Cultural Changes in the Consumption of Crafts and Their Relationships with Department Stores: A Case Study of the Folk Crafts Movement and Related Matters

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From the Meiji period to the early Taishō period (from the late 19th to the early 20th century), department stores were extremely fashion-forward, creating new trends one after another. These stores were a place of high cultural values. They utilized art as a means to keep their status. A number of art exhibitions were organized by department stores before museums were established in Japan. This was one of the factors to boost the cultural value of department stores. From the mid-Taishō to the early Shōwa period (from the early to mid-20th century), some emerging art-related organizations used department stores as venues for exhibitions to raise their recognition and reputation. This paper presents case studies of the Folk Crafts Movements that emerged as one of cultural movements at the end of the Taishō period. In particular, this paper examines how the members of these movements used department stores in order to reveal the relationships between department stores and the cultural consumption of crafts (especially handicrafts) in modern Japan. The analysis of the relationships especially focuses on the following two aspects of folk handicraft movements: (i) the activities of artists as members of the movements and (ii) the enlightenment activities of the movements. The former aspect is analyzed through a case study of the connections between the artists and the art sections established at department stores around the 1900s. The case study takes a close look at Kenkichi Tomimoto, an artist who played an important role in the art sections from their beginning, and individual artists who joined the movements, such as Shōji Hamada. Meanwhile, the latter aspect is analyzed through a case study of exhibitions held by Mingei Kyōkai, a folk craft association involved in the movement, and its relationships with department stores in the late 1920s to the 1930s. Through these analyses, this paper reveals the following two points: (i) how the Folk Crafts Movement, as one of emerging cultural movements, saw and used department stores; and (ii) how crafts (value-added products) were consumed through department stores (patterns of “cultural” consumption in a wider sense).

Key words: The folk crafts movement, exhibition, the art sections of department stores, cultural consumption, handicrafts