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Author(s)	Shimbo, Akiko; Mishima, Misako
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Crafts as Cultural Resources

‘Rescued’ Furniture: Reviving and Reutilising Kyushu University’s Historical Furniture

Akiko Shimbo

Shibaura Institute of Technology

Misako Mishima

The Kyushu University Museum

Abstract

This paper discusses ‘rescuing’ objects, focusing on furniture, and examines how this idea reflects and can contribute to ‘ideal truth’ of design in relation to consumption/use, disposal and reuse/reutilisation. The paper begins by seeking the basis of the notion of ‘rescuing’ objects, looking at the definitions of the English words ‘rescue’ and ‘salvage’, as well as the Japanese word ‘*resukyu*’. Referring to customs in material culture and folklore, this paper explores the possibility of analysing furniture from the viewpoints of personification and sanctity. The paper then analyses the language used by the Kyushu University Museum and its supporters. When Kyushu University (established in 1911) began to move to a new campus in 2005, many pieces of historical furniture that had been used were discarded. The museum started to ‘rescue’ them in 2008 and has conducted a project of ‘open preservation’: reuse of them not only on campus but also in shops and other facilities outside the campus. When the museum appealed for the costs of transport and repairs of discarded pieces of furniture through cloud funding in 2018, the word ‘rescue’ was used to describe them. The personification of the furniture was also seen in the donors’ comments. The paper concludes with an examination of some shops outside the campus that use the furniture loaned by the museum, conducting interviews concerning their views on reviving and reutilising it. The example of Kyushu University’s historical furniture demonstrates that the furniture that has literally supported people’s lives was saved by people, including those who are not related to the university, and is reutilised in other places. This also indicates that objects can be ‘rescued’ and deserve to be treated with respect, which ultimately leads to long-term use of products and even exemplifies eternal life.

Keywords: *Furniture; Rescued; The Kyushu University Museum; Material culture*

1. Introduction

While ‘humane act’, one of this conference’s topics, is usually directed at humans and animals, this word could also be used for objects. In this context, this paper discusses rescuing discarded objects, focusing on furniture, to explore people’s awareness of the lives of products, which are as precious as those of humans. The paper begins by seeking the basis of the notion of ‘rescuing’ objects, looking at the definitions of the English words ‘rescue’ and ‘salvage’, as well as the Japanese word ‘*resukyu*’. In particular, furniture is closely connected to the everyday life of people in homes and outside homes. Referring to customs in material culture and folklore, this paper explores the possibility of analysing furniture from the viewpoints of personification and sanctity.

The paper then analyzes the language used by the Kyushu University Museum and its supporters. When Kyushu University began to move to a new campus in 2005, many pieces of

historical furniture that had been used in the faculties were discarded. The museum started to rescue them and has conducted a project of ‘open preservation’: reuse of them not only on campus but also in shops and other facilities outside the campus. When the museum appealed for the costs of transport and repairs of discarded pieces of furniture through cloud funding in 2018, the Japanese word ‘*resukyu*’ was used to describe them. The personification of the furniture was also seen in the donors’ comments.

The paper further examines people’s views on reviving and reutilising the once or almost discarded furniture by conducting interviews with shops outside the campus that use the furniture loaned by the museum. The example of Kyushu University’s historical furniture demonstrates that the furniture that has literally supported people’s lives was saved by people, including those who are not related to the university, and is reutilised in other places. This indicates that objects can be saved and deserve to be treated with respect, which ultimately leads to long-term use of products and even exemplifies eternal life.

2. Objects’ Lives

As mentioned earlier, ‘humane act’ is usually directed at humans and animals, but not at objects(1), because objects have no life. In relation to this, the word ‘rescue’ is used both for humans and objects in English, with the definitions in separate categories in *the Oxford English Dictionary*.(2) According to it, the word ‘rescue’ began to be used for humans in circa 1330, while it started to be used for objects later than for humans, just ante 1413.(3) As far as the examples listed in OED are concerned, the word ‘rescue’ can be used for objects that are important or valuable, as the following examples indicate: ‘To rescue our Native Language’ (1754); ‘The papyrus fragments rescued from the ruins of Herculaneum’ (1875); and ‘rescuing Scotland’s forgotten literary legacy’ (1997).(4) Conversely, the word ‘salvage’ in English is almost exclusively used for objects and began to be used in a later period, 1889.(5) The word ‘salvage’ has also a more contemporary and practical meaning that first appeared in 1943: ‘To save and collect (waste material, esp. paper) for recycling’.(6) While the English word ‘rescue’ is thus used both for humans and objects, and the word ‘salvage’ is used for objects, it is worth noting that the use of both words for objects began from a later period.

