

Design Museum Japan Forum 2023

Vol.1 Design Museum Japan: Collecting and Connecting Japanese Design – Event Report

Event	Design Museum Japan Forum 2023 Vol.1 Design Museum Japan: Collecting and Connecting Japanese Design –
Date	Sunday, January 14, 2024
Host	NHK EDUCATIONAL CORPORATION, NHK PROMOTIONS INC., JAPAN CULTURAL EXPO
Cooperation	Design-DESIGN MUSEUM
Place	The National Art Center, Tokyo
Speakers	Takayuki Takeya (Sculptor), Kazuko Koike (Creative director), Naoko Nakui (Book designer), Mami Kataoka (Chief Curator, Mori Art Museum), Yuko Nagayama (Architect)
Moderators	Suuki Kishi (TV MAN UNION, INC.), Kyoko Kuramori

The project to found a national design museum began from the “Let’s Build a National Design Art Museum!” public symposium of 2012 instigated by Issey Miyake and Masanori Aoyagi. The discussions have continued at many gatherings ever since between creators active in diverse fields and art curators. The regular and special broadcasts then began from 2020 with an NHK program, *Design the Design Museum*, which has spread nationwide. NHK’s branch stations have been linking up with creators to research and introduce design treasures from every region of Japan. In November, 2022, treasures introduced on this program were displayed to high public acclaim in the Design Museum Japan Exhibition at the National Art Center, Tokyo.

This forum invited guest creators who participated in the *Design Museum Japan 2023* program associated with the Design Museum Project to talk about their research and consider together with the forum audience what design treasures there are to be found in Japan.

The forum guests were the sculptor, Takayuki Takeya; creative director, Kazuko Koike; book designer, Naoko Nakui; Mori Art Museum Chief Curator, Mami Kataoka; and architect, Yuko Nagayama. The discussions were moderated by the program director, Suuki Kishi of TV Man Union, and producer, Kyoko Kuramori, head of the Design – DESIGN MUSEUM foundation. Five program directors from the NHK branch stations around Japan that handled these broadcasts were also present at the venue.



Sensing the Spirit of the Fishermen and Boatbuilders Decorative Boards for Fishing Boats / Hokkaido

The first to speak was the sculptor, Takayuki Takeya. Takeya visited Rumoi in Hokkaido to research the designs of the decorative boards of the herring vessels in a community which thrived on the herring catch until about 70 years ago. Takeya was himself from Hokkaido and he remembered being fascinated as a child by the various patterns carved by the boatbuilders on the decorative boards of the fishing boats. He brought an example board to the forum for all of the panelists to see.



Takayuki Takeya

When the herring catch was big in Hokkaido, decorative boards used to be attached to the sterns of the fishing boats. I don't think they had any functional importance but the boatbuilders carved each one with a different pattern. I always saw many boats when I went to the harbors and beaches in my childhood, and in my childish way I found them beautiful. I visited Rumoi for this research, but every district and boatbuilder used different patterns, and there were many decorative boards I hadn't seen before. It was totally fascinating. The sculptures one normally sees are all very finely finished but these decorative boards were carved roughly and the chisel marks often still showed. They had the firm quality of things knocked off by seasoned craftsmen, and I thought they were truly beautiful.

Nakui

It is interesting to see that though this was made for the sea, the design includes peony flowers. Perhaps that was intended to dress it up.



A peony is carved on the decorative boat board

Takeya

They are rough and elegant at the same time. I feel very close to these because I grew up in a Hokkaido fishing village. When the idea of design treasures was first raised, it occurred to me they should have the character of their region and also be actually used by people, and that was why I chose these.

Things that Mature with Age

The Designs of Nozurazumi Stone Walls

The next to present was the architect, Yuko Nagayama. Her research topic was the Nozurazumi stone walls built for many generations by masons in Shiga Prefecture. The so-called Anoshu skill of piling up natural stones large and small without cutting dates from Japan's feudal period some five hundred years ago. This ability to use natural stones in their original shape reveals very high technique. It was not practical to bring an actual stone wall to the forum but video images from the program were screened and all were impressed by this artful use of the natural materials of the environment.



A Nozurazumi wall in situ

Yuko Nagayama

The masons' work began with collecting stones from the river beds. They didn't use much in the way of plans but rather imagined how the stones would fit together while making the wall. The most skilled masons fitted the larger stones together with gaps, and filled the gaps between the stones with smaller stones. This provided shock-absorbance in earthquakes. It occurred to me that this was a form of wisdom and skill developed in earthquake-prone Japan.

