

# Traditional Crafts and Globalization – Preserving the Past While Creating the Future –

By *Urushihara Takuya*

“I went to the Exhibition of Japanese Traditional Art Crafts. I understand your company organized it.”

My friend was talking about an exhibition at the Mitsukoshi Department Store in Tokyo. “No, our company promotes crafts made in the traditional crafts industry (*dentokogei*hinsangyo). The exhibition you’re talking about features traditional art crafts (*dentokogei*hin) – that’s not exactly our field,” I corrected him.

I had seen the exhibition several times, but wasn’t really interested in it because, as I told him, it did not exactly represent the type of work we promoted. But my friend wasn’t convinced that the point I was making was valid: “If you are picky like that, you might find it hard to promote any type of craft.”

That made me think. It was important to distinguish them. Traditional art crafts are made using techniques and methods that have remained unchanged over the centuries, while crafts made in the traditional crafts industry, which we are promoting, have their roots in ancient techniques and methods while making practical use of modern machinery. Another possible distinction is that “crafts made in the traditional crafts industry” are often those so designated by the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI). But at the same time, I now believe it is more important, and more natural, to feel an affinity for traditional crafts as a whole, rather than insisting on distinguishing them.

We can of course categorize traditional crafts in other ways as well, such as handicrafts (*shukogei*hin), industrial arts (*sangyokogei*) and folk crafts (*mingei*). Each one is seen as unique, and this is used as an excuse for artisans and promotion associations to have little interaction with each other. There are so many crafts like textiles, dyeing, ceramics, lacquerware, woodwork, bamboo work, metalwork, Japanese *washi* paper, traditional stationery, doll making, masonry and glassware, and each craft is different from the others, and this somehow further impedes collaboration among people working with different crafts. Taking all these types and classifying them as either “traditional art crafts” or “crafts made in the traditional crafts industry” no longer makes much sense, and it is better to take the general perspective of viewing them all as just traditional crafts. Mass production, mass consumption and mass disposal are becoming more prevalent in the modern world. This creates serious difficulties for people making and promoting crafts made by hand. Various organizations and craftspeople involved in traditional crafts, and trying to encourage them to cooperate is important.

In terms of governmental support, based on the Law for

the Protection of Cultural Properties, the Agency for Cultural Affairs protects and preserves traditional Japanese crafts, METI promotes industrial crafts, the Forestry Agency ensures a sustainable supply of raw materials like special types of wood and lacquer, the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare supports craftspeople by designating contemporary master artisans, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs promotes arts and crafts for the introduction of Japanese culture abroad.

A number of public-interest corporations also provide support. Those promoting various crafts include the Association for the Promotion of Traditional Craft Industries for crafts made in the traditional crafts industries, the Craft Center Japan for handicrafts, the Japan Industrial Arts Foundation for industrial arts and the Japan Craft Design Association for craft design. Those promoting folk crafts include the Japan Folk Crafts Museum, the Japan Folk Art Museum and the Association for the Promotion of Japanese Folk Crafts.

There are a number of organizations promoting specific crafts as well, especially in the field of dyeing and weaving, pottery and porcelain. The associations affiliated with the Agency for Cultural Affairs such as the *Nihon Kogekai* organize several exhibitions. We cannot forget art galleries known for their craft exhibitions such as the Crafts Gallery at the National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo and universities offering courses in various crafts. Other groups and cooperatives are active at the local level, and are too numerous to mention here.

To predict the future of traditional crafts, one must take into consideration the influence of globalization. The growing tendency of cultures to adopt common attributes is one part of globalization. The environment surrounding traditional crafts is no exception along with the challenges posed by changing lifestyles, inflow of imports and imitations and an overdependence on imported materials. To overcome such difficulties, organizations and craftspeople need to establish cooperative networks and convince people in Japan and abroad of the importance of preserving craftsmanship inherited from the past.

The World Crafts Council (WCC) was founded in 1964 at Columbia University in New York by craftspeople, educators and government organizations. At the beginning, entities from 20 countries were represented. The WCC’s main goals are to maintain and strengthen the status of crafts as a vital part of cultural life, and to improve the value ascribed to craftspeople and promote fellowship among the craftspeople of the world. Today, membership has expanded to about 90 countries. In Japan, the 8<sup>th</sup> WCC General Assembly was held in Kyoto in 1978, and people

