

Globalization and Native Tradition: Some Remarks on the Situation of Handicrafts, Fine Arts, and Folk Culture in Japan and Poland

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Introduction

By the end of the last century, “globalization” became one of the key words used in politics, social discourse, and cultural studies. It was and is understood as an intensification of certain specific processes in almost all areas of life, an intensification which also leads to an erasure of differences, a homogenization of the world as a series of interconnected elements, including prominently a culture of consumption. In distinction to “universalization,” with its promise of order and hope, this new word points instead to global effects and outcomes, which are unintended and unforeseeable. (Bauman 72)

During this process of globalization, we are witness to an overcoming of national boundaries by economic and technological mechanisms and systems. We also observe cultural changes, which—thanks to new technologies—and in particular, changes in one’s understanding of time and space. Thanks to globalization, events both distant and near are seen as occurring simultaneously and close to us. The very distinction of the center and the periphery thus becomes obliterated, and previously circulated universal cultural symbols lose their importance when one decides about one’s life choices. The role of family tradition is diminished. This in turn causes an overcoming and an erasure of cultural barriers, which makes it easier for elements of different cultures to interpenetrate.

Thus our life takes its course within a multicultural world—particularly in cities where we find hyperspaces, such as airports, hotel chains, and shopping centers. These are identical in the East and the West, similarly full of anonymous customers, who have access in the same place both to global and local products (for example, recordings in music stores). Previously, such occasions for the meeting of cultures,

and for the mixing of their elements, arose primarily through various kinds of pilgrimages to holy sites.

Globalization has an aggressive character, taking in everything in its path like a tsunami. It homogenizes, it makes alike, and carries further elements that originate in different cultural habits, nations, and environments. It combines serious values with grotesque. It creates a global marketplace, which sweeps away ethnic, familial habits and tastes. And yet this does not interfere with one's speaking one's native tongue, or attending one's ethnic school or church—there thus exists the possibility of maintaining national traditions, which determine a collective national consciousness, the otherness of which is primarily seen from the outside. And so the “Japanese-ness” of the Japanese is a quality seen by outsiders who idealize and stereotype. It includes everything that determined the Japanese in their past behavior: Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism, and other value systems, which have become a part of the domestic tradition of the Japanese, even though in the past they had been only “Chinese” or even “Western” (European and American).

The Problem of Overabundance

In the era of globalization, one is confronted with a potentially endless sequence of influences and threats. In the space of global influence, one is exposed to “an infinite diversity of stimuli” (Leder 87), while our senses are overexposed to an overabundance of simultaneous signals.” The metaphor of a soap bubble illustrates this state well” (Leder 87). The reality within this bubble is saturated with the connections of everything with everything else, with things from almost the whole world. Too often one has to choose, and especially renounce, wasting one's energy to eliminate and reduce. (Leder 89)

Here, it would be a useful reminder that the fundamental experience in the development of civilization in the past was a feeling of lack (Leder 90), that is, an insufficient number of means, goods, freedom, knowledge, etc. Visions that conceptualized the feeling of lack gave a sense of balance and rightness to this world. For example, thanks to the vision or concept of progress, the present world of lack was adorned with the hope of a “kingdom of plenty” in the future (a task for future generations during Communism). In this conception, forward movement and an opening to the future are the most important.

Hybridization

If it were for the market and the needs of large corporations to decide, the world of culture would tend toward full uniformity. (Kluszczyński 277-286) But there is also a theoretical possibility that the individualized needs of individuals and groups, using the Internet etc., would be able to express their individuality, and a global order could lead to a multi-language tower of Babel (exactly like in today's European Union!). But perhaps the most likely possibility is that the world will take on the features of a hybrid system—that is, a system of individual expressions which carry the stamp of cultural borrowings. At the same time, corporations would find the ability to compromise with desires alien to them. In this way, corporate-stimulated standardization is broken through individual expressions (Kluszczyński 278).

The Role of Tradition

On the other hand, valuable esthetic patterns can be preserved in local cultures, which—if appropriately used—could serve to enrich the world. The productions of local environments, counted among so-called folk culture or folklore, have no chance for survival without national programs of support. Kept in theme parks, they are condemned to a total marginalization and disappearance (e.g., the cultures of the Incas, the Aztecs, the Ainu) together with their creators. However, including the remaining elements of a local culture within the sphere of national or even international consumption can make the difference in allowing them to be preserved in memory and used in other, even if hybrid, creations.