Similarly, the Japanese word ‘*resukyu*’, which originates from the English word ‘rescue’, mainly means saving human lives, especially victims of disasters, distress, or accidents.(7) Nevertheless, the word also started to be used to mean saving cultural heritage, especially after the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake. Indeed, although the book titles that include the Japanese word ‘*resukyu*’ in the catalogue of the Japan National Diet Library deal with saving humans, animals as well as PCs and soft wares, some titles with ‘cultural heritage *resukyu*’ began to appear after 2012.(8) These pieces were mainly designated/registered cultural assets or items from museums’ collections. Therefore, it is also likely that the Japanese word ‘*resukyu*’ is mainly used for humans and objects that are as precious as human lives. This Japanese word ‘*resukyu*’ was used to describe saving Kyushu University’s historical furniture from discarding, as will be seen later, although the pieces had not been officially accepted as important objects because they were mere objects for daily use.

Customs concerning the sanctity and personification of objects may provide a clue as to why they could be treated almost as humans, which leads to the idea that their lives should be saved. In Western countries, there is a precaution that touching or knocking wooden objects wards off bad luck, based on the belief that these objects were originally made from sacred trees, especially oak, which had ‘protecting powers’.(9) In Japan, although it has been said that pillars, such as *daikoku bashira* and *kojin bashira*, and kitchen stoves (*kamado*) are the places where gods dwell and protect the family and home(10), the association of specific furniture with such customs needs further research.

3. 'Rescued' Furniture: A Case Study of Kyushu University's Historical Furniture

In this context of the discussion of 'rescuing' objects, furniture can show appropriate examples because it is closely connected to everyday life of people both in and outside homes. The second part of the paper therefore analyses the language used by the Kyushu University Museum and its supporters concerning 'rescued' furniture, paying attention to personification. When Kyushu University began to move to a new campus in 2005, many pieces of historical furniture that had been used since its establishment in 1911 were discarded on campus.(11) The university museum's 'rescue' team consisting of interdisciplinary specialists, Misako Mishima from botany, Shozo Iwanaga from archaeology and Shigejiro Yoshida from forest science, started a full-scale rescue of the furniture and equipment in 2009.(12) Then, Mishima proposed a new concept 'open preservation' ('*zaiya hozon*' in Japanese) and started to organise a project on 'open preservation', the reuse of the once or almost discarded university's historical furniture not only on campus but also in shops and other facilities outside the campus and homes to continue to be used and, at the same time, preserved in everyday life as 'cultural heritage in use' ('*katsuyo bunkazai*' in Japanese) .(13)

First, personification is seen in the organiser's method for saving the lives of objects: 'triage'. When the museum appealed for the costs of transport and repairs of discarded pieces of furniture through cloud funding in 2018, before the final move of some faculties to the new campus, the Japanese word '*resukyu*' was used to describe them.(14) Because of the lack of storage space, the museum had to pick and choose the furniture immediately on the site and transport only selected pieces to the storage facilities.(15) Mishima focused on the concept of the medical term 'triage' used in disasters to set the standard for selecting discarded pieces of furniture.

Although the word 'triage' originally meant '[t]he action or process of classifying, sorting, or separating out wool or another commodity according to quality' in the period between the early eighteenth century and the late nineteenth century, according to OED, this meaning is no longer in use.(16) However, since the early twentieth century, the word has been used as a medical term, which is directed at first military casualties and later patients, as the definition indicates: 'The action or process of making a preliminary assessment of patients (originally military casualties) in order to determine the urgency of their need for treatment and the nature of treatment required'.(17) Thus, the word is now commonly used as a medical term aimed at humans, as the latter meaning indicates.

