

Creativity after the Quake



THE JAPAN JOURNAL

*In May, the Public-Private Expert Panel on Creative Industries at the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, which has held repeated discussions about the development of Cool Japan, announced the Creating a New Japan: Tying together “culture and industry” and “Japan and the world” proposal. The Japan Journal’s Osamu Sawaji speaks with **Yoshiharu Fukuhara**, honorary chairman of Shiseido, who chairs the Expert Panel, about Japanese creativity and culture after the Great East Japan Earthquake.*

Yoshiharu Fukuhara

Creating a New Japan contains the phrase “Japanese creativity.” Please tell us about its significance.

Yoshiharu Fukuhara: I think of “Japanese creativity” as a method of incorporating things with different properties into a wide concept and creating new things. Hybrid, as it were. For example, in the fifth and sixth centuries, Japan introduced characters from China, but the characters were not used as such, rather, the phonetic sounds of the Chinese characters were adapted to create the *Manyougana* for writing native words in the ancient Japanese language.

In the Meiji period (1868–1912) as well, Japan introduced Western culture and created original Japanese technology and products. For example, in the early Meiji period, when Shiseido first started selling Western-style cosmetics in Japan, they incorporated the Art Nouveau style, which was the fashion in Paris, by using

oriental art forms at the time, in their perfume bottles and labels. However, they didn’t simply use the designs as they found them; by adding traditional Japanese design elements, such as arabesques with motifs of flowers and grass, they gave them a Japanese character.

I think this was another form of what we now refer to as Cool Japan. Cool Japan is created by adding contemporary elements to traditional culture, not simply preserving traditional culture. Manga and anime are examples of Cool Japan, but I think they are also popular with foreigners because they contain elements of some kind of traditional Japanese culture.

What part can culture play in the recovery from the Great East Japan Earthquake?

In Tohoku, the festivals and other regional traditional culture have become a symbol of recov-

ery since the Great East Japan Earthquake. I believe that culture is an act of creation by people who wish to lead better lives. That is why culture confers a forward-looking energy on the spirit of people.

Last year, people in Minamisanriku in Miyagi Prefecture got involved in the Kiriko-dori Project. Local women in their twenties and thirties went around the homes, listening to memories and anecdotes from the lives of the people, which they then represented in paper cutouts for decorating the eaves of ninety buildings on a one-kilometer stretch of the main street. Through this contemporary version of the activity of making *kiriko* cutouts, local people discovered their own creativity and a fascination with the region. However, just when regional development through the arts was bearing fruit, the Great East Japan Earthquake struck. Many of the people involved in the project perished, but I heard that those who remain feel strongly about wanting to continue the *kiriko* project. I think these are the kinds of people who will be the driving force for recovery in the town.

What kinds of things are necessary to nurture people who will be the bearers of Cool Japan?

It is the role of government, local governments and corporations to create places for nurturing people. For example, I think that the Yokohama Triennale, which runs from August, is one such place. Fumiko Hayashi, the mayor of Yokohama, is backing the Yokohama Triennale from the perspective that “culture is important for

revitalizing Yokohama.” Yokohama City is not the only supporter, but the Japan Foundation and the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology are also backers. Held three times so far, the Yokohama Triennale is dispersed across several venues, but this year, it is mainly held at the Yokohama Museum of Art. By showing the works of many artists together, I hope that it will become a place for giving shape to the new Cool Japan.



An exhibit of the Kiriko-dori Project held at Minamisanriku in Miyagi Prefecture last year. This *kiriko* cutout hangs from the eaves of a house where soy sauce used to be produced. The design features barrels and the family emblem of the soy sauce producers. Kiriko-making activities have begun again after a hiatus following the Great East Japan Earthquake. The Association for Corporate Support of the Arts supports these activities through the GBFund.

COURTESY OF ENVISI

I have been told that some overseas artists cancelled their participation in the Yokohama Triennale because of the earthquake disaster. However, conversely, I have also heard that some artists are traveling to Japan because now is the time to encourage the victims of the disaster.

We cannot create and diffuse Cool Japan with only Japanese people. By involving people around the world, a new Cool Japan can be created, one that I believe will spread further. 