# Japanese Museums: Challenges, Prospects, and a Life-Death Perspective on Cultural Inheritance[1]

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Keywords:
*Cultural Inheritance; View on life and death; Symbolic immortality; Memorial service*

## ABSTRACT:

This paper discusses the challenges facing Japanese museums, and explores their prospects, with a focus on the inheritance of objects. It proposes a novel perspective on cultural inheritance by applying the concept of "life and death" to museum practices. The current difficulties confronting Japanese museums regarding cultural inheritance are deeply rooted in their historical development, a path significantly shaped by European models. These European museums were established with the aim of using their comprehensive collections to contribute to social education, and in the 19th-century evolved into cultural facilities essential for modern nation-building. While Japanese museums largely followed the same trajectory, they now face structural and systemic deterioration, leaving museums increasingly strained. The situation necessitates a reconsideration of the traditional modernist approaches to cultural inheritance.The paper, using the keywords "symbolic immortality" and "memorial ceremony," which are concepts of life and death, considers new meanings of cultural inheritance in museums. For example, organizing exhibitions on the anniversaries of an artist's birth or death is another way museums can transmit cultural heritage associated with individuals and objects, and can also be considered a form of memorial service. Such practices not only serve as forms of remembrance but also actively ensure the "symbolic immortality" of both creators and their works, thereby enriching the methods of cultural transmission.

L'articolo affronta le sfide che i musei giapponesi stanno affrontando e ne esplora le prospettive future, concentrandosi sull'eredità degli oggetti. Propone una prospettiva innovativa sull'eredità culturale applicando il concetto di "vita e morte" alle pratiche museali. Le difficoltà attuali che i musei giapponesi incontrano nell'ambito dell'eredità culturale sono profondamente radicate nel loro sviluppo storico, un percorso fortemente influenzato dai modelli europei. I musei europei sono stati fondati con l'obiettivo di utilizzare le loro collezioni per contribuire all'educazione sociale e, nel XIX secolo, si sono evoluti in strutture culturali essenziali per la costruzione della nazione moderna. Pur avendo seguito in gran parte lo stesso percorso, i musei giapponesi oggi affrontano un deterioramento strutturale e sistemico che li mette sempre più sotto pressione. Questa situazione richiede una rivalutazione degli approcci tradizionali e modernisti all'eredità culturale. Il saggio, utilizzando le parole chiave "immortalità simbolica" e "cerimonia commemorativa", concetti legati alla vita e alla morte, considera nuovi significati dell'eredità culturale nei musei. Ad esempio, organizzare mostre in occasione degli anniversari della nascita o della morte di un artista rappresenta un ulteriore modo in cui i musei possono trasmettere il patrimonio culturale associato a individui e oggetti, e può essere considerato una forma di commemorazione. Tali pratiche non solo fungono da forme di memoria, ma assicurano attivamente l'"immortalità simbolica" sia dei creatori sia delle loro opere, arricchendo così i metodi di trasmissione culturale.

Opening Picture:

Fig. 1: Inside the storage facility at Toride Annex, The University Art Museum of the Tokyo University of the Arts.



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## Japanese Museums and Views on Life and Death

This paper aligns with the editorial objective of MMD 5, which is to promote academic discussion on the history of collections and exhibitions in Japanese museums, as well as various contemporary issues. By incorporating a uniquely Japanese perspective on life and death, this paper introduces a new dimension to the discussion on the past and future of Japanese museums. However, this paper is not based on faith in any particular religion (Buddhism or Shintō). Instead, it analyzes characteristics of Japanese customs, behavior, and thought, applying them to museological discourse.

Preliminary ideas have been presented in other forums, such as oral presentations outlining this topic and in newspaper interviews.[2] However, this paper represents the first formal academic publication of this research, incorporating new and more in-depth analysis.

To begin this consideration of the theme of museums and views on life and death, it is useful to recall statement from T. Marinetti's *Futurist Manifesto* (1909) as an early 20th-century criticism of 19th-century museums.

> *Let one pay a visit there each year as one visits one's dead once a year... That we can allow! ... Deposit flowers even once a year at the feet of the Gioconda, if you will!... But to walk daily in the museums with our sorrows, our fragile courage and our anxiety, that is inadmissible!.. Would you, then, poison yourselves? Do you want to decay?*[3]

This manifesto, which marked the founding of Futurism, also served as an incitement for a movement in which young Italian artists rejected all established views of art and sought to establish a new art form. In this passage, the museum is portrayed as a relic of the past and is rejected through its comparison to a tomb.

