

An Oral History of Broadcasting
Formation and Transformation of "TV Art"
(Part IV) The Creators of the Studio for Historical Drama*

June 2016

HIROTANI Kyoko

NHK Broadcasting Culture Research Institute
Media Research & Studies

*This article is based on the author's article "Hoso no Oraru Hisutori: Terebijutsu no Seiritsu to Henyo (4) Jidaigeki Sutajio wo Tsukuruhitotachi" [Oral History of Broadcasting: Formation and Transformation of "TV Art" [Part IV] Those Who Make up Samurai Drama Studios], originally published in the December 2015 and January 2016 issue of *Hoso kenkyu to chosa* [The NHK Monthly Report on Broadcast Research]. Full text in Japanese available at:

http://www.nhk.or.jp/bunken/research/history/pdf/20151201_1.pdf,

http://www.nhk.or.jp/bunken/research/history/pdf/20160101_5.pdf,

1. Introduction

Based on the testimonies of the actual persons involved, this series proposes to explore how along with the birth of television "TV art" came into being and evolved. In the following, divided into a first and second part, our topic will be the production site of the "historical period drama," where we will take a look at the work of the art production staff charged with creating the studio. The studio for historical period drama is considered the birthplace of the most complex kinds of work in program creation. How does it transform into a space that enables the capture on film? Executing work that is at times bold, at times intricate, but is invariably finished on time and with care, the art production staff are the studio's true craftspeople. How did their skills come into existence and how has their know-how accumulated since the dawn of the TV drama?

Based on the testimony of the art production staff, we will probe for answers and shed light on the actual work performed on-site.

Historical period dramas were produced for the silver screen in large numbers already before the birth of TV, but the development of the production for television was centered on NHK. The reason is that commercial TV stations, except for their very first productions, came to commission their programs with film production companies, which had the infrastructure and the know-how. Consistent with these facts, spread out over three sessions, we have interviewed in a roundtable talk format 12 people who were involved in historical period drama production at NHK (gathered on October 9, 2013, and on June 9 and 11, 2015). Moreover, from the "Broadcasters' Testimony" (gathered by the Broadcast Creators Association of Japan),¹⁾ we will quote Tsuneo Hara and Kiyoshi Hashimoto about the pioneer days of TV.

In the following, we will describe in brief how the studio for the production of historical period dramas is put together.

(1) Production of scenery props

(Parts of scenery props are made outside the studio)

[Including paper hanging staff (papering of hanging scrolls and *fusuma* sliding partitions) and painting operations (pictorial art production), etc.]

↓

(2) Set building

(Assembling the scenery props in the studio; also referred to as "decoration")

↓

(3) Landscaping (Decorating the set with trees and rocks)

↓

(4) Small props (Procuring small props and decorating on the set)

↓

(5) Special effects

(Generating natural phenomena such as rain, snow, wind, fog, fire, smoke; including effects related to action scenes such as explosives and projectile impacts)

[Additionally, there are art operations management tasks that relate to total operations beyond scenery props.]

We will advance the discussion based on the testimony of the persons charged with the production of scenery props, set building, landscaping, special effects, painting and decorating, small props, and art operations promotion tasks.

2. Production of and set building using scenery props —Live broadcasts compel adherence to theatrical conventions

From test broadcasting to the pioneer years—The 1950s



Set building for the NHK program *Basu Dori Ura* (1961)

"Scenery props are the most fundamental constituent element forming the scene. Scenery props, as the designation suggests, means large-size theatrical stage props such as scaffolding for plays or backgrounds for dance performances." (*NHK TV Art Reader*, page 86) Scenery props take up significant amounts of space on the set for TV programs. In the following, we will take a look at the transformation of scenery props over the years.

TV started in 1953 with live broadcasts. In Part II of this series, "Drama Set Design," we already said that at the very beginning a theater-type stage was imported into the set.

According to designers back then, "With TV the stage is built and taken down daily. This is the way the theatrical stage is used. In the motion picture industry, the stage is solid. Filming can be done from this side or that." (Hirofumi, 2014:33). As we can read in the *NHK Yearbook*, "Efforts were made to meld the scenery props used in the theater with the methods used for motion picture production sets, thus establishing television's distinctive style." (1953 Edition) "In traditional Japanese sets, we used no imitations and backdrops for window screens, sliding doors, window shutters, and glass doors, but we used and put in front of the camera lens the actual construction-normal materials. The effect of this realism was wonderful." (1955 Edition) In other words, at the very beginning, the sets for TV production consisted of large panels with back cloth, pillars, walls, and windows, doors, and fittings, while for set features that needed to be opened and closed the real articles were used, in a way similar to the stage setting of theatrical performances.

