

Keynote Presentation: Japan's Cultural Property Protection System

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I specialize in textiles within the craftwork section of the Fine Arts Division, Agency for Cultural Affairs. Here, I will discuss about textiles with reference to a number of specific case studies carried out by the government's protection of cultural properties. Cultural properties can refer to buildings, traditional techniques, or a large variety of other cultural assets, but the focus of my presentation will be on works of fine arts and crafts.

I will first talk about the principle of cultural property protection, followed by a description of the present status of the system for the protection of cultural properties. Then in closing, I will discuss future prospects, in terms of what sort of protection framework will be needed and what we must do in the future.

The Principle and History of Cultural Property Protection

Cultural properties are invaluable public assets that were born within a country's long history and that have been safeguarded and passed down to this day. They are also assets that are indispensable to accurately understand the history and culture of one's own country. Therefore, we, the Japanese people of today, must preserve and pass down our cultural properties to future generations. If our cultural properties were to be lost, we would lose our identity altogether, with nothing to show what kind of country Japan is or what kind of race the Japanese people are.

This principle underlies the Law for the Protection of Cultural Properties. Today, I would like to take this opportunity to consider anew why this law was enacted, and to think about how cultural properties should be protected in the future.

The Law for the Protection of Cultural Properties was enacted in 1950. As stated in Article 1 of the Law, its purpose is to "preserve and promote cultural property objects so that the cultural quality of the nation can be enhanced, thereby contributing to the evolution of world culture." In other words, it places weight on preserving and promoting cultural properties.

We cannot discuss the present law without turning our eyes to the historical background against which the law was enacted. Its history goes back to the late Edo Period and the Meiji Period. I will not go into the details here due to time constraints, but in short, social manners and customs in Japan underwent a dramatic transformation after the Meiji Restoration, and there emerged a general tendency to make light of the traditional culture of Japan, such that cultural properties were readily discarded or sold off. However, learned individuals who harbored a concern for this situation took action to protect Japan's cultural properties, and the move for cultural property protection gradually gathered momentum.

Finally, the Law for the Protection of Cultural Properties was enacted in 1950. It gained a boost from a growing public opinion that called for drastic measures to protect cultural properties following the 1949 incident in which a fire heavily damaged the Golden Hall of Horyuji Temple, to the shock of the Japanese people.

The Concepts of Preservation and Promotion of Cultural Properties

Under the Law for the Protection of Cultural Properties, we are presently working to both preserve and promote cultural properties so they may be safeguarded and passed down to future generations. Preservation and promotion are both necessary to fulfill our mission to safeguard and pass down cultural properties to future generations.

Preservation means to care for cultural properties under a proper environment and management framework. Promotion means to convey to the public via research papers and exhibitions the existence and history of cultural properties that have been surveyed and studied by curators and researchers.

There are various views concerning promotion. In recent years, there is unfortunately no denying that greater weight is gradually being placed on promotion rather than preservation. Especially given today's increasing numbers of foreign visitors to Japan, cultural properties have become tourist resources for introducing Japanese culture, and are even being considered sources of economic effect. It goes without saying, however, that cultural properties are not for making money.

In order to promote cultural properties, they must first be carefully preserved. For instance, no matter how favorable an environment a cultural property is exhibited in, it will suffer some damage. Even transporting a cultural property in a vehicle dedicated to handling fine arts also poses a risk of damage during transport. Therefore, unless cultural properties are handled in restricted ways that minimize the possibility of damage or risks, it would be difficult to pass them down to future generations.

Designation Activities of the Agency for Cultural Affairs

The government engages in designation activities for the preservation of cultural properties. Designate means to assess significant cultural properties from among many and to attempt to preserve them. At the national level, there are the designations of National Treasures and Important Cultural Properties. At the prefectural and municipal levels, cultural properties that are deemed important to the respective region are evaluated as Prefecturally Designated Cultural Properties or Municipally Designated Cultural Properties based on the local ordinance in each region.

With respect to works of fine arts and crafts, the Agency for Cultural Affairs designates tangible cultural properties of importance as Important Cultural Properties based on the Law for Protection of Cultural Properties. Among these Important Cultural Properties, those that are of particularly high value are given the higher designation of National Treasure. The criteria for evaluation vary for each

category, which includes paintings, sculptures, craftworks, calligraphic works and classical books, ancient documents, archaeological artifacts, and historic resources. Cultural properties considered for designation are firstly surveyed on-site by an inspector or a person in the position of technical official such as myself, in the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT). Opinions are also received from experts. Ultimately, the decision for designation is brought before the Commissioner for Cultural Affairs and on to the Minister of MEXT.

Designation activities are carried out every year. It is one of the most important activities for the preservation of cultural properties. By designating cultural properties, the government can ascertain the location and owner of these properties and prevent them from being illegally sold or taken outside the country.

Table 1 shows the number of works of fine arts and crafts that have been designated as of July 1 of this year. As I have mentioned earlier, they are divided into the categories of paintings, sculptures, craftworks, calligraphic works and classical books, ancient documents, archaeological artifacts and historic resources.

