

To See, and to Show: Commercial Museums and Cities in Modernity

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This paper examines the types of roles played by “commercial museums” that were established in cities throughout modern Japan.

Inspired by the commercial museums that began to gain popularity as a new type of urban institution in the West, provincial cities in Japan began establishing commercial museums toward the end of the 19th century. The museums were aimed at stimulating local industrialization, and operated under the jurisdiction of the ministry of agriculture and commerce (later the Ministry of International Trade and Industry). Their main activities were providing subsidies and guidance to people engaged in agriculture, commerce and industry, maintaining permanent facilities, and collecting and publicly displaying goods. The first of these museums were established by 1878, and during the Taisho period (1912-1926) they could be found in almost every part of Japan, although many disappeared during World War II as economic and social conditions deteriorated. Commercial museums in various locations experimented with different display methods to find those that were eye-catching and communicated the desired content effectively, enabling citizens to appreciate the benefits of seeing what is available or potentially available. For local commerce and industry people, the facilities provided a place to learn about showing samples of their products to third parties, and to gain practical experience, too.

In provincial cities with few public facilities, commercial museums held fairs and lectures, and even concerts and art exhibits for citizens. In cities where popular culture was blossoming, the museums did not just offer displays related to commerce and industry, but also served as venues where citizens learned to see and encountered things on show.