In actual fact, in the pioneer years, scenery props for TV made their entry from the theatrical stage. This is also made clear in the testimony of Tsuneo Hara who was in charge of scenery props at the Haiyuza Theater Company. Designer Kiyoshi Hashimoto, who was involved in the world of television from the time of trial broadcasting, talks about the complications back then.

Hara: Initially there was no category at all for a set for TV production. The construction was no different from a theatrical stage and also the background was almost identical.

Hashimoto: When TV trial broadcasting started, it seemed entirely natural to use the unaltered theatrical stage. How the art of film making was different found no consideration. Actually, TV studios were small, few in number, and therefore needed to be used on a rotating basis. If in these conditions sets were to be erected, the filming performed, and the set disassembled, it had to be the same type of work as on the theater stage.

Hara: Exactly. There was a lot of live TV. From our senior associates I heard that when a TV drama was filmed, perhaps by Kon Ichikawa, at Nippon TV they had problems because the whole set for the filming was brought in. All the more so because it was a real set. Back then, film-making had yet to have much of an impact. In the end it came to the influence from the theatrical stage being a lot stronger.

Hashimoto: Ultimately this is why in the search for more realistic effects the scenery props for TV gradually changed, away from the unaltered theater-type scenery props that were initially used. The changes and improvements made over time have been building up to what we have today.

Even though the idea was the amalgamation with the methods of cinematography, the realistic sets for film production were not yet suited for TV, which back then was still ridiculed as an "electric picture-story show." Starting with the scenery props of the theater, TV

advanced by small steps toward that "realistic" expression which television had been aiming at.

The workplace of veterans

From live broadcasts to true TV production—The 1960s

In the 1960s the number of TV subscriptions grew exponentially and NHK commissioned an affiliated organization with its TV artwork operations. In July 1961, the NHK Art Center (now NHK Art) was established, with a concentration of staff from the film and theater worlds, centered on transferees from NHK. Scenery props were built at a 270-square-meter worksite set up on the former NHK Fujimigaoka Ground (Suginami Ward, Tokyo). One of the transferees from the world of film was Tsugio Arai, involved in building scenery props, who also worked with director Akira Kurosawa at the Toho Film Studios.



Tsugio Arai
Scenery props construction

Born 1930 in Tokyo. Scenery props construction at Toho and Nikkatsu. Since 1961 with the NHK Art Center (now NHK Art).

(Tsugio Arai passed away on December 13, 2014.)

Arai: At the Fujimigaoka Ground we had borrowed a section of the premises, just a pre-fab. Working there were about ten carpenters, two or three paper hanging staff, and pictorial art staff. At the beginning of TV, many staff members came originally from theater set building. TV back then, excuse me for saying this, was a mixed bag. There were people from theater, from film, and also people who had joined of their own fancy, of course forming a jumble of opinions. Film production back then was about gun slinging and murder (laughs). This is why I gave up on it.

According to Arai, TV at the time had yet to cast off the mantle of the theater.

Arai: The reason was also that the TV screen was gradually turning more realistic. In the old days it used to be packed with theatrical playacting. It also looked like today's theater stage set-up, with a crossbeam, a wall, and two pillars set against it to hold it in place. At the bottom was a threshold with two *shoji* screens that open if you put them there. If you zoomed in, the seams of the pillars started becoming visible. Maybe TV audiences developed an eye for those

details, or TV screens came to render sharper pictures.

After parts of the scenery props are prepared and ready there comes the scenery props set-building or decoration work, i.e. actual construction in the studio. Takeshi Fujii transferred from his position as a temp at the NHK Art Division to the Art Center. Apparently back then, workers were—in a rather simplistic procedure—asked to line up and depending on the size of their physical frame were assigned to scenery props or small props. With his large frame, Fujii was assigned to scenery props. The parts that Arai and other product staff built were brought into the studio and assembled and finished with windows, doors, fittings, and *tatami* mats. His involvement with the Taiga Drama (an annual year-long historical fiction series) started from the second of the series named *Akō Rōshi* (1964).

Fujii: The problem was, we were always fighting against time, because the start of the filming was fixed at nine in the morning. Even though the end might have been scheduled for ten that evening, it always ran to midnight or one at night. Ending that late meant there was a lot less time left until nine on the next day. Nonetheless, the work for the next day had to be completed. Because time was short, each part of the studio became crowded with people trying to get their job done at the same time. The work started late, around two in the morning. That is also about the time when people feel most sleepy (laughs). We used to come out around noon, stood by during the filming, and when the filming had ended retreated to fix the work for the next day. In the morning we went home. That was our schedule. When the National Arts Festival Drama started we didn't return home for about one week.



