



ENDANGERED CRAFT TRADITIONS AND MUSEUMS: LESSONS ON SUSTAINABILITY FROM JAPAN AND A USA-KAZAKHSTAN PARTNERSHIP

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Abstract. As the relevance of museums in the 21st century continues to be explored and debated, and at the same time many craft traditions around the world face uncertain futures, the potential role for museums in supporting artisan communities and knowledge is becoming increasingly urgent. Museums have long been understood as repositories of collections of objects and other tangible cultural heritage, which they aim to preserve, study, and share with the public. However, an emerging and often overlooked role of museums is their support for intangible cultural heritage, such as local craft communities and traditions. In this article, I consider examples (from Japan and a successful USA-Kazakhstan museum and artisan partnership) of innovative ways that museums have helped to support and sustain craft traditions: by assisting with the navigation of complex legal frameworks for heritage support, and by making available museum spaces for craft community events.

Through these and other measures to promote craft practice, museums can serve both as stewards of material craft culture, and as active participants in securing the long-term viability of invaluable and endangered craft traditions. A focused effort to support craft practice can therefore provide renewed relevance for museums in the 21st century among both artisan communities and the public.

Note. This paper is based in part on: Pontsioen, Robert. *The Role of Museums in Supporting and Sustaining Craft Traditions.* Proceedings of an International Symposium on Kazakhstan's Crafts and Creative Economy. Paul Michael Taylor and Gulmira Shalabayeva (editors). Almaty: A. Kasteyev State Museum of Arts, 2020.

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Introduction

Museums have long been understood as repositories of collections of objects and other tangible cultural heritage, which they aim to preserve, study, and share with the public. However, an emerging and often overlooked role of museums is their support of intangible cultural heritage, such as local craft communities and traditions. Drawing on my work with artisans and museums in Japan (which has long been a global leader in the field of cultural heritage preservation and promotion), and a successful USA-Kazakhstan museum and artisan partnership, in this article I present examples of how museum practitioners can contribute to the sustainability of craft traditions. Around the world, many craft communities (and the traditions and knowledge they embody) around the world are currently struggling to maintain viability in a globalized marketplace due to increased competition from mass-produced goods, changing consumer tastes, aging practitioners, and difficulty in obtaining traditional materials among other factors (Taylor; Scrase; Shah and Patel; Pontsioen). A focused effort to support craft practice can therefore provide renewed relevance for museums in the 21st century among both artisan communities and the public.

Museums and Craft Law Facilitation among Japanese Artisans

Since the 1974 passage of the *Law for the Promotion of Traditional Craft Industries (Dentōteki Kōgeihin Shinkō Hō)*, which aimed to contribute to local economic growth through the promotion of regional traditional craft industries, the Japanese government has been vested in finding ways to support traditional crafts (Pontsioen 215). This law established the nationwide system of traditional craft designation, through which *kumiai*

(traditional craft guilds) and their members are able to gain recognition as producers of authentic wares made using traditional techniques and materials. As of 2019, there are 230 nationally designated traditional crafts of Japan, with all 47 prefectures represented. In addition to this national-level system, the *Law for the Promotion of Traditional Craft Industries* also facilitated the creation of prefectural-level craft designation and support systems. Tokyo was the first regional authority to enact such a program in September 1981 and has since designated 41 traditional crafts.

One unfortunate challenge in utilizing these government support systems for artisans is that they must navigate the complicated bureaucratic designation process, and this is one way in which several Japanese museum practitioners I worked with provide assistance to craft makers, thereby contributing to the sustainability of local craft traditions. For example, an active group of artisans who wish to have their craft designated by the Japanese government must complete the necessary application documents and submit these to their prefectural governor's office. In preparing these documents, *kumiai* have been assisted by curators and other museum staff at the Edo-Tokyo Museum (see fig. 1), a major public museum in the heart of the old downtown *shitamachi* area



Fig. 1. The Tokyo Metropolitan Edo-Tokyo Museum in Ryugoku, Tokyo. (Photo by the author, 2009).

of Tokyo that was historically and continues to be the location of most traditional craft workshops in the region. As outlined in the next section of this paper, the Edo-Tokyo Museum coordinates with traditional craft *kumiai* in hosting craft making demonstrations and other events, and this existing working relationship puts museum staff in a good position to provide such consultation as needed.

