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The Paris World’s Fair, held from 24 May to 25 November, 1937 had the theme of “Art and Technology in Modern Life”. Japan decided to participate in order to promote international trade, reaffirm relations between Japan and France, and as a preparatory event for the kigen 2600nen kinen nihon bankoku hakurankai (World’s Fair in commemoration of the 2600th anniversary of the founding of Japan) in 1940.

For the Paris Fair, a specially organized committee, in conjunction with the Japanese Ministry of Industry and Commerce, was confident that it could make a successful selection of exhibits, however its choice of traditional crafts objects received considerable criticism. In this paper, I would like to outline some of these criticisms and consider the process of exhibit selection.

1. The Japanese pavilion and Criticism

The Japanese pavilion in the Paris World’s Fair aimed to present a unified and coherent design philosophy in its architecture, exhibits and the form of display. The choice of objects and exhibitors was the responsibility of the Ministry of Industry and Commerce, and the main objective was that exhibits would promote cultural strength of Japanese industries and be strictly vetted. The exhibits were divided into 4 sections: katei-seikatsu-bu (Domestic Life), shōten-bu (Retail), bunka-senden-bu (Promotion of Culture) and kagaku-bu (Science).

The main section of the Japanese pavilion was ‘Domestic Life’, with displays of model rooms, some of which were provided by department stores. The ‘Retail’ section exhibited craft objects as a “display of up-market products”. Among the exhibits in the ‘Promotion of Culture’ section there was a map of Japan made of metal, displays of photographs, and a model of a modern house. Cine reels and records were also played. The ‘Science’ section aimed at showcasing state-of-the-art Japanese scientific and technological developments.

Before the Paris World’s Fair, the exhibits were displayed at the Nihonbashi branch of the Takashimaya department store in January, 1937 but were the target of some criticism.

The criticisms can be summarized as being that although the exhibits were of value culturally, they were not modern enough for the Paris Expo. Also the design of the displays and the Paris World’s Fair Committee itself came under attack, the model rooms being a particular target. In addition, the excessive number of exhibits and complexity of the displays was also criticised. In “DIE WELTWOCHE”, Giedion reportedly judged the Japanese displays were imitation of European objects, saying that the Japanese should thank to the architect who designed their pavilion, because it prevented the nation’s contribution from being a complete joke.

What was the cause of this criticism?

2. The selection process

A succession of different plans for the Japanese pavilion were proposed; first by Maekawa Kunio, then Maeda Kenjiro, and finally by Sakakura Junzo. The selection of exhibits was made in August 1936, following Maeda’s proposal, mainly based on a traditional Japanese aesthetic. As the pavilion was supposed to be coherent in its overall conception, it was assumed that the selection of exhibits should match Maeda’s design. Besides which the Paris World’s Fair Committee and the Ministry of Industry and Commerce, through this coordination of content and building design, wanted to promote traditional Japanese design. Maekawa’s modern plan was vetoed, in favour of Maeda’s design.

3. Selection of exhibits

Japanese craft magazines were informed that some of the exhibits were particularly special items from the Fourth Export Crafts Exhibition organized by the Ministry of Industry and Commerce in October 1936. The Export Crafts Exhibition had first been held in 1933 to promote the export of domestic craft objects, focusing on practical items for daily use. From this point of view, we can consider that issues of international trade influenced the choice of exhibits of Paris World’s Fair. However, from the 755 exhibitors of the Fourth Export Crafts Exhibition and 97 prize winners, only the work of only 17 was shown at the Paris World’s Fair. It was probably cause that the exhibits were immature because the export crafts exhibition planed the improvement.
At that time, many Japanese handmade goods for export were poor quality and did not have a very good reputation abroad. Therefore, it was considered necessary to promote up-market and luxury objects for export, over everyday household items to show off the potential of the Japanese craftwork industry. This decision to show the quality of higher-end products showed that the organizers well understood how Japan’s image could be improved.  

4. Selected crafts

Exhibits for the exposition were selected by agreement directly with artist. There was not only newly created work like porcelain by the Okura chinaware maker, but also pieces which had previously been seen in Japan such as a ceramic vase by Kawai Kanjiro which was privately loaned by a friend of the artist. Wada Sanzo, who was a professor at the Tokyo Bijutsu gakkō (the Tokyo School of Fine Arts), exhibited an embroidered wall hanging (shishū kabekake) and a decorated plate (toban soboryo) at the exposition, but also acted as a consultant and recruited other exhibitors. For example, giving advice to the International Tourist Office for the production of the metal map of Japan (kankō senden kinzoku chizu), the Jiyūgakuen Kōgei Kenkyūjo (Jiyū Gakuen Craft Institute) for their exhibits, and for the design of Nakajima Yoshiharu’s glass vase and Hattori Tokei Ten (Hattori Clock Store)’s electric record player. Also, he recruited Ezaki Eizō and Mori Shōzō to exhibit and probably he organized the exhibition of Nachi Takiko’s work. Then it seems the Committee emphasized a direct invitation for artists.

The Japanese report on the expo, published in 1939, described the selection of exhibits as being specifically designed to show off the cultural strength of Japanese industries which was represented by high quality and luxurious craft objects.  The exhibition of traditional arts and crafts was clearly desired by the Paris World’s Fair Committee. Of course, craft objects for everyday use were exhibited, but it was not made explicit if these could be mass-produced.

Conclusion

As mentioned, the exhibits chosen for the Japanese pavilion at the Paris World’s Fair were the cause of a lot of criticism domestically and abroad. This was because it focused on promoting traditional Japanese design and showing off hand-crafted art objects which was contrary to the expo’s theme of modern life. Another issue was the disconnect between the modern display space of Sakakura Junzo and the exhibits being chosen to match Maeda Kenjirō’s design. Besides, various tendencies aimed for practical crafts based on modern life were emerging. In conclusion, this contemporary situation seemed to cause harsh criticism against the selection of high quality art crafts for the 1937 Paris World’s Fair.