

When I first encountered a truly new design, I was puzzled, having absolutely no understanding of what it was. I was speechless, as if all words had been completely erased from my mind. I guess I can say that it was a feeling like I was all alone in an unknown place where I couldn't communicate. The reason for feeling like I was all alone was perhaps because the piece was completely out of the context of ordinary design. It's very difficult to objectively evaluate something that is out of context. If there's nothing to compare it to, it's the same as not being able to measure size or distance. To the extent that there is no comparison, it looks less like anything that came before it. When you encounter such a piece, you lose the understanding of design that you thought you had. I think that is what a design that is truly new is.

I had that kind of feeling when I saw Ii Naosuke (M) in an exhibition at the Nagasaki Prefectural Art Museum in 2007. Despite its theme of "something Japanese," the mirror, designed in the silhouette of a historical person and having a totally blank expression, didn't have a familiar feeling whatsoever. The impression I got was of a somber figure that you see only in history textbooks. Taking that as a hint, I came up with "Japanese history" as a theme. I decided to ask Hisakazu Shimizu to design a piece under this theme. I thought that if I gave Shimizu the theme of "Japanese history," he would undoubtedly come up with a piece that no one had seen before. I also had the hope that I would be able to understand the nature of "newness" if I was involved in the creation process.

In our preliminary discussion, Shimizu first said that he would make Ii Naosuke (M) bigger, although it was already quite big enough, since the venue was not yet decided, and thus there was no need to make it with that consideration in mind. He also talked about making the samurai's chonmage (topknot) bigger, and turning it into a product. We went back and forth many times over whether to make the chonmage functional, and if so, in what way. In the end, the chonmage became a giant piggy bank that sits on a stone base.

The completed pieces were, as I thought, something that no one had seen before. Everyone who saw these pieces for the first time showed a puzzled expression, not knowing whether to laugh or get angry. Even still, I thought that by making two pieces and making them bigger, the door to understanding opened a little wider. "Size" was the key. Making them bigger was not such a good move economically since it necessitated more technology and labor, and demanded a larger space in which to put them. A large piece has that much more energy, making people who look at it think that there is some special reason for it. At the same time, being bigger puts the observer "closer" to it. Just as it is necessary to get closer to the subject in order to take a good photograph, one has to get up close to a piece of work to understand it. Size naturally creates that context. It's like stepping into a separate world with just you and the object, and your own existence fades away as you stand before it.

The largeness of Ii Naosuke (L) and Chonmage Bank puts the observer in exactly that kind of situation. Moreover, people will for the first time think seriously about Ii Naosuke and chonmage. Since each person will have their own thoughts about them, I'd like them to take the time to look closely. As for me, the writer, my thoughts are as follows.

Ii Naosuke was an influential leader in the Bakufu, the council of the Shogun's advisors, who is most famous for signing the Harris Treaty with the United States, granting access to ports for trade to American merchants and seamen and extraterritoriality to American citizens. Ii created many enemies by clamping down on opposers with brute force. His dictatorial reign as Tairō (Great Elder) came to an abrupt end on March 24, 1860, when he was attacked by a band of 17 young samurai loyalists from Mito province and cut down just in front of one of the gates of the Shogun's Edo castle. Although he played a significant role in the development of modern Japan, he is always painted in a bad light in high-school history classes as well as plays and television dramas. The treatment given him shows the conflicted feelings of Japanese people toward history. Although we Japanese owe our way of life today to Ii Naosuke (the authority symbolized by him), we dislike him because of our attachment to traditional Japanese culture, which was lost as a result of Ii's actions in welcoming the West. It's like the story of Oedipus. We cannot forget that Ii himself was a samurai who wore his hair in the chonmage, but before gaining prominence, he lived a reclusive life and was an accomplished practitioner of the Japanese tea ceremony. Ii himself was torn by his own duality.

In being modeled on Ii Naosuke and not someone else, the mirror provides a close up of this conflict. Setting aside the real relationship between oneself and history, it is a criticism of "Japanese-style" design that has been drawn as fiction. The mirror reflects one's entire self, not someone else.

The cut-off chonmage represents the traditional culture that was destroyed by Ii, a symbol of the "lost culture" that we are attached to. The chonmage was the soul of the samurai, and so cutting it off was the same as dying to them. The cut-off chonmage reflects the downfall of the old system of things and the absence of the pride that supported it. The giant chonmage that sits atop the stone base is a big "nothing." The purpose in making the chonmage a piggy bank of sorts is also made evident from this. The minimal action by Shimizu of putting small slits in the chonmage shows the emptiness of it. The past culture that we have such an attachment to has no real substance anymore. It can be used to save up money, but the vacuum cannot be filled.