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Japanese Civilization in the Modern World

XVII

Collection and Representation

**Edited by
Tadao Umesao
Angus Lockyer
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Senri Ethnological Studies

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SENRI ETHNOLOGICAL STUDIES 54

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Preface

This volume of *Senri Ethnological Studies* (SES) is the result of the Taniguchi Symposium, “Japanese Civilization in the Modern World: Comparative Studies of Collection and Representation,” held at the National Museum of Ethnology from December 7 to 14, 1998.

Human beings collect and surround themselves with natural and man-made objects. This activity of collection and the institutional and material complex which surrounds it have played an extremely important role in the development of civilization. One does not have to mention the great age of exploration to realize that collecting forms the starting-point for all increases in knowledge. On the other hand, it is often pointed out that the public museum and art museum, which were built throughout the world, beginning with the British museum, established in 1753, and the Louvre Museum, opened in 1793, together with expositions, beginning with the Great Exhibition in London in 1851, played a large part in the formation of the nation-state.

In this symposium, we looked at the modern development of collections from various perspectives, focusing particularly on Europe and Japan. Through a series of comparative studies, the great differences between Europe and Japan as regards collections and their exhibition became apparent. It is not too much to claim that collections in Europe have generally aimed to construct what one might call a microcosmos, bringing together the various objects which make up the world in a kind of universal survey, without distinguishing between natural and man-made objects. A collection thus became proof of one's ability to possess the world, and exhibiting it to the public a way of showing off one's power and knowledge. A collection in Japan, by contrast, whether of paintings, noh costumes, or weapons, is always premised on “use,” that is, on the collected objects actually being put to use, and thus it is common for the collection to be “exhibited” only within a limited circle. This difference between the protocols governing collections and their exhibition in Europe and Japan is likely related to current differences in the relationship between museums and the “people.”

The purpose of this symposium, however, was not merely to clarify this general contrast between East and West, but to uncover much new information about details of the historical record which have been previously overlooked. The week of intense discussion became in effect an opportunity to compile a “history of collection in Japan,” always keeping in mind the contrast with the West.

This volume contains all the papers, including the keynote address, revised by the participants to take into account the discussion at the symposium. Harumi Befu (Institute for Cultural and Human Research, Kyoto Bunkyo University) and Josef Kreiner (Institute for Japanese Studies, University of Bonn) — who have acted as coordinators for the whole series of Taniguchi symposia on civilization studies —

also participated in the symposium and commented on the papers, but their comments are not included here. We intend to include a complete transcript of the discussion in the Japanese proceedings of the symposium, now in preparation.

Recently, interest has quickened in the role which collection has played in modern history, but until now, there has been almost no discussion of its development in Japan in a way which would make it accessible for a Western audience; this publication of the results of the symposium in SES provides a new perspective with which to develop a comparative theory of civilizations, as well as a substantial contribution to research on collection and cultural representation.

The Taniguchi Foundation international symposia on civilization studies have been held every year since the first symposium in 1982, under the common theme of "Japanese Civilization in the Modern World." Using the framework of comparative civilization studies, they have attempted to construct a new outline of world history, always using Japan as a starting point for comparison, or in other words, by adding the Japanese "card" to the pack. The Taniguchi Foundation was dissolved in 1999, so bringing to an end this series of symposia. In choosing the theme of collection for this last symposium, we also intended to summarize the significance of these symposia on civilization studies, held at the National Museum of Ethnology, through a reexamination of the apparatus of the museum, which has functioned as their site. Our hope is that the discussion in this volume will make apparent the significance, in terms of civilization theory, of the way in which museums function in Japan.

Finally, we would like to express our heartfelt appreciation to the Taniguchi Foundation, which has supported not only this symposium, but the whole series of symposia stretching over the last 17 years. Throughout this period, all the participants have stayed in the same hotel and eaten together for the length of the symposium, continuing the discussion outside the conference room and so furthering intellectual exchange, as the late Toyosaburō Taniguchi wished. Through this series of symposia, the field of civilization studies has come into its own, and the place of Japanese civilization in world history has become clearer. At the same time, we should not forget that these symposia have helped build an extensive, deeply rooted network of human relationships. We clearly bear a great responsibility in thinking how to make best use of, and further develop, this valuable legacy.

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