

The Development of Design Education
for Children in Japan

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Abstract

THIS study overviews the historical development of design education for Japanese children and considers the meaning of non-professional design education. There are two significant historical events that have influenced the development of design education in Japan. First, during the first half of the 1930s, with the introduction of the Bauhaus practice, the modernist method of art education began to attract schoolteachers who were dissatisfied with merely sketching objects. *Kōsei* education, which Renshichirō Kawakita established, played a pivotal role in this movement. Second, during the late 1950s, the word “design” became widespread in the Japanese language. It was in 1958 when the Ministry of Education first included “design work” in the new Course of Study for school art curriculum. This binding requirement encouraged public discussion on design education for children; however, the fundamental ambiguity of the concept has been a constant bone of contention. What does children’s design imply when the children are not professional designers? What is the purpose of design education for children who will not necessarily become professional designers?

The design boom was witnessed from the late 1950s, and it peaked during the 1964 Tokyo Olympics. Consequently, during this period, there were numerous discussions about design practice for children. However, design practice in school, which was originally introduced with modern movement, has gradually lost its charm since the 1970s. Instead, the new concept of *zōkei* play has gained a stable position in the art curriculum for elementary school. *Zōkei* play is children’s physical involvement in the outside world characterized by joy. It encourages site-related creations as well as the amusing treatment of materials. *Zōkei* play, comprising the essence of contemporary art, adequately took over the fundamental plastic work for younger children.

What was once referred to as design practice has dissolved into the free composition of esthetic elements or the arrangement of useful things. In general, as part of children’s art curriculum, design practice has been content with its obscure position. Today, the concept of design has been incorporated in all social activities such as rebuilding lost communities. We should now move past the current standards of art education to rethink the possibilities of design education for children.

Keywords: Design Education; School Education; Children’s Design

Introduction

THIS paper examines the historical development of design education for children in Japan and considers the meaning of design education that is not intended for professional training. Such consideration also has significance for non-credit education, as conducted for the public through the design museum. Since the 1950s, Japanese researchers have posited numerous ideas pertaining to design practice offered through schools and performed research on the history of design education in Japanese schools.¹⁾ However, most studies are written in Japanese. Therefore, this paper first provides an historical overview on design education to facilitate the comparison with the educational practices of other countries. The paper is concluded by considering how the concept of design has encompassed all social activities far beyond the domain of the art.

There are two significant historical aspects concerning design education for children in Japan. First, during the first half of the 1930s, with the introduction of The Bauhaus practice, the modernist method of art education began to draw schoolteachers who were not content with merely sketching objects. Second, when the new Course of Study was announced in 1958, as the word design began to spread in the Japanese language, the Ministry of Education first positioned “design work” in the school art curriculum. This binding requirement encouraged public discussion on design education for children; however, the fundamental ambiguity of the concept has been a constant bone of contention. What does children’s design imply when the children are not professional designers? What is the aim of design education for children when the children will not necessarily become professional designers? The following historical overview will focus on these two questions.

The Reception of Modernism

THE word design became popular in the Japanese language during the 1950s. Thus, when we discuss design history before the widespread use of the word design, we must begin by finding the equivalent for the word design. The titles of educational subjects provide a significant clue, as they represent the dominant concepts of the time. In Japan, from the late 19th century into the early 20th century, the word *zuan* was used to imply design. This word was frequently coupled with the word *kōgei*, which means craft, and *zuan* described the invention of ornamental motifs. However, since the modernist concept was introduced in Japan during the 1920s, *zuan* became unsuitable to represent the concept of design in general. Instead, another word, *kōsei*, acquired significance, as it corresponded to two keywords of modernism: composition and construction. *Kōsei* was used as a convenient word to spread the modernist idea and represents the basic operation in design education even today.²⁾

1) ————— Masato Takahashi (ed.), *Dezain kyōiku no genri* [Principles of Design Education], Tokyo: Seishin Shobō, 1967.

2) ————— Keisuke Takayasu, *Kindai design no bigaku* [The Aesthetics of Modern Design], Tokyo: Misuzu Shobō, 2015, pp. 69ff.

