

Cultural Assets Showcased as “Stories”

Aoyagi Masanori



MANY regions in Japan today are promoting cultural tourism with art and history museums as their bases. We spoke about Japan’s cultural tourism with Aoyagi Masanori, who worked as the Commissioner for Cultural Affairs at the Agency for Cultural Affairs of the Japanese government from 2013 to 2016 and is currently the Chairman of the Board of Directors for Tama Art University, director of both the Yamanashi Prefectural Museum of Art and the

Ishikawa Prefectural Museum of Art, and Director General of the Archaeological Institute of Kashihara, Nara Prefecture.

In a variety of regions in Japan, cultural tourism is currently being promoted centered on cultural facilities that include art and history museums, shrines, temples, and more. What is the background to these initiatives?

There are many unique forms of regional culture throughout the country of Japan. They are quite diverse, from traditional crafts, architecture and other tangible cultural properties to folk performing arts, festivals, and other intangible cultural properties. Even when we look globally, there aren’t many countries that have this level of rich regional cultures. The purpose of the promotion of cultural tourism today is to showcase these cultural assets as tourism resources both within Japan and abroad, leading to regional revitalization.

To promote cultural tourism, stories are important. Rather than simply showcasing valuable cultural assets, the history and charm of the region where these assets exist must also be clearly showcased as stories. The cultural assets themselves then radiate a lively charm, leading many people to gain an interest in cultural assets. You could say that what institutionalized this concept was the certification of Japan Heritage¹ by the Agency for Cultural Affairs and the enactment of the Cultural Tourism Promotion Act, which was enacted as a national law in May of this year

Photo: Courtesy of Tama Art University

(2020). This Act aims to revitalize areas by actively promoting cultural tourism and deepen an understanding of culture through the viewing of various cultural resources. It also aims to produce economic effects.

The background stories that cultural assets have accumulated are key points in cultural tourism, aren't they?

Definitely. In the past, French wine was defeated by wine from another country in an international wine contest. I had a Japanese friend who was a vice president of a company that makes wine at an old château in France, but his reaction to this was unexpected. I thought he would feel a sense of loss, but he said, "It's not a problem. In this day and age, if you want to create quality grapes, you can do it anywhere in the world. But for us, we can showcase the stories from history that the château has been through, something that rising new wine makers don't have." Indeed, his château was once owned by a historically famous aristocratic family so I'm sure the château has a variety of stories. We can say that people drink their wine while also thinking about the stories of this wine-producing château.

In the same way, there are heaps of excellent cultural assets in various parts of Japan that can be introduced to the world along with interesting stories. However, Japanese people haven't really told these stories as much.


What role do museums specifically play in cultural tourism?

Most regional museums are located where local culture has been systematically organized. They surely take on an introductory or encyclopedia-like role to learn about the regional culture for those who visit an area. I also think that they act as a central facility to collect various local cultural

assets and as a place to showcase culture itself.

For example, there is an art museum in Hokkaido where viewing the works by a local artist can be incorporated into a tour of the beautiful surrounding scenery and includes lunch using local ingredients. The tour has become popular for groups because participants can appreciate the distinctive stories of the place.

The Yamanashi Prefectural Museum of Art, where I serve as director, is famous for its Millet paintings, but in addition to these paintings, we also exhibit works by local artists and works that feature Yamanashi. It is also important to arrange works not only by world-famous artists, but also by young or local artists. I think that putting various works from leading artists together with those of young or local artists causes a variety of changes to occur and then new creative works are born.

You can also say that the accumulation of tangible and intangible culture in digital archives will be a major role for various museums including art museums in the future. Cultural assets suffered serious damage from the Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011. Even if a natural disaster occurs and various records and cultural assets are lost, they can still be accurately recorded and handed down if they've been digitally archived. If various museums including art museums save the photos and paintings of their corresponding regions, it is helpful for local governments and residents to learn about local changes of the past and future. Surely this role will become more and more important, together with their role as a base for cultural tourism. 

Interview by SAWAJI OSAMU

ⁱ Japanese tangible and intangible cultural properties/assets, i.e. regional histories, traditions and customs, are passed down for generations through narratives. These stories, telling of the legacy of our culture and histories, have been designated as "Japan Heritage" by the Agency of Cultural Affairs. <https://japan-heritage.bunka.go.jp/en/index.html>