

# 15

## Design Recycle meets the product introduction hall

### Craft, locality and agency in northern Japan

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#### **Introduction**

In December 2012, a second-hand housewares shop appeared in Yamagata, a city in northern Japan. Items for sale included brightly coloured dishes, glasses and cookware from the 1960s and 1970s. Pots, pans and plates from Japanese, European and American manufacturers were displayed on sculptural wood furniture, itself also for sale. A sign explained the shop's concept:

Amongst already created products are long-life products that possess a universally-recognisable design sense, and can continue to enjoy steady sales and use. [We have] gathered products like this from each area of Yamagata. There may be things here just like those you use in your own home. A perspective unfettered by the distinction between 'old' and 'new' brings new discoveries. (Design Recycle 2012)

Second-hand housewares shops are common in Japanese cities, and the shop's focus on postwar housewares and furnishings with a distinctively modernist aesthetic – clean lines, bright colours, abstract patterns and sculptural forms – corresponds to the revival and popularity of 'mid-century modern' style since 2000. Indeed, the second-hand furniture was entirely comprised of pieces by Tendo Mokko, a furniture manufacturer located in the same prefecture whose modernist pieces are prized by collectors and found in museum collections worldwide.

Unusually for a design shop, Design Recycle was located within a 'product introduction hall' (bussan shokai shitsu) for traditional local craft and food products (see Figure 15.1). Scandinavian-style juice glasses intermingled with iconic Yamagata crafts such as carved wooden roosters, papier mâché dolls and patterned towels, alongside tins of apple juice and other agricultural products, presented in cheerily bright packaging. This unusual combination formed part of the



**FIGURE 15.1** The product introduction hall at the Manabikan Mono School, Yamagata Japan, December 2012. Local crafts and foodstuffs were displayed alongside postwar housewares on used tables and stools from legendary modernist furniture manufacturer and local firm Tendo Mokko, also for sale. Photograph: Sarah Teasley.

Manabikan Mono School, a public facility in central Yamagata. As operated by Colon Design, a local design agency under contract from the Yamagata city government, the Manabikan Mono School aimed to connect Yamagata's existing crafts industries with the city's new creative communities and with new markets, and to promote 'making' to local residents generally. Like the Design Recycle pop-up, which reframed ordinary household objects as valuable items of modernist heritage for casual visitors, the product introduction hall reframed traditional crafts and foodstuffs as contemporary craft for a new, younger audience of residents and tourists alike.

Yamagata city is a regional centre for craft production, known particularly for iron casting and lacquered wooden Buddhist altars. Since the 1990s, craft industries in the city and surrounding Yamagata Prefecture have weathered economic and demographic challenges. In response, industry organizations, local and national government and design activists have experimented with new support mechanisms. In some cases, as with the Manabikan Mono School, these actions have brought members of craft communities into collaboration with new industries, technologies and markets – both within Yamagata and further afield.

This chapter articulates how Colon Design and Chobundo, a Yamagata iron-casting firm, have engaged with new actors and technologies to reframe local crafts products as lifestyle goods for new markets, as a way to secure a future for Yamagata crafts. A key theme is 'the local' and how the various actors – at the national as well as local level – understand and employ the concept within crafts promotion activities in Yamagata. I suggest that 'the local' is subject to interpretive flexibility (Kline and Pinch 1996) and that actors have varying investments in Yamagata as a locale, but that these differing understandings and investments do not impede collaboration. Rather, the interactions discussed here are pragmatic collaborations to achieve differing aims through shared

results. In a short chapter it is impossible to name all actors and interactions, let alone to assess their impact. However, a further hope is that presenting some actors and interactions might offer a model for carrying out similar initiatives elsewhere.