The introduction of Bauhaus education in Japan led to the establishment of design education for children. In 1931, Takehiko Mizutani, the first Japanese to experience the entire Bauhaus curriculum, suggested *kōsei* education.³⁾ In 1932, Renshichirō Kawakita, an activist architect, established a private school in Tokyo entitled *Shin Kenchiku Kōgei Gakuin* (*New School of Architecture and Crafts*), where he developed a *kōsei* education curriculum based on the model of the preliminary course of Bauhaus and invited teachers with Bauhaus experience.⁴⁾ Therefore, his school can be referred to as the first to introduce Bauhaus education to Japan. However, Kawakita emphasized its originality and distinguished the abstract *kōsei*, which is not immediately useful, from the productive *kōsei*, which is intended for a certain useful purpose.⁵⁾

Kawakita's school certainly produced talented designers and also developed enthusiastic educators, but his efforts did not have a remarkable influence on other academic institutions. Instead, the school drew schoolteachers who were not content with the contemporary status of art education, which was based on dessin, and Kawakita duly engaged in instructing these teachers on his methods.⁶⁾ Prior to Kawakita's attempt at this revamp, art education in the schools comprised ornamental training; besides there had been a subject dealing with handicrafts. However, as *kōsei* education emphasized on the composition of elements—materials, colors and forms—instead of depicting objects, it can be perceived as the beginning of modern design education for children in Japan.

In 1934, Kawakita published *Kōsei Kyōiku Taikei* (*A General Guide to Kōsei Education*) in collaboration with elementary school teacher, Katsuo Takei.⁷⁾ This book was a compilation on *kōsei* education. Of course, there was a considerable influence of Bauhaus: compositions of materials, colors and forms, were illustrated; examples of photomontage were introduced; Joseph Albers' paper model was imitated; and the figure of the interior design of Gropius' office was copied. As demonstrated in the book, *kōsei* education comprises four stages: plane composition, material study, solid construction, and application. However, through the significant depiction of examples of children's work, it can be understood that *kōsei* education was primarily intended for the general education of school children. Although it necessarily lacks in theoretical precision, it has relevant practical suggestions.

Japan witnessed cultural tension throughout the 1930s. Professionals increasingly wanted to adopt modern design, namely geometrical art or functional construction without ornament; however, this became even more difficult because, as nationalism intensified throughout Japan, modern design was suspected to be associated with the international socialist movement. That is why Kawakita could not advance his original modernistic education curriculum during the

3) ———— Takehiko Mizutani, 'Kōsei kiso kyōiku' [The Basic Kōsei Education], *Kenchiku gabō*, vol.22, no.10, 1931, pp.1-4.

4) ———— Renshichirō Kawakita, 'Design boom no mae o kakerumono' [Precursors of Design Boom] in *Nihon dezain shōshi*, Tokyo: David Sha, 1970, pp. 180-188.

5) ———— Renshichirō Kawakita, 'Kōsei kyōiku ni tsuite' [On Kōsei Education], *Kenchiku Kōgei I See All*, vol.2, no.11, 1932, pp.1-17.

6) ———— Hiromitsu Umemiya, 'Tōmei na kinōshugi to han-bigaku: Kawakita Rennshichirō no 1930-nendai' [Transparent Functionalism and Anti-Esthetics: Renshichirō Kawakita's 1930s] in T. Omuka, and T. Mizusawa (eds.), *Modernism/Nationalism: 1930-nendai nihon no bijutsu*, Tokyo: Serika Shobō, 2003, pp.102-130.

7) ———— Renshichirō Kawakita, Katsuo Takei, *Kōsei kyōiku taikei* [A General Guide to Kōsei Education], Tokyo: Gakko Bijutsu Kyōkai Shuppanbu, 1932; reprint, *Kindai nihon no design*, vol. 50, Tokyo: Yumani Shobō, 2012.

late 1930s. Instead of *kōsei* education, he suggested *kōsaku* education in his 1942 book, *Kosaku Gijutsu Taikei (A Guide to Industrial Technique)*.⁸⁾ The latter is composed of technical instruction in favor of a military country.

