

Proportional Relation between Openness and Warmth

KAWAHARA Koya (Curator of Tokyo Shibuya Koen-dori Gallery)

In this article, I will summarize the characteristics of the Museum of Mom's Art (hereinafter, "this exhibition") while looking back on Mom's Art and episodes with the creators I met.

While investigating works for this exhibition, I did some research around shopping streets in Shibuya Ward. Mom's Art was found in osteopathic clinics, dental and ophthalmology clinics, tobacco shops, stationary shops, etc. However, the investigation proved difficult due to reasons such as, "I can't identify the creator because it was a gift," "The creator has died," and "She's not making things anymore."

In the end, however, over 1,000 pieces of Mom's Art were assembled in the exhibition venue. So many works were gathered thanks to the collection of guest curator Kyoichi Tsuzuki and the works of creators whom Mr. Tsuzuki had met directly as well as the fact that we were able to collect masterpieces of Mom's Art mainly in Wadamisaki, Kobe. It goes without saying that this could not have happened if it were not for the more than 15 years of steady efforts by the association "crazy about SHITAMACHI-RETRO," a joint curator based in Wadamisaki. It is possible to find Mom's Art in places like those just mentioned (such as somewhere around shopping streets), but it is not easy to investigate or collect them for the above reasons. It is difficult even to meet the artists just out of curiosity or on impulse based on unexpected encounters. Mom's Art is private and marginal; there is a sense of familiarity, but you can see that in reality it is not something that can be approached without building up deep communication.

At first glance, Mom's Art may seem, based on its forms, to be cute and loose (indeed, it is very cute), and it may be taken as easy to make. However, it is not so easy when you see the actual production sites, listen to the creators, and try to make it yourself. Moreover, the handicraft books and kit instructions that write out how to make works are difficult to read for people who are unfamiliar with them. Mom's Art is underpinned by a pile of handicraft techniques. Thus, it could be that Mom's Art's unique relaxed look comes from a gently refined state of inaction, created in a relaxed attitude by people who have outstanding skills and experience.

Further, flexibility in the production process is another feature. Whatever can be obtained and used—yarn and beads used in handicrafts, scraps of waste cloth and flyers, nuts and scraps of wood picked up by the roadside—is used indiscriminately. The combination of materials is also full of improvisation; things that already exist in everyday life are used, and for things not at hand, something else is substituted. While inheriting the techniques of handicrafts, Mom's Art is created with a knack for free ideas and combinations of materials. From such an unconventional style, one can feel the openness of having been liberated even from the creative genre of practical handicrafts. Indeed, when I spoke with creators, some told me that the reason they work on Mom's Art is because, unlike handicrafts such as lace and embroidery, they can give free play to their imagination and enjoy a change of pace, and because they can do it in an easygoing manner.

"Handicrafts" refers to the act of decorating the space around oneself with handmade creations and giving them to people close to oneself while enjoying using leisure time; it also refers to the creations themselves. However, why is it that this "leisure" part does not fit as it should with Mom's Art, even though Mom's Art is liberated from handicrafts and is supposed to be free?

When I heard someone say, "When I'm eating clam soup, I can see the clam strap that I'll make later," I was won over. I was surprised that people find materials for artworks among the foods set out on the dining table. In addition, when I heard episodes such as creators starting their nightly artistic work after finishing their day jobs, preparing small parts between work, and continuing to tinker away even though no one had asked them to, I began to catch glimpses of their extraordinary sites of creation. That is, I could feel from that a strong will to make the most of received "leisure," different from using one's hands to fill free time.

According to Josef Pieper's *Leisure: the Basis of Culture*, a classic work of leisure theory, leisure is perceived as "doing nothing = sloth." This stems from the fact that modern work ethics value practicality and functionality and regard the social, active, and things accompanied by hardship as good. Pieper, however, points out that sloth is rather the loss of leisure, taking sloth as the loss of oneself by placing work at the center of one's life. Leisure, he says, is not something between bouts of work but rather an attitude of mind necessary for humans to lead enriched lives. He explains that "there is also a certain serenity in leisure. That serenity springs precisely from our inability to understand, from our recognition of the mysterious nature of the universe; it springs from the courage of deep confidence, so that we are content to let things take their course."¹ I try to think about Mom's Art in association with the above conception of leisure. Doing so, I cannot help thinking that Mom's Art is something that makes us realize that we should distance ourselves from worldly productivity, embody our individuality, and live a rich life.

Mom's Art includes many items that are useful in everyday life, but the overwhelming majority comprises impractical ornaments and decorations. In particular, figures in the shape of animals, including owls, frogs, turtles, cranes, and good-luck charms in the form of zodiac animals, dogs, cats, and mascot characters stand out. They have childlike eyes, noses, and mouths, and stare at the viewer with indescribable expressions. When we look back at these eyes without explanation, can we open ourselves and face what they see without putting ourselves on guard?

Mom's Art may be like glue that holds together and fills the gaps in life. The sense of absorption that can be attained by working the hands silently is sublimated into satisfaction, sometimes presented to others, inherited, and spread. It is a sharing of wonderful leisure and happiness. The charm of Mom's Art is to be found in the openness of creation and the warmth that resides in the relationships between people as well as the uniqueness of the humanity of the creators.

1 Josef Pieper, "Leisure, the Basis of Culture" (Originally *Muße und Kult*), Kodansha Ltd., 1998, P.67, Translated by INAGAKI Yoshinori