More than 100 years later, in March 2024, in Japan, the exhibition *Does the Future Sleep Here?—Revisiting the museum's response to contemporary art after 65 years* was held at the National Museum of Western Art in Tokyo. The museum director Tanaka Masayuki explained that the purpose of the exhibition was to reexamine the significance of a museum specializing in Western classical art in contemporary Japan, particularly in relation to contemporary art. At the same time, citing Theodor W. Adorno and Douglas Crimp, Tanaka stated that the initiative was aimed at preventing the museum from becoming a "graveyard of artworks" or a "ruin," a place devoid of life.[4]

Adorno, in *The Valéry Proust Museum* (1953), claimed that the connection between "museum" and "mausoleum" is not merely phonetic, and that a museum is like a tomb where artworks are buried.[5] In other words, this idea that museums are akin to graves from a contemporary perspective began in Europe in the early 20th century, and has persisted to the present day in Japan. In fact, for contemporary artists, having their work housed in a museum


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is considered "*entering the grave*," and the identification tag on which the work is registered and prepared for storage and exhibition can be compared to a tombstone.[6]

However, the tomb itself is neither meaningless nor negative; on the contrary, it is a form of cultural inheritance that has great significance. The purpose of this essay is not to criticize museums that are equated with the tomb, but rather to reconsider Japanese museums from the perspective of life and death, which are closely related to culture.

This discussion begins with still life painting. In traditional Japanese painting, there was no term or concept for still life painting. There were similar genres entitled *Sosaizu* (Vegetable Paintings) or *Kasozu* (Fruit and Vegetable Paintings), but they differed in their origins from Western still life painting. This difference likely stems from a motivation rooted in the Japanese tradition of an intimate gratitude for the food harvested from the mountains and fields.

In Europe, this genre is known to have flourished in Flanders in the 17th century, but in Dutch, English, and other Germanic languages, it is rendered *Still-Leven*, *Stillleben*, or *still life*. In Italian, on the other hand, it is *natura morta* (dead nature). While referring to the same motionless object, still life suggests something that is static, but still retains the possibility of being alive. On the other hand, *natura morta* implies something that was once alive but has died and become material. This contrasts with the term *natura vivente* (living nature) for a portrait. These linguistic expressions surrounding still-life paintings reveal a subtle discrepancy between the north and south of Europe, and between the West and the East in terms of the views of life and death concerning objects.

Relating this to the act of museum collecting, it can be argued that the origin of museums lies in the attempt to collect inanimate objects and preserve them forever, whether as still life or *natura morta*. In the modern Western world, all kinds of objects were collected, classified, and organized in accordance with the desire for knowledge. The institution of the museum embodied a way of presenting knowledge based on Western rational thought, that is, enlightenment through display.

As is clear from this origin, even if museums have been criticized as places where the dead are buried, in Europe the items stored in museums are merely objects (materials) and are considered to be unrelated to human life and death. On the other hand, when the Japanese term "*shizō* (dead storage)" is used in relation to museums, it often refers to the state in which collected items remain in storage, i.e., a failure in the museum's primary functions. In other words, by linking the state of unused items with "human death," the term problematizes the issue of their underutilization.

## Issues facing museums today regarding the inheritance of objects

The museum, which emerged as a hall of enlightenment in the modern Western world, was positioned in the 18th century as a facility for the public display of royal and private collections, and in the 19th century as a place where all objects


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acquired through imperialism and colonialism could be used for public and social education. This naturally reinforced the evaluation of objects based on the objective accumulation of knowledge in the form of scholarship and science. The museum's status as an authority was at times reinforced by the state, its political patrons, or its public credibility, making it an indispensable cultural institution in the development of the modern nation. This trend in Europe was also true in Japan. The Japanese museums created in the Meiji period were direct adaptations of the 19th-century European model.[7]

Until the end of World War II, Japan had few public museums other than national museums, and only a handful of art galleries. It was only after the war that the National Museum of Modern Art was established. The Museum Law enacted in 1951 encompassed zoos, botanical gardens, aquariums, science museums, and other museums, and at the time of its enactment, the total number of museums was around 200.

Large museums were built throughout the country during the 1970s and 1980s. Art museums were established in almost all prefectures, and the Imperial Household Agency's *Sannomaru Shozokan* (The Museum of the Imperial Collections) opened within the Imperial Palace in the 1990s. Approximately 120 years have passed since the establishment of the Tokyo National Museum in 1872. At the midway point, the Museum Act of 1951 positioned the nation's various museums, each with its own parent organization, as institutions for social education. Today, the total number of museums exceeds 5,700. Consequently, Japan now has one of the highest numbers of museums in the world. However, facilities fully fulfilling the functions of preservation, research, and exhibition are largely limited to national museums, major public museums, and a few private museums.

