Tsukurimono, Okimono and Art

HIDAKA Kaori

This paper surveys the history of “okimono” (free-standing display ornaments), which are works of art lacking in utility that are important when examining the relationship between tsukurimono and art.

The history of okimono can be summarized through two broad trends. First, there are those that, like animal sculptures and dolls, originally had no practical use and are three-dimensional objects that were made purely for the purpose of decoration. Second, there are those that, though possessing some kind of use by serving as incense burners, incense cases, water jugs, paper weights, and the like, deviated from the original functional forms of such artifacts and were made as animals and other figures and used as decorative pieces. These decorative art works gradually gained status from the Middle Ages through the Early Modern period through their decorative use as indoor decorations largely represented by the decorations placed in tokonoma that became popular. Then, with the arrival of the Modern period they became the subject of considerable attention as art works for export for the purpose of acquiring foreign exchange, thus assuming a new function.

The fate of tsukurimono was such that they were made for festivals and rituals and then destroyed after they had adorned a specific scene. In contrast, though okimono are extremely closely related to tsukurimono in that they too are non-utilitarian decorations, the fact that they weren’t destroyed and they retained their forms is a huge point of difference between the two. In past research into the history of art, little attention has been paid to okimono, just as with tsukurimono. Nonetheless, the study of these figures has some meaning when forming a picture of the figures from these periods and the society and culture that gave birth to them.