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Tradition in Motion: Creating “Jakuchu” with Bamboo and Lacquer

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Introduction

Since the collapse of the bubble economy in the early 1990s, Japanese decorative arts made of ceramic, lacquer, bamboo, wood, metal, grass and other materials have been suffering from a plunge in market value. With these art forms often categorised as traditional art, traditionality has often been one of the main subjects when the future of decorative arts is discussed. Some artists regard “traditionality” as an essential element for their survival, adamantly refusing to change anything, while others view it as the main obstacle in making their products accommodate the contemporary art market.

The Invention of Tradition by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger in 1983 pointed out how traditions were being created in the modern era. Similar to the cases presented in the book, Modernism has affected every aspect of Japanese arts and culture which went through a period of significant changes in the Meiji era. The issue in question is how the idea of decorative arts being traditional affects the creation of artists today and how these artists have reacted against it.

1. Japan Traditional Art Craft Exhibition

The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) of Japan recognises holders of important intangible cultural properties and bestows them

with the “Living National Treasure” title. This internationally renowned system has been facing the issue of two seemingly contradicting ideas where holders of the title must produce works both traditional and new at the same time.

An interesting fact about this system is that being the best artist in any given field is not the only qualification required to receive the prestigious title. Unbeknownst to most people, almost all the holders of the title within the field of decorative arts are chosen from members of the Japan Kogei Association that holds the Japan Traditional Art Craft Exhibition. This means being recognized as one of the best artists at this particular annual exhibition over the years would provide you with a chance to be recognised by the government.

The rules provided by the organisers of the Japan Traditional Art Craft Exhibition more or less decide what kind of works should be created by living national treasures. Artists are thus required to create works using “traditional” materials, “traditional” techniques and taking “traditional” shapes (plates, vases, jars, boxes, tea ware and so forth). That said, however, such works are also required to be “new” in some ways. The exhibition has a 60-year history and the task of creating traditional yet new crafts has been pursued by generations of artists. It has reached a point where conceiv-

able new approaches have now been exhausted, and the idea of making works being somehow “traditional” has become a burden for many young artists.

2. A new approach to “tradition”

In order to tackle this issue of “traditionality”, two young artists and I have started “Project Bamboo × Lacquer”. The purpose of this project is to seek the possibility in creating traditional decorative art only possible in the twenty-first century.

Bamboo artist Tanabe Shochiku (b. 1973) and the Hikoju Makie Workshop, headed by lacquer artist Wakamiya Takashi (b. 1964), have been working together to produce corroborative artworks. Their approach to tradition is somewhat different, combining three traditional yet new approaches as follows.

1. Reviving of lacquer technique on bamboo

The application of *takamaki-e* (raised lacquer decoration) over a bamboo surface had hitherto been considered as impossible. Although the technique existed in the Edo period, it was lost ever since. Wakamiya spent three years on reviving this technique and succeeded in reinventing a similar method in 2011.

2. Weaving an image with bamboo strips

Ajiro-ami is a kind of weaving method commonly used by bamboo artists. Tightly woven two-coloured thin strips of bamboo were sometimes used to create simple images such as Chinese characters with auspicious meanings. Tanabe has elevated this technique to another level. Using the thinnest strips of bamboo ever used, he has de-

veloped a technique to create fine images such as a tiger or a cock.

3. Using works of Ito Jakuchu for inspirations

In addition to the two techniques, all the works they create use motifs from paintings by Ito Jakuchu (1716–1800) in the collection of Etsuko and Joe Price in California. Ito Jakuchu is one of the most popular painters in the history of Japanese art. In January 2012, Mr. Price understood the purpose of the project and gave them permission to use any image by Jakuchu in their collection.

Wakamiya and Tanabe combined these three aspects to create a few dozen collaborative works. In 2013, these works were exhibited for the first time at the Art Salon of Takashimaya Department Store. The exhibition recorded one of the best sales of exhibitions held at the venue for the last five years. Having achieved a successful exhibition, the two artists decided to continue the project for the next eight years.

Conclusion

In the field of decorative arts in Japan, the idea of “tradition” plays an important role. The result of “Project Bamboo × Lacquer” has demonstrated that there are still creative possibilities waiting to be explored. Wakamiya and Tanabe have revived an old technique, further developed an existing technique, and used Ito Jakuchu’s images as motifs to elevate their works. Thanks to the mixture of these three elements, it is now possible to produce highly traditional artworks that can only be created in the twenty-first century.