicates and turns insight into

action — extending our coaching and training into a continuous, measurable system that helps teams keep improving.

A significant part of our work is with IT and technical teams — helping engineers, analysts, and technical managers communicate more effectively across team layers, with business stakeholders, and in international environments. Muslim holds a Certified Scrum Master certification and currently works with the IT department of the Belgian Ministry of Finance.

Aftermath delivers individual coaching, group workshops, and tailored programmes in English, French, Dutch, and Russian — in-person and remotely.

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Avenue Louise – Louizalaan 279 – 1050 Brussels

Tel: +32 487 18 48 31

E-mail: muslim@aftermath.is

Website: <https://aftermath.is>

Contact: > Muslim Kasumov, Founder

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