With the April 2023 revision of the Museum Law, the Japanese government has broadened the requirements for museum establishment and is encouraging the registration of small-scale museums that are engaged in unique activities. However, while there are few tangible benefits, the administrative and financial burdens of maintaining standards for small, under-resourced museums have limited the number of newly registered museums to approximately 250 to date.[8]

Although there are a variety of problems faced by Japanese museums as a whole with such a history, this paper will focus on the inheritance of objects in museums. The following section, therefore, describes the current situation in this regard.

Japanese museums are currently facing serious storage problems. Thirty or forty years after construction, many museums across the country have reached full capacity and are unable to secure new space.[9] Securing storage space has become an urgent and unavoidable issue for Japanese museums.[10] In addition to the space issue, the enormous amount of energy required for storage equipment to maintain a constant temperature and humidity not only puts a strain on budgets, but this energy consumption also poses a challenge to decarbonization efforts.

The following is not a general state-


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ment, but rather a discussion based on the actual situation at the University Art Museum of Tokyo University of the Arts (hereinafter referred to as Geidai Art Museum), where the author works, drawing on the author's experience serving as a trustee and collection committee member at other museums.

First, the reality of the workplace has become increasingly apparent in recent years: the museum's ideal workload of collecting, maintaining, managing, and exhibiting objects is disproportionate to the number of curators and other professionals who actually work there. These problems have contributed to the structural obsolescence and deterioration of the museum system, leading to professional burnout. The maintenance of the hardware environment, such as exhibition rooms and storage facilities, has become a significant burden. This is compounded by the fact that extreme weather conditions caused by climate change have resulted in flooding and power outages, and the combination of budget cuts and rising commodity prices has not only hindered the maintenance of facilities, but has also had a direct impact on the retention of human resources.

On the other hand, over the past 20 years or so, another problem has arisen concerning collections: the Tokyo University of the Arts has a tradition of purchasing the best graduation works from each year's graduating class and acquiring them as part of the museum's collection. In its nearly 140 years since its founding, the museum has collected about 20,000 works of art as reference materials for art education and about 10,000 student works. In recent years, the categories of painting, sculpture, and crafts that were central to 19th-century museums have been collapsing, and the museum's collection now includes concepts, data, and installations that lack a stable physical form. This has presented a serious challenge to the management of the Geidai Art Museum, which is responsible for housing the latest student works (fig.1).[11]

For example, recent student works may be in the form of data, such as video or sound files. However, these are often stored in the form of USB memory sticks and CDs. This raises questions about the meaning and long-term viability of storing such media as permanent collection materials. The management of servers for storing works is a necessity, but sufficient future-proofing measures have not been taken.

In addition, there are cases where works made of extremely fragile materials or materials with limited lifespans, such as rubber or Styrofoam, have to be stored. The dilemma is that eventually, works that no longer convey the original intent of their creation due to deterioration will remain dormant in storage facilities.

## Methods of cultural inheritance in Japan

These challenges necessitate a re-evaluation of how museums approach cultural inheritance. In the contemporary art world, the relationship between objects and people has changed, and the people who created them (artists) have become more important than the objects (works) that are created and


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bequeathed. The museum of the future, especially the art museum, is not expected to inherit objects in the 19th-century sense. There is an imminent need to reexamine for whom and for what purpose preservation should occur, as well as what should be preserved and passed down.

Therefore, while it is a basic premise that a museum is an institution that preserves and passes on objects themselves, this section will discuss alternative methods of cultural transmission, and examine Japanese characteristics, citing several examples.

The first is the *Shikinen Sengū*, a traditional event of the Japanese Shintō religion (fig.2). Every 20 years, the Ise Jingū Shrine is rebuilt in the same ancient style, and all of the shrine buildings, costumes, and treasures (approximately 2,500 items) are replaced with new ones. This is a Shintō ritual that began in the 7th century and has continued uninterrupted to the present day.

The concept is that by periodically renewing the dwelling places of the gods and replacing sacred treasures with entirely new ones, the divine authority of the deities is eternally preserved and continually rejuvenated. This notion, largely absent from Western thought rooted in monotheism, remains a part of contemporary Japanese spiritual culture. At Ise Grand Shrine, this has recently been termed the concept of *Tokowaka* (“everlasting youth”) and positioned as one aspect of Japan’s

**Fig. 1:**
Inside the storage facility at Toride Annex, The University Art Museum of the Tokyo University of the Arts. The new storage facility, completed in 2024, includes an anteroom called the *engaging storage room (Visible storage)* where s select works of the collection are stored and exhibited, and is open to the public. This room has a small window that allows visitors to peer into the adjacent storage facilities.


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spiritual culture.[12] Consequently, this ritual, with a history spanning over 1,300 years, functions as a vital method for the transmission of tradition in crucial aspects of Japanese culture, namely the forms and techniques of its sacred architecture and treasures.

