



# **"Antonin Raymond, an Architectural Journey. From Bohemia to Japan in the Early 20th Century"**

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an Architectural Journey, see page 10



*Clockwise from left:*

- Antonin Raymond, self-portrait, 1910. Antonin Raymond archives, Karuizawa. Courtesy of Kitazawa Koichi.

- Adachi house, Karuizawa, 1966. Antonin Raymond archives, Karuizawa. Photo: Yola Gloaguen, 2012.

- Jan Letzel (1880-1925) was also from Bohemia and designed the Hiroshima Prefectural Industrial Promotion Hall (1915), which now stands as the A-Bomb Dome, a landmark of the city's Peace Memorial.





## Antonin Raymond, an Architectural Journey from Bohemia to Japan in the Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century

by Yola Gloaguen

On new year's eve of 1920, Czech-born American architect Antonin Raymond (1888-1976) and his wife, French graphic designer Noemi Pernessin (1889-1983), set foot in Japan for the first time. They had travelled across the Pacific Ocean in the company of Raymond's mentor Frank Lloyd Wright. The famous architect, father of the American prairie house and designer of modern architecture landmarks of the early 1900s such as the Larkin building (1904) and Unity Temple (1908), had invited the couple to join his team in the final stages of the design and renderings of the new Tokyo Imperial Hotel (1914-1923). On the journey that led the party from the port of Yokohama to central Tokyo, Raymond saw unveiled before his eyes the tangible expression of an aesthetic beauty and harmony that he had hitherto only partly perceived, first through the exotic lens of late European *japonisme* and later in America, through the extensive collection of Wright's Japanese prints and art collection<sup>1</sup>. This encounter with Japan was the ending point of a long journey, both intellectual and physical, that began in the heart of his native Bohemia, and would turn out to be the starting point of a prolific career in the making of Japanese modern architecture.

### Early life and education

Antonín Reimann<sup>2</sup> was born in the town of Kladno, home to the most important steel industry (Poldi) in

the peripheral region of Prague. His father, Alois Reimann was a Jew of German descent and his mother Růžena Tausig, a Catholic. Both were of peasant stock, but owing to Alois's education and subsequent success as an engineering salesman, they now lived a modest bourgeois lifestyle in an apartment located above the family shop on the corner of Pavla Square. Kladno displayed a heterogeneous body of architectural styles ranging from Gothic to Baroque and Czech Renaissance, and as with most towns or cities that had thrived during the industrial revolution, reflected the general trend of 19<sup>th</sup> Century historicism. These in essence constituted Raymond's initial architectural points of reference, since at the time, he had hardly any contact with Prague's rich architectural heritage, or the burgeoning signs of modern architecture expressed in *Art Nouveau* and later in the Czech Cubist movement. His upbringing was orientated by the progressive education delivered at Kladno's *Reálné Gymnázium (Realka)*, where sciences, arts and sports were a central part of the curriculum. The two latter, to which Raymond was especially responsive, were applied to encourage personal expression and development, and were also a medium for the cultivation of Czech identity. Despite being registered as "Israelite" throughout his school years, and as such being affected by the status of the community<sup>3</sup>, Raymond, together with his 5 brothers and sisters, were in fact not wholly educated in the Jewish tradition. This was a direct consequence of the distance Alois had put between himself and the community, judged in his eyes too strictly orthodox. Education at the *Realka*, together with the particular climate of the days leading up to the crumbling of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the awakening of a

*Kladno, the historical birthplace of heavy industry in Bohemia. The mining industry began here in 1842.*



<sup>1</sup> Frank Lloyd Wright was closely related to the "Boston Orientalists", the most active circle of Japanese art collectors and connoisseurs in North America at the turn of the 20th century.

<sup>2</sup> The correct spelling of Raymond's name is somewhat of a mystery as it varies depending on the source. In his own autobiography, Raymond spells it Rajman whereas his school records show a Reimann. Lastly, the Immigrant registration book of Ellis Island spelled his name "Rejmon", which is obviously a free transcription made by the clerk in charge at the time of his entry.

<sup>3</sup> The family was affected to the point that all of Raymond's brothers and sisters, as well as his father were deported during the Second World War, never to return. Czech historian Irena Veverková has reported that sisters Ella and Irma were sent to concentration camps (Irma in Poland). Brother Viktor died on 31 July 1942 in Mauthausen (Austria), Frank on 26 January 1943 in Auschwitz and Egon on 25 October 1944 in Terezín. For a short biography of Antonín Raymond in Czech, see her article *Mladá letá světově známého architekta Antonína Raymonda* in *Slánskéj Obzor*, vol. 6, 1998, pp. 101-108.

