【Concluding Remarks 3】

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As a historian, I am of course fascinated by the changing meanings and functions of “craft” in modern Japan, and by the complex historical trajectories of such traditional Kyoto crafts as textiles, ceramics, and lacquer that have been traced in this symposium. I have also been alerted to the many challenges that face these established industries as they greet the twenty-first century.

My deeper and more compelling concern, however, is less for the history *of* the crafts in modern Japan, but for the far broader prospect of a history *through* crafts, what I call simply “the history of things.” Ewan Clayton has provided a point of departure in his inspiring comments about the way in which objects work in human culture. All of the objects that we make and use, he proposes, have a sense of *presence*, precisely the sort of self-presence that all of us ourselves require to engage in human communication. “Objects,” he observes, “affect the way we feel, the way we think, the way we behave with each other.” I would propose that objects and people *make each other*: we all lead lives that are intertwined with the things that serve as an interface, not just with the material world, but even more importantly, with other human beings.

The central importance of crafts in general is to draw our attention to the importance of things in human culture, and in the case of Japan, to alert us to the special attention that Japanese have lavished on things, especially since the early modern period. From the seventeenth century, for reasons that I cannot go into here, but which were closely related to the sociopolitical system under Tokugawa rule, Japan experienced an era that is probably unparalleled in premodern human history for the breadth and quality of production and consumption in all the crafts. It is this legacy that has continued to work to make crafts so vitally important in modern Japan.

Today, however, we are faced with an unprecedented challenge to an appreciation of the importance of things in human culture in general, and in Japanese culture

in particular. Ewan Clayton has identified the culprit precisely as the "information revolution," which has brought the illusive promise of a "virtual" reality separate from physical reality, promoting digital illusions of sight and sound that are themselves at best crude approximations of those senses in the real world, and that offer none of the other critical bodily sensations of touch, smell, and above all the kinesthetic sense. At the same time, a widespread tendency to abstraction in writing about the humanities (often confused with "theory") has distanced us still further from the materiality of things.

Let me shift gears now, and offer two concrete examples of the way my own research in the history of Japanese culture from Tokugawa to Meiji has been enriched by a close attention to materiality. The first example is a single fan print in the collection of the Brooklyn Museum in New York, signed by Keisai Eisen and dated 1829. It is the only specimen of the print known, not unusual in the case of fan prints, which after all were made to be pasted onto the ribs of a rigid *uchiwa* fan and then used to cool the body on hot summer evenings, a familiar example of the interwining of crafts and people. The picture on the print itself is of material interest, since it was executed entirely in different shades of the imported blue pigment of *berorin*, or "Berlin" blue, what is known today as Prussian blue.

Time here does not allow me to go into the many complex issues raised by this print, but suffice it to say that the representational content of the print—a Chinese-style landscape—was closed linked to the material culture of the day, through its associations with China itself (in the era of the late 1820s when trade with China was flourishing, and when the Chinese-style *sencha* tea ceremony was much in vogue in Japan), with the blue of the indigo-dyed cotton that had come to dominate commoner dress in Japan, with the blue of blue-and-white *sometsuke* porcelain ware that was rapidly making its way onto the tables of ordinary people throughout Japan, and even with the blue of the tattoos that were all the rage among Edo artisans at the time. As important as the visual representation is for this or for any picture, its deeper meaning cannot be grasped without a thorough understanding of its materiality and of its relationship to other contemporary materialities. If I had confined myself to the picture, to the flat visual dimension alone, I would have missed much that his historically important about this print.

Let me offer one more example from my own research, that of the "One-Mat

Room" of Matsuura Takeshirō, a tiny study constructed in 1886 in downtown Tokyo in celebration of the builder's seventieth year. Born in 1818, Matsuura earned fame in the Bakumatsu period for his explorations of what he himself would later christen "Hokkaidō," but in his later years, he settled into a life of antiquarian connoisseurship, building a wide network of friends who had a similar interest in old things. The One-Mat Room was constructed of pieces of wood that had a history, each sent by a particular friend. Matsuura integrated the eighty-nine pieces (mostly wood, some stone and metal) into a small but comfortable study attached to his house. He recorded each piece, noting its donor and its history, in a small woodblock printed book entitled *Mokuhen kanjin* ("A Solicitation of Wood Fragments"). In a postscript recording his thoughts about the room, he said that his project was not a mere whimsy (although of course to some extent it was), but rather a way of remembering his friends—who gave this piece, who gave that. At the same time, the pieces of wood constituted a history of all Japan, with fragments ranging from ancient to the later Tokugawa period, each with its own history. I can imagine no more compelling example of the essential sociality and historicity of things.

Equally revealing of the complex meanings of materiality was Matsuura's request that at his death (which came less than two years after the completion of the room), his body be cremated together with the room itself, and the remains of both transported to Mt. Ōdai (today known as Ōdaigahara) in the Kii peninsula, not far from his own birthplace near the town of Tsu in Ise province. Ōdai, as an experienced geographer like Matsuura knew, was a very rainy place, in fact the rainiest place in Japan. And he also knew, as an explorer, that the water from Ōdai flowed out in three directions, into the great sacred areas of Japan, south down the Kumano river to the three shrines of Kumano, west down the Kii river to the Yoshino area, and of course east down the Miyagawa river to the great shrines of Ise. So his own remains, together with the remains of this building, would thus be literally incorporated into the very landscape of Japan. To me, this was an inspiring example of the powerful meanings of material things and of the complex physical and spiritual work they do within our lives.

To summarize, I would make four simple points about things, and hence about crafts. First, all things that we single out as "things" are *useful*, and even the most useless things (to take one definition of "art") are profoundly useful, in the sense that they have a presence of their own, and that they live lives that are inextricably entwined

with human lives. Our conventional notion of "utility" is far too narrow to be of any help when we consider human culture broadly, since it sets up an artificial distinction between our physical and spiritual needs. This makes no sense. All things that we use and that offer themselves to our use are useful, no matter what the purpose.

Second, as I have already stressed along the lines proposed by Ewan Clayton, things are *social*. This is seen from the very start, in the fact that very few things are produced by isolated individuals. Collaboration is a hallmark of almost all craft production, since most craftsmen work with materials that have already been processed in some way by others. However much a cult may be made of the individual artist/artisan in the modern period, the facts of production belie the essential sociality of all things.

Thirdly, things are *exchanged*. This is terribly important, and among historians, there is currently a booming industry in looking back to the trade in things as a way of rethinking *all* history, particularly in the early modern period, since the beginning of the global age in the sixteenth century.

Fourth, as a consequence of all of the above, things have *lives*: they are created, they live in people's hands, they are constantly recontextualized as they move from one set of hands to another, they get sick, they age, and of course they die. It is precisely these lives that make things every bit as important and fascinating as the lives of the people whose lives intersect with them. The ultimate importance of crafts for the historian is that they offer a persuasive and necessary way of writing history itself.

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