

TRADITIONAL CRAFT INDUSTRIES: PRESENT STATUS & MOVES TO ACTIVATE THEM

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The environment surrounding Japan's traditional craft industries is changing dramatically. Most of these industries – cultural assets in which the nation takes pride – date back to the Edo period (1603-1867) while some others date as far back as the Heian period (794-1185).

What Craftwork Industries Look Like Now

Traditional craft industries have been cultivated over centuries as a local business in each region and in close contact with the daily lives of community residents. Craftwork used to be supplied as daily necessities for people.

Craftwork output peaked at ¥540.6 billion in 1983 and then followed a long-term downtrend, dropping to some ¥180 billion in 2005. The number of workers engaged in craftwork production peaked at about 290,000 in 1979, and then declined gradually to around 90,000 in 2005, according to a survey by the Association for the Promotion of Traditional Craft Industries.

This is due to several factors. In the first place, standardized goods meeting our daily needs have come to be supplied in large quantities. Most of these items are made from plastics and are sold inexpensively. Today, we can get most of what we need for our daily lives in “100 yen shops.” As most craftworks are made by hand and not suitable for mass production, their market share has been declining. Secondly, people's concept of “goods” has changed along with the spread of a throw-away

culture. People have lost the habit of carefully using high-quality items for many years. This has reduced the desire to purchase craftworks. Thirdly, with the rapid economic growth of Japan, many farm products have been replaced by imports, bringing about a decline in the agricultural and forestry industries. As these industries have been the major suppliers of raw materials for traditional craft industries, it has become difficult for them to secure necessary supplies, such as raw silk for weaving, lumber, *urushi* (lacquer trees), *kozo* (paper mulberries), *mitsumata* (paper bush) for *washi* (Japanese paper) and animal hair for writing brushes. Fourthly, people carrying on the craftwork trade have been in short supply due to depopulation in provincial areas and the collapse of the conventional “apprenticeship” employment system. Yet another factor includes increases in inexpensive imports.

Reasons for the decline in the craftwork sector can also be found on the supplier front. One is that craft producers have been slow to develop products meeting consumer needs as most of them are tiny in business size. Also to blame is a decline in the roles and functions of existing distribution channels,

including those of wholesalers at the places of consumption. Among other reasons are slow development of new distribution channels convenient to consumers such as sales via the Internet, and low levels of name recognition among consumers about the existence of traditional crafts.

Measures to Boost Craftwork Industries

Under these circumstances, the Japanese government has been taking various measures to support traditional craft industries.

Based on the Law for the Promotion of Traditional Craft Industries, the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI) has established a system to help craft-producing regions push with self-help efforts, including the fostering and training of business successors, market exploitation, and product development.

The Association for the Promotion of Traditional Craft Industries, a METI affiliate, is working to arouse new recognition of and interest in traditional

Photo: Association for the Promotion of Traditional Craft Industries



“*Wa-NEXT*”: an exhibition of products made with traditional craftwork techniques and skills



Imari & Arita porcelain: a porcelain fountain pen

goods through publicity campaigns. For example, the association is seeking to make it known to consumers that traditional goods produced across the country render various regional cultures unique, that the skills that have produced craftwork support highly sophisticated modern industries with cutting-edge technologies, and that using traditional goods in daily life not only enrich our lives but also help pass industrial technologies on to later generations. The association thus emphasizes that craftworks are different from inexpensive, mass-produced products. At the same time, the association has introduced a system to certify people with sophisticated hand-making skills in various regions as “master craftsmen” to promote the improvement and continuation of skills. It has also established a system to help ensure the supply of agriculture-related raw materials depleted or in short supply, and to support research and development to find their replacements. To secure successors to artisans in craft-producing regions, the association is undertaking a project to find people desiring to make a career out of the trade by giving city-dwellers and elementary, secondary and high school students opportunities to experience traditional craft-making. The association has a permanent craftwork exhibition space in Ikebukuro, Tokyo, to give a chance for products made in remote places to be noticed by urban consumers and to cultivate demand. Other activities include support for the development of new products using traditional skills and materials through collaboration between producing communities and designers, and “Wa-NEXT” fairs to exhibit products made with traditional craft skills to arouse interest in and create demand for traditional goods, thus introducing to consumers new products that match changing lifestyles.

While support for traditional craft industries has primarily been extended to the supply side, efforts are now being made to stimulate demand. In a bid to get early results through undertakings from a new perspective, cooperation is sought between major Japanese companies and various projects under way. To increase “supporters” of traditional craft industries in a broad range of industries, the association is urging them to throw support behind craftwork manufacturers by using traditional crafts to help enhance their corporate images. In addition to reinforcing various nationwide events in Japan, the



Aizu-nuri lacquerware of “BITOWA” (Beauty & Harmony) brand

association plans to exhibit traditional crafts in a Japanese government pavilion at the World Expo to be held in Shanghai in 2010 to promote the goods overseas.

At the state level, the Japanese government is carrying out a “regional resource utilization project” to create new businesses using regional resources and promote sales channels for small and medium companies. It is also undertaking a “Japan brand support and development project” to develop products that can be marketed both at home and abroad, establish their brand names, strengthen business foundations of their manufacturers, and reenergize regional economies. For example, under the “regional resource utilization project,” producers of Imari and Arita porcelain in Saga Prefecture are making porcelain fountain pens in tandem with a major Japanese fountain pen maker, joining hands in cultivating marketing channels. In the “Japan brand support and development project,” Aizu-nuri lacquerware manufacturers in Fukushima Prefecture in northern Japan have established a “BITOWA” (Beauty & Harmony) brand by fusing their lacquerware techniques with new design and fashion sense and undertaking events such as an exhibition in Paris. Numerous similar projects are unfolding in many parts of Japan.

Return to Traditional Crafts

As the 21st century opened and Japanese society entered an era of fewer children and aging population, people have begun to seek spiritual richness rather than material wellbeing. It is therefore necessary to imbue children, who will shoulder the nation’s future, with affection for the crafts that are around them and arouse their interest in the people who make them by giving them opportunities to experience craft making and familiarize themselves with traditional crafts so that the wonder and charm of these items will be passed on from generation to generation.

As environmental protection and the conservation of resources are today’s pressing issues on a global scale, production of traditional crafts, which use natural raw materials and which can be repaired for repeated use, is a resource-recycling industry. From this perspective, too, the industry should be promoted more than ever.

It is hoped that the traditional craft sector, Japan’s cultural heritage in which we can take pride, will live on forever. **JS**