Designation applies to diverse types of craftworks, but within the category of textiles and costumes, there are 8 National Treasures and 152 Important Cultural Properties. With respect to textiles, at least one item per year has been designated as Important Cultural Property in recent years. As I have discussed earlier, designating a cultural property contributes to its preservation, so it is ideal that the number of designated properties increases yearly. However, in addition to surveys and studies, designation foremost involves establishing a relationship of trust with the owner of cultural properties. Therefore, it is a highly sensitive undertaking that requires prudence.

Figs. 1 and 2 show examples of textiles that have been designated as Important Cultural Properties. Fig. 1 is a *furisode* kimono with designs of bamboo, squirrels and plum blossoms on figured satin dyed blue and yellow (owned by the Agency for Cultural Affairs). Fig 2 is a white *dobuku* coat with pine designs applied by the *tsuji-ga-hana* technique (owned by the Agency for Cultural Affairs). The *furisode* kimono underwent repair (conservation-restoration)* after it was designated as Important Cultural Property, but there are numerous cultural properties that have been designated but have yet been repaired. I will come back to the details of repair again later.

Purchase of Cultural Properties by the Agency for Cultural Affairs

The purchase of cultural properties refers to the government's act of purchasing and managing cultural properties, and purchases are made when the purchase conditions are right. The cultural properties may be either designated or non-designated items. In other words, cultural properties do not need to be National Treasures or Important Cultural Properties to fall under the scope of purchase by the government.

In most cases, offers are received from the owners of cultural properties who wish to sell their

property and request the government to buy it from them. When such an offer is received, it is assessed from various perspectives, such as whether the relevant property is something that could be managed by the government, whether it is worth possessing, whether it could be used, and whether it could be purchased within the budget. The government endeavors to preserve cultural properties by purchasing cultural properties that could no longer be properly owned and managed by their owner. After a cultural property is purchased, it is restored as necessary and studied in detail. As the Agency for Cultural Affairs does not have an exhibition facility, it may also be loaned for free to a facility where it could be placed on public display.

Outflow of Cultural Properties to Foreign Countries

Next, let us discuss regulations on the export of cultural properties. Cultural properties that have been designated by the government may not be exported to foreign countries. This is to prevent the outflow of designated cultural properties from Japan. There are exceptions, for example, when an exhibition of Japan's cultural properties is to be held overseas. Therefore, when antiquities are taken out of Japan, an inspector with the Agency for Cultural Affairs makes sure they are not nationally designated items.

In recent years, swords have become extremely popular not only in Japan but in foreign countries as well, and many are being exported overseas. These swords are naturally non-designated items, but as many as 5,000 are probably being exported from Japan per year. My specialty within the craftworks section is dyed and woven textiles, but I sometimes spend half the day examining swords.

Repair (conservation-restoration) of Cultural Properties

Next, let us examine the repair of cultural properties. Owners of nationally designated cultural properties are asked to submit a notification of repair before performing any type of work, and are required to specify in advance who will undertake it, how much it would cost, and how long it would take. "Cultural property" can refer to diverse items that differ in material or shape or the environment in which they have been passed down through the generations, so their method of conservation also differs from one item to another.

The repair (conservation) of cultural properties is performed with the inter-involvement mainly of the owner, conservator-restorer, conservation scientist and expert. All parties, from the owner or museum that manages the cultural property, to conservator-restorer who undertake the actual treatment, persons that produce the materials used for the treatment, those who study these processes, and experts who conduct surveys and studies of cultural properties, share their views from their respective standpoints in deciding the basic course of repair.

My daily visits to sites and interactions with the owners of cultural properties make me keenly aware that work cannot be performed without a mutual relationship of trust among all parties involved.

Owners of cultural properties may feel anxious at temporarily letting go of their possession and placing it in the hands of a conservator-restorer. Some may not understand about support fabrics explained to them during meetings. It is necessary to embark on the treatment upon reassuring and convincing the owners.

Consideration is also given to the storage space and to the accessibility of the cultural property after treatment. It is important to consider the owner's intention so that the owner is able to properly preserve and manage the cultural property afterwards. In treating cultural properties, the owners' wishes are respected as much as possible.

With respect to repair (conservation-restoration) policies, particular weight is placed on reversibility. If a part that was once treated deteriorates again after several decades, it is important to know which part had been treated, because treatment of an object often involves the removal of old repairs. For this reason, we aim to ensure reversibility. In the treatment of textiles, a support fabric is sometimes used to underlay holes that have formed in the fabric, but it is physically inevitable that the support fabric will eventually deteriorate in several decades' time. When future attempt is made to further extend the life of such object, not being able to remove the old support fabric or not being able to remove it without putting strain on the object itself would not only detract from the aim of conservation but could damage the integrity of the cultural property.