In this way, the museum and its staff can serve as craft law and bureaucracy facilitators, what Levitt and Merry (2009) call “vernacularizers”, who “convey ideas from one context to another, adapting and reframing them from the way they attach to a source context to one that resonates with the new location” (449). For example, museum staff can help to clarify the complex requirements and regulations spelled out in the 1974 *Law for the Promotion of Traditional Craft Industries*, and identify potential benefits of designation more generally, for busy artisans who often lack the time and inclination to parse the text of the legislation. This resonates with Levitt and Merry’s research on the implementation of transnational human rights law, which demonstrates the difficulty in rendering legal frameworks coherent and relevant for people at a local level (499). Given that museum professionals are well-situated to work with local craft communities and to be conversant in cultural heritage law, the role of museums can be critical in this context. In the case of Japan, for example, although cultural heritage legislation and governmental support systems help to ensure the future and vitality of many of Japan’s traditional crafts, lengthy and complicated application procedures can deter or prevent other groups of craft workers from applying for traditional craft designation (Pontsioen 198).

Museum Spaces and Craft Community Engagement

In addition to being facilities for housing collections, museums are public spaces that increasingly seek to engage with and benefit local communities (Golding and Modest). Among traditional artisan communities, one important way to promote craft business is through special events, craft exhibitions and craft-making demonstrations, which presents museums with another opportunity to contribute to the sustainability of craft traditions.

For example, most Tokyo traditional craft *kumiai* arrange at least one exhibition every year, which are major annual events for many craft practitioners. These events not only facilitate sales but also introduce new audiences to traditional craft products and producers, and the museum setting is an excellent venue to reach a wide and diverse audience. One such event, organized by the *Tokyo Waggaki Kumiai* (Tokyo Traditional Musical Instrument Maker’s Guild), which represents *shamisen* (traditional Japanese three-stringed lute) makers, is held annually at the Edo-Tokyo Museum in Ryogoku (see fig. 2). *Shamisen* maker Takeuchi Yasuo (see fig. 3) described the nature of this event: “We have a demonstration event every year at the Edo-Tokyo Museum, have you heard of it? Here is the flyer for this years’ event. The *kumiai* rents a space in the museum, a large concert hall with a stage. They have been doing this event for many years now. Craftsmen work on making an instrument and their techniques are described and narrated by a master of ceremonies. They have about ten craft workers on stage and together they make a complete shamisen or koto. One craftsman will stretch the skin over the shamisen body, another will plane the neck, and another will polish the instrument. They have a different time slot to show each part of the process to the audience. The whole event is free to attend and the people who come



Fig. 2. The 23rd annual shamisen and koto craft demonstration, held by the *Tokyo Waggaki Kumiai* at the Edo-Tokyo Museum on August 30th, 2017 (Photo by the author).



Fig. 3. *Shamisen* maker Takeuchi Yasuo in his Tokyo workshop. (Photo by the author, 2014).



Fig. 4. *Shamisen* maker Horigome Toshio seated in his Tokyo workshop. (Photo by the author, 2014).

out really enjoy it. At the end of the demonstration, they have a lottery to give away the finished instrument. Whoever wins goes home very happy. Even though it's a *shamisen* for practice (rather than a concert instrument), it isn't a cheap instrument by any means" (17 July 2009).

Kumiai-endorsed exhibitions and special events at museums are one of the best sources of advertising and public relations available to traditional craft practitioners. One of the challenges facing *kumiai* in staging such events, however, is cost. In discussing the annual Tokyo Waggaki *Kumiai* event, for example, Horigome Toshio (see fig. 4) had this to say: "One

of the ways our *kumiai* works to promote our craft industry is through the annual demonstration and exhibition at the Edo-Tokyo Museum. This year will be the fifteenth straight year we have held this event. The only problem is that it is expensive to rent the space and there is no entrance fee for visitors to attend the event. This means our *kumiai* has to cover the cost and therefore our *kumiai* membership dues are somewhat higher compared to other *kumiai*" (23 July 2009).

