

THE ROLES OF NATIONAL MUSEUMS IN JAPANESE SOCIETY

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INTRODUCTION

National museums in Japan can be divided into three main categories based on their management: those managed directly by the government, Independent Administrative Institutions, and Inter-University Research Institute Corporations. The first category includes, for example, the Agency for Cultural Affairs' National Archives of Modern Architecture, the Imperial Household Agency's Museum of the Imperial Collections, and museums at bases of the Japan Self-Defense Forces under the Ministry of Defense. Institutions belonging to the second category were operated directly by the government. However, with the introduction of the Independent Administrative Institution in 2001, three such institutions were established: National Museums (National Institutes for Cultural Heritage from 2007), National Museums of Art, and National Museum of Nature and Science.¹ The National Museum of Japanese History and the National Museum of Ethnology fall into the third category. They were managed directly by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), but became Inter-University Research Institute Corporations as part of the National Institutes for the Humanities when national universities became independent of the government in 2004.

Japanese national museums were thus established in a number of diverse forms through various processes. As discussed, below, however,

the four museums of the National Institutes for Cultural Heritage are usually considered the epitome of national museums in Japan because of their long histories and the circumstances of their creation. In this paper, I will discuss the role of these museums and that of the Tokyo National Museum in particular.

1. NATIONAL MUSEUMS AS INDEPENDENT ADMINISTRATIVE INSTITUTIONS

Museums are considered institutions for social education under the Museum Act in Japan (1951). They are expected to carry out systematic educational activities while maintaining political and religious neutrality. However, because they were originally established by the government, national museums are exempt from this act. This does not deny their roles as educational institutions. They are exempt because they were expected to carry out the nation's educational and cultural policies as specialized institutions belonging to the Ministry of Education, Science, and Culture (later MEXT, and the Agency for Cultural Affairs).

The Tokyo National Museum was established in 1872 as a "Museum of the Ministry of Education." Authority over the museum was later transferred to the Ministry of the Interior, and later to the Ministry of Agriculture and Commerce, the Imperial Household Ministry, and other ministries and agencies. Likewise, the museum's role also changed accordingly, from, for example, the promotion of education and

¹ Independent Administrative Institutions are legal bodies that were established to take over operation of organizations the government did not need to be directly responsible for. The aim of which was to increase efficiency.



Tokyo National Museum
Image courtesy of Tokyo National Museum



Exhibit of Ainu Culture, Tokyo National Museum
Image courtesy of Tokyo National Museum

culture, to the promotion of industry, and to the management of the Imperial Household's properties. The establishment of the National Museum of Nature and Science in addition to National Museums of Art during this long process allowed for different fields to develop independently.

From 2001, national museums, which had been based on the laws of the Ministry of Education and Science Establishment Act (2001), became Independent Administrative Institutions. These museums included three National Museums (four since 2005), four Na-

tional Museums of Art (five since 2007), and one National Museum of Nature and Science. Each Independent Administrative Institution came to be operated under a different law of establishment. Despite handling different fields, these institutions share common roles as museums, as specified by, for example, The International Council of Museums (ICOM) and the Museum Act in Japan. These roles include acquiring and preserving objects, making these objects available for public viewing, and conducting research and educational activities. Due to these common roles, the idea to merge these three Independent Administrative Institutions was

brought up during the process of administrative reform. However, after National Museums were integrated with National Research Institutes for Cultural Properties to become the National Institutes for Cultural Heritage in 2007, there has been no further integration or restructuring.

2. NATIONAL MUSEUMS AS NATIONAL CENTRES

Although Independent Administrative Institutions such as National Museums and National Museums of Art are not bound by the Museum Act, they are expected to serve as “National Centres,” or as models for museums across the nation. This is, of course, due to them having the largest collections and outstanding staff. In the mid-term goal for the National Institutes for Cultural Heritage, which MEXT sets every five years, it clearly states that these institutions are “National Centres, the mission of which is to acquire, conserve, manage, exhibit, and pass on to the next generation tangible cultural properties, foremost of which are numerous National Treasures and Important Cultural Properties, to conduct research on these properties, and to communicate the history and traditional culture of our nation within and outside of Japan, all for the purpose of conserving and utilizing these cultural properties, which are the valued property of the nation.”² The same passage is also used for National Museums of Art in addition to the National Museum of Nature and Science, and indeed, these are their roles.

