

Philosophical Note

(As I was passing by...)

Japanese Cultural Uniqueness: Homogeneity of High Cultures and Subcultures

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Japan, which is recognized as one of the countries with a rich history in the world, has many interesting historic sites, religious artifacts and temples, arts and cultures. According to a recent survey, about 10 million foreign tourists have visited Japan for work, study, pleasure and sightseeing. Although temples and shrines are their favorite spots, many foreign visitors tend to try and want to experience Japanese subculture for quenching their thirst of curiosity. In recent year, Japan has been known to the world for its subcultures, comics, animations and artistic figures etc.. This tendency has not only just begun in our modern times; Japanese subcultures have indeed prospered well in olden days.

During the Edo era (1603-1868), under the government policy of seclusion, Japanese people enjoyed their own original culture. Many eminent artists were active in Japanese painting. For example, ITO Jakucyu (1716–1800) was one of the most famous Japanese painter in ‘high’ cultures. Many of his paintings are concerned with traditional Japanese avian species, such as chickens and birds. Many of his otherwise traditional works display a great degree of experimentation with different perspectives, and with other very modern stylistic elements.

At the same time, there were many other artists who engaged not only in high cultures but also in subcultures. Artists of the Edo period involved in subcultures, such as KATSUSIKA Hokusai (1760-1849) and ANDO Hisoshige (1797-1858), were Japanese ukiyo-e painters and printmakers. Ukiyo-e is a genre of the pictorial arts established during the Edo period, and divided into two categories: (i) original drawings, and (ii) woodblock prints. Several hundreds of ukiyo-e drawings was printed at that time, and a countless number of ukiyo-e drawings swarmed major cities and towns in a

splash unlike anywhere else in the world then. As a result, high-quality works of arts and woodworks were very popular among even the ordinary Japanese people. It was during the Edo period that many Japanese people could generally enjoy arts in the most economically viable way..

In spite of its beauty with outstanding quality and artistry, ukiyo-e prints were treated as cheap articles with essay access even for common people in Japan. While ukiyo-e paintings were traded at prices; so low that secondhand and defective ones were used as packaging materials for sea cargoes, these paintings enjoyed exorbitant quotes in Europe; prices that were traded at quotes that were unthinkable in Japan at the time. At the end of the Edo period, ukiyo-e paintings and drawings were highly valued in the West due to ‘Japonism’. In the western countries, Ukiyo-e painting/drawings were highly appreciated, especially among the great masters of Impressionist schools. In fact, their works were much influenced by ukiyo-e printings/drawings: so much so that the paintings/drawings were even reproduced in oil paintings. For example, Vincent VAN GOGH (1853-1890) drew ukiyo-e paintings on the background of his masterpiece "Portrait of Pere Tanguy" and reproduced works of ANDO Hisoshige using oil painting. In a similar fashion, the "Young Flautist" of Edouard MANET (1832-1883) was in fact influenced by ukiyo-e paintings/drawings.

Now, let us at present Japan. The present situation resembles much of the time during the Edo-period, about 200 years ago. Among modern Japanese arts, not only Japanese High Cultures but also Japanese SubCultures are highly appreciated.

One of the leading Japanese Subculture companies is KAIYODO (Kadoma city, Osaka

Prefecture). This company, which is dedicated to artistic figures and garage kits, mostly focuses on anime-related characters of Disney, and Japanese animation characters. KAIYODO is also famous for its elaborate biological models and paleontological restoration based on scientific knowledge. In fact, in famous Hollywood movie "Jurassic Park®", dinosaur models of KAIYODO was the prototype of computer graphics production, and it has remained useful to this day. Collaboration with MURAKAMI Takashi, one of the most famous contemporary Japanese artists, and designer Louis Vuitton, KAIYODO has crafted cute and attractive lively girl-dolls and other avant-garde objects, and they were exhibited at the Palace of Versailles in 2010. As has been explained thus far, Japanese culture of creation and beauty is somewhat unique in having the qualitative homogeneity of High Cultures and Subcultures in a melting pot maintained from the past to the present.



Paleontological crocodile model based on scientific knowledge by KAIYODO
(The Museum of Osaka University)