Despite the costs to *kumiai*, most artisans feel the expense is justified given the amount of exposure such events provide to their craft and business; indeed, several

craft workers I interviewed told me they had joined their respective *kumiai* specifically so that they would be able to participate in *kumiai*-sponsored events and exhibitions (Pontsoen 223). This example of traditional craft demonstration in Tokyo represents one important way in which museums can engage with and support local artisans, by making available museum space for community-directed projects and activities.

A second example of how museums can effectively engage artisan communities by leveraging prominent public spaces is the event around which a Scholarly Symposium entitled *Kazakhstan's Crafts and Creative Economy* was jointly organized by the Kasteyev State Museum of Arts (Almaty, Kazakhstan) and the Smithsonian Institution's Asian Cultural History Program (Washington, DC, USA). This event was carried out in conjunction with the annual Smithsonian *Craft2Wear* show (Oct. 3–5, 2019), held at the National Building in Museum in Washington, DC. The Symposium brought together museum professionals from the Kasteyev State Museum of Arts in Kazakhstan and the Smithsonian's Asian Cultural History Program, as well as a group of artisans from Kazakhstan who were able to share their experiences as craft makers, provide craft making demonstrations, and exhibit their artisanship for the American public. During the symposium, the participants presented and discussed various approaches to the study and promotion of crafts. For example, Prof. Gulmira Shalabayeva (Honored Worker of Kazakhstan and Director of the A. Kasteyev State Museum of Arts) described the craft displays at the Kasteyev State Museum, noting that “museum professionals and scholars from Kazakhstan are well-positioned to inspire pride in the cultural heritage of Kazakhstan locally, and to promote this heritage to the wider world” (Shalabayeva 12).

The study and exhibition of crafts at the Kasteyev Museum exemplify one important way that museums can raise awareness of the cultural and aesthetic significance of traditional and modern crafts for a broad public. This increased awareness is surely beneficial to contemporary artisans (who often work within communities from which museum collections were sourced in the past), as museum visitors can become acquainted with and interested in their work.

The visiting Kazakh artisans at the *Craft2Wear* show, who specialize in making jewelry, garments, and other wearable crafts, also had the opportunity to mount a fashion show (see fig. 5) that was hosted by the Embassy of the Republic of Kazakhstan. The sequence of activities and contributions of each participant are described more fully in the introductory essay within the volume of Proceedings from the Symposium (Shalabayeva and Taylor). This international exposure to the crafts of Kazakhstan, especially to the work of the Kazakh artisans in attendance, is an excellent example of the potential tangible beneficial outcomes of partnerships between museums and artisan communities.



Fig. 5. Participants at the fashion show mounted as part of the scholarly symposium titled *Kazakhstan's Crafts and Creative Economy*, featuring wearable crafts from Kazakhstan. Held at the *Craft2Wear* show, National Building Museum, Washington, DC, Oct. 3–5, 2019 (Photo by Marc Bretzfelder, Smithsonian Institution).

Conclusion

As the relevance of museums in the 21st century continues to be explored and debated (Anderson; Worts; Martin), and many craft traditions around the world face an uncertain future as described above, the potential role for museums in supporting artisan communities and knowledge becomes increasingly urgent. In this paper, I have considered two examples (from Japan and a successful USA-Kazakhstan museum and artisan

partnership) of innovative ways that museums have helped to support and sustain craft traditions: by assisting with the navigation of complex legal frameworks for heritage support, and by making available museum spaces for craft community events. Through these and other measures to promote craft practice, museums can serve both as stewards of crafts as material culture, and also as active participants in securing the long-term viability of invaluable, living, intangible craft traditions.