There is a well-known story about how synthetic resins have been used to treat textiles in the Showa Era. The fibers of these textiles have hardened due to the synthetic resin, and the characteristic suppleness of silk has been lost. In some serious cases, the fibers have disintegrated into powder. When deciding on a method, we now consider a number of options. Even for cultural properties other than textiles, we try to operate on the principle that there is no one "best" method among a number of options but only a "better" method, because no absolute method exists that could eliminate the need for any more work in the future. We entertain the thinking that the purpose of repair (conservation-restoration) is strictly to delay the present deterioration, and that we can only choose the method we think is suited to the present situation. There is no end to the repair (conservation-restoration) of cultural properties.

The idea of maintaining the present state of a cultural property is also important. Maintaining the present state does not mean to simply leave missing parts, stains and damage as they are. In the case of textiles, conditions such as needle marks made in the production process, alteration marks, and stains made while wearing or using the textile, all have historical values in themselves. As excessive conservation would strip the cultural property of its original quality, it is important not to intervene more than necessary.

Here I would like to introduce a case study of a repair (conservation-restoration) of a dyed and woven textile performed in recent years. Fig. 3 shows a short-sleeved kimono of the Keicho period, called Keicho *kosode*, designated as Important Cultural Property. The object is made of figured satin

dyed in different colors and decorated with *kanoko* tie-dyeing and embroidery. After taking the *kosode* apart, we selected an optimal support fabric to underlay the holes and missing parts and chose to use a fabric that closely resembled the original textile. All through the treatment process, we test-applied the fabric to each hole to see how it would show and whether or not it would affect the object in any way.

The purpose of repair (conservation-restoration) is not simply to prevent deterioration. It allows us to see what we cannot see unless the object is taken apart. For example, we usually cannot see the underside of a *kosode* lining, but by taking apart the *kosode* during treatment, we uncover the embroidery technique that was used in ancient times. We may even find important writings in ink (written information) in the seams. What we discover in the process is always documented. It is also extremely important to document the condition of an object before treatment. This is similar to creating a clinical record.

The aims for repair (conservation-restoration) can roughly be divided into three. The first is emergency treatment. This applies to properties in urgent need of treatment. For example, if a property is covered with mold, the mold is removed using appropriate chemicals to prevent it from spreading and affecting other objects. The second is full-scale repair (conservation-restoration). If the damage is extensive, the object is repaired so that it does not need to be repaired again for another several decades. The last is repair for the purpose of exhibition and promotion. For instance, an object to be displayed in an exhibition case would be treated to withstand the duration of the exhibition.

A serious concern, however, lies in the continuity of conservator-restorers who undertake the actual work. There are many cultural properties in need of repair. Yet, because some cases are extremely costly, conservation workshops cannot expect to receive regular commissions. Due to this dilemma, the survival of conservation workshops and the difficulty in securing conservator-restorers have become an issue today. This is furthermore affecting the manufacture and manufacturers of materials and tools that are used for repair whose traditional techniques are passed down through generations. This is a dire situation. The Agency for Cultural Affairs thus faces the issue of taking a government-led initiative in creating a framework for providing support against this situation.

Conclusion

Up to here, I have discussed the preservation of cultural properties, but I wish to also touch upon their promotion. The government not only conducts surveys and studies of cultural properties, but also organizes exhibitions overseas and holds an exhibition once a year under the co-sponsorship of the Agency for Cultural Affairs and local museums in Japan, to exhibit the cultural properties it has purchased. For example, in July 2017, an exhibition was held at the Ichinoseki City Museum in Iwate Prefecture. By exhibiting cultural properties that have been purchased and are being preserved by the government in museums besides national museums in Japan, we aim to provide an opportunity for

people to give thought to the issue of safeguarding cultural properties.

The numbers of museums and exhibitions have increased in recent years. However, there is a shortage of on-hand personnel. Moreover, when an exhibition is held, importance is placed on the number of visitors it can attract, so popular works tend to be displayed repeatedly, and thus increasing the burden on the same artifact. In this sense, the balance between preservation and utilization is unstable.

With the Tokyo Olympic Games coming up in 2020, we will likely see an accelerated move towards putting cultural properties on public display. Public display is certainly important, but it cannot be emphasized more strongly that preservation of artifacts is of primary importance. The Agency for Cultural Affairs, recognizes the need to collaborate with museums, art museum facilities, and local governments, and is also keenly aware of the need to strengthen cooperation with those who undertake the actual conservation work and those who manufacture conservation materials.

With today's presentation as a starting point, I hope to make every effort to share the issues related to cultural properties with as many people as possible and contribute to improving the situation in the slightest way possible.

* *Shūri* (repair) is an official word used in the Law of the Protection of cultural Property and by the the Agency of Cultural Affairs when meaning conservation-restoration in the western heritage sector. The Agency does not use the term *shūfuku* meaning restoration nor *hōzon-shūfuku* meaning conservation-restoration.

Table 1

	Paintings	Sculptures	Crafts	Calligraphic works/ Classical books	Ancient documents	Archaeological artifacts	Historic resources
National Treasures	160	131	253	225	60	46	3
Important Cultural Properties	2,010	2,699	2,452	1,906	763	626	198

As of July 1, 2017



Fig. 1



Fig. 3



Fig. 2