Report from Tohoku

Museums in the Disaster Zone

By Lois Lydens

The ocean has two faces; one brings rich wealth, the other brings disaster Ryoichi Kinno

Recently, Saori Maekawa, a senior curator in Tono, Japan, created an exhibition featuring eight earthquake and tsunami-ravaged museums in Tohoku (northeastern Japan). On 11 March 2011, the coastline in this area was devastated and 20,000 people were killed. The eight museums were completely destroyed or suffered severe damage to their physical structures and collections. Tragically, many museum employees or their family members lost their lives.

Commemorating the first anniversary of 11 March, the exhibition contains poignant reminders of the area's cultural and historical heritage. Along with artefacts that were recovered and restored, photographs and descriptive panels offer visitors the opportunity to understand the current condition of the eight museums.

Near the exhibition's entrance, a video shows the encroaching tsunami waves. Made by a local resident, the footage communicates the terror of that day as all manner of debris smashed into Miyako City's buildings. The cameraman donated the film to keep the memory of the tsunami alive. He does not want future generations to have to suffer the same experience.

Large photographs show a 30 metric ton stone with writing etched on it, "The 1933 tsunami came this high". The etching was forgotten and the stone was used as a base for road construction. The tsunami uncovered the stone: a bitter reminder of the consequences of forgetting the past.

A museum employee from Rikuzentakata made a printed tag for a museum piece. It was an old vegetable cutter used to stretch a family's meal. Root vegetables were cut into tiny pieces and added to precious rice. The laminated tag was intact when the cutter was dug out of the debris, thus allowing rescue workers to identify it as belonging to the museum. Sadly, the museum employee who meticulously printed and laminated the tag is now listed as missing.

A colourful *papier-mâché* tiger mask and fabric costume are in the exhibition. The tiger is used in festival dances to wish good luck to fishermen heading out to sea. In folk legends, tigers can travel 500 kilometres in a day and return home safely at night. This particular tiger travelled during the tsunami and found a resting place on some debris. It was restored by museum workers and happily, claimed by someone who identified it as "Jiro".

Jiro, *photo by Saori Maekawa*

The labelled vegetable cutter, Rikuzentakata City Museum, photo by Makoto Manabe

A story from *Tono Tales*, a collection of folk tales documented by ethnologist Kunio Yanagita, is included in the exhibition. In this story, based on an actual 1896 tsunami, a man survives but loses his wife. A year after the tsunami, he sees his wife in a dream – she is now part of a new world. This story illustrates how the tsunami is part of local ethnology and the difficulty of overcoming a traumatic experience.

The exhibition will tour Japan in 2012 and may travel overseas after that. Meanwhile, museum officials and volunteers from all over Japan are working tirelessly to recover and restore artworks, statues, ceramics, books, folk art, textiles and zoological and botanical specimens. They know they must preserve the cultural heritage of Tohoku while facing the daunting task of reconstruction. At present, people in Tohoku are restoring and cataloguing collections. Rebuilding the museums is a dream for the future.

Damaged Collection Room in Rikuzentakata City Museum 27 April 2011, photo by Makoto Manabe

Museum officials & volunteers working on recovering the collections, photo by Makoto Manabe

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