

In Japan today there is a keen growth of interest in security. In a society undergoing a rapid development of new value systems and pluralism and diversification of life views, this can be seen as a natural phenomenon. Security is a common problem of highly mature modern societies, but in a society like Japan, which has long been dominated by an elusive dream of a communal unity, the security problem comes with a special profundity. Japan is a society where we are becoming increasingly aware of the other's existence through experience.

The reverse side of this desire for security is the problem of consensus building. This is due to the fact that both of these have as a fundamental premise the suspicion and fear of others. While there is a strong demand for security technology in a society full of suspicion and fear of others, at the same time there is a strong pursuit of consensus—in what might be called an attempt to guarantee security.

However, while security is a severing concept of protecting oneself from disquieting strangers, consensus-building efforts are based on a concept of creating ties with others. Security can be protected to some degree through laws and security systems based on legal standards, and with consensus building as well, it is possible to establish laws that promote the purpose. This can be seen in areas like environmental protection. But, consensus building does not end with systematic solutions. This is because, as we see from the etymology of con-sensus, the concept involves the dimension of sympathetic relationship before an agreement is reached. In addition, to the natural individual differences, detail differences are also involved with the culture one belongs to. This is probably the area where “crafts” and consensus building intersect.

However, in order to identify this point of connection, it is first necessary to grasp what “craft-like things” are. In doing so, the most important thing is probably the breaking open of the tough shell we know as “tradition.” In the following essay I would like to use the crafts theory of Georg Simmel as a point of departure for attempting to do so.

In his essay *The Handle (Der Henkel)*, Simmel writes about vessels that also have value as ornamental objects of art.

*A vessel, however, unlike a painting or statue, is not intended to be insulated and untouchable but is meant to fulfill a purpose—if only symbolically. For it is held in the hand and drawn into the movement of practical life. Thus the vessel stands in two worlds at one and the same time. (1)*

The “two worlds” indicated here are the world of the ideal and the world of the practical. Said in another way, it is the autonomous nature of a work of art that is integrated into our lives in a formal way and the more open nature of an object that fulfills a purpose in daily life, and a vessel with a decorative aspect is something that integrates both of these natures. In short, it is a type of complex (composite).

The expression “beauty in function” is often used with regard to crafts, and when this standard is considered in an ideological context, it is actually more applicable to design than to crafts. The visual appeal of design is the result of a pursuit of functionality and is limited by the “function” for which the design is used. This is why function is used in its adjective form. In the case of crafts, however, the decorative appeal is pursued as a separate aspect from the object's function. Therefore, “function” and “beauty” are parallel aspects that should be connected with “and” instead of as adjective and noun. Thus, crafts exist in the realm of “function and beauty” rather than “beauty in function.”

There have been cases where design seeks a visual, decorative appeal divorced of function, but this is invariably a case where the decorative aspect is pursued as a secondary added value that does not compete with the functional aspect. Therefore it is not worthy of being connected with an equalitarian “and.” It is a subordinate relationship. If there is an aspect of decorative beauty worthy of the conjunction “and,” it is no longer in the realm of design. Rather, it should be ascribed to the realm of arts and craft. If the general aspiration of crafts toward a higher level of decorative beauty occurs in a state where the “two worlds” of function and beauty are in harmony or balance, it is not because of what Simmel describes as an act of surrender to some strange dogma by which practical use defines beauty.

Through its pursuit of practical functionality, design affords people the possibility for action. It offers the user convenience. In other words, design can be said to be an art of “affordance.”

Take the mailbox for example. It affords us an access to sending mail, and although it can also be seen in the context of its connection to the postal system, the shape and structure of the mailbox itself is based on the human body. Or, take the wine glass, clothes or the handle, for instance; all of these are created with shapes that are convenient for the human body to perform some action. Therefore, their forms can present an opportunity for bodily rapport (consensus). It goes without saying that the kind of rapport that design gives birth to is inseparable from the a sense of purpose related to some function. In *The Handle*, Simmel uses the following eloquent words to describe this.

