

Design Resolves Issues of the Times

Kanazawa Citizen's Art Center, winner of
the Good Design Grand Award in 1997
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DESIGN PROMOTION

Now entering its sixtieth year, the Good Design Award and its recipients continue to reflect societal changes.

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THE Japan Institute of Design Promotion (JDP) has conferred the Good Design Award on recipients as varied as robots, housing complexes, space stations, home electrical appliances, automobiles and furniture. The Good Design Award is Japan's only comprehensive design evaluation and recommendation movement for a wide range of fields. It is rooted in the Good Design Selection System (or G Mark System), which was founded in 1957 by the Ministry of International Trade and Industry (currently the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry) for trade promotion. In recent years, roughly 1,200 designs are recognized every year, including applications from both Japan and overseas. In the sixty years since its establishment, around 44,000 designs have been recognized.

The G Mark, which represents the Good Design Award, continues to play a role as a symbol of "good

design" over half a century since the establishment of the award.

Motomi Kawakami, chairman of the JDP, says, "The Good Design Award is not just a competition for superior design, a design is evaluated in terms of whether or not it 'can enrich our lives and society.' There are many different designs around us.



Motomi Kawakami, chairman of the Japan Institute of Design Promotion

Photo: YUICHI ITABASHI

The award is intended to select those that are currently necessary, with foresight from a wide range of fields, and to disseminate the designs and to lead our entire society toward a richer future.”

The criteria for the evaluation of the Good Design Award have changed from year to year. Initially, the primary focus was on “economy and usability,” that is, the overall product function. For example, an electric rice cooker manufactured by Toshiba, which won the award in 1958, was an epoch-making product that had a large impact on society because it had achieved dramatic efficiency as an electric appliance and shifted the conventional work of cooking rice away from using a stove. This design has been popular for many years as the original electric rice cooker model.

In the 1970s, the oil crisis caused a major shift in thought.

Kawakami says, “At that time, people faced the challenge of manufacturing products by using as few resources as possible, which led to compact industrial products, such as the camera. This evolution is compatible with ‘manufacturing sustainable products,’ which is a major issue today.”

In the late 1970s, focus shifted from material affluence, which was required during the postwar restoration period, to mental affluence. The evaluation of design was also impacted by the shift in thought from material affluence to a mentally rich life. This age was symbolized by original Japanese products, including Sony’s Walkman, a portable music player that won the Good Design Award in 1981.

In addition, Kanazawa Citizen’s Art Center (1-1 Daiwa-machi, Kanazawa, Ishikawa), which opened in 1996 and won the Good Design Grand Award the following year, changed design perspectives in many ways.

“Kanazawa Citizen’s Art Center was a comprehensive cultural facility that was built by reconstructing an old Daiwa spinning mill. As a particularly noticeable point, we focused on the great design as reconstructed architecture and also the fact that local citizens voluntarily managed the facility around the clock without a break. Kanazawa

Citizen’s Art Center was a public cultural facility established by the Kanazawa municipal government to support civil arts activities as a national pioneering project. What we cannot see, such as the effort to build a system for managing people and the effort to create a comprehensive environment for enriching people’s lives, came to be recognized anew as the field of design,” says Kawakami.

In recent years, Good Design Award-winning designs by small- and medium-sized venture companies are receiving a lot of attention. One such example is “HACKberry” electric hands (which can



The HACKberry electric hand, developed by exiii Inc., won the Good Design Award in 2015
Photo: COURTESY OF THE JAPAN INSTITUTE OF DESIGN PROMOTION

be intuitively manipulated by a person without a hand using their arm muscles), invented by exiii Inc., which won the Gold Good Design Award in 2015. They were evaluated in recognition of their significant reduction of manufacturing costs using a 3-D printer as well as the construction of a system for adding choices in function and design by disclosing design data on the Internet and providing it to developers and designers worldwide for free.

Regarding Japanese design of the future, Kawakami says, “In 2011, Japan experienced the Great East Japan Earthquake, an unprecedented disaster, and entered a new era with a shift toward new values. I feel that an increasing number of people try to choose things that they really need and increase their focus on mental affluence rather than material affluence. Due to the impact of the declining birthrate, Japan will see more social changes, such as in families, lifestyles and communities. Under such circumstances, people will consider what is truly necessary design.”

Kawakami maintains that design has the power to solve contemporary issues. 