The *Shikinen Sengū* ceremony is incompatible with the 19th century museum concept, which places the permanent preservation of objects at its core, and recreating it could even be seen as the destruction of cultural property. On the other hand, these traditional rituals themselves are recognized by ICOM under the concept of intangible heritage. The "Heritage" section of ICOM's *Key Concepts in Museology* states the following:

*For some years the notion of heritage, essentially defined on the basis of a western concept of transmission, has felt the impact of the globalisation of ideas, such as the relatively recent concept of intangible heritage. This concept, of Asian origin (in particular from Japan and Korea) is founded on the idea that transmission, to be effective, must essentially be done by human carriers, from whence evolved the idea of living human treasures.*[13]

**Fig. 2:** Scenery of Ise Shrine, Gekū: Photo by the author 2025.



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While the continuation of *Shikinen Sengū* is characterized by its emphasis on preserving tradition through creativity, its consideration of relics (i.e. things that must be preserved) has been limited to the preservation and exhibition of some materials at the Jingū Chōkokan Museum. Applying this tradition to museums today is not easy, but the responsibilities of museums today go beyond simply preserving artifacts. The 2019 ICOM definition of museums includes the practices of "diversity," "equity," "accessibility," "inclusion," and "sustainability." Museums of the future must consider ways to function as spaces that contribute to the transmission of memories and skills. From this perspective, learning from the idea of "everlasting youth" will likely be a future challenge, at least for Japanese museums.

The second perspective is the concept of *Migawari* ("substitute")[14] as a method of passing on culture while changing its form. This is related to the fact that methods such as copying and reproducing cultural properties and producing architectural models were considered effective in the early stages of the museum system in Japan (late 19th century to early 20th century).[15] The Tokyo Fine Arts School, the predecessor to the Tokyo University of the Arts, had since its foundation undertaken numerous projects to produce and exhibit hand-crafted reproductions of antique artworks, in collaboration with the then Tokyo National Museum. When a work, such as a Buddhist statue, was fragile to begin with and therefore risky to display or move, it was thought that displaying a substitute would be effective for both the preservation and utilization of the cultural asset. However, advances in conservation science and the development of the concept of authenticity have led to a gradual retreat from the exhibition sphere. On the other hand, the Japanese method of copying and reproduction reflects, in a sense, the idea of "everlasting youth". This research, encompassing everything from materials to production techniques, facilitates the transmission of skills that can, in some cases, reconstruct an object as it might have appeared 1,000 years ago, rather than merely creating a superficial imitation.

One example of this is the creation of architectural models, which are scaled-down versions of buildings. This is one way of passing on cultural assets that are difficult to preserve in a different form. Architectural models were also useful when Japan exhibited them at international expositions and were displayed until the early 20th century. This method seems to have become obsolete due to photography and digital technology, but the significance of creating substitutes by hand will likely increase in the future.

The third perspective is the issue of re-enactments and re-creations of contemporary art, such as performing arts and installations. This refers to cases where the artist does not recreate the work themselves, but rather a re-creation can be undertaken on behalf of the artist, even after the artist has passed away. The artist prepares detailed instructions in advance, and the re-creator prepares and installs the necessary items according to those instructions, which can sometimes bring the work back to life even when the


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museum no longer has the original components in its collection. This can be seen as one way of passing on a work of art that occurs in the absence of physical objects (fig.3).

**Fig. 3:** Banner ads of the exhibition *Re-Display: Instruction and Protocol*, at The University Art Museum, Tokyo University of the Arts, 2021.

## Symbolic immortality

As mentioned above, there is a Japanese word for *shizō* (dead storage). Its antonym is *katsuyō*, which means to make good use of or utilize effectively, and has the nuance of something being activated or vitalized, rather than passively used. If the utilization of objects is central to their inheritance in museums, then a connection exists between people's views on life and death and the inheritance of objects in museums. The role of museums as repositories, storing vast numbers of objects with no prospect of use, is symbolically equivalent to that of the caretaker of a cemetery. Furthermore, the shift from "utilization" to "dead storage," which occurs amid changes in cultural values, should be seen as a record of this historical change in value.

The remainder of this paper will use the two keywords "symbolic immortality" and *kuyō* ("memorial service"), which are related to views on life and death, to further consider new methods and the significance of passing on objects in museums.