It was interesting to see how the masons expressed their aesthetic sense in these functional designs. In the usual way of thinking, big, long stones would be placed at the base to prioritize stability, but we see places where they have deliberately been inserted diagonally to form a pattern, or big stones are used to make a striking statement. Rather than formal beauty, it felt like discovering the individual thoughts, sense and aesthetic interpretation of each individual mason. Looking at the stone walls, I would wonder if the same person had made these different parts, or think about how the mason who made a particular wall had prioritized balance... It was all very fascinating.

Nakui

The first thing that surprised me was how big these stone walls were. I wondered if any records survived of how they were built but there were no design drawings and everything was communicated verbally. I heard this was because those details were secret in the feudal period. That was another surprise.

Takeya

The walls took several decades to build and have been appreciated for centuries. Designs that span the ages are especially wonderful.

Nagayama

They grow stronger in their environment and over time. I think this maturation with time is also a feature of Nozurazumi design.

Thread and Beyond

Impressions Gleaned from Two Kinds of Thread

The book designer, Naoko Nakui, visited Yamagata to research two kinds of thread. One fabric, Shina-ori, was made from fibers drawn from tree bark. Twenty-one different processes were involved and the thread took a whole year to make. The other was a state-of-the-art ultra-fine mohair that could only be made on 60-year old machines. Both types of thread were displayed at the forum, revealing both the high technical skill of their makers and the quality of designs produced from nature.



Shina-ori fibers and a Shina-ori bag

Nakui

They showed me the nearly year-long Shina-ori production process and also how the fabric is woven at the Shina-ori Center. I was particularly impressed to see the young weavers. As for the ultra-fine mohair, as you can see from the example here at the forum, it is so thin you can see through it. A single gram of mohair produces more than 50 meters of thread, making it as fine as spider silk. The users of knits made from this thread include a global fashion brand. I was amazed this thread was made, with some adjustments, on a machine built in 1958.

Mami Kataoka

I see this is the inside of the bark. Even before it was woven, people around the world were using it to make bark paper. The techniques have been declining in most places but, in recent years, there has also been a growing trend for young artists in many countries to revive the techniques.



Ultra-fine mohair thread and knits

Kazuko Koike

These two different threads are both new to me. I wish I had gone there myself! (laughs) I do like the fineness of each thread but the colors are also beautiful, as are the woven surfaces.



Nakui

Young people participate, too, in developing these threads. They take a lot of pains over the colors and have developed threads for use in attractive patterns. The Shina-ori provides a fundamental example of how thread can be made from almost anything. The ultra-fine mohair thread reminds me of how in my own book production work it is so important to adjust the old machines. Rather than computer-controlled devices that don't touch human essence, those machines have scope for human intervention. I felt a commonality with the world of thread. Seeing these two different threads, I sensed the importance of both the thread itself and what lies beyond.