Drawing an example from the Tokyo Metropolitan Government, Bureau of Public Health's standard for triage, it ranks the groups of patients in priority order according to the level of urgency and severity of injuries or illness, putting a tag of a specific colour to each rank: red to the top priority, and then yellow, green and black at the lowest.(18) Mishima developed this method for triaging discarded pieces of furniture, and Ryuji Arai then adjusted the standard and elements from the viewpoint of a specialist in twentieth century Japanese furniture:

- A1: Complete condition (with the manufacturer's label). To be saved and kept—Blue or yellow
- A2: Complete condition (with the manufacturer's label). To be saved and required to be repaired—Red
- A3: To be reused as a material—Brown
- A4: Under consideration - Black
- A5: To be loaned to other institutions—Pink (19)

Mishima's idea was thus the application of the method originally used to save human lives to saving objects in a limited time and space.

The personification of the furniture was also seen in the donors' comments on the 2018 cloud funding website: 'the furniture has watched over the university and its students'; 'the desk has supported their research'; 'the desk that married into another place'; 'the furniture starts to live its

second life’ and ‘... the desk is born again and will support other people’s lives’.(20) Here, furniture functions as the subject of the sentence, which is grammatically not normal in the Japanese language.

People’s support for saving the university’s furniture indicates their will to make it continue to live as companions of humans. It is not limited to graduates of the university but is shared by those who are not related to the university. Even though people lived in different ages and places from those where the furniture was made and used, they donated to the museum’s idea in order to show respect for the fact that the furniture has lived and supported humans over a long time. Finding value in the discarded historical furniture as it is, they also made a donation to express their wishes to make it continue to live for the future.



Figure 1: The use of Kyushu University’s Furniture in the University Museum’s botanical exhibition room



Figure 2: Kyushu University’s Furniture in the University Museum’s new storeroom (desks and tables)



Figure 3: Kyushu University's Furniture in the University Museum's new storeroom (cabinets)

4. Shop Owners' Views on Historical Furniture

The furniture that had supported humans and, in return, was saved by many people beyond the original owners and users—the university and its members and continue to live for other uses and in other places as a communal heritage. Through their practice the new keepers of these pieces of rescued furniture demonstrate that, like humans, objects should also be treated with respect. We interviewed four shop owners, to whom the museum had loaned the rescued furniture by email from late August to early September 2023. Three of them are bookshops with cafés, and the other is a prefectural art museum's café.

The first question is as to what shop owners felt when they decided to use the once or almost discarded furniture in new places away from the original place. All the shop owners are aware of the time the furniture spent. The owner of *Daidai Shoten*, a bookshop with a café in Kumamoto, answers that she felt as if she had carried on the memories that existed within the objects.(21) Similarly, the owner of another bookshop with a café called 'Rural Reading' in Niigata says that she feels as if she had something to be handed down or was holding a baton to be passed for a while.(22) She thinks that, for furniture, she is just one of many people it has met. In addition to her memory as a graduate from the university and awareness of the furniture as a link between her and her grandfather, who had also spent time on the same campus with the furniture, she also thinks that the furniture has 'bigger stories' in itself and that her and her family's stories are just part of them. These owners thus display the feeling that they are part of a long history of the furniture.

The owner of the café at the Fukuoka Prefectural Museum of Art further draws attention to the time accumulated in the furniture. According to her, some visitors say that they feel the passage of time in the 60-year-old museum building and relax with its nostalgic atmosphere.(23) In her view, both buildings and furniture accumulate time within them. Even though she did not live in that building or did not use that furniture, she can feel from the texture that it shared the same age as she lived in. She also states that both buildings and furniture can convey the spirit of the age to people who were not born in the period, without words. She says, while new things are convenient and look pleasant, they make her anxious as if she were rootless. Alternatively, buildings and furniture, in which the passage of time is engraved, calm her down. She says, even though the furniture's whereabouts seem to be lost, it can play not only a functional role, as a desk or a bookshelf, but also a new role. Interpreting her words, this 'new role' may be the foundation on which humans should lay their own.