“nationalistic spirit of the people”, infused Raymond’s mind with a strong awareness of his Czech identity as well as the significance of local roots and the vernacular expressed in rural dwelling and farm buildings. This was further emphasised by the considerable amount of time spent in the comforting cradle of his maternal grandparents’ farm in Řeňčov (present Řevničov), which he later in life valued as formative of “the poetic sub-soil of life”. The presence of nature and man’s relationship to it in particular, cultivated through the intensive practice of drawing and observation of pastoral life, would in later years become an integral part of the backbone of Raymond’s approach to architectural design.

### Formative years in architectural design

In 1905, following the premature death of Růžena (1903), financial difficulties led Alois to move his family to Prague. After completing his course at the *Realka*, Raymond entered the Vysoká Škola Technická (Technical University) on Charles Square. There, the course consisted mainly of engineering classes and training in *Beaux-Arts* style drawing and composition. Raymond recalled the hours spent at the drafting table copying motifs of the classic orders as particularly “unpleasant”. Free time was spent discovering the architectural riches of the town, roaming the streets with fellow Czech students and picking the occasional fight with their German counterparts. A romantic at heart, Raymond also often sought refuge in Prague’s natural surroundings. The frustration brought on by formal education triggered the thought that although the architecture of the past should be valued for the way it reflected its own era, now was the time to reconsider its form, its space and the way it was built in order to give birth to an architecture designed for the man of the new era. In other words, the principles of an authentic tradition should serve the search for modern architecture. This line of thought also developed with the teachings Raymond received from professors such as architect and historian Josef Schulz (1840-1917) as well as architect and designer Jan Koula (1855-1919). Koula, together with Jan Kotěra (1879-1923), was one of the main Czech representatives of *Art Nouveau* at the turn of the century<sup>4</sup>. Raymond’s desire to address the present reached yet another level of intensity in 1910, on his first encounter with the works of Frank Lloyd Wright through a portfolio published by Berlin publisher Ernst Wasmuth<sup>5</sup>. Through the novelty of the architecture presented, as well as the artistic rendering inspired by Japanese prints and Arts and Crafts, the portfolio appeared as a complete work of art. In Raymond’s own words, “Wright had restated the principles of building; he had overcome the cell,

liberated the plan, made space flow, given buildings a human scale and blended them with nature, all in a romantic, sensual and original way which left us breathless. He was what we had been longing for, a real revolutionary”<sup>6</sup>.

This turning point added to the level of Raymond’s creative frustration. Increasing financial difficulties in the family and the bleak prospect of military service eventually led the young man to commit a petty crime - he eloped with the funds of his student club with the idea of reaching the United States. In July 1910, after a short period of work in Trieste, Raymond boarded the S.S. Atlanta bound for New York<sup>7</sup>. Upon arrival, thanks to connections made in the Czech community, the young and inexperienced architect was hired as a draftsman in the office of Cass Gilbert, where he acquired knowledge in the business aspect of the trade and was put in charge of detailed drawings for the bas-relief of the Woolworth building (1910-1913), the highest sky-scraper at the time. These were formative times, yet America did not turn out to be the creative and progressive architectural heaven Raymond had anticipated. As a result, he gradually withdrew from the profession to pursue his passion for art and nature. In 1914 Raymond spent a few months on the outskirts of Rome among an artist community, but fled back *in extremis* to New York upon the announcement of imminent war. On the boat he met his wife to be, Noémi Pernessin, a French graphic designer educated in Paris and New York. They married later that year and Antonín Reimann was naturalised as Antonin Raymond in early 1916. That year, thanks to Noémi’s connections, the couple was invited to live and work at Wright’s Taliesin house and studio, which would eventually lead to their invitation to Japan. Taliesin revived Raymond’s faith in architecture and for a while its environment offered everything the man could have dreamt of - guidance by a master of design with a true vision, contact with

<sup>4</sup> Jan Kotěra was a close pupil of the world famous Austrian Otto Wagner (1841-1918). Wagner was an important member of the Viennese Secession founded in 1897 by a group of painters and architects, among which were painter Gustav Klimt (1862-1918), architect and designer Josef Hoffmann (1870-1956) and architect Josef Maria Olbrich (1867-1908).

<sup>5</sup> The portfolio is available online from the J. Willard Marriott Library in the University of Utah, and may be found at: <http://content.lib.utah.edu/cdm/search/collection/FLWright-jp2>

<sup>6</sup> Antonin Raymond, *An Autobiography*, Tokyo, Charles E. Tuttle, 1973 p. 24.

<sup>7</sup> Trieste, then under Austro-Hungarian rule, was the compulsory port of embarkation for all official subjects of Empire.



*Reinanzaka house, Tokyo, circa 1926. This is the first house Raymond designed for himself and his family. It was made in reinforced concrete in the aftermath of the Great Kantō earthquake that occurred on 1st September 1923. Antonin Raymond archives, Karuizawa. Courtesy of Kitazawa Koichi.*



*Goto House, Tokyo, 1924. This house designed for the Mayor of Tokyo integrated many details inspired by Czech cubism.*

*Antonin Raymond archives, Karuizawa. Courtesy of Kitazawa Koichi.*

nature expressed in architecture and art on a daily basis - a somewhat romantic quality that recalled Raymond's own precious years in Bohemia.