"Symbolic immortality" is a concept presented in *Six Lives, Six Deaths: Portraits From Modern Japan*[16] which examines Japanese views on life and death through the lens of six prominent modern Japanese figures. The book emphasizes the principle of symbolization when considering the relationship between personal and collective life and death, and defines "symbolic immortality" as the desire of finite individual lives to seek universal and continuous life within a continuous symbolic relationship between the past and the future.[17]


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As a premise for this discussion, one of the authors, the critic, Katō Shūichi, offers the following argument about how Japanese attitudes toward death differ from those of Westerners, from a perspective of comparative culture:

> *For Japanese, the continuity of the group is a given condition that is to be accepted and not a goal that one seeks to achieve. For modern, and especially urban, Westerners, the symbolic continuity of one's personal existence is not a given condition but is consciously recognized as a central goal that must be achieved through personal efforts.*[18]

Katō expands on this point as follows: For example, the idea that "even if I die, my work will remain" is common among Westerners as a form of "symbolic immortality," but in contrast, the idea that "even if I die, my descendants will remain" is deeply rooted among Japanese people. However, since the desire for "symbolic immortality" is weak in Japan to begin with, projecting the desire for immortality or continuity onto entities such as family or work is merely a secondary interest; the Japanese people's primary interest is in the present.[19]

Written half a century ago, Katō's theory of the Japanese people requires re-evaluation in a contemporary context. The current discussion must also consider that among the Japanese people today, especially the younger generation, there is a weaker sense of belonging to a group. When discussing how to pass on traditions to the future, we must not forget that this weakening of belonging will be a challenge for the next generation.

It is also important to establish that the idea of "symbolic immortality," such as "even when I die, my work will remain," is rooted in the general Western view of life and death, particularly that of Christian culture, and the logic of individualism.

In Western modernity, the institution of museums (in the humanities) was created to preserve the things people created after their death. With the continuation of this institution in mind, when considering the future of museums, one thing that must be considered, at least in Japanese museums, is whether it is possible to implement practices based on an Eastern view of life and death. If this is possible, then we should move on to considering the issue of what specific measures should be taken regarding how culture can be passed on.

First, in today's world where the 19th century idea of collecting everything is no longer valid, museums must be aware of the need to transform into institutions that have the will to create the future (i.e., history) that should be created through their collections.

Maruyama Masao's historical theory, which Katō's also discusses, is helpful in this regard.[20] Maruyama distinguished between "history that should be made" and "history that is becoming (history created without human will or intention)." Katō argues that this is similar to the difference in attitudes toward death between Westerners and the Japanese. Maruyama's theory suggests


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that Japanese historical consciousness is based on three concepts: *tsukuru* ("creating"), *umu* ("to give birth"), and *naru* ("becoming", flow of events beyond individual influence). Of these, he points out that "becoming" has become fundamental in historical narratives since the Middle Ages. Put simply, the mythological world of the *Kojiki* and *Nihon Shoki*, as well as subsequent Buddhist thought, is strongly rooted in the idea of "becoming," which has had a profound influence on Japanese views of history and life and death. This contrasts with the idea of "creating" that is fundamental to Western monotheistic thought (i.e. the idea that all things were created by God).

One of the roles of museums, which originated in the West, is to select what is necessary, even if it is not possible to collect everything, and to take responsibility for the collection that is created as a result. This can truly be called "history that should be made." This responsibility is fundamentally the same for museums in Japan.

Furthermore, one should consider the artifacts that are left behind naturally, that is, to consider the role of museums from the perspective of a "history that is becoming." It is important to note that a related term, the "Laissez-faire principle," can be misleading, as it is easy to misinterpret this as an irresponsible attitude suggesting that outcomes are predetermined and that museum preservation efforts are futile. However, this is not what is argued here. The museum, regardless of its will, will be required to remain mindful of and considerate towards the artifacts left behind by a "history that is becoming." If it is not possible to preserve everything, it is extremely important for museums to be aware of their obligation to do what they can, such as storing a selected portion of existing artifacts, or creating special exhibition opportunities.

In this context, I would like to raise a serious issue regarding the inheritance of possessions in Japan in recent years. In traditional Japanese society, there was an implicit understanding that the role of inheriting possessions was the responsibility of the *ie* ("family"), or the affiliated community to which one belonged. However, in modern society, where the birthrate is declining and the sense of belonging to a group is weakening, the very continuity of the old institution of the "family" is in jeopardy. This inevitably leads to a situation where the future of possessions that should be inherited within that framework is also uncertain.

In light of this contemporary situation, museums are expected to take on a role once held by the "family." They are expected to become collection points for objects that have nowhere to go. However, as we have seen so far, there are few museums equipped to cope with this reality. What will be required of museums of the future will be the practice of cultural inheritance that strikes a balance between "history that should be made" and "history that is becoming."

Additionally, with regard to new methods of inheriting objects in museums, I would like to consider the various aspects of contemporary art that, as mentioned above, cannot be addressed with current systems and facilities.


