Time and Historical Representation: A Museum Experiment on their Representation; Centered on the Great Hanshin Earthquake

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How is time represented?

This paper addresses this question in conjunction with an exhibition mounted by a museum that focuses on history. In general, it is thought that time passes from the past toward the future. But is this correct? For with time there is time that passes and time that does not pass. How are they represented in museum exhibitions?

I consider this issue based on the Great Hanshin Earthquake. In 2003, the National Museum of Japanese History (NMJH) held an exhibition called "Documenting Disaster: Natural Disasters in Japanese History 1703 to 2003." I was in charge of the section on the Great Hanshin Earthquake in this exhibition, and it is on the basis of this experience that I examine the representation of time.

The passage of time following the Great Hanshin Earthquake can be divided into three periods. First, there is a time that was like a chasm, a rupture and a hiatus that lasted an extremely short time after the disaster. This was followed by a time that continued for two to three months that may be best described as the time of disaster utopia or the "period of life" of a disaster. Volunteers were active during this period. Then, thirdly, there is a time when the disaster is preserved in memory, and during which events of the past are variously transformed and are conveyed via vestiges and remains.

These point to the pluralistic nature of human perceptions of time. The mechanism of this kind of perception of time is marked by time that is linear and non-linear, an embedded structure in time, and reality and actuality.

It could be said that up until now historical museums have not necessarily excelled in representing the qualities of this kind of pluralistic time. There is a need for historical representation based on new perceptions of time in today's new era.