Furthermore, the manner in which humans treat objects is connected to how humans consider life. When the owner of a bookshop, *Natsume Shoten* in Fukuoka decided to borrow the university's furniture, she hoped that taking great care of a period of the furniture's life would make its further years better.(24) She also states that the expression of objects changes depending on how they are

treated. Thus, the owner treats the furniture similarly to humans. Like humans, objects reflect happiness, and such a well-treated life continues for a longer time.

The second question is whether the shop has any policy to continue to use Kyushu University's historical furniture at the shop, a new place for the furniture. All of them considered the harmony of the old furniture and the interior of the shops, most of which were built 50, 60, or 70 years ago.(25) The owner of *Daidai Shoten* in Kumamoto answers that she takes care of it not to be damaged because it has been cherished for a long time and keeps in mind that the harmony of the old furniture and newly installed ones is maintained.(26) The owner of 'Rural Reading' in Niigata also considers the interaction between the 'genuine time' the old furniture has and the interior of the shop.(27) While the owner of *Natsume Shoten* in Fukuoka also tried to harmonise the 50-year-old building, which had formerly been a hair dresser's shop, with the university's furniture, she thought that she wanted to use the furniture in its original state as much as possible.(28) Echoing her answers to the first question, she says that in order to convey to visitors that the furniture is precious and encourage them to treat it carefully, the shop owners themselves always treasure it. Thus, once or almost discarded furniture moved places to live, casting a light of time over the surroundings and protecting and being protected by humans.

Three of the four owners say that they are willing to explain Mishima's idea, 'open preservation' ('*zaiya hozon*' in Japanese) to visitors who show an interest in the furniture or the interior of the shop.(29) The practice of the new keepers of the rescued furniture demonstrates that the time the furniture had spent and brought to the new places deserves to be respected, and the objects that are treated with respect would continue to live for centuries. In that meaning, objects surely have life.

Conclusion

The Japanese word '*resukyu*', which originates from the English word 'rescue' mainly means saving human lives, especially victims of disasters. The Japanese word '*resukyu*' was used to describe saving Kyushu University's historical, but everyday, furniture from being discarded. As this paper has analysed, the language used by the Kyushu University Museum and its supporters indicates the personification of the furniture. As the final part of the paper has examined, the words of the shop owners who use the university's furniture demonstrate that the time the furniture had spent and brought to the new places deserves to be respected. At the same time, objects that are treated with respect would continue to live for centuries, which embodies the ultimate truth of using products. This may further lead to immortality that humans themselves never achieve, and without humans' succeeded hands, objects would never achieve.

Notes

1. The entry of the word 'humane', Oxford English Dictionary Online (Oxford University press) https://www.oed.com/dictionary/humane_adj?tab=meaning_and_use&show-all-quotations=true (accessed on 8 September 2023).
2. The entry of the word 'rescue', Oxford English Dictionary Online (Oxford University press) www.oed.com/dictionary/rescue_v?tab=meaning_and_use#25919961 (accessed on 8 September 2023).
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.