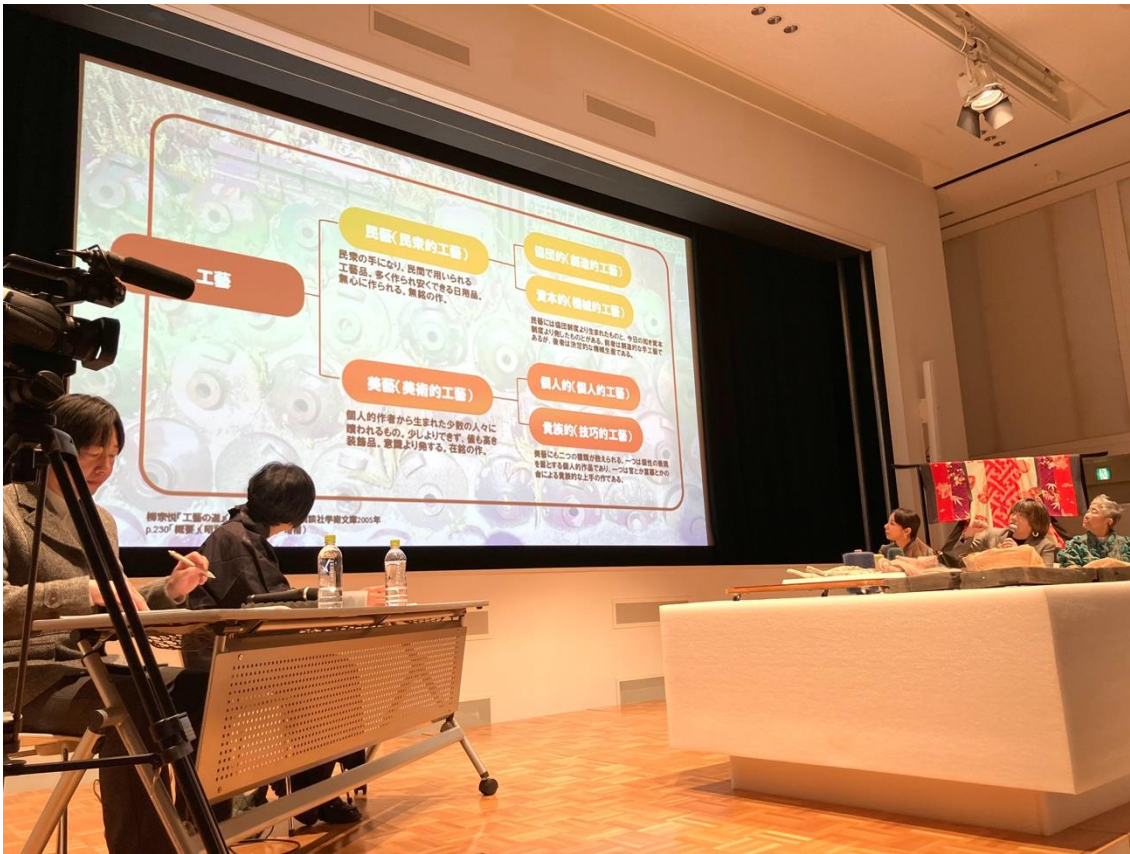
Designing the Invisible

The Industrial Ceramics of Tokoname

Mami Kataoka, the chief curator of the Mori Art Museum, chose Tokoname in Aichi Prefecture for her research after learning about its attractions in her role of art director of Aichi's Arts Challenge 2022. Tokoname pottery has a history of over 900 years and has produced industrial ceramics for each and every era from tiles to the ceramic ducts used to insulate electrical cables. Kataoka examined the beauty and design embodied by these primarily functional products. The forum saw a video presentation of her research in Tokoname and she spoke about the special inseparability of the community's craft and industry; design and art.

Kataoka

It is hard in a word to describe Tokoname. First, production has continued from the Middle Ages to contemporary times. Japan has 6 main pottery producing areas, the so-called Rokkoyo, namely Echizen, Seto, Tokoname, Shigaraki, Tamba and Bizen, and Tokoname is one of them. Tokoname has continued to produce items suited to each period from the Middle Ages through the Edo and Meiji eras. Also, Tokoname is on the sea coast, so pottery from all over Aichi came to Tokoname for shipping to Edo and on. In the Meiji period, Tokoname made earthenware pipes, ducts and sanitary products. With the coming of modernization and industrialization, it moved ever more into mass production.



Kataoka spoke of the industrial and ornamental crafts in the manner of Soetsu Yanagi. Of those two conceptions, Tokoname tends, albeit within the field of folk craft, towards the mechanical and capital intensive, but many items are even so produced by individuals whose work spans the divide between folk craft and fine art. The elements of industrial design and individual expression have developed together and are closely interwoven. Kataoka introduced scratched tiles used in Frank Lloyd Wright's former Imperial Hotel, which now stands in Aichi's Meiji Mura, and the Tokoname Tonomori Ceramic Research Institute designed by Sutemi Horiguchi. The works of contemporary ceramic artists steeped in the Tokoname tradition were shown, too, as well as the introduction of Tokoname ceramic workers at Aichi's Arts Challenge 2022. She spoke of her fascination with Tokoname as a meeting place of art, craft and design.



During her research, Kataoka visited a house built from recycled ceramic ducts. The reuse of old ceramic products is a common sight in Tokoname.

Kataoka

The design of ceramic ducts was featured in the program. The duct is an industrial-use ceramic product that normally holds various buried cables. Tokoname still receives orders for its ducts from around the world. This made me think of invisible design. Nobody can see it once a thing has been buried in the ground, but because it is ceramic it won't rust like metal. A functional beauty derives from the properties of the material, and I find this very interesting.

Takeya

This is, I suppose, a mass-produced item. It is designed to carry a cable, but the inside is very beautiful. The work is precise.

Nagayama

I have used this material to make tiles and it is very interesting. Tiles aren't used so much on the outside walls of buildings these days because they tend to peel off, but I have seen 4,000-year old tiles in museums and their colors remain amazingly vivid because they are ceramic. They don't fade with time. The scratched tiles of structures like the former Imperial Hotel show the close attention the architect and owner paid to every tile. I would like to see the use of tiles expand once more.

The Beauty of Embodiments of Time

Hanui Costumes Connecting Eras

The creative director, Kazuko Koike, made the final presentation. She visited the Nishimonai district of Akita Prefecture to research the Hanui Bon festival dance costumes that have a history of over 700 years. The people of Nishimonai unpick the garments made by their ancestors and stitch the pieces together in new ways to produce beautiful forms with a spirit and skill that connects the eras. Attractive Hanui costumes were displayed at the forum, giving participants the opportunity to view them up close and appreciate the exquisite technique of the makers.