Form *Kōsei* to Design

MASATO Takahashi took over *kōsei* education after the Second World War. He was an important specialist in design education, not only revaluing the *kōsei* education within the general education but also developing it as a necessary fundamental training for artist and designers. Furthermore, he established it as an academic discipline that investigates new principles of plastic arts.⁹⁾ In 1951, Takahashi published his essay, “The Meaning of *Kōsei* Education,” in a journal of art education, *Biiku Bunka*.¹⁰⁾ According to Takahashi, sketching as well as decorating are concerned only with a part of our lives while *kōsei* education aims to promote understanding of the fundamental principles common to all products, including commodities, dwellings, fashion, photography, drama, and publications.

Haru Madokoro is another representative in the development of design education for children in Japan. She obtained her *kōsei* education at Kawakita’s school in the 1930s. After the war, she taught *kōsei* education as an elementary school teacher in Tokyo. Her 1955 book, *Kōsei Education for Children*, is the documentation of her teaching.¹¹⁾ Throughout her book, children’s works are systematically arranged along with her comments—light and shade, color, material, and synthetic composition—and focus was on the free composition of plastic elements. She attempted to encourage children to comprehend the fundamentals of plastic arts by themselves. What she did as a teacher, was assign children tasks that were appropriate for their age, observe how they fared in them, and estimate their creative devices.

Corresponding to the revision of the Course of Study in 1958, Madokoro published a new book in 1963 entitled *Children’s Eyes and Design*.¹²⁾ The book’s title reflects the spread of the word design as a key concept, although the word *kōsei* was still used to signify basic design through the construction of plastic elements. At the beginning of the book, she devoted more pages to explain her concept of *mayoimichi*, literally “losing course,” which she had already adopted in her class from around 1950. The majority of the works that she presented as *mayoimichi*, could only be determined to be the equivalent of the English word “doodle,” which are the labyrinth-like automatic drawings constituted of long twisted strokes and that are occasionally given colors or developed into three-dimensional objects.¹³⁾ *Mayoimichi* perfectly matched

8) ——— Renshichirō Kawakita, *Kosaku Gijutsu Taikei* [A General Guide to Industrial Technique], Tokyo: Zuga Kōsaku, 1942.

9) ——— Japanese Society for the Science of Design, *Special Issue of Japanese Society for Science of Design, Kōseigaku no tenkai* [Development of *Kōsei* Study], vol.10, no.3-4, 2003.

10) ——— Masato Takahashi, ‘*Kōsei kyōiku no igi*’ [The Meaning of *Kōsei* Education], *Biiku bunka*, vol.2, no.5, 1951, pp. 201-207.

11) ——— Haru Madokoro, *Kodomo no tame no kōsei kyōiku* [*Kōsei* Education for Children], Tokyo: Zōkei Geijutsu Kenkyūkai, 1955.

12) ——— Haru Madokoro, *Kodomo no me to design* [Children’s Eyes and Design], Tokyo: Zōkei Sha, 1963.

13) ——— Shinya Niizeki, ‘Madokoro Haru ni yoru mayoimichi to design kyōiku’ [Haru Madokoro’s *Mayoimichi* and Design Education], *Bijutsu kyōiku gaku*, no.29, 2008, pp.383-394.

what she practiced because it could easily translate a child's creative urges into spontaneous investigations of form. Moreover, in accordance with the national guidelines which invite the "design of useful things," she also presents application models, such as packages.

Design Practice in School

THE Pacific War came to an end in 1945, with Japan's surrender to the Allied powers. The occupying forces controlled the Japanese government, aiming to secure Japan's democratization and demilitarization. The School Education Law of 1947 outlined the new school system, which impressed people as the genesis of a new education system. Under the new single-line system, compulsory education included six years of elementary school and three years in the lower secondary school. Before the war, there had been two subjects: *zuga*, which provided instruction in drawing and painting, and *shukō*, which dealt with handicrafts. However, the 1947 reformation integrated both subjects into *zuga kōsaku* and mandated that it should be taught as part of the compulsory education curriculum.