5. The entry of the word 'salvage', Oxford English Dictionary Online (Oxford University press) https://www.oed.com/dictionary/salvage_v?tab=meaning_and_use#24435993 (accessed on 8 September 2023).
6. Ibid.
7. The three major Japanese dictionaries, for example, include the words '*resukyu tai*', meaning a rescue team, and define it as a team for saving human lives in such situations. The entries of the word '*resukyu*' in the following Japanese dictionaries: *Kojien*, *Seisenban Nihon Kokugo Daijiten*, and *Meikyo Kokugo Jiten*.
8. The catalogue of the Japan National Diet Library, accessed on 18 September 2023.
9. E. and M.A. Radford, *The Encyclopedia of Superstitions* (Oxford, 1995), 60-1, 252-253. Akiko Shimbo, *Furniture-Makers and Consumers in England, 1754-1851: Design as Interaction* (Ashgate 2015, Routledge 2016), 1 has referred to this.
10. Takao Mori (ed.), *Sumai no Minzoku Jiten* [Encyclopaedia of Housing Folklore] (Tokyo: Shufusha, 2019), 404, 406, 433.
11. Misako Mishima and Shozo Iwanaga "Kyushu Daigaku Sogo Kenkyu Hakubutsukan Daiichibunkan no Sasshinteki Katsuyo (1) Keii [Innovative Usage of the Kyushu University Museum Annex 1: (1) Circumstances]," *Kyushu Daigaku Sogo Kenkyu Hakubutsukan Kenkyu Hokoku* [*Bulletin of The Kyushu University Museum*]¹² (2014): 57.
12. Misako Mishima et al., "Katsuyo Bunkazai to shite no Rekishiteki Mokusei Juki no Zaiyahozon [Open Preservation of Historical Wooden Furniture and Equipment as Cultural Heritage in Use]" (Toyota Foundation 2017 Research Grant Program Report TYTID D17-R-0714 (2023)), 2-4.
13. Misako Mishima, "Kyushu Daigaku no Rekishiteki Mokusei Juki no Hozon to Katsuyo no Aratana Arikata ni Mukete [New Perspectives of Preservation and Usage of the Kyushu University's Historical Wooden Furniture and Equipment]," *Kyushu Daigaku Sogo Kenkyu Hakubutsukan Kenkyu Hokoku* [*Bulletin of The Kyushu University Museum*]¹⁵⁻¹⁶ (2018): 66-67.
14. The 2018 cloud funding website: "Rekishiteki na Mokusei Gakkokagu wo Sukue! Kyudai Juki Hozon Katsuyo Purojekuto [Save the Kyushu University's Historical Wooden Furniture! The Preservation and Use of Kyushu University's Furniture and Equipment]" <https://readyfor.jp/projects/kyudai-furniture> (accessed in May 2023).
15. This and the following reference come from Mishima et al. "Katsuyo Bunkazai to shite no Rekishiteki Mokusei Juki no Zaiyahozon" (2023), 6.
16. The entry of the word 'triage', Oxford English Dictionary Online (Oxford University press) https://www.oed.com/dictionary/triage_n?tab=meaning_and_use#17792601 (accessed on 12 September 2023).
17. Ibid.
18. <https://www.hokeniryo.metro.tokyo.lg.jp/iryo/kyuukyuu/saigai/triage.html> accessed on 12

September 2023); Mishima et al. (2023) refers to TMG’s method. Mishima et al. “Katsuyo Bunkazai to shite no Rekishiteki Mokusei Juki no Zaiyahozon (2023), 6.

19. Ibid., 6, 29.
20. The 2018 cloud funding website: “Rekishiteki na Mokusei Gakkokagu wo Sukue!” <https://readyfor.jp/projects/kyudai-furniture> (accessed in May 2023).
21. An interview to *Daidai Shoten*, a bookshop with a café in Kumamoto by email (1 September 2023).
22. This and the following two references come from an interview to *Rural Reading*, a bookshop with a café in Niigata by email (1 September 2023).
23. This and the following six references come from an interview to the café at Fukuoka Prefectural Museum of Art by email (11 September 2023).
24. This and the following reference come from an interview to a bookshop, *Natsume Shoten* in Fukuoka by email (11 September 2023).
25. The interviews to four shops conducted above.
26. The interview to *Daidai Shoten* by email (1 September 2023).
27. The interview to *Rural Reading* by email (1 September 2023).
28. This and the following reference come from the interview to *Natsume Shoten* by email (11 September 2023).
29. The responses to the interviews conducted above.

Author Biographies

Akiko Shimbo

Akiko Shimbo is a professor at Shibaura Institute of Technology in Japan. Her research field is the history of material culture, especially furniture and houses. She has been involved in Kyushu University’s historical furniture project since 2016. She is the author of the book *Furniture-Makers and Consumers in England, 1754-1851: Design as Interaction* (Ashgate 2015, Routledge 2016).

Misako Mishima

Dr. Misako Mishima is a professor at the Kyushu University Museum in Japan. Her background is botany, and she manages the herbarium of the university. She started practical museum research in 2006 and has been leading the historical furniture project at Kyushu University since 2009.

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