

“Japanese Design Today” – Into Tomorrow



Hiroshi Kashiwagi, professor emeritus at Musashino Art University, serves on the selection committee for the “Japanese Design Today 100” exhibition.

SINCE 2004, a touring exhibition that aims to convey Japanese culture through contemporary design, has been held all over the world. We spoke with Hiroshi Kashiwagi, professor emeritus at Musashino Art University, a design critic who serves on the selection committee for the exhibited works.

Japanese Design Today 100, a touring exhibition that introduces Japanese products and designs, has enjoyed great popularity since it began in 2004. The second version of the exhibition is currently being held. Could you please give us an overview?

Japanese Design Today 100 was a touring exhibition held abroad continuously for a period of ten years. The Touring Exhibition: Japanese Design Today 100 <renewal version> began as another ten-year project in 2014. As in the previous project, eleven of the 100 products selected are leading designs from the early postwar period, while the remaining eighty-nine products comprise modern items created from 2014 onward.

When we travel overseas, we get a feel for the culture of the place and understand it by looking at the design of things at our destination such as store windows, fashion and buildings. In the same way, the purpose of the touring exhibition is to see Japanese culture through contemporary products. For example, we hope that visitors to the exhibition will get a sense of the importance that Japanese

culture places on meticulous finish, imbued with qualities such as a delicate aesthetic sense and consideration for the user of the product.

How popular is the touring exhibition?

It enjoys considerable popularity, attracting large numbers of visitors ranging from young students to the general public. Interestingly, at the previous touring exhibition, many people asked how they could buy certain products or expressed a strong wish to own them. This time, therefore, an email address and URL information have been included alongside the product exhibits. The primary purpose of the touring exhibition is to introduce Japanese culture, but it seems that when visitors see the products they want to own them [laughs].

What are the characteristic elements of Japanese design?

Not surprisingly, the fact that they are meticulous and well thought out. One example is Naoki Tera-da's 15.0% Ice Cream Spoon, which is being exhibited in the current touring exhibition. When you hold the spoon, the temperature of your hand is transmitted immediately, making it easy to scoop ice cream. It's an extremely sophisticated product with superb visual appeal. Another example is the contemporary reinterpretation of traditional crafts. Lacquerware is especially popular, so much so that some people end up taking the exhibits [laughs]. People appreciate items that convey Japanese tradition and originality, such as iron kettles, hot-water bottles, ceramics, even kitchen knives, and these things are related to folk arts and crafts, or *mingei*.

You mean *mingei* [folk crafts] are an expression of Japanese originality?

When Soetsu Yanagi, who founded the Mingei [folk crafts] movement, established the Japan Folk Crafts Museum in 1936, he said that he wanted it to be a place where visitors to the museum would

understand the extent of Japanese culture at first glance. After that, Japan experienced growing interest in crafts, particularly ceramics and furniture, with an increasing number of events being held across the country to introduce crafts. Today, Japan's crafts are recognized the world over as a category that expresses Japanese originality.

The 1964 Olympics is said to have been the turning point in the pursuit of originality.

At that time, there was a strong awareness in respect of originality. The thing that changed decisively was graphic design. The Tokyo Olympics poster designed by Yusaku Kamekura caused a stir for its fusion of the traditional Japanese aesthetic sense of simplicity and modern design. It was after this that world-class designers began to emerge in Japan. Whereas most posters showcase the product, in Japan we are seeing a rapid increase in creative posters that give strong prominence to the aesthetic sense. This is rarely seen in the rest of the world.

Where do you think this originates?

Put very simply, I think it originates in Japan's unique print culture. It is the division of labor and cooperation resulting in the high level of technical skill seen in *ukiyo-e* woodblock prints. Later, from the Meiji period [1868-1912], Japan learned from Western posters. However, rather than simply imitate these, the Japanese learned techniques, which were combined with traditional Japanese printing methods, resulting in the gradual emergence of originality. Visitors to the touring exhibition can see that Japanese-style originality for themselves. When the touring exhibition comes to a city near your readers, I hope they will go and see it with the mindset of tourists sightseeing in Japan. 📖

Interview by HITOSHI CHIBA
