



Ryohei Miyata. Born in Sado, Niigata Prefecture in 1945, he graduated from Tokyo University of the Arts in 1970. He served in various teaching and administrative roles at the same university including as president (2005 to 2016) before his appointment as Commissioner of the Agency for Cultural Affairs in April 2016.

A “Peddler” for the Arts

Yes, it does. After getting up in the morning, our whole family – including the apprentices – would grind out some ink and practice calligraphy before eating breakfast. If the purpose of this calligraphy was to write beautiful characters, then of course if we wrote poorly formed characters it would only be natural to add red ink to them and indicate the correct way of writing them. But my mother never, ever did that. Even if the shape of one of my characters was different from that of the same character the day before, she would say kindly, “This part’s different from yesterday, it looks interesting.” I think that when human beings are praised they instinctively amplify it. And so I would think to myself, let’s do something different again. I think that has led to my own personal way of thinking about the arts today, of wanting to make something different from yesterday, even now.

RYOHEI Miyata, a metal artist known for his “Springen” series of “jumping” dolphin-themed works, was born into an artistic family engaged in wax casting – an Intangible Cultural Property – in the city of Sado, Niigata Prefecture. Last year, after a stretch serving as president of Tokyo University of the Arts, Miyata was appointed commissioner of the Agency for Cultural Affairs. *Highlighting JAPAN* spoke with the Commissioner.

What is your mindset as a wax casting artist?

Because metalworking involves beating metal into the desired shape, you only have to make one slip or mistake and it will be hard to rectify later. That means that you constantly have to imagine the final, finished shape of the piece in your head as you are creating it. However, the image of that completed form changes continuously within me, and it is not the same today as it was yesterday. Only, the original “roots” within me do not change. Those roots are the joy of creation that we as people gain from making something, and the feeling of *tokimeki* – of heart-beating excitement.

Does that relate to your background in any way?

What are your thoughts on the passing on of traditions, and the evolution of traditional culture?

The reason that evolution exists is because we have the base of tradition. Without the springboard of tradition, then no matter how much we jumped we could never reach the top. Tradition is the basic, fundamental power that allows us to move to the next step, enabling us to jump higher, run sideways, or dive deeper.

If we continue to protect and preserve tradition when we make the next step then it is very reassuring, and it gives us great peace of mind, but there is no evolution there. All it serves to do is to create constraints within ourselves, the idea that

things must be a certain way, or a particular shape or form.

What do you expect to see from the young generation of people aspiring to get into the arts?

I don't expect anything [laughs]. The reason for that is, that hoping or having expectations for something forces a certain shape or form upon it. When they get glimpses of that, then people avoid it. For that reason, I make a point of never hoping for – or expecting – anything.

That's something you've experienced yourself, from your calligraphy, isn't it?

That's the awareness that I would like to have. The important thing with culture is to not create boring concepts. When a new bud emerges that is different from what we saw yesterday, it is important to have the ability to notice that change, and to lead it steadily into bloom by recognizing and acknowledging it. We don't need fixed concepts there. A person will always grow and develop when they make use of their intuitive abilities. And if that person expands their dreams, using their own particular applied methods, then they will surely be able to create something interesting.

Even if people who have positioned themselves in the world of traditional arts and culture attempt to carry on the old ways of the past, we are really people of the present; and so I want them to be leaders who show the way forward with new methods that are specialized towards the needs of this current day and age, rather than being dragged back towards the past.

The 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games is an opportunity to appeal to the world about Japanese art and culture, isn't it?

It's a fantastic opportunity. I'm thinking of what I call a "tricycle" concept. Let's say that culture is a unicycle. People who can ride a unicycle are amazing, but there are not that many of them. If we add



Ryohei Miyata looks at one of his dolphin-themed works at the exhibition commemorating his retirement at the University Art Museum, Tokyo University of the Arts, November 2016
Photo: Courtesy of Tokyo University of the Arts

the economy to this and make it a bicycle, then it creates interesting relationships and increases stability. But unless we continually turn the pedals of our bicycle it will fall over. So, we add tourism to the mix and create a three-wheeled tricycle. A tricycle – consisting of culture, the economy and tourism – is very stable. I want to make culture the front wheel, the leader, in charge of handling. Culture has the power to form links with the economy and to lead the way for tourism, so I am confident that we can create a well-balanced project with total, integrated strength.

What of image do you have of your own role in that project, as Commissioner for Cultural Affairs?

I see myself as a kind of "peddler" for the arts. Picture a street vendor, who loads mountain produce onto his trailer cart and delivers it to the people who live by the sea, then loads his cart up again with ocean produce to take back with him. I have always kept myself constantly in the field, and have devised a diverse range of ways of doing things by considering things from that perspective. Now, I just happen to be playing my part of peddler as Commissioner for Cultural Affairs. I want to fulfill the role of an agent or intermediary for the arts, helping to share the goodness of both the mountains and the ocean with people, so to speak. ▣

Interview by HITOSHI CHIBA