Kazuko Koike

In Japanese we talk of things for “hare” (bright) and “ke” (sombre/everyday) use, and these kimonos are made for “hare” days. The plain, “ke” parts are used as a sort of frame for the “hare”. It becomes a tableau. The whole kimono is like a family tree. We sense the spirit of a people who valued their possessions and passed them down to succeeding generations. Hanui connects parts from various kimonos vertically, piecing them together, for use in the Bon Festival dance. The dancers also wear sedge hats that hide their faces. I don’t think hiding the face is very unusual but here they also employ a black mask that hides it completely. There is a sense that perhaps the returning spirits of the dead lurk behind the masks. I felt that very strongly.



Nagayama

I thought perhaps they just stitched the patches together but the borders are sealed so perfectly that it doesn't look stitched at all. The skill is tremendous.

Kataoka

The reds are very special.

Koike

It feels as if they want you to see inside. This town also has indigo Bon costumes with the same red sleeve openings. The Hanui technique developed by unpicking the kimonos of the past and stitching them together in new rolls to make something new.

Design Treasures from Across Japan

Diverse Proposals at the Forum

The second half of the forum moved on to an open request to the audience to propose their own design treasures. Audience members posted their suggestions on a giant map of Japan and the panelists then discussed these ideas with them. The wide-ranging nominations from across Japan included Abashiri Kangoku Prison in Hokkaido, the octopus pots of Akashi in Hyogo, Ise Shrine and the Sengu rites in Mie, the tea brushes of Ikoma in Nara, the Kumiki lattices of Hakone in Kanagawa, the Sasadango cakes of Niigata, the Kokeshi dolls of Gunma, the paulownia chests of Saitama, the Kutaniyaki pottery of Kanazawa in Ishikawa, Hakozen food boxes nationwide, the Higo inlays of Kumamoto, and the **Harley** boats of Okinawa.



Koike

Abashiri Kangoku is an interesting thought. I think the building would make a good museum or hotel.

Shogo Suzuki (Program director at NHK Asahikawa)

Abashiri Kangoku is in fact now a museum. I have been there for program coverage and the building is wonderful. It was the worst possible place to be a prisoner but I nominated it as a design treasure because it is so full of design ideas, from designs for not allowing the prisoners to see each other to designs for not letting them escape.

A Member of the Audience

A prison in Nara has also been renovated as a hotel.

Nagayama

My attention was drawn to the fishermen's houses in Hokkaido and stepped tangerine fields of the Seto Inland Sea. Stepped fields are a design that joins the artificial with the landscape. I think it is important to think about how to use such places.

Nakui

I am interested in the retro-looking frosted glass windows of the Showa era. When I became involved in this project and thought about design, it occurred to me that while designs that have survived across the ages do matter, the designs that have disappeared with time are also extremely important. We had frosted glass in my family home, too, but I have heard not many places make it anymore. This concerns me. Items don't have to be major. Some little things ought to be preserved as well.

Nagayama

The skills for making frosted glass have all but disappeared. There are limitations. The technique can't be used to make big panes, making it necessary to combine a number of small panes instead. Also, once the styles of the period have gone, production becomes impractical. This is a difficult area.

Takeya

I especially noticed the Ainu patterns of Hokkaido and Harley boats of Okinawa. The Ainu patterns use shapes drawn from nature and impart a sense of ancient Japan. The Okinawa Harley boats connect with the fishing boats of Hokkaido and I am sure the differences must be extremely interesting.



What is your Image for a Design Museum?

Lastly, the panelists were asked what kind of design museum they would like to see, and discussed this with the audience.

Kataoka

Japan already has museums for architecture, design, and crafts, and the lack of a Japan Design Museum is a serious problem. I think the urgent task is to trace the history from traditional things to modern products. It would be interesting if the exhibits didn't stop at the national level but could present the treasures of each region of Japan and then also reveal their connections with places all over the world; the connections with neighboring territories such as South Korea and Taiwan, for example. It is important that it should not stop at political boundaries.

Takeya

It is fine to start on the small scale in the different regions of Japan and then think about how to introduce these things to people nationwide. Also, perishable items can be digitally scanned for viewing on computers.

Koike

I think what we can do right away is to exchange information and build a network. What should we collect? Where should it be located? It is important to have a place where we can always exchange information."

Nakui

It is important to have a building, but also important to go to the places and recognize design. I think we could spread awareness by organizing regular tours to various places like the ones we have been introducing.

Nagayama

Hearing all of these things, I think we do need a single base. Rather than simply collecting items, a learning base is required. I think it is important to establish a research gaze from there and then set out to places all over Japan. The real place and virtual spaces can be mutually complementary. Funding also has to be considered. Use might be made of income tax donations to local communities, or effective use of crowdfunding, to build a sustainable cycle.

(Text: Keiko Kamiyo)