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According to Kato's aforementioned theory on the Japanese people, the main concern of Japanese artists is the present. Even if an artist expresses a desire for the immortality or continuity of their work to a museum, it is difficult to imagine that a museum could take responsibility for storing and managing objects (including non-physical works) created solely out of a concern for the present. If an artist did not believe that they "should [have] made" something to leave behind, the museum will inevitably have to seriously consider how to pass on their legacy "that is becoming." For example, they could create and preserve symbolic substitutes or records to replace the objects. Geidai Art Museum, which is constantly accepting new forms of expression, recognizes this as a major challenge for the future. When considering what the art museum of the future should be, it becomes clear that its role is not necessarily limited to the preservation of objects.

Finally, we should also consider the fact that artistic expression is itself an act of seeking symbolic immortality. Katō et al. list this as the third mode of "symbolic immortality." "Symbolic immortality" can be achieved through the artist's presence and the influence of their work, and to that extent, artists have participated in this process with a "prophetic function."[21] However, in this case, the term refers to the artist's creative act in general, which is easier to understand in fields such as literature and music, where the artist's work is likely to survive through reproduction, or in other words, fields whose outputs are not typically preserved in museums.

**Memorial services: Japanese views of the afterlife**

Next, this paper will examine the concept and ritual of *kuyō* ("memorial service") in the Japanese view of life and death, and consider its relationship to the function of museums. Before doing so, it is necessary to clarify Japanese attitudes toward the dead and the afterlife, *anoyo* ("the other world"). However, while Japan has an indigenous view of life and death that dates to ancient mythology, it has also been influenced by Buddhism, as well as Chinese and Indian thought, and mainstream thinking has changed over the years, making it difficult to provide a unified view of the dead and the afterlife. This section provides a brief discussion of the topic as it relates to the "memorial service".

In a 2013 survey of the Japanese people's national character, 40% answered "yes" to the question of whether they believe in "the other world."[22] The term "the other world" generally refers to the world after death, but its interpretation may vary. The inhabitants of the afterlife are the dead, but Japanese people view them as spirits. It is believed that a person's soul inhabits a body from the outside, becoming life, and, even after leaving the body at death, floats through nature. In other words, human life is the fleeting physical state of a soul that comes from nature and returns to it.[23] This differs significantly from the Western view that individual life is bestowed by God.

This indigenous Japanese view of life and death underwent a transformation in the Middle Ages as Buddhism took hold. With the spread of


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Pure Land Buddhism, it was taught that Amida Buddha's original vow could send souls to the Pure Land (paradise), "the other world," after death. Then, during the Edo period, cemeteries and Buddhist altars became commonplace in communities, and rituals to honor the spirits of ancestors became widespread.

It should not be forgotten that this Buddhist approach to human death fostered a Japanese view of impermanence. The view of life and death that permeated Japanese culture was one of impermanence (*mujō*): everything in this world is in a state of flux, and human beings are seen as transient, accepting death as an inevitable part of nature.

In his aforementioned book, Katō points out that the Buddhist view of impermanence has the function of "relativizing human death and mitigating its impact." Katō's explanation that "it is not that individual death comes first and is followed by symbolic immortality being projected onto biological or social groups, but rather that the collective immortality comes first, and then individual death is symbolically relativized" aptly represents the Japanese view of impermanence.[24]

However, the concept of impermanence should not be misinterpreted as a prescription for resignation or indifference toward mortality. It is equally true that greater emphasis has been placed on the act of praying for the repose of the souls of the departed, particularly those who have passed away close to us, our ancestors, or those who died bearing grudges.

This is the act called *kuyō* ("memorial service"). Originally, *kuyō* in Buddhism referred to a Buddhist ritual in which offerings were made to revered objects (physical items and people) such as scriptures or priests, through three methods: actions, words, and the mind. However, today, "*kuyō*" generally refers to the act of praying for the repose of the dead. While this "memorial service" held immediately after death, i.e., a funeral, is a prayer for the repose of the deceased's soul, and the first *Bon* festival is a celebration of welcoming the deceased's spirit, "memorial services" held from the third anniversary onward take on greater significance for the living. Furthermore, "memorial services" for ancestors in general, which have become regular events during the New Year, and the *Bon* festival in July, welcome the spirits of ancestors—that is, reflect on their existence—and thus help to reaffirm the traditions of the "family" and community and maintain order.[25]

On the other hand, "memorial services" also function as rituals to send the souls of objects important to humans to "the other world" when their purpose has ended. Even today, "memorial services" for items such as needles, chopsticks, dolls, insects, and eels are held throughout Japan. There is a deeply rooted culture of offering memorial services to express gratitude for tools used for many years, objects that have outlived their usefulness, and living creatures that humans have had to kill. These are rituals that pay respect to the former existence and function of the object and allow it to transition to a peaceful state. Philosopher Takeshi Umehara has stated, "The souls of tools also go to the afterlife and are reborn as new tools. In order to create new tools, it is necessary to send the souls of old


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tools to the afterlife." [26]

As mentioned above, "memorial services" which serve to pass on to the present the people, objects, and cultures of the past, can be a mechanism for cultural inheritance. The connection between this tradition of memorial services and the function of museums warrants examination.