In the last fiscal year, the four national museums belonging to the National Institutes for Cultural Heritage offered assistance and advice to public and private museums on 264 occasions, and lent a total of 1,962 objects (including those on long-term loans) on 274 occasions. 95 objects were also lent overseas on 13 separate

occasions, which is an outstanding number in Japan.

National Museums also serve as the “Face of Japan,” often holding exhibitions abroad as anniversary events upon the requests of governments and embassies. In fact, most of the foreign exhibitions organized by the Agency for Cultural Affairs are co-organized by the Tokyo National Museum. Loans from other institutions, temples, shrines, and individuals are possible because of the trust arising from these institutions being national museums.

3. BALANCE WITH POLITICAL HISTORY

As mentioned before, although national museums in Japan are exempt from the Museum Act, fundamentally they are institutions for social education and are expected to maintain political and religious neutrality. National Museums of the National Institutes of Cultural Heritage rarely deal with political history because they primarily handle cultural properties that are artworks. However, there are times when organizers must be careful with the names (such as the names of regions) used in special exhibitions that deal with areas that were colonised or involved in territorial disputes. In such cases, names are chosen based on international standards (regulations and treaties) or schoolbooks, which are based on the Courses of Study (government curriculum guidelines). Moreover, although historical periods are usually based on political history, divisions based on cultural or art history are also used at museums in Japan. For example, from July to September of this year (2015) the exhibition *Hakuho, The First Full Flowering of Buddhist Art in Japan* was held at the Nara National Museum. The names of periods such as “Hakuho” and “Tempyo” are derived from categories used in art history.

Political history is more likely to become a concern when an exhibition deals with modern history. At the National Museum of Japanese History there are constant debates regarding modern history exhibitions, most often about the wording and expressions used in the explanations for these exhibitions.

Even during times of political and diplomatic tension in the Asia-Pacific region, we actively engage in cultural exchange, such as through exhibitions, between national museums of different countries, and believe that these exchanges should continue into the future. At the Tokyo National Museum we therefore regard the existence of ANMA as having great significance.

4. BALANCE WITH ETHNOLOGY

There are exhibitions at the Tokyo National Museums about Ainu and Ryūkyū cultures in addition to those of other Asian ethnic groups. The focus, however, is on artworks and historical records, not ethnology. Similarly, there are exhibitions about these ethnic groups at the Museum of Nature and Science but they focus on anthropology and botany, while the National

Museum of Ethnology conducts research and holds exhibitions pertaining to ethnology and cultural anthropology. Each museum thus has clearly assigned roles.

The activities of these museums, however, are not overly narrow in focus. The National Museum of Nature and Science, for example, has held special exhibitions concerning fields such as archaeology, history, and ethnology. These include *The Inka Empire Revealed: Century After the Machu Picchu “Discovery”* in 2012 and *Mummy: The Inside Story* in 2006. Additionally, *The Power of Images*, an exhibition held last year that consisted of objects from the National Museum of Ethnology, was co-organized with the National Art Centre, Tokyo. Rather than categorizing images based on regions or historical periods, it focused on similarities in form, effect, and function. It was a revolutionary exhibition that questioned the preconceptions we have about objects created by humans. In recent years, special exhibitions that cross over different fields have been increasing in number, and it is believed that national museums of different Independent Administrative Institutions should collaborate further to hold diverse exhibitions and programs.



Room 18 (Modern Art), Tokyo National Museum
Image courtesy of Tokyo National Museum

2. National Institutes of Cultural Heritage (Japan), ed. *Dokuritsu Gyōsei Hōjin Kokuritsu Bankazai Kikō No Chūki Mokuyō (The Mid-term Goal for the National Institutes for Cultural Heritage)*. Report. April 1, 2011. <http://www.nich.go.jp/data/hyoka/index.html>.

