

A Visit to Tomioka Silk Mill, a World Heritage Candidate, and Its Vicinity

After about an hour's ride from JR Takasaki Station on the local Joshin Dentetsu Line, which was opened in 1897, the train finally arrived at a quiet town in the western part of Gunma Prefecture. Here I found an important legacy of the dawn of modern Japan and some picturesque archetypal landscape.

Tomioka Silk Mill: The Beginning of Modern Japan



The East Cocoon Warehouse on the right and Brunat's residence beyond



Paul Brunat, who supervised the mill's initial operation, lived in this house.

Paul Brunat's Enthusiasm for the Project

The Tomioka Silk Mill is located about 15 minutes on foot from Joshu Tomioka Station on the Joshin Dentetsu Line. It was founded in 1872 as Japan's first state-run silk-reeling factory in line with the Meiji government's twin policies, aimed at the modernization of Japan, of "building a wealthy and militarily strong country" and "boosting production and developing industry."

The Meiji government hired the Frenchman Paul Brunat (1840–1908), who was then in his early thirties, to supervise the construction and initial operation of the mill. As well as bringing engineers from overseas and importing machinery to be used in the factory, Brunat adopted French-style management methods, including Sundays off, eight working hours a day, and dormitories for workers. The silk-reeling machines were specially ordered to match the physique of Japanese women workers and the humid climate in Japan. Brunat clearly tackled the project with much thoughtfulness and enthusiasm.

The factory buildings are a blend of Western and Japanese craftsmanship, with Western-style timber-frame brickwork and Japanese-style tiled roofs and mortar joints. The French-style brickwork, which is considered to be the most beautiful, consists of rows of alternating stretchers (the side of the brick) and headers (the end of the brick). This so-called Flemish bond style, which reveals Brunat's highly aesthetic sense, creates a tasteful pattern on the walls and explains why the buildings look so elegant.



French brickwork



Inside the factory

(Photos courtesy of Tomioka City and Tomioka Silk Mill)

Women Active in the Early Meiji Period

Just as the mill was preparing to start operations, an incident occurred that seems quite incredible nowadays. The mill advertised for female factory workers, but there were very few applicants. When the operators investigated why, they discovered a rumor circulating that the red wine being drunk by the foreign engineers there was really blood and that if you went to Tomioka Silk Mill, they would drink your blood. At that time, most common folk had never seen red wine before, let alone drunk it.

In order to debunk the rumor, the first manager of the mill, a man called Atsutada Odaka, recruited his own 14-year-old daughter as the first female mill worker, and the Meiji government solicited former feudal clans around the country. Thanks to these efforts, eventually around 400 girls were gathered from well-known and former samurai families, and gradually the mill began to prosper.

These women workers took the silk-reeling know-how that they learned in Tomioka back to their own hometowns and taught techniques in local factories there. In the early Meiji period, women factory workers contributed immensely to the modernization of Japanese industry. That was a real innovation.



This dormitory was built as a residence for French male engineers.
It was probably here that they drank, er, red wine . . .



This dormitory was built as living quarters for French female instructors.

Tomioka Silk Mill

1-1 Tomioka, Tomioka City, Gunma Prefecture 370-2316

Tel.: 0274-64-0005

<http://www.tomioka-silk.jp/hp/en/index.html>

The Majestic Mount Myogi



View of the majestic Mount Myogi from my hotel room

Breathtaking Scenery in the Morning

In the late afternoon, after my visit to the Tomioka Silk Mill, I drove 30 minutes to the Myogi Green Hotel, which also operates a golf course. One of the reasons why I chose this hotel was its natural hot spring. After checking in, I immediately washed away the day's grime and relaxed in the large common bath. For dinner, I enjoyed a hearty meal of local cuisine, including a hot pot with local specialties like devil's tongue, welsh onion, shiitake, and chicken. After that, since I love spas, I could not resist another soak in the large bath to allay my tiredness from the journey before turning the lights out.

When I awoke in the morning and opened the curtains, for a moment I could hardly believe my eyes. The scenery was so magnificent it made me wonder if this was really Japan. Almost without realizing what I was doing, I had picked up my camera and was taking snaps from this angle and that. I wouldn't have many mornings as bracing as this, I thought.

That morning I changed my schedule and headed for Mount Myogi. On the way I passed occasional farmhouses surrounded by paddies and fields of welsh onions. This was a nostalgic slice of archetypal Japanese landscape, where time passes slowly. I couldn't help thinking that foreign tourists should visit such places and observe the splendor of Japan's countryside.



Mount Myogi with a welsh onion field in the foreground



The Myogi Roadside Station(Myogi Produce Center) has restaurants and shops and also provides tourist information.

Myogi Green Hotel

2678 Sugawara, Myogi-machi, Tomioka City, Gunma Prefecture 379-0208

Tel.: 0274-73-4111

<http://www.myogi-hotel.com/> (Japanese only)

The Gorgeous Myogi Shrine



The main building of Myogi Shrine is designated as an important cultural property of the state.

Colorful Carvings

On my drive I noticed a splendid torii at the foot of Mount Myogi, so I parked at the nearby Myogi Roadside Station and took a stroll.

Beyond the first torii, the road is lined by ryokan and souvenir shops, with Mount Myogi rising majestically in the background. Apparently this was a bustling district in the past with many inns catering to itinerant peddlers.

Climbing the stone steps ahead of me, I came to the resplendent Somon main gate, a 12-meter-high vermilion-lacquered structure designated as an important cultural property of the state. On the right and left sides of the gate there are two ferocious-looking Nio statues, muscular guardian kings positioned to prevent evil persons entering the precincts.



The first torii of Myogi Shrine, with *ryokan* and souvenir shops lining the road



Somon gate
(important cultural property of the state)

Chastened by the fury of the guardian kings, I climbed up some more steps to the Karamon gate, another important cultural property decorated with elegant sculpture. The carvings really are splendid---and not surprisingly, since they were created by the same sculptors who worked at Toshogu Shrine in Nikko.



**Karamon gate,
an important cultural property of the state**



**The main building of Myogi Shrine,
an important cultural property of the state**

And finally I arrived at the black-lacquered main building of Myogi Shrine, an important cultural property built in the gongen-zukuri style in which the main hall and worship hall are connected by a stone passageway. The colorful carvings are simply wonderful. Among them, the glittering gold-leaf dragons on the pillars are especially worth seeing. Rising high behind the shrine was Mount Myogi. Next time I come, I thought, I'm going to climb the mountain as well.

Myogi Shrine

6 Myogi, Myogi-machi, Tomioka City, Gunma Prefecture 379-0201

Tel.: 0274-73-2119

<http://www.myougi.jp/index.html> (Japanese only)