"Japanesque Modern" in Media Design Education

Tomoko Hatanaka
Assistant Professor
Takushoku University
hatatomo33@gmail.com

Preface

In this global society, how can we apply the Japanese traditional way of thinking and manners to our new technology or digital content? The Japanesque Modern Project (*Shin-Nihon-Youshiki*) began in 2006, promoted by the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry of Japan. The purpose of this project is to seek the distinctive national brand of products, contents and services originating in Japanese culture to make strides in the international market. This project has four aspects as follows.

1) The Committee Japanesque Modern was established as a think tank of the community. It consisted of more than 100 organizational and individual members.
2) A certification "J-mark" was launched to select symbolic products, services, and content that reflect the concept of Japanesque Modern.
3) The "J-mark" collections were exhibited in the central business area of Tokyo.
4) Some academic institutions offered educational programs related to "The Japanesque Modern" to spread the concept and foster future projects by young designers.

Learning from the Japanesque Modern Collection

The "J-mark" collections are regarded as fitting our modern life by integrating traditional craftsmanship, hospitality and aesthetics, and new technologies of Japan. So far, 116 products and services have been marked as acceptable. When we started the special course called "Introduction to the Japanesque Modern," the committee and I arranged to invite some guest lecturers, including jury members, J-mark holders, potential receivers and researchers of Japanese traditional media technology.

J-mark collections were defined for students through a series of lectures.

For example, Mr. Okinaka of Suntory Ltd., a beverage maker, told us how they had established the brand image of their bottled Japanese tea "*Iemon-cha*" by collaborating with a traditional green tea maker, introducing bottling technologies, and creating package design. Their TV commercial mainly targets middle-aged businessmen, portraying a green tea craftsman and his obedient wife to foster a sense of nostalgia for the "good old days".

Mamoru Hosoda, animation director of *The Girl Who Leapt Through Time*, introduced the original story that was written 40 years ago and interpreted several times by different directors. However, remaking the film revealed a difference in the time periods. He changed the high school girl heroine, thereby reflecting the audience's preference for a contemporary Japan. He also discussed how he collaborated with Takashi Murakami to create "*Superflat Monogram*", a short movie for Louis Vuitton.

We can also understand that recent innovative humanoid robots, such as HONDA's *Asimo*, are rooted in the history of Japanese mechanical dolls of the Edo period (17th–19th centuries). Asimo's gestures and features represent a quest for a human-friendly robotic culture influenced by Japanese anime and science fiction.

Another sample, "*The House of Light*", incorporates American artist James Turrell's concept, domestic technology, and the traditional usage of light in Japanese houses. When Turrell was commissioned by the Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennial in Nigata Prefecture, he took the concept of a guesthouse for meditation from "*In Praise of Shadows*", a well-known aesthetic essay by Japanese novelist Junichiro Tanizaki.

The following table shows a basic description of the lesson.

Table 1: Overview of the Lesson Plan

Subject	Introduction to the Japanesque Modern
Target	87 students (freshman and sophomore levels)
Time period	From April 26, 2007 to August 2, 2007 (90 min. by 14 times)
Institution	Department of Digital Communication, Digital Hollywood University, Tokyo, Japan

Topics and speakers	• Part 1 — Introduction to the concept of Japanesque Modern.
	  Hirotsugu Kashiba, Secretary-General, Council members — Japanesque Modern,
	  Tomoyuki Sugiyama, jury of J-mark collection, principal of the university,
	  Yutaka Hikosaka, jury of J-mark collection, architect/environmental designer.
	• Part 2 — Getting to know the tradition of the Japanese media.
	  Machiko Kusahara, Waseda University — "Utsushi-e" shadow theatre,
	  Nobuhiro Yamaguchi, Origata Design Institute — Origata/paper holding.
	• Part 3 — Case studies of media design.
	  Sadahiko Hirose, Columbia Music Entertainment — Kyoto Movie Studios Project,
	  Naoto Okinaka, Suntory — Japanesque branding of bottled green tea,
	  Kimitaka Kato and Tomotaka, Suzuki, Fujitsu — Universal web design,
	  Daishiiro Aramaki, Takahiro Inoue, Shochiku — Kabuki Cinema,
	  Kentaro Kawashima, Bandai Namco Games — producing games for a global market,
	  Mamoru Hosoda, animation director — "*The Girl Who Leapt Through Time*".
	• Part 4 — Assignment — editing a visual report or making a freestyle project plan.
	• Part 5 — Student presentations.

Figure 1

Figure 2

After the series of lectures, the students had to submit and make a presentation on either their visual report or a freestyle project plan of digital content reflecting Japanesque Modern. The "visual report" included a summary of the lectures with illustrations or collages related to the theme (Figure 1). I asked some of the students to take photos of the classroom (Figure 2).

The photos and links, along with my comments, were uploaded on our closed website so that the students could download them. One student presented a plan for the exhibition of J-mark collections in the online 3D virtual world "*The Second Life*", and another did a promotion plan for a movie that featured 3D avatars of traditional dancers.

Conclusion

Though most of the students have had little experience with traditional Japanese entertainment culture, they seemed to be interested and had many ideas for their new media creations. Here are some of their comments:

> I was moved to find that many companies make an effort to learn the good points of traditional Japan and take advantage of them. I was also happy to learn and discover traditional culture.

> I have heard "to preserve tradition" frequently, but "to make the best use of tradition", like Japanesque Modern, was a new concept to me. It may be the result of the Japanese people's change of consciousness from modest to active in an effort to promote their own culture in the age of globalization.

Since this course was an experimental one-year program for the freshman/sophomore level, the results will show at a later stage. Yet, some of the students I taught at the senior and graduate level have been trying to create contemporary Japanesque images in the form of digital illustration or animation.

As Takahata and other researchers point out, the style of Japanese anime can be traced back to storytelling using old picture scrolls or theatre arts. Those stories and expressions developed through the repetition of editing and reformation of former ones. The traditional stories or images were thought to be public domain, or collective intellectual/artistic property, and conventional art education was based on following them.

The game maker and J-mark holder, Nintendo, was established in 1889 as a maker of card games. Japanese card games originated from the Portuguese "*Carta*" (tramp cards), and were localized by mixing Japanesque graphic patterns and rules. In other words, this "software" has developed over a period long enough to make it look totally different. For people like us in non-Western countries, the industrialization of the 19th century was equal to Westernization. Therefore, we feel a distance between domestic traditional culture and modern technologies. However, the reality was a hybrid culture of Western methods and domestic thinking. Now, we know we cannot dismiss the value of traditions as a rich resource for contemporary media design.

1. *Japanesque Modern* official website — http://www.japanesque-modern.org/

2. *The House of Light* official website — http://www11.ocn.ne.jp/~jthikari/

3. Takahata, Isao. 1999. *Jūni-seiki no animēshon:Kokuhō emakimono ni miru eigateki animeteki naru mono*. Tokyo: Tokuma Shoten, pp.3-7.

4. Matsuoka, Seigo. 2007. *Nihon to iu houhou, Omokage utsuroi no bunka*. Tokyo: NHK Books, pp.19-28.