Anthropologists, geographers and historians have articulated how crafts industries and external actors adapt to changing conditions within globalizing economies, in Japan as elsewhere. A key strategy identified has been an emphasis on the local nature of craft production as a way to signify authenticity and value, particularly for consumers operating within globalized economies (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998; Comaroff and Comaroff 2009; Cavanaugh and Shankar 2014; Boyd Gillette 2016; Wilkinson-Weber and DeNicola 2016). As Susan J. Terrio writes:

Indeed it is the politics of cultural authenticity in global markets that enables genuine craft businesses and commodities produced over time in a specific place to be maintained, revived and/or reinvented precisely because they can be commoditized and sold as such. Within the framework of international capitalism, a regional identity tied closely to a specific production mode, labor practices, associational forms, or indigenous goods becomes a valuable commodity which can be readily marketed to and purchased by tourists eager to consume tradition. (Terrio 1999, p. 129)

Since the early twentieth century, intellectuals, civil servants and entrepreneurs have regularly publicized ‘the regions’ (chiiki) as a more ‘authentic’ Japan, in hopes that doing so might support regional economies through tourism and the consumption of regional products (Moeran 1990; Ikuta, Yukawa and Hamasaki 2007; Ivy 1995; Creighton 1997; Wigen 1996; Kikuchi 2004; Brandt 2007; Love 2010). Most recently, in the late 2000s, influential Tokyo-based designers and curators previously associated with product design, graphic design and branding began to promote the consumption of regional tourist experiences and products – light industry and foodstuffs as well as craft – as a vehicle for accessing Japanese cultural heritage (Nagaoka 2015). At the same time, other design activists began promoting ‘endogenous’ (naihatsu-teki) development on a national scale (Dimmer 2017). This chapter contextualizes these actions within the longer history of centralized promotion of local culture and industry, but the main focus is to articulate how industry actors in Yamagata have interacted with these external actors and their concept of ‘local craft’ (Klien 2010). In doing so the object is also to displace the view to ‘the regions’ and to argue for an expanded understanding of new craft economies as formed of old and new actors alike (Edgerton 2006; Mohlman 1999; Pollard 2002; Matanle 2006; Teasley 2013).

## **Chobundo: A ‘traditional crafts producer’**

Iron casting is one of two Yamagata city products officially designated as a traditional craft product under the 1974 Law for the Protection of Traditional Craft Industries, but this designation belies iron casting’s history as industrial production. Yamagata iron casting dates to the sixteenth century, when material availability, urbanization and population growth drew both iron and bronze casters to the area. Principal products included kettles, stoves and religious artefacts. Thanks partly to their popularity with pilgrims to a nearby shrine as souvenirs, Yamagata iron casting gained a national reputation in the eighteenth century.

Yamagata iron casting became 'craft' in the mid-twentieth century as a self-conscious, urgent response to a changing product landscape and daily life habits. The 1937 Yamagata City Commercial and Industrial Directory described iron casting as 'an important industry for this city' and listed 118 ironware firms located within city boundaries (Yamagata Shoko Kaigijo 1937: 20). After the Second World War, some firms diversified to agricultural, weaving and mining machinery and to car parts, becoming suppliers to larger local and regional industries (Yamagata Imono Kogyo Danchi Kyodo Kumiai n.d. a). Others began producing sewing machines, a popular product on domestic and export markets (Yamagata-ken Kikaku-bu Kikaku Kaihatsu-ka 1963). For the remaining iron-casting firms, domestic electrification and the arrival of affordable, mass-produced tin and aluminium kettles in the mid-1960s rendered cast iron kettles superfluous 'craft' items. Some producers rebranded their products for use in the tea ceremony, and others joined the world of 'artistic crafts' (*bijutsu kogei*), singular pieces sought after by collectors (Figure 15.2).