Wider currents of national tradition are also threatened. It is beyond doubt that not only in science, but also in the arts, everyone seems to be preoccupied with the same things, at a cost to conceptions of culture which spring from domestic esthetic tradition. (Rewers 201)

One often believes that today it is economists and politicians who make decisions about culture, and who accentuate the connections of culture with society and economics. In the budgets of both local and central governments, the financing of cultural projects meets with tremendous difficulties. One could say that state sponsorship is disappearing, while private sponsorship is not sufficiently developed, especially in poorer countries, including Poland. There are no funds to realize ambitious cultural projects, and the market favors only pop culture.

We should remind ourselves that without the support of the Ashikaga, such an advanced and refined art as the noh theatre would not have arisen. Today, the rules of the market (commercial demands made of artistic creation) compel artists to cater to the tastes of a mass audience. Huge corporations care mostly for profit, for the chance to sell to a global market. They globalize the market, creating supermarkets of culture. Their projects find their way to movie theaters or markets in Europe, Asia, New York, Tokyo, Seoul, Hong Kong. Undoubtedly, they enrich and co-create in this way a multicultural dimension. However, “a global cultural economy” (Appadurai) expresses itself foremost in the coming and going of occasions that create a tension between cultural homogenization and cultural heterogeneity (Rewers 210). The force of resistance from local or national values can thus in some way mean a return to cultural differentiation.

The cultural space should be, and is, a subject of study. This is not news. For space has been multicultural, beginning from the most distant past, for example Mesopotamia, ancient Greece, Rome, or medieval Japan. Even in local, provincial centers, one mixes that which is local with that which is global (one used to say—“universal”). This goes by the name of glocalization.

Cities constitute a unique, kaleidoscopic space without borders, also called a “third dimension,” or a hybrid space, with Tokyo an excellent example of this. As a reminder, hybridization was a key concept used in describing the postmodern condition. (Rewers 207)

There are also the traditions of “small homelands,” of regions. Globalization has given rise to movements which promote the acceptance and preservation of local national or religious traditions. In the experience of their participants, these appear as possibilities, not as elements of the everyday. Thus, they can be a means for realizing individual needs. At the same time, “the tradition of some self-understood ‘my’ toward which the individual—in happiness and in sorrow—can always refer themselves, becomes visibly weakened.” (Jacyno 117) The acceptance of a local tradition becomes, in today’s situation of globalization, an element of choice in the strategy of auto-construction, and not a matter of “content.”

The Situation of Country Crafts in Poland

During the process of globalization, nothing promotes a need for Polish artistic

crafts. If someone needs any such products, one can just as well use Scandinavian products, or Chinese ones. Retail corporations in Poland (French, German, American supermarkets, for example), prefer that which brings profit. They do not make the effort to promote the arts, for example by building galleries or exhibit spaces within their markets. Polish products which are not mass-market are on an equal footing, and so they cannot compete. To some extent, however, identity choices can lead to a preference for Polish products. For example, one can hear sometimes said in a whisper, “And yet Polish silver is better.”

Of course, Polish artist-craftsmen are present along the full spectrum of traditional materials workmanship. They work with gold, silver, and bronze, furniture, ceramics, glassware and decorative glass, looms and textiles, leather goods, watch making, and many others. They produce both decorative and utilitarian objects. From the point of tradition, artist-craftsmen do not limit themselves to copying the products of bygone masters; often, they revivify old patterns, adapting them to modern criteria of use and esthetics, even while they return to old techniques and materials. Many skills are maintained within families and trade groups, which keep up a tradition of high quality craftsmanship. In the area of clothes design and tailor-making, one should notice especially a specialization in regional costumes, in which there is maintained the recreation of skills and methods in the making of folk costumes from different areas of Poland. Some workshops are also attempting to “nationalize” modern patterns of wear (Sieradzka 384), and thus an original combining of embroidery, frills, and fabrics originating in folklore. However, no one has had a success comparable to, for example, Hanae Mori or Issey Miyake of Japan.

In addition to regional costumes, paper cutouts, or colored Easter eggs, there are no significant products that have a specifically Polish character. The situation is different in Japan, which can be proud of a large number of products distinguished by their “Japaneseness” when contrasted with European or American ones.

