

Art museum celebrates namesake birthday

Happy anniversary to the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa, as the popular and iconic museum in central Kanazawa, Ishikawa Prefecture, turns 21 this year.

The name itself distills the essence of the museum.

"In many ways, our museum is defined by two things: firstly, the city of Kanazawa. Secondly, the fact that from the museum's inception, we have been dedicated to exhibiting contemporary art," said Director Meruro Washida, whose distinctive first name is a tribute to French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

Washida's words can come off as enigmatic. But closer inspection reveals there's more to what he says than meets the eye. He explains that Kanazawa, a major city on Honshu's coastline along the Sea of Japan, is one of the few urban areas that escaped U.S. firebombing during World War II and as such, managed to retain its historically beautiful cityscape.

"Kanazawa has a rich cultural history that was nurtured during the Edo Period (1603 to 1868)," Washida said. "This entire region is also famed for a legacy of artisanship and craftsmanship. There's also the generational wealth passed on from the Maeda clan that once ruled the entire prefecture." In the last decade of the 20th century, Kanazawa's mayor announced his vision to take the city into the future. "To keep the flame of Kanazawa burning into the 21st century and beyond, the city needed to introduce something new and innovative to the dynamic," Washida said.

This culminated in a circular museum building absent of imposing facades or even a main entrance, so visitors can approach and enter from multiple directions. On the days the museum is closed, people are still free to walk through its corridors to go



The museum building is designed to be welcoming. KOJI ISHIKAWA

through it instead of around it.

Given the city's historical and cultural status, dedicating the museum to contemporary art was an act of faith, as well as part of its mission to revitalize the community by generating new culture.

"Before the 21st Century Museum came along, the city of Kanazawa had never experienced anything like it," Washida said. "The museum could well have been seen as an alien phenomenon, but Kanazawa's community accepted and embraced the building and the art. We continue to be very grateful for local support and understanding. At the same time, we are well aware of the need to give back by continuing to do good work and to present the community with new ideas and stimulus."

Washida went on to explain that one of

the goals is to be "participation-oriented," which seems to be a recent trend among museums worldwide.

"Museums are no longer a one-way street where people pay to see artworks and go home. They are assets to be shared with their communities, visitors and museum supporters. At the 21st Century Museum, we aim to be an open space for culture, people and ideas to roam freely and interact."

Washida says that back in the 1980s, museums in Japan were built away from city centers, reflecting the mass exodus to suburban areas.

"Cities were deemed as places to work, not to enjoy or experience culture and art. But the 21st Century Museum was built on a different idea. Our museum is not isolated or hidden away — it's part of a bustling, thriving urban community. We wanted visitors to absorb this experience as much as they enjoy the exhibits."

For more information, please visit
<https://www.kanazawa21.jp/en/>



Left: The museum is designed with no main entrance to give it a sense of openness.

Right: Director Meruro Washida OSAMU WATANABE; KUNIYA OYAMADA

Upcoming exhibits at 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa

'Side Core: Living road, Living space'
Oct. 18 to March 15, 2026

'Kongkee: Electronic Heart Beat'
Oct. 18 to March 22, 2026