Support mechanisms played a role in making iron-casting craft. From the 1900s to the 1960s, prefectural and national industrial research institutes helped local industries adapt to change through design, technical and marketing support and training (Hayasaka and Atsumi 2013; Kogyo Gijutsuin Sangyo Kogei Shikenjo 1960). In the late 1960s, many institutes' focus shifted towards high-value technology and human factors, as mass-produced products replaced handmade light industries' products as everyday housewares (Kogyo Gijutsuin Seihin Kagaku Kenkyujo 1976). The 1974 Law for the Promotion of Traditional Craft Industries, backed by the Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI) and sponsored by the newly created Association for the Promotion of Traditional Crafts Industries, rebranded traditional industry as 'craft'. Promulgation allowed industries like Yamagata



**FIGURE 15.2** 'Yamagata ironwork': teapots for sale at Chobundo in Yamagata, Japan, December 2012. The ironwork kettles, teapots and vases for which Yamagata metalwork is best known are characterized by thin, lacquered skin, low-relief decoration and a tactile quality to the surface. Photograph: Sarah Teasley.

iron casting to apply for official designation (1975) as a recognized traditional craft, thus transitioning to luxury or lifestyle goods outside competition with novel, cheaper mass-produced goods (Tohoku Keizai Sangyo Kyoku n.d. a). Designation provides access to promotion mechanisms such as national and overseas exhibitions and branding, funding for new product and market development, the recording and preservation of skills and techniques, and materials and training schemes to secure successors and for new marketing (Hayasaka and Atsumi 2013; Japan Brand Ikusei shien jigyō' (n.d.), Keizai Sangyo Sho Daijin Kanbo Chosa Tokyo Guruppu (2014); Keizai Sangyo Sho 2015). In effect, the law offers similar support to that provided by the industrial research institutes, but differentiates products as craft – with the added urgency to retain technical knowledge and skills as makers die without successors (Tohoku Keizai Sangyo Kyoku n.d. c). Furthermore, marketing rhetoric and the well-publicized criteria for designation – local materials, techniques and tools, a minimum of 100 years' history, 'handcraft-ish' (shukyogyo-teki) processes and products predominantly used in everyday life use products – emphasize products' local and handmade identity, creating an aura of authenticity directed to market appeal (Sangyo Keizai Sho n.d.; Tohoku Keizai Sangyokoku n.d.).

In the mid-2010s, the city of Yamagata was home to twenty-four traditional iron-casting firms (Tohoku Keizai Sangyo Kyoku n.d.). Small and micro-businesses predominate, and include workshops going back several generations as well as relocated designer-artisans. Firms operate a cooperative association to liaise with state support mechanisms and organize promotional activities; a small museum is currently closed for lack of funding. External economic challenges include two decades of recession and the loss of central government subsidies to regions (Keizai Sangyo Sho Daijin Kanbo Chosa Tokyo Guruppu (2014); Rausch 2010; 2014), as well as import competition from China and the 3.11 earthquake and tsunami disaster, which had little physical impact on Yamagata but disrupted infrastructure and caused emotional distress. Japan's ageing population and low birth rate have resulted in regional depopulation, including in Yamagata Prefecture (Yamagata-ken Kikaku Fukko-bu Tokei Kikaku-ka 2016), further destabilizing northeastern Japan's economic base and social fabric (Assmann 2016; Brown 2006; Matanle and Rausch 2011); demographic change presents crafts industries like iron casting with a dwindling market and challenges finding successors (Yubido n.d.).

The iron-casting industry demonstrates the clear impact of these changes. Chobundo is a family micro-business founded in 1952, currently run by father and son Hasegawa Fumio and Hasegawa Mitsuaki (Hasegawa 2012). Shrinking demand and production volumes have changed labour structure and skills: in the 1950s and 1960s, the firm employed specialists for specific processes such as lacquering the exterior. In 2012, the Hasegawas performed all processes themselves. They retain batch production and hand tools, but employ a new workflow allowing more efficient throughput. They have retained the founder's materials and aesthetic but innovate within them to create new products and designs (Hasegawa 2012). Product design combines components of the founder's designs in novel ways rather than to create new objects, for example, transforming the pattern from the wall of a pot into a handle on the lid. The Hasegawas also, however, develop new product types for changing uses and markets. A rare decision to modify the form of Chobundo kettles resulted from the decision to create a kettle for induction hobs – in this case, to broaden the base, to fit the diameter of induction hobs. And while Chobundo is known for formal kettles and teapots for use in tea ceremony, less-expensive teapots for everyday use invite more casual purchases. Products in the Mono School product introduction hall included whale-shaped chopstick rests, designed and priced to appeal to the Mono School's younger, design-savvy visitors, not conventionally a market for local products or traditional crafts (Hasegawa 2012).