First, the Buddhist idea of *ekō*, which underlies the "memorial services," and in particular the idea of *kanso ekō* ("returning to life"), in which the dead return to this world to enlighten and save people, is consistent with the museum's basic approach to people and objects. Remembering the dead and temporarily bringing them back to life overlaps with the museum's work of reaffirming the appreciation and value of their associated artists and works through research and exhibitions. Removing items from storage and bringing them back to life in the exhibition room could be considered a "symbolic 'memorial service'" for the collections.[27]

Next, holding exhibitions to mark anniversaries of certain year such as an artist's birth or death is another way museums can ensure the cultural inheritance of people and objects, and can be considered a form of "memorial service". Birth and death anniversaries are divided into ten-year or five-year periods, and exhibitions are planned several years in advance, focusing on these anniversaries. This is done for practical reasons, such as the ease with which local governments can allocate budgets for anniversary events, and they also generate significant publicity.

The holding of anniversary exhibitions, while a one-off event, provides an opportunity for works scattered across various locations to be gathered in one place. Furthermore, through curatorial re-examination, it offers a forum for the recollection and reassessment of artists and their works. By revisiting an artist's presence during significant years marking their birth or death, museums have made substantial contributions to scholarly research on artists. [28]

Thirdly, planning an exhibition themed on traditional culture includes, to a greater or lesser extent, an element of "memorial service". In the case of Buddhist-themed exhibitions of prominent temples or statues, a *hōyō*, a formal memorial service performed by a Buddhist priest, is often held the day before the exhibition, but this applies to all exhibition planning related to history and culture. To give an example of an exhibition I have planned, the 2024 *Yoshiwara Exhibition* (fig.4) [29] had a theme that included the negative history of the red-light district in premodern Edo, but the very act of planning an exhibition that focuses on the people and objects related to it can be seen as a "symbolic 'memorial service'".

The relevance of the Japanese "memorial service" to museum functions lies in its capacity to frame relics not as objects frozen in time from another era, but as entities that continually transform within their own era alongside us, as objects that endure and are therefore worthy of being passed on.


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**Fig. 4:**
Poster of the *Yoshiwara Exhibition*, The University Art Museum, Tokyo University of the Arts, 2024.

## Conclusion

In 19th-century Europe, the existence of museums as symbols of civilized nations was unquestioned. Museums were driven by a straightforward assumption: the accumulation of material goods brings happiness to a country and its people, and increasing knowledge leads to greater prosperity. However, today, as the definition of a museum begins to change, the objects collected there are expected to function not just as objects, but as educational materials for addressing contemporary issues such as promoting the acceptance of different values, diversity, and globalization.

In Japan, the era of rapid economic growth, in which the accumulation of material goods and the growth of museums symbolized people's happiness, ended three decades ago. From the 1960s to the 1980s, when large museums were established all over the country, Japanese society achieved growth through methods that prioritized rapid development. Large museums across the country were positioned as cultural facilities that demonstrated the results of this effort, but today they are being reexamined and continue to search for a new meaning for their existence. As social thinker Saeki Keishi points out, not only Japan but all developed countries around the world are facing various contradictions and difficulties due to the ideologies of growth and nationalism.[30]

This paper does not question whether museums will continue to grow, but rather attempts to examine


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what a museum could be, from the perspective of how it should engage with collected objects, and its approach towards future acquisitions, exhibitions, and exhibition planning. In doing so, it emphasizes a cyclical model of cultural transmission rather than a growth-oriented one.

This paper has shown that the inheritance of Japanese culture is based on the idea of the cycle of life and death, and the idea that the soul repeats this eternally, and it argues that there is much that museums can learn from this. The responsibility of a curator is to discover new value in artists and their works through research, collection, exhibitions, and exhibition planning, thereby promoting a cyclical process in which the significance of objects is re-evaluated. By moving back and forth between the current society and the museum world ("the other world"), visitors themselves become participants in cultural inheritance. This paper concludes by presenting this symbolic model of cultural inheritance.


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**Endnotes:**

[1] I extend my heartfelt gratitude to Mr. John Naoto Tanaka for his invaluable assistance in improving the quality of the translations.

