

I.M. Pei: Innovator, Architect, Asian-American

Many people know about the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland, Ohio, and the Louvre pyramid in Paris – but how many know the genius that turned those visionary buildings into reality?

I. M. Pei was born Ieoh Ming Pei of Guangzhou (formerly known as Canton) on April 26, 1917. At the age of nine, Pei and his family moved to Shanghai where he was captivated by a 25-story hotel. This intrigue sparked the fire to Pei's genius.

At the age of 17, Pei moved to the United States where he completed his bachelor's degree at M.I.T. (and where he met his future wife, Eileen Woo), and enrolled in Harvard's graduate architecture program. Pei contemplated returning to China but the Japanese invasion of China (one of the two events cited as the beginning of World War 2), prevented him from returning home. Instead, Pei left Harvard and volunteered to join the National Defense Research Committee in Princeton, New Jersey, where he became an expert on fusing bombs in the United States. After his efforts in the war, Pei returned to Harvard, completed his graduate degree, and began his career in architecture.

Pei found success working for the architectural firm Webb & Knapp, leading large-scale projects in New York City. Not wanting to work under anyone for the rest of his life, Pei created his own, fully independent architectural firm.

Now independent, Pei was unanimously chosen by a subcommittee as the architect of The Kennedy Library in Boston, Massachusetts – which became the stepping stone for showing the entire nation Pei's talent. He gained recognition for his use of gridded concrete (as evidenced in his designs of the Silver Towers and Kips Bay Plaza). During his peak, Pei designed many well known projects like Washington D.C.'s L'Enfant Promenade and Plaza (1968) and National Gallery East Building (1978), the Louvre pyramid in Paris (1995), and the illustrious Rock and Roll Hall of Fame (1983).

Pei's accolades are astounding: He won every major award and recognition available in architecture, including the Pritzker Award (commonly referred to as the Nobel Prize of architecture). Its dedication said: "Ieoh Ming Pei has given this century some of its most beautiful interior spaces and exterior forms ... His versatility and skill in the use of materials approach the level of poetry." The prize included \$100,000, which Pei used to start a scholarship program to encourage Chinese students to pursue architecture. Some years later, President George H. W. Bush awarded I. M. Pei the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

Even after his death on May 16, 2019, his legacy continues to live on through his groundbreaking designs that captured the world.