*With the handle the world approaches the vessel; with the spout the vessel reaches out into the world. Only in receiving its current through the handle and in yielding it again through the opening is the vessel fully integrated into human teleology. Precisely because the spout is an opening of the vessel itself, it is easier to connect its form organically with that of the vessel. (2)*

Design can become involved in consensus building in the context of a pursuit of functional purpose based on adaptation to human form. However, this is only a minimum form of consensus, what you might call the poorest form of consensus. As something, which has been formed, directly or indirectly, from concepts dictated by industry as the pursuit of developing practical means to maintain life, it is difficult for design to break out of this type of character.

Of course, craft is also an art involved with industry. However, there is a big difference in the way design and crafts are tied to industry. In that design is involved with mass production through mechanical industry, there is a demand for patterns or uniformity. There is a need for standardization. Conversely, what is important in crafts that are the products of manual industry is that the products be similar to each other. With design there is a necessity

# Tradition / Crafts – Informed by Simmel's Discussions on Crafts

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*The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them. —T. S. Eliot  
The unity formed by this combination or articulation is always, necessarily, a 'complex structure'. —Stuart Hall*

that it be based on a standard (common form), while with crafts the presence of accidental/spontaneous differences that originate from the (bodily oriented) manual processes involved are acceptable.

These differences between design and crafts become especially prominent in the area of vessels (tableware). When a table is set with groupings of designed vessels, their standardized character creates an orderly type of installation of a kind that will not afford any leaks. In contrast, the small individual *zen* trays (or tables) used in traditional Japanese dining are usually set with a varied array of vessels (bowls and dishes) of different origins. What appears on the *zen* is a complex patchwork type of installation.

When we consider the expression “pure crafts” (*junsui kōgei*), which came into use since Japan’s Taishō Period, we can’t help but read in it an inherent irony, especially when considered with the principle of crafts in mind. This is because the “purification” of crafts would mean a pursuit in the ultimate in (composite) complexity, which in short means distancing it from what is normally considered purity. In other words, “pure crafts” can only be described as “pure impurity.” The identity of crafts as composite complexity is surely an identity that is always open to things other, or an identity that is always seeking something else. And, when seen in terms of a modern substantialist concept of identity, it must surely be seen as a kind of failed identity.

However, this is neither the character nor the weakness of crafts. Rather, this is an aspect where we can find a true meaning of what we call identity. As Stuart Hall points out, identity is essentially the process of identification in which the other is added as an articulation or eliminated. And thus, identity can be seen as existing within the context of interaction with the other. Although one might tend to see the act of elimination as being based on the premise of a set identity, this is not necessarily the case. This is because that which is eliminated forms the paradigms for the other and thus contains the potential for re-articulation and the renewal of systems for re-articulation. In short, identity is something that is always hungering for the other.

At the same time, however, our conscious identity often forgets many of these fundamental characteristics

of identity; or negates them. In our awareness, identity is perceived as a set quantity that is closed to the other. This view of identity can be seen clearly in our consciousness of that which we call tradition.

The decorative aspect of crafts is generally thought to be the markings of tradition. Said in another way, decorative sensibilities are symbolic of ethnic culture. For this reason, crafts have long contributed to the consensus that lies at the base of an ethnic nation. The pieces of lacquer ware or scraps of cloth that the Japanese children left behind in China at the end of World War II bring with them as proof of their ethnicity when they come to Japan in search of their separated families and relatives are one direct example of this. The decorative patterns on these pieces of craft are presented as symbols of the ethnic group they belong to.

This nature of the decorative sensibilities shows that crafts have an aspect that cannot be fully explained by the mere sharing of physical wants. It must surely be something in the realm of desire that stimulates the creation of diversity. However, consciousness of one’s ethnic culture goes beyond accepting diversity as diversity; it also can’t help but imposing aspects of the superior and inferior. In other words, difference is seen in terms of qualitative rank. The sense of self-esteem is something that is invariably attached to tradition. Ethnic identity has always been understood as something based in a sense of self-esteem. But, it is also important to recognize that the sense of identity formed in this way is made possible by a lapse of historical memory.

It goes without saying that tradition is recognized in historical terms. Nonetheless, it is often assumed to be something that transcends history. It is understood as the substance on which history is based or a system identifying things historical as history. In any case it is always perceived as an already completed quantity. Therefore, a sense of tradition only produces closed forms of consensus.