### **Becoming an architect in 1920s Japan**

Both Raymond's and Wright's temperaments were of an explosive and uncompromising nature. That eventually led to the Raymonds returning to New York after a few months, but in 1920, Wright offered them a position as assistants on the Imperial Hotel project. After a few months spent in Tokyo, Raymond soon became aware of the potential for him to launch his own architectural business and at last be able to give form to his own vision of modern architecture. Among the élite there was increasing demand for Western-style houses, since they stood as tokens of modernity in an intensely developing city. Mainly through social clubs Raymond was able to build up a network of potential clients in the political, industrial and mission realm. He opened his first office in 1921 in the heart of Tokyo's business district Marunouchi, in partnership with an American colleague (L.W. Slack), and embarked on building his career as a pioneer of modern architecture. From the beginning the commissions consisted of a heterogeneous ensemble of projects set in Tokyo and Yokohama as well as the sea and mountain resort towns of Kanagawa and Nagano prefectures. However, a large number of the commissions that came to Raymond were for private villas. The office staff started with an international team of Western and Japanese engineers and architects, which by 1935

had evolved into an almost exclusively Japanese team. Among Raymond's distinguished collaborators of the 1920s were the Czechs Bedřich (Friedrich) Feuerstein (1892-1936), architect and stage designer, and structural engineer Jan Josef Švagr (1885-1969), who also came from Bohemia. Although he didn't work with Raymond, it is also worth mentioning another of several Czech architects that worked in Japan at the time, Jan Letzel (1880-1925), also from Bohemia and author of the Hiroshima Prefectural Industrial Promotion Hall (1915), which now stands as the A-Bomb Dome, a landmark of the city's Peace Memorial.

Motivated by a combination of ambition and necessity and also eager to propose a modern architecture closely connected to the specific context of Japan, the formation of Raymond's own approach to design would be conditioned by a number of challenges. The first was to design villas and buildings taking into account the particular climate of Japan, an archipelago regularly beaten by typhoons and heavy rains, where humidity levels were sky-high during the rainy season in early summer, and the ground was recurrently shaken by earthquakes. Also, cultural differences between his Japanese and Western clients meant that living space should be designed based on distinct customs and habits that sometimes complicated the task, for example, when *tatami* needed to be integrated into living spaces and shoes be removed upon entering the house, or the fact that kitchens needed to allow catering for both



Western and Japanese style cooking. Furthermore, as a participant in the birth of Japanese Modern Architecture, Raymond would have to train a generation of young Japanese architects that would in turn become the representatives of modern architecture in post-war Japan. These specific traits of designing in Japan reflected in form, space and construction, were carried out with a combination of wood and reinforced concrete. Raymond implemented reinforced concrete as an integral earthquake proof and design material for residential architecture in a way never seen before in Japan. The idiom used for his concrete modern villas drew on the influence of then-famous European architects such as Swiss-French architect Le Corbusier (1887-1965) and engineer-architect Auguste Perret (1874-1954), sometimes to the level of what could be interpreted as plagiarism. However, these designs or sections of designs should always be set against the background of Japan's specific context and the truly original way in which Raymond and his team adapted these international references to a local environment. Wooden houses he also designed benefited from the age-long skill and expertise of Japanese carpenters and use of natural material as a means of reflecting the relationship between man and nature in architecture. In this respect, Raymond found inspiration in the rural houses of Japan, *minka*.

In 1938, the rise of military nationalists compelled Raymond and his family to move back to America, only to return 10 years later. After 15 years of practice in Japan, he would in turn promote what he perceived as the principles of Japanese architecture to the Western public and profession. By doing so, Raymond endeavoured to perpetuate the achievement by which he had managed to integrate Japan in the unrolling of the history of modern architecture as an international phenomenon, while reflecting its local identity.

**Yola Gloaguen PhD** graduated from Paris La Villette School of Architecture. She studied architectural theory and design at the architectural department of Kyoto University, Japan, and gained her PhD at the *École Pratique des Hautes Études (EPHE)* in Paris for her thesis 'The villas designed by Antonin Raymond in 1920s and 1930s Japan - A synthesis between Western Modernism and Japanese Vernacular houses'. She is currently a research assistant at *Collège de France* and affiliated to the *East Asian Civilisations Research Centre (CRAO)* as a postdoctoral researcher.

*Below, summerhouse, Karuizawa, 1933. Raymond's own summer villa inspired by an unbuilt project of Le Corbusier, built in wood in the mountain resort of Karuizawa. Antonin Raymond archives, Karuizawa. Courtesy of Kitazawa Koichi.*