As participation in the Mono School suggests, Chobundo have accessed new technologies and aesthetics for marketing their products to new audiences, including a Facebook page launched in 2013 (Chobundo 2016b). Chobundo has also tapped into d design travel (2009), a privately run mechanism for promoting Japanese regional products and tourism to new domestic markets. As created by designer Nagaoka Kenmei within the multidisciplinary practice D&DEPARTMENT, d design travel publicizes regional businesses, categorized by prefecture, through print, online and social media; physical and online shops; exhibitions and promotional events (D&DEPARTMENT n.d. a). Since 2014, Chobundo has sold products through d design travel shops and appeared in events and blog posts. The firm's image – on its own media as well as in D&DEPARTMENT's – emphasizes skill, the handmade and materiality (Kendall 2014), combining fashionable rhetoric around the authenticity of craft making with D&DEPARTMENT's contemporary visual aesthetic to promote Chobundo products to new markets while retaining its existing market of tea ceremony practitioners and traditional crafts aficionados (Shibuya Hikarie 8 2014, d47 design travel store Shindo 2015). In this framing, Chobundo's craft qualities are highlighted more prominently than its localness, indicating the shared presence of two rhetorics of authenticity – within d design travel as well.

Chobundo is also adept at framing its products through locale. By late 2012, Chobundo had refused several invitations to create a factory and showroom in China, Chinese market-specific designs and a diffusion line, after Chinese entrepreneurs recognized the appeal of Chobundo's products to a growing market of wealthy, aesthetics-conscious Chinese consumers interested in luxury tea wares. According to Hasegawa Mitsuaki, the firm preferred to retain a waiting list and current production volumes, to keep full control of the brand and quality and to not dilute their brand image and attention to managing existing production and sales (Hasegawa 2012). And yet the firm had also recombined classic design elements to create new products with the larger, more elaborate designs popular with its Chinese consumers and was clearly actively engaging with this new, unexpected market. In sum, affiliation with external actors and conditions and the ability to maintain multiple framing devices for a largely standard set of products, in part by setting clear parameters for adaptations, has allowed Chobundo to further its aims.

## **Design, making and activism at the Manabikan Mono School**

Unlike Chobundo, Colon Design is a newcomer to Yamagata: a design firm launched in 2001 whose founder and chief designer, graduates of Yamagata's art and design university, remained after graduation to promote Yamagata's sense of local pride and community and visibility as a tourist destination through design (Takahashi 2013b). The motivation was not new. Since the 1990s, mass manufacturing itself encountered difficulties due to economic recession and rising competition from Chinese and South-East Asian imports. Municipal and prefectural branding, place-making (machizukuri) and regional vitalization (chiiki kasseika) initiatives followed, in Yamagata (Yamagata-ken 2010, Yamagata-shi Machizukuri Suishin-bu Toshi Seisaku-ka 2011) and across Japan (Yoshida 2007, Rausch 2008, Love 2010, Love 2013, Favell 2016; Okamoto 2013; Sorensen and Funck

2007). Design-specific responses aimed at manufacturing communities included the NPO Yamagata Design Network (1990), which provided promotional activities and design consulting, and Colon Design's alma mater, the Tohoku University of Art and Design (1992).