However, when we reflect on the concept of a closed consensus we find something very close to a contradiction. Consensus is something that inherently is sought with others, and if tradition is an entity that is already complete, there is certainly

no way that consent can be sought.

Tradition as identity can also be seen to be in actuality a process of identification. As we have pointed out earlier, this is a process that is based on the articulation and elimination of that which is other. This is the kind of process by which identity is formed. Since the process of identification is one that always demands things that are other, tradition must also be recognized as an open, unfinished process. Therefore, one’s recognition of tradition in its actual substance is something that should involve constant re-evaluation. Tradition must constantly be re-created.

When viewed in light of the real process of identification, however, this re-creation is actually the birth of new things. History constantly adds new things, in other words “things other,” to tradition, and these things are not simply appended on. They become articulations of history according to the process of identification. Furthermore, these articulations can’t help but bring changes to the system itself. Borrowing the words of T.S. Elliot, the appearance of new things causes history to be re-read in new ways, and this also serves as a definition of what qualifies things as worthy of being called truly new.

New things always include otherness. However, the newness is not new only in a sense of historical otherness. Through the power of their otherness, new things invariably bring changes to the system of identification. Despite being a product of history, and while being recognized as new through the comparison with history, new things renew history and identity as something different from what they were before. In short, each new articulation invariably re-creates the process of re-articulation. Thus, newness is a kind of irony, as is the system by which we recognize newness. The now famous paradoxical statement that “tradition is creation” is evidence of this ironical state of affairs.

The irony involved in “tradition” can be illustrated by tracing the history of the word’s usage. The Japanese word “tradition” (*dentō*), which originally referred to actual genealogies, came to be used with a nuance of the spiritual aspects of the Japanese nation in the period after the Meiji Restoration and later became a key word in the nationalistic ideology that emerged in the period of

wartime aggression beginning around 1940, after which the same meaning carried over into the postwar period. In other words, the term “tradition” itself became socialized with a strong aspect of identity.

In the ways we have seen above, history moves on in an ironical process of change involving articulation and re-articulation. But this historical mechanism has made the effect of the noun “tradition” ambiguous and in some cases concealed. When we look at crafts, a substantive view of identification and the tendency toward fixed concepts that it entails is especially prominent in the area of so-called “traditional crafts.”

Of course, even in the case of crafts that take pride in their traditions have not evolved with a complete disregard for the movements of the different eras. And the crafts that are considered “traditional” have also displayed an ongoing demand for things other. However, when looked at as a whole, these demands are mostly on the level of design. What’s more, they are carried out only on the superficial level of decoration. In this context, these things other are often abbreviated. Otherwise they may be dissolved in the illusion of internalization. In any case, the brilliance of their otherness is modified and relegated to a suitable place by the fixed forms of identification that result from a substantive viewpoint. And, if there is a failure of this process, the products can no longer be called traditional crafts.

It has been systems of technique that have supported the foundations of traditional crafts, and these systems are also perceived as existing in an unchanging realm. And if, for example, a major innovation should occur, it is eventually seem as no more than a mere appendage to the tradition. Otherwise it will be eliminated. In the realm of technique as well, the articulation of things other does not shake the substantive view. In traditional crafts where the purpose is the acquisition and transmission of technique, this can be considered a logical conclusion. This is driven by an ideology of traditionalism that seeks unchanging values that restrain the out-of-context spontaneous results that can be produced at the level of technique in pursuit of a stoic purity.

In this way, traditional crafts have been able to exist by concealing the mechanisms involved in the process

of identification. This is not a statement addressed at individual practitioners of traditional crafts. And, I have no intention of saying that well-intentioned practitioners of crafts who believe in the existence of viable traditional have been the objects of some deception. That would be no more than a bad joke. However, when you look at the whole of the genre referred to as traditional crafts, the word “deception” is perhaps appropriate. We cannot deny that there is a lack of consciousness at work in the genre or a virtually unconscious ideology of ethnic self-centeredness.

It can probably be said that the denial of a deception in the first place is a sort of insufficient ideology in itself. However, there are at least two valid reasons for doing so. One of them is related to circumstance, while the other is involved in the essential nature of crafts.