Although many distinguished works are created in Poland, none of the branches of artistic craftsmanship has distinguishing marks of Polishness (beside the aforementioned regional dress, and a limited number of folklore artifacts) that would determine the Polish character of the product. To be sure, they satisfy an often shyly expressed—less often publicly—desire to “buy Polish.” I mention this only in order to confirm the thesis about one of the unintended effects of globalization: the

emergence of desires through which the area of individual choice is enlarged (Jacyno 108). Markets too give rise to many possibilities—in one place one can find products from almost the entire world, although, too often, not from Japan.

Folk Costumes and Mazowsze

There are not many artistic patterns in Poland that would be distinctly associated with Polishness. (In this category, Japan is beyond all competition.) However, we can consider some examples of art that originates in two sources, namely folk costumes presented by the Song and Dance Ensemble Mazowsze (as well as many other regional groups) and the work of the world-famous sculptor, Magdalena Abakanowicz (born 1930). The following words express well the goals of Mazowsze: “we tend to return increasingly often to the source, to our cultural roots, to national, regional and local tradition” (Sandecki). Without digressing into the beauty of the songs and dance, I would merely like to point out the rich kaleidoscope of colors it presents on the stage, particularly with the rich costumes from the Masovia region in central Poland. These costumes used to have a functional utility, to be worn on holidays (today no one wears them outside of performance), but now they have become works of folk art as well as cultural symbols.

Polish folklore fascinates with its diversity, which testifies to the inventiveness and talents of its creators. (Ziejka 7) Along with the archaism which springs from the power of tradition, we see in it an ability to adapt to new materials, techniques, and patterns of style. Every creation is made by hand, and even in its typical features it is individual and unrepeatable. Each object is decorated, independently of its function. This is most clearly visible in the case of parade or holiday costumes, or decorated furniture, colorful cutouts, or painted Easter eggs. These distinguish themselves sharply from works of serial manufacture. We observe the beauty of form in simple wooden utensils and tools. Nevertheless, their use is already marginal, and the esthetic feelings they evoke is similarly limited.

Abakan

In comparison, the creative work of Abakanowicz springs from European sources. Following study at Warsaw’s Academy of Fine Arts in the 1960s, she became familiar with traditional weaving in Gobelin and Aubusson. A few years later, she began to create her own large scale sculptures of weavings, using atypical materials. These sculptures, due to the originality of their form and material, acquired the

specific name of *abakan*. Today, after her world-famous human figures (from the 1970s) made from hardened strings of flax (*Figures*) as well as her accurately rendered heads, multiplied casts (for example, *Backs* 1976-80, *Crowds* 1986-91), Abakanowicz creates bronze sculptures and arranges them in a landscape (for example, in her *Dragon Space*, 1988 Seoul). She has also carried out an architectural projects and sculptures in a Hiroshima park. Her creativity suggests that there is still room for original, individual forms of expression using the available means of European culture, despite the global influences conspiring against individuality.

Japan – Tatsumura Kōhō and Tradition

The creativity of Tatsumura Kōhō (born 1946) is a good example of a creative use of Japanese tradition at a time of globalization. This artist is a master of the traditional Japanese art of colorful weaving (*nishiki*). During exhibitions of his weavings in Europe, audiences were able to admire the best features of “Japaneseness,” in which tradition combines with modernity. The typical motifs of his works recall to one’s mind precisely Japan, no other Far Eastern country, although the sources of these motifs and techniques also included continental, East Asian cultures, in particular the Han and Tang dynasties.

During an exhibition entitled “Japanese Brocade Nishiki Art: Kōhō—The Ultra-Modern Inherent in Tradition,” in Krakow one saw brocade weavings (*nishiki*) created with modern technology and ancient techniques preserved, among other places, at the repository of Shōsōin. Tatsumura’s weavings are indeed paintings: they look as if painted, even though they were created from a delicate weaving of silk thread. They expose their colors depending on the light and the angle of vision. They leave the viewer with an unforgettable impression.

The work that makes a lasting impact was *The Graceful Pine Tree, or Miyabi no matsu*, which was the emblem of The Tenth International Conference of the EAJS in Warsaw in 2003. Here, on a purple background, we see an old pine tree—a symbol of longevity and loyalty. It is ringed with ivy, which symbolizes a couple living in harmony (the pine meaning a man, and the ivy—woman). Thus the motif, popular in Japan and known also from noh theater, usually giving rise to stereotypical associations, here comes to life with the glow of gold brought out by green with a background of purple, provoking a feeling of mystical depth and eternal time.

The majority of brocaded pictures (*nishikie*) designed by Tatsumura give the impression of spatial composition, as if cubical. However, this impression depends on the right kind of lighting to bring out the dimensionality of the silk threads.