The Manabikan is located in a former elementary school in Yamagata's centre. From 2010 to 2013, Colon Design operated the facility as the 'Manabikan Mono School'. In its bid, the firm proposed that the facility serve three functions: town centre vitalization through attracting tourism, support for making and a place for learning (Takahashi 2013b). A product introduction hall, café, reading room, wood and metal workshops and events programming supported all three functions. In addition, Hagiwara desired to use the Mono School to connect Yamagata's crafts industries with members of the new artistic and craft community – for industrial revitalization and to help new arrivals ground themselves in the city. The two remits could be seen to sit uneasily alongside each other – the reading room offered tourist material alongside design periodicals – but aimed to support Yamagata's economic base and social cohesion by convening previously divergent communities through a shared investment in making and its products.

Here we should consider Colon Design's use of 'the local' in this schema. Hagiwara has ascribed his motivation for undertaking public facility management as derived from meeting D&DEPARTMENT's Nagaoka (Takahashi 2013a). Indeed, the desire to contribute to community and industrial revitalization mirrored Nagaoka directly, as did the combination of product information hall and Design Recycle: d design travel developed from Nagaoka's broader interest in 'long-life' design, which in the early 2000s consisted of reframing post war Japanese housewares and furnishings in a display environment to render them internationally legible modernist design (d design travel' n.d.; *Ki ni naru kaisha intabyu 60 Bijon no mezasu mono'* 2008; *Nippon Vision Exhibition Tokyo'* 2008; *Rokumaru 60 Vision: Concept* n.d.). Within this framing, the valuing of local well-being merged with a broader desire for authenticity. d design travel promotes regional tourism and 'good design' consumption as a socially responsible, aesthetically satisfying choice but offers authenticity as proof of value, with product selection criteria that include 'communicating that place's important message' and editorial guidelines that include 'not hiding behind special lenses in the photography. Photographing things as they are'. (D&DEPARTMENT n.d. a) In other words, D&DEPARTMENT projects locate the draw of local products and experiences in their ability to offer authenticity, and local origin – like heritage – is a mode for delivering it.

Like twentieth-century schemes to brand Japanese towns and regions through an appeal to nostalgia (Ivy 1995; Creighton 1997), D&Department positions both itself and its consumers outside (Tokyo shiten to chiiki no miryoku o kosa sasete iku: Nagaoka Kenmei D&DEPARTMENT (2012)). Hagiwara, by contrast, situates Colon Design's practice as a go-between:

People like Yamazaki-san and Nagaoka Kenmei-san bring delicious seeds from the outside like birds or the wind. I'd like to take them, germinate them and plant them in this place called Yamagata. Vitalising the city's human potential is important, but stimulus from the outside and places for people from inside and outside the city – from inside and outside the prefecture – are also necessary. Now, I can't help but think that's our role.

We might see Colon Design, then, as an actor positioned at the interstices between inside and outside, mediating information – and capital – between the two through the act of reframing.

## Conclusion

Chobundo, Colon Design and D&Department's actions and interactions indicate how one's situation in relation to 'the local' might shade the meanings one assigns it. Designers with a sense of social obligation transform everyday artefacts into fashionable commodities through the aesthetics and rhetoric of 'design'. They collaborate with city officials to create framing devices for local products, tapping into the now-historical rhetoric of 'the local' and of crafts products as an authentic, real alternative and pragmatic craftspeople join these frameworks for their own livelihood, in addition to a similar spirit of social contribution, but frame their products within the rhetoric of making, not locality. More poignantly given the predilection both within and outside Japan to speak of 'Japanese craft', the only actor of the three to refer regularly to Japaneseness is D&Department, the actor situated furthest from the local products categorized as such. Calls for consumers to take pride in their country – through its modernist design as much as its authentic local crafts – sit alongside products' promotion through appeals to the local and the handmade. For the actors, however, the rhetoric may not matter as long as the objectives are accomplished.

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