

CULTURAL CONNECTIONS TO JAPAN – Part 2: Mr. Robert Weis

In this article series by the Cultural Section of the Embassy of Japan in Luxembourg, we present many different important personalities who have shaped the cultural connections between Japan and Luxembourg over the years. Thank you for reading and please enjoy!

“Japan has enriched every aspect of my life” – The Life and Work of Mr. Robert Weis

On a warm and cloudy day, Mr. Robert Weis sits in the garden of the Musée national d'histoire naturelle, or MNHN for short. The wind brushes through the ginkgo tree, and a little metal furin bell, a Japanese wind chime, tingles its refreshing tones through the summer air.

The “Spirit of Shizen” exhibition is at this moment in the MNHN, and it presents the 72 micro seasons of Japan. While the year can be spilt into 4 seasons respectively, it can be further dissected into small timeframes of nature’s changes: “the first cherry blossoms” (桜始開 *Sakura hajimete hiraku*, March 26–30), “warm winds blow” (温風至 *Atsukaze itaru*, July 7–11) and the current micro



Mr. Robert Weis explains his influences and experiences

season, “evening cicadas sing” (寒蟬鳴 *Higurashi naku*, August 13-17)

An exhibition that shows these micro seasons, with poetry, films, ukiyo-e woodblock prints from the 1800s, impressive nature photography, an anthology full of writers sharing their views and many more aspects, that was the vision of a palaeontologist, Mr. Robert Weis – and now it has become reality. This summer exhibition at the MNHN can be visited until the 28th of August 2022.

As he sits in the museum garden for this interview, one can see that he is happy with his work. With great care and enthusiasm he shares his way towards Japanese nature and culture and how he became who he is, all while connecting Japan and Luxembourg in many cultural ways over the years.

How It Started: A Young Robert Finds a Book on Bonsai

Mr. Robert Weis is a palaeontologist at the Musée national d'histoire naturelle, and has been for 20 years. He studies and researches Jurassic fossils in the region, and is delighted to share natural history and geoheritage to the people.

While his professional focus lies in Luxembourg and Europe, it is his personal interest that lies in Japan, and which has influenced him for nearly all his life.

How did it start? He can pinpoint the very moment: “I remember finding a book on bonsai in my parents’ bookshelf as a teenager, and being immediately fascinated by it. The beautiful works were by a Japanese bonsai master from the 60s. How could it be that such a tiny plant is actually a grown tree?” recalls Mr. Weis, “I must have been about 12 years old during that first discovery. And from that point onward, I was enamoured.”

He tried to get more books and to buy himself some plants to train and shape them like a bonsai, but “the first attempts didn’t look so good”, he laughs. Still, the passion and interest grew, until he was finally able to visit Japan in his adult years. Today, Mr. Robert Weis has 20 different bonsai trees, and is a member of the Bonsai Association of Differdange.



Mr Robert Weis’ bonsai at the « Spirit of Shizen », a Pinus Parviflora, a Japanese white pine, which is approximately 50 years old.

In his first visit to Japan in 2009, his goal was clear: to visit as many places as possible in Japan, especially the Omiya Bonsai Art Museum in Saitama, which features a garden by a bonsai master Mr. Kimura Masahiko. Mr Robert Weis was highly impressed by the works of nature and artistry. In only 12 days, he visited the classics first: Tokyo, Kyoto, Hakone. Mount Koya, where he went to a Buddhist temple, and participated in a morning ceremony. “It was a fire ceremony, that was impressive!” he recalls.

He felt in love with Kyoto, the ancient cultural capital of Japan and built relationships with the locals over the past 10 years, always returning to the same spots to meet his friends. A cultural connection between Japan and Luxembourg began to form.

Back in Luxembourg, he already started thinking if an exhibition on the beauty of Japanese nature would fit the museum. His first thought was a bonsai exhibition, but he concluded that it is difficult to present delicate trees in a safe manner, as every plant needs meticulous care and proper surroundings involving correct and stable temperature and humidity. In addition, to be an exhibition that attracts not only bonsai lovers but also more people interested in Japan, there needed to be more.