The motif of waves, which used to decorate some kinds of Japanese paper also gives rise to poetic impressions. Aristocrats of the Heian era wrote their poems on such paper. They valued the great craftsmanship of its creators, and the combining of the wavy lines of the paper with beautiful calligraphy (*kana*) was a high point of Japanese esthetics. It is precisely this tradition that has come alive again in the composition called *The Inland Sea of Seto*, which gives the impression of being woven by light beams that change color while dancing on minute waves.

Chinese motifs also played a big role in the composition of brocaded fabrics. Tatsumura Kōhō has used and transformed these in many of his well-known works, including the *Ryūsenkin* (Clay Tile's Dragon Design). Here, against a light blue background, he situated a multicolored composition, which recalls to mind the creators of ornaments pressed into glazed roof tiles during the Han epoch. (Tatsumura 10) In the center of this composition, we see a dragon (usually the sign of the emperor), suggesting the distinction of the culture of ancient China. The artist uses allegorical motifs, which often appear in congratulatory ornaments, such as the *Sekiryū jufuku monkin* (Congratulatory Design with Pomegranates), in which the pomegranate signifies "many sons," and the peach—congratulations. The added citrus fruits and bamboo add to the sincerity of the wishes for happiness. In the *Kajitsu shukuju* (Congratulatory Fruits), the artist combines the old motif or theme of "three wishes in flowers," combining bamboo, the *nanten* bush (with its bright red fruit), and other "fortuitous" flowers. This kind of composition usually expresses wishes for good health, long life, and many sons, and is often used on occasions of marriage or birth. Another motif, "three kinds of happiness," composed of citrus fruits, peaches, and pomegranates, has a similar meaning. In Tatsumura's composition, the two are combined into one picture in order to intensify the good wishes.

As far as Buddhist themes, the artist refers to them among others in the green composition entitled *Kinsei hōsōge karakusa ryūde* (Symmetrical Hōsōge Arabesque with Dragon), also inspired by continental roof tiles, but this time from Kyongju in Korea. *Hōsō* signifies here the rays of the light of Buddha, while *ge*—big petals of

a flower, most likely lotus as a seat of Buddha, while the dragon here could be the guard of the Buddha.

Tenpyō hōō monkin (Tenpyō Phoenix) is a composition of two phoenixes under the tree of life. It was created to commemorate the completion of work on the curtain for the National Bunraku Theater. It refers to an ancient fabric, with a Persian motif, dating from the Tenpyō period (722-748), and preserved in the Shōsōin Repository. Similarly, the *Tenpyō no fūin* (The Elegance of Tenpyō) is a copy of a pattern taken from a screen (also Shōsōin). The threads used here were colored using an ancient technique, while the motifs of animals and trees recall the style of the Sasanid epoch in Persia. (Tatsumura 15, 103)

The artist also used Shōsōin patterns in *Mitsuda karahana monkin* (Mitsuda-e Style Chinese Flowers), as well as the *Sairyō heidatsu nishiki* (Colorful Heidatsu Brocade) and the *Sairyō budō karakusamon kin* (Grapevine Scrolls). In the beautiful *Saika shokusei nishiki* (Colorful Brocade of Shokusei Weave) he used the technique of *shokusei*, detected in fragments of material preserved in the Shōsōin Repository, from which the surplices of monks (*kesa*) used to be sewn supposedly during the time of Sakyamuni Buddha.

In other compositions, Tatsumura also refers to Hellenic motifs (mosaics), for example in the *Artemis no kakera* (Fragment of Artemis), *Dionysos no hana* (Dionysos's Flower), or the idea of the Pax Romana (*Rōma no heiwa*), as well as mixed patterns discovered along the Silk Road. The motif of a gathering of birds on the *Wa no tsudoī* (Harmonious Gathering) indeed represents missionaries of hope of a time when cultural exchange flowered. From this path where so many cultures crossed, and in particular from Turfan (from the burial ground of the Uigur fortress of Astana) there originates the pattern of oval chains surrounding Chinese characters expressing “nobility” (see *Kōki mon* – Design of Nobility).

Abstract universals are also an attractive source of inspiration for creative artists whose careers have been devoted to the recreation of the disappearing tradition of artistic weaving. In such works as the *Zipangu nishiki* (Zipangu Brocade), *Seto no uchiumi* (Inland Sea of Seto), *Tabusegawa no hikari to kaze* (Light and Breeze over the Tabuse River) the foremost themes are universal ones: light, time, movement, wind, cosmology. And yet even these creations have a Japanese flavor, thanks to the

geographical names and plant motifs typical in Japanese culture (*kiri, matsu, kaya, ume, take*).