Let us return once again to quote from Simmel’s *The Handle*:

*And in such cases, only rarely can the decorative beauty of its appearance compensate for the fact that the inner tendency of the vase toward unity has negated its relatedness to the outer world.*

*However, just as the aesthetic form must not become so self-willed as to make impossible perception of the handle’s purposiveness (even when, as in the case of the ornamental vase, it is out of the question in practice), ... (3)*

Simmel says that such a vase evokes in him, “a painful feeling of ineptness and confinement, similar to that produced by a man who has his arms bound to his body.” And this appraisal is not one that deals merely with the decorative aspect. In the case of traditional crafts, this “ineptness” is something that opposes the very nature of crafts. Crafts with “the inner tendency toward unity” are something that stands in opposition to crafts as a complex (composite) form of art that incorporates both “function and beauty.” This attempt to internalize the relationship with the outside world within a vase is a kind of design that is accepted in traditional crafts, but, at the same time, it is also a metaphor of the complacently self-enclosed genre of traditional crafts. (It cannot be completely denied that the complexity of crafts is to some degree inept. And,

based on this premise, it can probably be said that the sense of ineptness in traditional crafts originates in the attempt to suppress ineptness.)

Furthermore, this sense of ineptness is also related to the fact that traditional crafts have developed hand in hand with the ethnic nation. That is to say traditional crafts have developed spontaneously along with the political process of the modern ethnic nation which incorporates ethnic elements in the direction of nationality—and the process of expansion of cultural-national ideology—while in fact most of it has developed as local industry, and when seen in this light is none other than a complex containing the most ethnic of technologies. Evolutionists might say that nationality is born of the sum of the various elements of ethnicity, and while it is a fact that there was already a process of cultural homogeneity occurring on a national scale by the Edo Period, the present state of the nation, and therefore the actual state of that which we call traditional crafts, exists in a state that when examined in detail can surely be called a complex. If you want to define the distinguishing characteristic of the traditionalist ideology, it is something in which we can find non-integrated pluralism and diverse integration.

Occlusion, autonomy, purity, and their criticism can, after all, be called simply matters of ideology. Even the form of craft ideal cited earlier cannot be proven with any real certainty when it is understood in consideration of the fundamental nature of identity, meaning the dependence on things other and their articulated integration. But, this cannot be said either when the problems associated with market conditions come into play.

As long as they are products to be sold, crafts created with a consciousness of tradition cannot afford to choose the contexts and environments that are worked into them. This is because the workings of capital can’t help but produce intricacies of context. For example, there is no guarantee that a *butsudan* cabinet, which is intended to hold the family’s Buddhist relics, might not be used for shelves of a home bar. Because the *butsudan* affords such an excellent storage space, who can guarantee that it will not be used in such a way? The “the inner tendency toward unity” turns completely toward the outside.

Furthermore, this is not something to expect only in the foreign culture realm. In Japanese society as well,

especially in the large metropolitan areas, cultural mixing and confusion has already become a common part of the life environment. "Affordance" has begun to break away from the normal systems and customs to develop in unbridled freedom.

As the continuation of the passage we just quoted, Simmel writes:

*... so a disagreeable picture results whenever the purposiveness works in so many different directions that the unity of the impression is broken up. (4)*

Here, Simmel is referring to a Grecian vase that has more than one handle and spout, and if it is disagreeable when "the impression of unity is broken up," this is a kind of disagreeable condition that is ubiquitous in life today. The example of a butsudān being converted into a home bar may be too black for some, but that is because the "affordance" which until now has been regulated by systems and customs, is now being grasped in new ways at the level of bodily equivalents, constantly, from all directions and in the most unexpected ways.