The idea still simmered to combine his passion for Japan and the MNHN, until one day when he stumbled upon the concept of the 72 micro seasons. He was immediately smitten: First, it was a concept unheard of in Luxembourg, and second, it would be an attractive concept to introduce Japanese nature, culture and traditions as a whole to a new audience. It would also involve local clubs of bonsai and ikebana to show their craft. Thus, “Spirit of Shizen” came to be, and after many years of planning, the result is visible, graspable and enjoyable to a wide audience.

The Connections to Kyoto and the Collaborations that would bloom

The connection with Kyoto he cultivated for years arose again for that project, in the shape of artistic collaborations with the MNHN for “Spirit of Shizen”. Due to the pandemic and online connections being on the rise, (and Mr. Weis being frustrated that he could not travel to person, he jokes) he continued his contact with Kyoto virtually, with an online group called “Writers in Kyoto”, an English-speaking group of writers made of expats and residents in Kyoto. “The group is public and anyone interested can join”, Mr. Robert Weis smiles.

After asking the group if any of them wanted to contribute an essay to an official anthology of the “Spirit of Shizen” exhibition, the answer was a resounding and near unanimous “yes”.

This anthology, a unique piece of cultural collaboration, includes essays, explanations, poetry, haikus and many other forms of written literature on the different seasons in Japan. In addition, the Ambassador of Japan to Luxembourg, H.E. Mr. Jiro Okuyama, wrote the foreword to it.

But not only the anthology, but also more collaborations have been materialised, as Mr. Weis extended his network: contributions and workshops of artists, poets, cooks, zen buddhist monks, filmmakers, the embassy, and private people and companies – The “Spirit of Shizen” took its multi-blossoming shape of remarkable international and local influence in one lovingly crafted Luxembourgish flower pot.

The Friendships and the Future

When asking Mr. Weis what his biggest achievement is, he proudly proclaims that he has two different things: the first is this exhibition itself of course, and the second is the fact that he could make many Japanese friends. “It’s not always easy as non-native, especially when you can’t visit the country every year”. However, the fact that he keeps his friends and colleagues, and is able to



Mr. Robert Weis at the “Spirit of Shizen” exhibition

collaborate with them in such a beautiful project, makes him happy. The visitors are interested in the exhibition and the feedback he has received is very positive. “I am able to give back something to Japanese culture.” he concludes with a nod. Mr. Weis himself is not only a bonsai enthusiast, but he also follows zen Buddhism, and the idea of ikigai (生き甲斐, 'a reason for being'), the way to find your own personal life goal and energy. To be able to share his enthusiasm to a new audience has been a success.

For future endeavours, he has already started on a few new projects: he is currently writing a book on his experience in Kyoto over the years, and if everything goes well, it will be published in 2023. “Of course it will be brought to the Cultural Space of the Embassy for visitors to read too!” he grins.

Is there anything he wants to share for future generations? “A lot of young people have their first contact with Japanese culture through manga and anime. They are a good entry point, but don’t stop there, try to get into history, maybe of anime and manga too, not to only stay on the surface. Like many things in Japan, everything has history and culture, so get in there, and you will find a whole new marvellous world!”.

Mr. Robert Weis adds: for the near future, should the pandemic calm down and tourism be possible again, “Many people will want to visit Japan, I expect a boom for the country. What I can recommend is: Don’t only visit the big cities like Tokyo, Kyoto and Osaka, also visit the countryside, such as any parts of Nakasendo (中山道: long route connecting Tokyo and Kyoto), Kumano Kodō (熊野古道: ancient pilgrimage routes in the Kii peninsula), a number of islands of Setonaikai (瀬戸内海: inland sea of Western Japan). There are places for hiking, cycling, pilgrimage, even projects to get involved into local rice planting or pottery. Volunteering in a farm is also a good way to experience everyday rural life in Japan. There are many more facets of Japan to see off the beaten paths.”