Japan regained its sovereignty in 1952. At the beginning of the 1950s, with the special procurement needs during the Korean War, industrial production increased. Because of the increasing exports and a growing domestic economy, companies gradually realized the significance of design so that the term design gained in popularity, and industrial design as well as graphic design became socially recognized as professional fields. Beginning in the late 1950s, there was a design boom. In 1955, the *Zōkei Kyōiku Center (Art Education Center)* was established by those who wanted to promote a modernist design education. This organization had a certain influence on the national policy of school education through some central members. Besides, the Good Design Selection System, initiated in 1957, also had a role in activating the discussion of design.

The Course of Study is the national guideline for school education.¹⁴⁾ The 1958 revision of the Course of Study was a significant turning point, because the word design first appeared in the provisions for art education; that is, modern design clearly found its position as a component of art education. Within the elementary schools, the first and second grade pupils are expected to begin with "pattern making," and pupils from the third to the sixth grades are expected to engage in "design," which is divided into two categories: the "free composition", that has no useful purpose, and the "design of useful things." The former should remain dominant from the third to the fourth grade, while the latter should be dominant throughout the fifth to the sixth grade. Within the lower secondary school, the *zuga kōsaku* was separated into two subjects again: *bijutsu*, or "fine arts," and *gijutsu*, or "industrial arts," and *bijutsu* should contain *bijutsu dezain* or "artistic design."

The Course of Study of 1958 prompted public discussions among those concerned with art education in the schools about design education for children. The phrase "children's design" represented the entire problem. *Biiku Bunka*, a journal of art education, is one of the relevant

14) ——— Kazuo Kaneko, *Bijutsuka kyōiku no hōbōron to rekishi* [The Method and History of Art Education], revised edition, Tokyo: Cyūōkōron Bijutsu Shuppan, 2003.

publications to present the controversy surrounding design education for children. The journal was open to the critical opinions of teachers on the current educational policy.¹⁵⁾ The special issue on design education has occasionally been published. The most remarkable are the articles from 1958 to 1964. It was the period of a design boom that culminated in the Tokyo Olympics. Consequently, there were many discussions about children's design, in which main arguments were out as follows:¹⁶⁾

Children's design acquires its significance for designers, as far as it adequately combines artistic creation with manual work. At this point, it appears still problematic that the art subject *bijutsu* was separated from the technical subject *gijutsu* in the lower secondary school. The former should conduct "artistic design," which may sound awkward to designers.

The negative evaluation of design education for children mostly stemmed from the artistic perspective, with the following main arguments: First, art education should be the cultivation of artistic sentiment through self-expression; design work is then not preferable because it tends to be too pragmatic. Second, the holistic approach in depicting an object is rather effective to understand the principles of plastic arts. In contrast to this, the specialized training for each purpose, such as the composition of colors, has no merit. Third, children should become interested in their ethnic traditions. As long as design practice engages the operation of abstract elements, there would be no room for knowing regional merits.

One of the most contentious points of art education in the school context has been the alternative or balance between subjective expression and the acquisition of the objective principles along with general skills. As a part of art education, design practice also allows for children's free expression as well as their spontaneous creation. However, when the group *sōbi* became popular in the 1950s, as they gave absolute priority to children's free expression, the design practice played a certain role in hindering excess sensualistic individualism.

The Course of Study that followed the first provisional version of 1947 has been revised seven times. In the 1958 version, the word design first appeared. With the implantation of the 1968 version, design was firmly positioned throughout all grades as an instructive field among others, such as painting. However, the 1977 version brought the determination that design instruction should begin with the fifth grade of elementary school. Finally, the current version, 2008, does not use the word design for the elementary school. The design practice in the school, which has originally developed with modern movement, has lost its charm in the school. Similar to the transition from an industrial society to a consumer society, art educators' emphasis also appears to have shifted from the method of production to the esthetic experience. Therefore, critical art educators came to avoid the use of the word design, especially for younger children. However, that does not indicate that design education has totally disappeared. What was known as design education has assumed the form of the free composition of esthetic elements

15) ———— Yoshiichi Ōizumi, 'Shotō design kyōiku no reimeiki ni okeru "kodomo no design" gainen no kento III' [Study of the Notion "Children's Design" at the Beginning of the Design Education in the Elementary School, Part III], *Bijutsu kyōiku gaku*, no.29, 2008, pp.129-140.