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Роберт Понциоен

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ЖОЙЫЛЫП БАРА ЖАТҚАН ҚОЛӨНЕР ДӘСТҮРЛЕРІ МЕН МҰРАЖАЙЛАР: ЖАПОНИЯДАН ТҰРАҚТЫ ДАМУ САБАҚТАРЫ МЕН АҚШ ПЕН ҚАЗАҚСТАННЫҢ СЕРІКТЕСТІГІ

Аңдатпа. Мұражайлар ежелден бері сақтауды, зерттеуді және жұртшылықпен бөлісуді мақсат ететін заттар мен басқа да материалдық мәдени мұралардың жинақтарының қоймасы ретінде түсініледі. Дегенмен, мұражайлардың жаңа және жиі назардан тыс қалатын рөлі олардың жергілікті қолөнер қауымдастығы мен дәстүрлері сияқты материалдық емес мәдени мұраға қолдау көрсету болып табылады. Бұл мақалада Жапониядағы қолөнершілермен және мұражайлармен (мәдени мұраны сақтау және насихаттау саласында ұзақ уақыт бойы әлемдік көшбасшы болған) жұмысыма және АҚШ пен Қазақстан арасындағы сәтті мұражай және қолөнер серіктестігіне сүйене отырып, мен мұражай мамандарының қолөнер дәстүрлерінің тұрақтылығына қалай үлес қоса алатыны туралы мысалдар келтіремін. Дүние жүзіндегі көптеген қолөнер қауымдастықтары (және оларда жинақталған дәстүрлер мен білімдер) қазіргі уақытта жаппай өндірілетін тауарлардан бәсекелестіктің күшеюіне, тұтынушылардың талғамдарының өзгеруіне, тәжірибешілердің қартаюуына және басқалармен қатар дәстүрлі материалдарды алудағы қиындықтарға байланысты жаһанданған нарықта өміршеңдігін сақтау үшін күресуде. Осылайша, қолөнер тәжірибесін қолдауға бағытталған күш-жігер ХХІ-ші ғасырда қолөнершілер қауымдастығы мен жұртшылық арасында мұражайлар үшін жаңартылған өзектілікті қамтамасыз ете алады.

Ескерту. Жарияланған мақала ішінара келесіге негізделген: Понциоен, Роберт. «Қолөнер дәстүрлерін қолдау мен сақтаудағы мұражайлардың рөлі». Қазақстанның қолөнері және шығармашылық экономикасы бойынша халықаралық симпозиум материалдары. Пол Майкл Тейлор және Гүлмира Шалабаева (редакторлар). Алматы: А. Қастеев атындағы Мемлекеттік өнер мұражайы, 2020.

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ИСЧЕЗАЮЩИЕ РЕМЕСЛЕННЫЕ ТРАДИЦИИ И МУЗЕИ: УРОКИ УСТОЙЧИВОГО РАЗВИТИЯ ИЗ ЯПОНИИ И ПАРТНЕРСТВА США И КАЗАХСТАНА

Аннотация. Музеи уже давно понимаются как хранилища коллекций предметов и другого материального культурного наследия, которые они стремятся сохранить, изучить и поделиться с общественностью. Однако новой и часто упускаемой из виду ролью музеев является их поддержка нематериального культурного наследия, такого как местные ремесленные сообщества и традиции. Опираясь на свою работу с ремесленниками и музеями в Японии (которая долгое время была мировым лидером в области сохранения и популяризации культурного наследия), а также на успешное партнерство между музеями и ремеслами США и Казахстана, автор статьи представил примеры того, как музеи могут способствовать устойчивости ремесленных традиций. Многие ремесленные сообщества (а также традиции и знания, которые они воплощают) по всему миру в настоящее время изо всех сил пытаются сохранить жизнеспособность на глобализированном рынке из-за усиления конкуренции со стороны товаров массового производства, изменения вкусов потребителей, старения практиков и трудностей с получением традиционных материалов среди прочих факторов. Таким образом, целенаправленные усилия по поддержке ремесленной практики могут придать музеям новую актуальность в XXI веке как среди ремесленных сообществ, так и среди общественности.

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