[2] Oral presentations of this research were given at a seminar entitled “Philosophy of Cultural Heritage Preservation: A Comparison between Japan and Italy” held at the University of Bologna on May 9, 2024, and at the 27th University Museum Council and the 19th Japanese Society of Natural History held at the University of the Ryukyus on June 28, 2024. The research was also mentioned in an interview in the *Chugai Shimbun* (October 9, 2024).

[3] Marinetti 1961, p. 124.

[4] Tanaka 2024, p. 13.

[5] Adorno 1981, p. 173.

[6] Interviews conducted by the author with several curators revealed that in some European museums, the museum labels (nameplates) attached to collections are referred to colloquially as “tombstones” or “epitaphs.”

[7] Matsumiya 2003, pp. 10-11.

[8] Museums already registered under the old law can undergo an examination and be newly registered during a five-year transition period. According to the Agency for Cultural Affairs, the number of newly registered museums as of September 6, 2025 is 247. See https://museum.bunka.go.jp/guide/.

[9] In a survey conducted by the Japan Association of Museums in 2019, the findings showed that 33.9% of responding institutions reported their storage space was “more than 90% full,” and 23.3% stated they had materials that did not fit into their storage rooms. In addition, 27.2% of the museums had outside storage space, while 31.9% of museums reported that they did not have such space but needed it.

[10] The National Museum of Nature and Science launched a crowdfunding campaign with a goal of 100 million yen under the slogan “Protect Earth’s Treasures” to address the critical condition of its storage space in 2023, and eventually raised more than 900 million yen.

[11] At the Tokyo University of the Arts, the issue has been continuously discussed in events ranging from the *Re-Display: Instruction and Protocol* exhibition in 2021 to the 2025 symposium *Re-Display Reproduction: Questions and Pleasures in the Re-presentation of Culture, Art and History* (Tokyo University of the Arts, https://taira.geidai.ac.jp/archives/news/sympo20250524).

[12] Kawai 2013; and Mure 2013, pp. 654-689.

[13] ICOM 2010, p. 41. The book goes on to quote the following definition from UNESCO (UNESCO, 2003):

*The “intangible cultural heritage” means the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity. For the purposes of this Convention, consideration will be given solely to such intangible cultural heritage as is compatible with existing international human rights instruments, as well as with the requirements of mutual respect among communities, groups and individuals, and of sustainable development.*

[14] The author is grateful to Professor Yukio Lippit of Harvard University for his insights on this matter (personal communication, May 2024).


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15 Shiina 2010.

16 Lifton, Reich, and Katō, 1979. A Japanese version was published earlier (*Japanese Views of Life and Death*, Iwanami Shinsho, 1977), but the two are not necessarily an exact translation of each other.

17 A sense of immortality, then, is not simply a denial of death. Rather it reflects a compelling and universal inner quest for a continuous symbolic relationship between our finite individual lives and what has gone before and what will come after. It is a search for symbolizing continuities, despite the discontinuities of death. See Lifton Reich, Katō, 1979, p. 7.

18 Lifton Reich, Katō, 1979, p. 21.

19 Katō 1999, p. 153.

20 "This contrast is similar to Maruyama's distinction between history as 'history that should be made' (*tsukurubeki rekishi*) and history as a 'history that is becoming' (*nariyuku rekishi*)." Lifton Reich, Katō, 1979, pp. 21-22.

21 "The third mode of symbolic immortality is achieved through creative works and personal impact on others—whether through great works of art, literature, science, or more humble influences. The artist has long been recognized as participating in this mode of immortality through his prophetic function." Lifton Reich, Katō, 1979, pp. 10-11.)

22 Institute of Statistical Mathematics, *Survey on Japanese National Character*, 2013.

23 This has been the explanation given in *Kojiruien-jin-bu, 8, Seimei* (Jin-gu-shi-cho 1914), among other places.

24 Katō 1977, pp. 213-214.

25 "'Memorial services' were also an exquisite way of dealing with the spiritual power of those who died harboring resentment or envy. The ceremonies held as "memorial services" have various aspects, such as rituals, and even today they are often the subject of debate between religion and politics. However, the 'memorial services' discussed in this paper do not take the narrow perspective that ordinary Japanese people have in mind, such as appeasing the souls of or dealing with "those who died with resentment (and the spiritual power that is said to emanate from them." Ikegami 2019, p. 17.

26 Umehara 1993, p. 32.

27 To elaborate on this point, the author believes that recent well-being initiatives in museums should be directed not only towards visitors but also towards the collections themselves.

28 Furuta, 2024.

29 https://museum.geidai.ac.jp/en/exhibit/2024/03/yoshiwara.html

30 Saeki 2018, pp. 17-21.

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