16) ———— The issues of 1959. 6. and 1959.7. ran a special feature on "The New Course of Study and Design Education," in which the immediate reaction of the teachers to the reform can be observed. The issues of 1962. 6. and 1962. 8. featured "The Problems of Design Education."

or the arrangement of useful things.

It is worth further considering another keyword of art education in school—*zōkei*, which has been used throughout postwar art education due to its utility. The word *zōkei* literally means shaping, being equivalent to the German word, *Gestaltung*, and has merit in that it can ambiguously refer to both art as well as design. Therefore, art educators could refer to anything without using the word design. Interestingly, in the Course of Study of 1977, a new concept of *zōkei* play first appeared as an experimental idea, and, since 1989, *zōkei* play has gained a stable position in the elementary school.¹⁷⁾ *Zōkei* play is characterized by children's physical and joyful involvement in the outside world wherein the process is more significant than the results. *Zōkei* play encourages site-related creation as well as the amusing treatment of various materials. Its undifferentiated form beyond the established art genres such as painting and its characteristic of amusement has tended to confuse teachers until today. Nevertheless, *zōkei* play has already established its position and has been actively discussed among art educators. There seems to be two reasons for this occurrence: contemporary art has demolished the established art genres such as sculpture, and contemporary design has overcome the modernistic ideas based on functionalism. *Zōkei* play, comprising the essence of contemporary art, adequately took over the fundamental plastic work for younger children, which was formerly expected in the "design" practice.

Meaning of Children's Design

OUR first question is what the children's design means when children are not professional designers. We could then look at a classification that encompasses the standard form of children's design in the school. Masato Takahashi, one of the leading specialists in design education, classified children's design into two activities of learning in the 1967 book, *The Principles of Design Education*.¹⁸⁾ The first involves the basic plastic work, which is not immediately useful, and the other is the practical plastic work, which is intended for a certain useful purpose. The basic plastic work aims to learn the fundamentals of plastic arts immediately by constructing elements instead of depicting objects. Takahashi further divided this work into two types of training that he considered to be distinguished from each other to clarify each different purpose. The first is the examination of the esthetic effects of color, texture, volume, movement, and light, while the other is the examination of physical structures using sticks, plates, and blocks. Takahashi also divided the practical plastic work into two types of practices, the first being the creation of the medium of visual communication and the other is the creation of the required useful product.

Our second question involves the aim of the design education for children when they will not be professional designers. As the purpose of school art education has been ambiguous, the

17) ——— Tomoko Mutō, Kazuo Kaneko, 'Zōkei asobi no hassei ni tsuite no rekishi teki kenkyū' [A Historical Study of the Genesis of Zōkei Play], *Ibaragi Daigaku Kyōiku Gakubu Kiyō: Kyōikukagaku*, no.53, 2004, part 1: pp.27-50, part 2: pp.51-68; no. 54, 2005, part 3: pp.39-58, part 4: pp.59-77.

18) ——— Masato Takahashi (ed.), *Design kyōiku no genri* [Principles of Design Education], Tokyo: Seishin Shobō, 1967, pp. 2-30.

aim of the design education for children has never been evident for the schoolteachers. Despite the shifting of ideas and values over time, the postwar national policy of art education has maintained its central purpose as “the cultivation of rich esthetic sentiment” throughout the seven revisions. In addition to this conventional statement, the 1958 Course of Study for the “arts and handicrafts” for elementary schools, which first introduced the design practice, specified “fostering the pragmatic attitude” as well as “the respect for techniques.” The 1968 Course of Study for the “arts and handicrafts” for elementary schools, continued to include an educational purpose: “the respect for techniques.” However, as far as it can be observed in the art educational journals, most art educators who supported design practice for younger children were not so pragmatically motivated as the opponents criticized. After the Course of Study of 1977, both the pragmatic as well as the technical purposes were totally removed from the art curriculum in the schools. In general, as a part of art education, the children’s design has been content with the obscure position. Today, the concept of design has also been inculcated in social activities such as rebuilding lost communities. We should now step over the school art education in order to rethink the possibilities of the design education for children.