

KEIJI ASHIZAWA

Three long-term collaborators reflect on their cultural exchange and the relationship between Scandinavian and Japanese aesthetics.

NORM ARCHITECTS

As Japan was forced to open its ports to trade with a number of Western nations, led by the Americans in 1854, exports flooded into Europe and North America. Alongside porcelain, lacquerware, bronzes, *ukiyo-e* prints, and books, came contemporary decorative arts manufactured specifically for the Western market and its taste for the “exotic.” Parallel to this, rapid Westernization took place in Japan starting in the 1860s, changing the look of Meiji Japan (1867–1912) as it began to adopt Western ideas and systems, as well as culture, fashion, art, and architecture, and as official government missions were sent to the West to observe the “modern” way of life there.

A strong kinship can be seen between Scandinavian countries and Japan—defined by mutual admiration, aligned aesthetic ideals, and a common dedication to traditional craft. The Scandinavian appetite for Japanese aesthetics began in the 1880s, led by key figures such as Arnold Krog of the Royal Danish Copenhagen Manufactory (Royal Copenhagen, today) and Danish art historian Karl Madsen, who wrote the first book on Japanese art published in a Scandinavian language, *On Japanese Painting* (1885). A fascination for Japan left a strong mark on the art and design of the Nordic countries during this period, but it was not until the mid-20th century, in the more developed phase of *Japonisme*, that a direct influence, as well as a deeper understanding of Japan’s

traditional aesthetics within crafts and architecture, took hold. This played a significant role in shaping the now-distinctive brand of Danish modernism. Japanese forms influenced the architects who would integrate sliding doors, open floor plans, and internal gardens into their Scandinavian houses, and when midcentury Scandinavian design arrived in Japan, it resonated. Keiji Ashizawa says, “Scandinavian design is organic, functional, and beautiful. It is similar to the details found in traditional Japanese architecture.”

Jonas Bjerre-Poulsen, Frederik Werner, and Keiji Ashizawa met in 2017, during an Ariake furniture workshop in a seaside town in the Saga prefecture. Bjerre-Poulsen reflects, “We were a group of designers from all over the world and it was my first trip to Japan. Having been in love with Japanese aesthetics for many years from afar, and having studied and adapted ideas from Japanese architecture and crafts for many of our projects, this trip was a dream come true.” While together in Japan, the three designers shared hours of in-depth discussion. Bjerre-Poulsen says, “I think all of us were surprised by how much we had in common, how much we appreciated the same aesthetics, and how easy communication about architecture and design was. During our journey from Ariake back to Tokyo, a long journey of collaboration and friendship was born. Now, seven years later, we have worked together on countless designs and completed numerous

BIOGRAPHIES

Keiji Ashizawa founded his studio Keiji Ashizawa Design in 2005. With an emphasis on craft, he designs architecture, interiors, and furniture under the motto of “Honest Design”. Jonas Bjerre-Poulsen is a cofounder and partner of Norm Architects, and Frederik Werner is a partner and designer at Norm Architects—both are based in Copenhagen.

