Soshoku and Kazari—A Study in the Context of Japan at the End of the 18th Century

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The use of the words "decoration" (soshoku) and "decorative" (soshoku-teki) as critical terms to describe the special characteristics of Japanese art—in particular its rich coloration, flatness and abundant use of gold and silver—is a relatively recent phenomenon in Japan as they came to be used in this manner during the 1890s. Japanese art first encountered the critical term decorative (soshoku-teki) at the time of the Paris International Exposition of 1867 beginning with the period of "Japonisme" that gained momentum during the 1870s and 1880s. An early instance of the use by Japanese themselves of the word soshoku (decoration) to describe Japanese art is found in the series of lectures on "Japanese Art History" (Nihon bijutsu-shi) given by Tenshin Okakura from 1890 to 1893, followed shortly afterwards in 1896 by Seigai Omura's critical appreciations of Ogata Korin.

The word soshoku was used as a translation of the Western word "decoration" in the English-Japanese dictionary Eiwa Tairyaku Shuchin Jiho (A Pocket Dictionary of the English and Japanese Languages) compiled by Hori Tatsunosuke and published in Japan at the end of the Early Modern Period in 1862. It had, however, already appeared in classical Chinese documents and had been used during the Edo Era for a number of different meanings. Terms such as zashiki-kazari (decoration of a reception room), shogon (literally, "magnificent and impressive") and kazari-mono (decorative object) that along with soshoku are terms that describe the "culture of decoration" (kazari no bunka) all appear in an interesting work called "En'yu Nikki" (Diary of Banquets and Pleasures), a voluminous work of 26 volumes in 13 sections stored in Yanagisawa Bunko Library that was written by Yanagisawa Nobutoki (1724-1792), the retired lord of the Koriyama feudal domain in Yamato Province. The term soshoku is used in his diary for the words hyoso and sotai that refer to mountings for handscrolls and paintings. His use of the word shogon to describe the Main Hall of Eko-in Temple in the Ryogoku district of Edo and his use of zashiki-kazari to describe the decoration of a room to greet guests for a haikai poetry gathering held at his home Rikugi-en in Komagome are examples of their use in the context of urban Edo culture. But it is the term kazari-mono that occurs the most frequently and is used to refer to a variety of interesting phenomena.

The word kazari-mono is used to refer to the tsukuri-mono decorations of the annual O-eshiki Taisai Festival that took place during the tenth month at Kishibojin-do Temple in Zoshigaya and is used often for the lantern display (toro-kazari) at Nakano-cho in the Yoshiwara pleasure quarter that took place every year in the seventh month. Yanagisawa Nobutoki describes in detail the display of Bon lanterns put out each year on a variety of rich themes to commemorate the death of the courtier Tamagaki. It is interesting to note that when referring to the same lantern decorations he interchanges his use of the words kazari-mono and tsukuri-mono. The use of kazari-mono and tsukuri-mono with more or less identical meanings occurs often in these diaries and is indeed deserving of our attention. It is clear from Yanagisawa's diaries that the "culture of decoration" of Edo is connected to "tsukuri-mono" (fabricated things) and "misemono" (popular street attractions), which were forms of a rich, urban visual culture.