

Phoenixes from Columbian Exposition on view again

by Gary Ossewaarde. Revised from a similar article by Mr. Ossewaarde first published with the September JPAC Newsletter. A shorter version was published in the Fall Park Advocate of Friends of the Parks.

The Art Institute of Chicago's Asian Galleries have become a fitting home for four carved and painted wooden panels that once were the highlight of Japan's exhibit at the Columbian Exposition of 1893, the Hoh-o-den, in the north end of Jackson Park's Wooded Island, just to the west of the modern Osaka Japanese Garden. After careful restoration, the panels are mounted on permanent view above display cases and the entry to a special contemplative room within the Japanese and Asian Galleries of the Weston Wing, Michigan Avenue first floor.

The panels (*ramma*), each of two planks, were deeply and elaborately carved and heavily painted and applied with gold leaf, as was commonly done to add brightness in Japanese temples etc. The two mythical birds on each panel, depicted as a cross between pheasant and peacock, are sharp-beaked. On one both phoenixes have open mouths, on two one's mouth is open and the other closed (oppositely), and the final has both with closed mouth-- showing perhaps dichotomy and complement, yin and yang. Phoenixes are said to mate for life and live in pines and *paulownia* (a blue-flowered plant).

Phoenixes are said to appear in the realm when there is a great ruler. Since the Columbian Exposition followed Japan's Meiji Restoration (opening up, modernization, and strong central government), the phoenix may have been considered an especially appropriate emblem to copy from old buildings and display. Japan was especially eager to show its culture, wares, modernization and strength to the world by donating pavilions and reproductions of temples and tea houses at international expositions. The Phoenix Hall was a highlight of Chicago's Fair, set apart on the Island that was intended in part to serve as a respite and elaborate garden. (The Tea House was opposite, on the mainland.) The Phoenix Hall (Hoh-o-den) was the first Japanese-style building in the U.S. and is said to have been modeled on the 11th century Byodo-in temple of Uji near Osaka. Skilled craftsmen were sent from Japan and lived during construction in a small village in the south part of Wooded Island. The phoenix panels were made by master sculptor Takamura Kuon (1852-1934). The Phoenix Hall made a special impression on Frank Lloyd Wright, who called special attention to it as, among other things, an "unmasked" structure revealing what can be done with fine craftsmanship and everyday materials, with interconnecting corridors and a holistic flow, in contrast to what he considered the reversion and stilted froth of most of the White City. Others recognized its importance—*Harper's* printed the plan and had a reporter chronicle construction.

The 1893 Ho-o-Den (Phoenix "Temple") consisted of three structures joined by covered walkway and suggests the shape of the phoenix bird, which it did resemble from ground level. The beams and joinery were part of the beauty and ornament. Inside were artifacts and treasures from three periods of Japanese history—scrolls, vases, decorative screens, writing materials, and musical instruments. A major feature was the lanterns-- both the elaborate stone ones and the paper lanterns at ceiling level. The elements and art were designed and crafted in Japan and brought over by steamer and train, along with carpenters, stone workers and gardeners. The construction itself was an activity that drew many visitors. A reporter wrote, "They move about serenely as if it were a pleasure to work."

After the Fair, the temple and its panels were given to Chicago by the Japanese government. They suffered gradual neglect, and in 1935 the remaining structure was made a tea house serving food and beverages. A succession of fires occurred in the mid 1940s and destroyed the structure and severely damaged the panels, which were placed in storage by Chicago Park District- under the bleachers of Soldier Field. About 1973, they were found- two were sent to the Art Institute of Chicago and two were displayed in a hallway at the new University of Illinois at Chicago ("Circle Campus").

Eventually UIC realized money for restoration was unlikely. Now-emeritus UIC professor David Sokol started to look for a new home, first choice being the Art Institute of Chicago. In 2005 he got an enthusiastic "yes" by Janice Katz, Associate Curator of Japanese Art at the Art Institute. The vision was to reunite, restore, and permanently display the panels when the Asian galleries were renovated. The panels were donated in 2008, gallery renovation begun, and in 2010 the panels were sent to be restored by Litas Liparini Studio in Evanston. Restoration was very complex. Soot had to be removed without creating damage, beaks re-carved in linden, based on clay molds, lost areas built up with gesso, and pigment built up over gesso and micaceous replacement for gold applied so as to match present looks and make the panels look "gracefully aged" rather than new. The panels were installed August 1 and 2 of 2011 and are now on permanent view beside other arts and crafts of Japan, sacred and secular, as in the 1893 original installation. Today you can also visit, on Jackson Park's Wooded Island, Osaka Japanese Garden and Toro gate, tea house, real and replica 1893 stone lanterns and other objects. All are carefully tended by members of Friends of the Japanese Garden and excellent contract firms.