In the pattern-making of belts (*obi*) we can observe this Japanese quality also in the choice of colors, for example with the *Yūsoku itsutsushima kantō* (Yūsoku Five-colored Stripes) or *Shima gyokurin* (Golden Scales on Stripes). In the experimental *Texture Series* we can find influences of European abstractionism. And despite this, the artist achieves his vision of a universal form, resting on the Chinese conception of the five elements: wood, fire, earth, metal, and water.

Thus, the modern textures of Tatsumura are only one example of the connection between modern arts and tradition. They are one of many achievements of contemporary Japanese arts and artistic craftsmanship, deeply rooted in tradition both through the use of a unique system of teamwork, perfected in the Edo era, and through the use of old techniques.

Tatsumura uses silk to create many kinds of everyday use objects, like *obi* belts or theater curtains. But all of his works have a high artistic value. They surprise with their original combination of colors and motifs, but also give the impression of natural harmony. Tatsumura goes back not only to ancient East Asian, especially Japanese and Chinese, sources. He is also inspired by shapes (*katachi*) discovered in nature, for example in sand, water, rocks. One should also note that he is very interested in movement, which is shown in his composition “Phoenix in the Egg of the Universe” (*Uchū no tamago no fenikusu*).

The phoenix—a symbol of eternity and of the power of rebirth—became a fundamental motif for Tatsumura thanks to an order for hanging textiles from a certain company, which desired its own rebirth. For the artist, this work also concerned the rebirth of ancient Japanese fabrics, fragments of which (*meibutsugire*—celebrated fabrics) have been preserved thanks the Shōsōin Repository in Nara and its special talent for taking care of relics.

In sum, Tatsumura Kōhō is an artist who, with great effort but successfully, assists in the creation of a cultural identity for modern Japan, not minding the difficulties created by the processes of globalization, with their preference for pop culture.

In Japan, there are other notable artists, who resist the pressure of the mass, popular culture that accompanies globalization, and that homogenizes even the content of human consciousness through the mass media's shaping of the imagination. There is developing in Japan an original artistry in ceramics, paper *washi*, lacquerwork, metalsmithing, doll-making, woodblock printmaking, and garden design. Artists and craftsmen represent great creative potential in these fields thanks to their substantive grounding in tradition. These artists notably combine traditional skills with a philosophy of beauty which has been developed over centuries. They supply fresh ideas to European design as well as to domestic craftsmen and artists who have received an education in Europe and America, and also in the Western arts departments of Japanese schools. This Western orientation has been, after all, for centuries a part of Japanese tradition, and is thus often, paradoxically but appropriately, seen as a Japanese tradition.

And this is of inestimable value in our time of globalization, because Japanese art has a great role to play as a specific antidote to Western pop-culture. The positive attitude of recipients (consumers) of culture toward Japan and its products is an advantage for the Japanization of many aspects of culture, and especially in pop culture—a hybrid combination of Japanese and Western esthetics in manga, anime, horror movies, J-pop, the prose of Haruki Murakami, the music of drums and Japanese jazz, and also in the kitchen (as with the sushi bars so popular in Warsaw). One should also mention the recent craze for pokemon or sudoku. “Japanese” has recently become trendy, especially among youth. With this background, one cannot help being surprised by the interest shown in such difficult topics as noh or buto theater. However, in the “supermarkets of culture,” there still remains a place to be filled by Japanese crafts and artistic works. In Poland there is no wide access to Japanese television, for example. And perhaps the internet is the only open conduit for the propagation of Japaneseness to Poland and Europe, because the shopping galleries rising here have replaced the “houses of trade” of old, and today they are nothing more than supermarkets, in which there are no art galleries (in Japan, this was an important part of a shopping center). There remain museums and other exposition spaces, and Japanese art seldom arrives here from Tokyo or Kyoto. Sometimes, the most shocking, avant-garde happenings come from New York. In 2003, the exposition of the weavings of Tatsumura Kōhō was brought directly from Kyoto to The Manggha Center of Japanese Art and Technology in Krakow. It is here that there are organized, on a regular basis, exhibits of Japanese objects and seminars

devoted to Japanese art, both traditional and modern. And in part they satisfy the Polish hunger for the cultural other, no matter what kind, as long as it comes from Japan.

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