Preparations are also being made for the 2020 opening of the National Museum of Ainu Culture in Hokkaido although its management body is still undecided. This museum will conduct research and hold exhibitions that cover different academic fields on the Ainu, who are an ethnic group indigenous to Japan.

5. BALANCE WITH ART

National Museums of the National Institutes for Cultural Heritage primarily handle cultural properties that are artworks, but not those by contemporary artists. In other words, such artworks fall within art history and the value of which have been more or less established. However, this designation was only clarified in recent years.

The National Museum of Modern Art was established in 1952. (It became the National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo in 1967.) Through a mutual agreement regarding the management of objects based on historical periods, the Tokyo National Museum was to manage works from 1906 and earlier, the National Museum of Modern Art, those from 1924 and later, while works created between 1907 and 1923 were to be managed as they had been for the time being. 1907 was the year when the government began an annual exhibition, the Bunten Exhibition, which was sponsored by the Ministry of Education and when the ministry started to purchase artworks. The National Institutes for Cultural Heritage almost never handle contemporary art, which ranges over a wide variety of genres such as comics (*manga*), animation, digital art, and illustration. However, in recent years, there has been progress in designating certain works of modern art as Important Cultural Properties. Additionally, the transfer of artworks by the Agency for Cultural Affairs, the National Institutes for Cultural Heritage, and National Museums of Art has become more difficult since the introduction

of the Independent Administration Institution in 2001. Cooperation and joint research among these institutions, with regards to conservation, is becoming increasingly necessary. It is possible that certain contemporary artworks will be designated Important Cultural Properties in 50 or 100 years. These artworks will be recognized for their historical and cultural significance in addition to their artistic value, and may come under the management of the National Institutes for Cultural Heritage.

6. NEW ROLES OF NATIONAL MUSEUMS IN JAPAN

During the previous fiscal year, the National Task Force for the Japanese Cultural Heritage Disaster Risk Mitigation Network was established at the National Institutes for Cultural Heritage based on the experience gained from activities such as the “rescue” of cultural properties after the Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011. This task force is planning to establish a nationwide system for disaster prevention and the rescue of cultural properties. Preventing the destruction of cultural properties is an important role that the Tokyo National Museum must fulfil given its standing as a National Centre. From now on, it will actively pursue this objective.



Logo for ICOM General Conference in Kyoto
Image courtesy of Tokyo National Museum

The ICOM General Conference will be held in Kyoto in 2019, just a year before the Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games. With national museums at the centre of this endeavor, it is essential to use this occasion as an opportunity to promote international exchanges and communication at Japanese museums. In partic-



Buddhist Sculpture at The Gallery of Horyuji Treasures, Tokyo National Museum
Photo by Sato Akira. Image courtesy of Tokyo National Museum

ular, the Tokyo National Museum is expected to be at the centre of planning cultural programs for the Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games, and the Kyoto National Museum, to act as a leader among the 200 museums in its city. We hope to contribute to the development of Asian museums as a whole with the cooperation of Korea and China, both of which have hosted the General Conference in the past.

In recent years, the function of museums in MICE (Meeting, Incentive, Conferences/Conventions, Exhibitions/Events) has been recognised and their use as “unique venues” is also increasing. These developments will contribute to the invigoration of fundraising and museum marketing. Tokyo National Museum is taking the initiative in these developments as part of its cultural and tourism planning. It will continue its active engagement while giving proper consideration, as a National Centre, to conservation, and crime and disaster prevention.

CONCLUSION

The establishment and development of national museums varies by country and region. Their roles, therefore, cannot be discussed in broad, sweeping terms. One similarity, however, is that all national museums receive national funds, and, whether they like it or not, are subject to the policies of their respective countries. Such governmental influence often comes from financial considerations rather than cultural policies. We have experienced significant changes in the establishment and management of national museums resulting from changes of government. However, our foundation does not consist of short-term objectives, but the perpetual mission of determining how we can protect and pass down the invaluable cultural properties of the nation to future generations. Gaining the understanding of various stakeholders such as the political and business sectors in addition to individuals of academic standing is essential for this purpose. We wish to exchange information with other members of ANMA while striving for the development of national museums in Asia and maintaining a balance between history, ethology, and art.