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Exhibition Review

"Zakka: Goods and Things"

21_21 Design Sight The Miyake Issey Foundation, Tokyo, Japan, February 26–June 6, 2016. Exhibition Director: Naoto Fukasawa

Reviewed by Jessica Hemmings

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What is *zakka*—or more crucially what is it not? The term loosely translates in English as *sundries* or *miscellaneous goods*. Perhaps more familiar in our vocabulary: *the everyday*.

But precisely what, even the exhibition organizers acknowledge, is a little tricky to pin down. Naoto Fukasawa, co-director of *21_21 Design Sight* alongside Issey Miyake and Taku Satoh, as well as the director of the Japan Folk Crafts Museum, suggests, "*zakka* have emerged as another category of things that have an allure that is distinct from the allure of design, art, antiques, folk craft and handicraft."[1] What we are left with is modest—sometimes even mundane. But Fukasawa qualifies this importance by the sense of nostalgia these objects may conjure during an era when we have "grown weary of new things and are disoriented by the speed at which the times change."

If *zakka* suggests a sense of comfort born from familiarity, the exhibition's second premise is the realization that the changing reference points of the term over the past nine decades reflect Japan's changing economic fortunes and influx of external influences. Exhibition organizers point to fifty years ago when Japan's long period of economic prosperity meant that "*zakka* generally referred to things like kettles, brooms, buckets, and other utensils, necessary household items": practical and functional but perhaps still tinged with the novelty of material consumption. Today the term's meaning has drifted to "include things that consumers cannot

Fig 1 Matsunoya + Norihiko Terayama, *Matsunoya Sundries Peddler*. Photo: Sohei Oya/Nacase and Partners.

imagine when they might use—and even things that serve no purpose whatsoever."

Instead of cohering around a single interpretation of the term, each cluster of this exhibition is assembled by individuals tasked with collecting *zakka* from their own perspectives. For example, Kenmei Nagaoka amassed a "convenience store" of "daily necessities … more than one, more than necessary, and … not being used." Norihiko Terayama worked with a wholesaler of brooms, dusters, baskets, and buckets to compile a present-day recreation of a Meiji-era photograph hawking similar goods. "Roots of Zakka" (credited to the entire exhibition planning team) includes English and Japanese wall texts beside small shelves holding vignettes of *zakka* exemplars: 1926 is acknowledged as the start of the Mingei Movement and its celebration of folk craft; the 1950s recognized "the value of craft-like work" in the face of an increasingly industrialized manufacturing industry; then plastics; the rise of the industrial designer and the "Mingei Boom" as a revival reaction against globalization. The six shelves provide poetic if at times difficult to differentiate snapshots.

Aesthetically, Japanese culture is extraordinarily attuned to visual and material surroundings. Without this sensibility, this painstaking exhibition of the everyday may be hard to get excited about. But the broader physical context

Fig 2 *Roots of Zakka*. Photo: Sohei Oya/Nacase and Partners.

of this exhibition is crucial to appreciating its logic. *21_21 Design Sight* occupies a building designed by Tadao Ando and benefits from purposeful, considered exhibition spaces. Outside its doors, the city of Tokyo presents the uninitiated with shopping overload. Everything from tofu to Tumi® comes in versions and varieties. (Closer to home, the Muji shop provides a glimpse of this reality. Who knew that Q-tips came in different widths or that you need five different sized folders or travel bottles until presented with the option?) But the twelve contributors to this exhibition—all Japanese with the exception of the Dutch design trio *WeMakeCarpets*—presumably know this volume of choice as their familiar.

The last thing all this stuff adds up to—at least in the context of this effective exhibition installation—is clutter. Black metal frames delineate the exhibition space without cutting off lines of sight. Low platforms bestow a solemnity more familiar to the priceless finds of an archaeological dig. In an exterior atrium *WeMakeCarpets* has installed a carpet of hooks bought in 100¥ stores in Tokyo; 8000 pink, blue, and yellow plastic S hooks to be precise, purchased in 1300 packages after the trio visited twenty stores across the city. *WeMakeCarpets* have made an art out of the assembly of temporary pattern-based “carpets,” previously working with anything locally available, from pasta to bricks. The work cannot withstand traffic. Here the

components of the carpet all have the potential to function if removed from the floor, but currently are devoid of this role—another indication of the shifting meaning the term *zakka* has accrued.

We are all responsible for making sense of our daily lives and physical surroundings. Some of us take this challenge a good deal more seriously than others. Perhaps the strength of this exhibition lies in its honesty. Today our material keepsakes are rarely physically unique. Their sheer ubiquity often renders them mundane. If the Japan Folk Crafts Museum operates with an archival function, Naoto Fukasawa's curatorial work at *21_21 Design Sight* brings a pragmatism to the present day. Our daily material worlds may no longer contain remarkable examples of skilled craftsmanship or material sophistication. But societies around the globe continue to find emotional solace in the details that make up our physical surroundings. The emotional purpose of *zakka* far outweighs their physical modesty.

Note

1 *21_21 Design Sight* Press Release. Available at: http://www.2121designsight.jp/en/program/zakka/ (accessed May 16, 2016). All further quotes are from the same source.