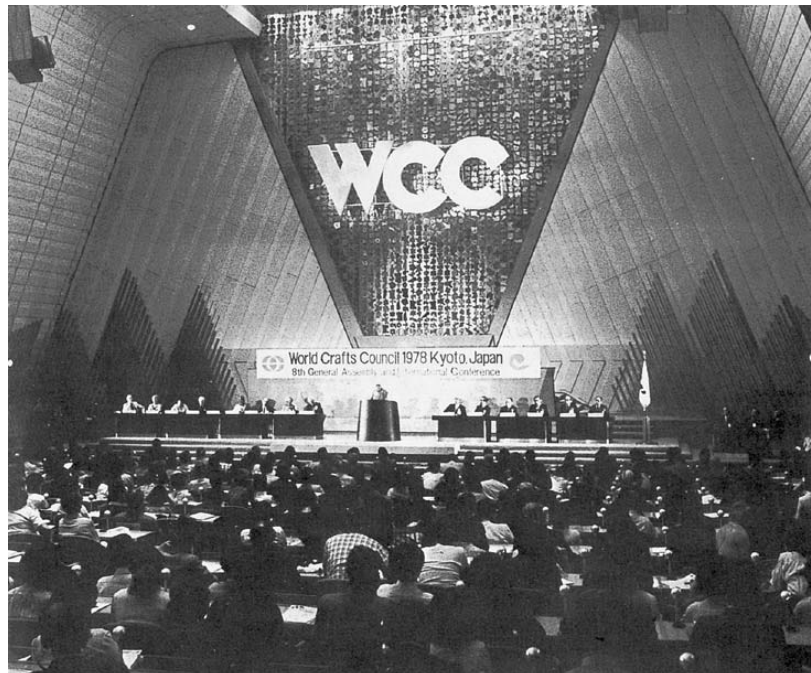
from about 50 countries and many organizations promoting Japanese crafts attended. After that General Assembly, in 1981, the Japan Crafts Council was founded and given membership of the WCC. The 15<sup>th</sup> Asian Assembly of WCC and the Asia Pacific Crafts Conference were both held in Kyoto in 1991, and the WCC International Secretariat was located there from 1996 to 2000. Many organizations promoting traditional crafts in Japan took part in all of these programs, and this served to convey the message that traditional crafts are important. But only a very few of the original groups still participate in the activities of the Japan Crafts Council, and many have terminated their memberships. As there are many organizations promoting traditional crafts, the recent situation cannot be said broad-based.

It has long been said that organizations representing other fields and industries suffer from a lack of coordination and interaction, and the same seems true for the world of traditional Japanese crafts.

The groups tend to organize programs that serve a short-term purpose only for themselves. Of course, they do need to act in their own specific fields and work to some degree on their own. But they should also share information, and collaborate with others when doing so would benefit their crafts. They need to find common ground and send a common message on traditional crafts to the world. This requires developing a consensus on why traditional crafts are needed today. In addition, it is crucial to make stronger links with craft production sites, societies, NPOs, educational institutions and the media. It would also be useful to take advantage of the support of well-known people who did a great deal for traditional crafts, such as the writers Ei Rokusuke, and Sakaiya Taichi (a former Minister of State for Economic Planning). Corporate support is important, too. At the 8<sup>th</sup> WCC General Assembly some leading Japanese companies such as Toyota and Matsushita offered their collaboration. To create a venue for the participants of traditional crafts regardless of the difference of their background will be essential from now on.

Governmental support for regional development should shift from the national to the local level, with the national government being responsible for implementing strategies for traditional crafts at every stage. In other words, the national government should not restrict itself to specific promotion or training programs. Instead, it should develop medium- to long-term strategies to promote the country's

Photo: World Crafts Council 1978 Kyoto, Japan 8<sup>th</sup> General Assembly and International Conference / Kyoto International Craft Center



The 8<sup>th</sup> World Crafts Council Kyoto, opening ceremony, Sept. 11, 1978

traditional crafts. This promotion must have a global perspective. Over the last few years, the Small and Medium Enterprise Agency has initiated programs promoting greater recognition and increased exports of “Japan Brand” products, and this has prompted local artisans to set their sights on the international market. The national government has to develop comprehensive promotional strategies on a global scale.

The WCC holds its General Assembly every four years, while the Asian WCC chapter holds general meetings almost annually. People involved in traditional crafts in Japan, however, have shown very little interest for some time now. One stumbling block is that the interests of the WCC groups in industrialized countries are different from those in the developing world. But this does not mean that we can ignore the benefits to be gained through the global promotion of traditional crafts.

It no longer makes sense to pigeonhole crafts as “Japanese” or “foreign.” We need a global perspective with wide-ranging efforts that stimulate the interest, awareness and support of people from different parts of society. **JS**

– This is the last article of the series –

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