The problem of fundamental consensus in a society is built on mixings of elements that are foreign to each other seems to center around how to suppress the disturbing nature of it, but when we reverse our perspective, I wonder if we really find it something so disagreeable. Within the cultural mixing that has taken place since the Meiji Period, haven't we lost to a saddening degree the sense of orderliness originally implied by the word "style" (*iyōshiki*)? And, more than this, haven't we allowed ourselves to develop all too magnanimous a sensibility with regard to the mixing of foreign cultural elements? Doesn't it seem that instead of feeling distaste and raising our eyebrows disapprovingly at the multi-directional diversions going on, we have already adopted the magnanimity to accept it all—both in multi-layered and compounded ways. Looking back, we see—as in the history of Japan's participation in world exhibitions since the Meiji Period—that traditional crafts as products have been supported by the cultural condition of foreign mixing, and that this fact made it possible for the call for respecting "tradition" to have a certain political significance as a

warning bell against such a society—and therefore proof of its existence as an important premise.

For traditional crafts to have political significance means that there is some correlation with the conditions or circumstances of the times. And, while serious politics cannot exist without criticism of conditions or circumstances that has a firm basis in ideology, this is a process of commitment to circumstances or conditions of the times, not a transcendence of them. For example, in today's social conditions where suspicion and fear of others is causing an increased interest in security among people, there can't help but be a change in the political significance of traditional crafts. And this is a change that is proceeding despite the good intentions of individual artists and craftsmen. Borrowing an example from the economy, the influx of a multitude of foreign workers into the domestic employment market is already a fact and is certain to accelerate in the future. The mixing of new elements into society that occurred following the Meiji Restoration was mainly in the areas of culture and information but from now on the mixing will probably occur increasingly in the form of actual human beings.

Despite the existence of a clear accumulation of cultural mixing since the Meiji period, Japanese society retains a deeply rooted cultural character, as demonstrated in traditional crafts that stands in opposition to this. The debate concerning the contents of history education in the schools remains unsettled. We hear some criticize what they describe as a "petite nationalism." There is no guarantee that we will not see the advent of a dynamic force of denial functioning on a society-wide level. If they wish to avoid this, there are two things that people working in the crafts should probably keep in mind.

The first is maintaining a strong awareness of the kind of irony involved in identity that we have mentioned above. There is a need for people in the crafts to think about the sharp slash between "tradition" and "crafts" if they wish crafts to be actively involved in the process of creating the agreement = rapport that lies at the foundation of a consensus that should be found beyond the suspicion and fear in today's society, and at more than just a level of physical need. This is because, in the social conditions that are sure to come, the type of closed consensus embraced

by traditional crafts is sure to eventually have the effect of strengthening the impending suspicion and fear rather than relieving it.

In order for crafts to become committed to creating new consensus, the second thing artists and craftsmen must do is to search for a path that will bring complexity itself, in other words "craft-like things," actively into their working methods. The problems of social/cultural mixing will naturally come to focus in the post-modern world, and regarding this, it should be kept in mind that the concept of "tradition" was encompassed in the idea of ethnic purity and autonomy, and that purity and autonomy were among the guiding concepts of Modernism.

In today's social conditions where the intensification of mixing (complexity) is making security an urgent problem, the concept of traditional crafts based on a consciousness of justifying one's culture and the ideals of cultural purity and autonomy, has already lost its role as a medium of social/cultural criticism. Traditional crafts have already completed their social dislocation in a passive phase. And, this is a point that holds true not only for crafts. In the world of contemporary art, there is an emerging movement to open up new possibilities of creation as complexity in order to reform the identity of "art" (fine arts) in its relation to society, the urban environment and the market. Contemporary art is moving forward resolutely and actively to change itself. Of course, this is not a movement that has just begun recently. But, this movement has certainly gained new urgency and significance in the face of today's larger social conditions. Amidst the ongoing rush of mixing in today's society, this movement has significance as a practical pursuit of the possibilities of a "better way of living."

Crafts as complex have much in common with this type of contemporary art. And this can be read in the new context of a practical search by both for a human ethic on which to base consensus in the face of cultural confusion (complexity). Furthermore, being a search for new forms, a line is drawn between this and moralistic claims of things like "humanistic virtue (仁)" or "civil propriety (礼)." And, it is a search that connects—even through the irony involved in all things new—to an essence that art has continued to pursue over the ages.

(1) Georg Simmel, *1858-1918: The Handle from A Collection of Essays*, edited by Kurt H. Wolff [et al.], The Ohio State University Press, Columbus, 1959, p. 267

(2) *Ibid.*, 272

(3) *Ibid.*, 270

(4) *Ibid.*, 270