Crafts of Okinawa

As the second memorial exhibition of our 80th anniversary, we hold an exhibition of crafts of Okinawa as well as precious photographs of pre-war Okinawa taken by photographer Manshichi Sakamoto (1900-1974), who accompanied with Soetsu Yanagi (1889-1961), founder of the museum, to Okinawa from the end of 1939 to 1940.

Soetsu Yanagi and Okinawa

It was the end of 1938 that Soetsu Yanagi finally visited Okinawa for the first time. Then in 1939 and 1940, Yanagi returned to Okinawa four times in all and stayed for about 100 days there. At that time, Okinawa had been regarded as uncivilized far south islands. Yanagi, however, saw actual Okinawa with his own eyes and found Okinawa remarkable treasure of beauty. He had many opportunities to learn about their way of life or handicrafts, and enthusiastically collected. Yanagi had many opportunities to learn about their way of life or handicrafts, and enthusiastically collected weaving materials in second-hand clothes markets or ceramics and urushi works in antique shops. Having witnessed that various crafts had been preserved as they should have been and that their folk customs, lifestyles, and beliefs still had kept their traditions strongly, Yanagi felt ‘it should be a miracle for us to have Okinawa now in such a complicated and chaotic period of Japanese crafts.’

In the second tour to Okinawa, the main purpose was to learn the brilliance and secrets of Okinawa crafts. Shoji Hamada and Kanjiro Kawai learned making ceramics. Keisuke Serizawa learned dyeing, and Yoshitaka Yanagi and Toshio Tanaka learned weaving during this second trip. Returning Tokyo, Yanagi enthusiastically introduced Okinawa through exhibitions in the Japan Folk Crafts Museum or publications like ‘Kogi’ magazine. Manshichi Sakamoto, who accompanied Yanagi to the third research trip, took a huge amount of precious photos with Yanagi. Those photos include Tamaudon, an imperial mausoleum which attracted Soetsu Yanagi highly praised that stencil-dyeing is the most genuine and qualified among dyeing textiles, and that bingata is the most beautiful above all among stencil dyeing textiles. A wide variety of materials are applied as motifs such as peony, lily, cherry blossoms, paulownia tree, maple tree, crane, tortoise, phoenix, and landscapes. Wrapping cloths in a tritsu-gaki style (free-hand resist dyeing) are also exhibited in the room.

Ceramics of Okinawa

The Tsuboya ware was established by uniting various kilns of Ryukyu in 1682. This room mainly introduces daily wares called jo-yachi decorated in various styles like abac (overglaze red enamels), white glaze design, or copper green glaze. As represented by a crescent-shaped sake server called dachi-ko or anurn urn called jiru-gami, a diversity of forms is also one of the attractiveness of Okinawan ceramics.

Weaving of Okinawa

In Okinawa, weavings have been produced which have regional varieties. Floating weave design called han-ari of raw silk or lattice work and kasuri design in Shuri, han-ari of cotton or tisā-ji in Yomitan, colored kasuri of ramie or white-ground kasuri of cotton in Yaeyama, kasuri of potoge in Kume Island are included. In addition, pieces of woven cloths collected by Toshio Tanaka are on display.

Okinawa and the Mingei Movement

Exhibited in this room are ceramics of Shoji Hamada and Kanjiro Kawai, who were greatly influenced by ceramics of Okinawa, ceramics by Jiro Kinjo, weaving works of Shuri by Hatsuko Miyahira and Shizuko Oshiro, weaving works of fine hemp of Yae-yama by Sachiko Aragaki, and kake (banana fiber) by Toshiko Taira. In Okinawa, weavings have been produced which have regional varieties. Floating weave design called han-ari of raw silk or lattice work and kasuri design in Shuri, han-ari of cotton or tisā-ji in Yomitan, colored kasuri of ramie or white-ground kasuri of cotton in Yaeyama, kasuri of potoge in Kume Island are included. In addition, pieces of woven cloths collected by Toshio Tanaka are on display.

Dyeing of Okinawa Bingata

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Porcelains of China

Chinese porcelains of the museum collection mainly consist of old sometsuke and abac. Both were produced during the Tang period at the end of Ming Dynasty in Jingdezhen kilns. Using rough white porcelain and deep cobalt pigment, motifs like landscape, figures, animals and plants were freely depicted.

Porcelains of Japan

The museum houses about one thousand porcelains such as Imari, Saga prefecture and Imari, Saga prefecture and those made in Seto, Aichi prefecture. Most of them have designs of geometric motifs, plants, and landscapes depicted in gosu pigment. In this room, about 50 pieces of excellent porcelains made in Imari including iro-e (overglaze enamels) works of Kobutani-style are exhibited.

Paintings and Crafts with Plain and Simple Expression

Otsu-e painted as souvenirs to passing travelers as well as paintings on urushi, ceramics, and porcelains are shown in this room. Crafts and paintings of Japan sometimes have plain and simple styles, and this room showcases the attractiveness of line drawings in a simplified form.

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