Takeshi Fujii
Set building

Born 1940 in Hiroshima Prefecture. In 1959 joined the NHK Art Division as temporary worker. In 1961 joined the NHK Art Center (now NHK Art). Work responsibilities centered on the Taiga Drama series.

Participating in the roundtable are five or six members each from the Taiga Drama group and the Serialized TV Novel group. Stories are flying: "I changed my residence certificate to the address of the studio," "Even the debt collector came." In the old days, we hear, staff also included some with a rougher temperament, and *naguri* hammers would frequently be thrown (a *naguri* is a special tool used for set building, with a long shaft and a head shaped for hammering nails in and also for extracting them). Sets then had many

veterans from the theater. During the *Basu Dori Ura* drama series (1958–1963) Takeshi Fujii experienced live broadcasting.



Fujii: All of the actors back then were veterans who often helped us out. When a tree came down during a broadcast, the actor only said "Trees around here don't seem to be firmly rooted." There were situations where this saved our bacon. And then there were the windows, doors, and fittings. Back then the glass sliding doors had no glass in them, and instead of frosted glass they had tracing paper. Since there were no glass panes the actors grabbed the wooden frames, where hands should not normally be able to pass through (laughs).

It also happened that roof tiles kept falling down. Until the invention of fiber reinforced plastic (FRP), we used real roof tiles. (According to the *NHK Yearbook*, plastic roof tiles were developed from around 1962 and partly introduced for use in 1964. By 1968 plastic roof tiles were used in many programs.)

Fujii: It was dangerous. The front gate of a samurai residence carried roof tiles. Since the backside was not visible, the back had no tiles on it. And because the weight was resting only on one side, the structure would overturn. When FRP became available, we made a mold from a real roof tile, poured in FRP and made plastic tiles. "Weight reduction," you could put it.²⁾ We put weight reduction to work on a lot of things, but there seems to be a strengthening trend that favors using the real article.

In the old days, for a pillar we put four boards together and called it a box pillar. But since real pillars came into use, there is also a lot of weight involved. When *Akō Rōshi* was filmed in 1964, for the first time there were pillars made from bonded wood, which is old wood that has been compressed. When we tried to join the pillar to the set, it was too hard to put nails into it. We did finally manage to insert nails, but later at disassembly when we tried to pull them out, because there was one part hard and one part soft material, the whole set collapsed. The pillar was too heavy for carrying it to the storage, so we stored it behind the

cyclorama (the cloth curtain used as background) and left it in the studio. In the end it cost us a lot of time and consumed much strength.

Methods for saving time

From growth to maturity—Until the mid-1970s

In 1973, NHK completed its relocation within Tokyo from Uchisaiwai-cho in Chiyoda Ward to Jinnan in Shibuya Ward, and the NHK Hall was also opened. Along with the increase in programs, there was growing demand for large-scale sets for public programs such as the *Kōhaku Uta Gassen* ("Year-end Song Festival"). This year, as a contractor firm of the NHK Art Center, a specialized company for the production of scenery props was established. Saburo Kodate, formerly an urban carpenter, came to this company as a change of career. For the next 40-odd years, he would be involved in work for television, but initially he found himself puzzled without end.



Saburo Kodate

Scenery props construction

Born 1948 in Akita Prefecture. From working as an urban carpenter transferred to a company for the production of scenery props (formerly Takumi, now S'Art). Currently company president.

Kodate: When I was a carpenter I built houses and that was that, without wasting much thought on it. Today the situation is completely different. Because, in a sense, what I am making today is all fake (laughs). I think, for three or four years I struggled with this that. In the case of a carpenter's work, the yardstick is "core to core," but in the world of television it is the inside measure that matters, something that doesn't sit right with me, no matter how hard I try. I found it very difficult to get used to this situation.

On NHK sets the reason why the inner measure (the distance between inner sides of two pillars) was adopted and not the core-to-core measure (the distance between the cores of two pillars) which is the norm in architecture is due to the fact that the dimensions of the windows, doors, and fittings to be used were predetermined.³⁾ Sets for TV program production must be rebuilt each day for filming. This requires ease of assembly and disassembly. In order to meet this special quality, it is necessary to use the same dimensions when building windows, doors, and fittings. This is a principle that also underlies Japanese architecture.

"It is a special characteristic of the architecture in Japan that generally the dimensions of windows, doors, and fittings and *tatami* mats are standardized so as to make them interchangeable between residences. This characteristic has also been employed since olden times for kabuki stage props. That is, pillars, walls, transoms, entrances, and windows, doors, fittings, etc., have been kept in permanent stock, and by modifying combinations and colors, they have the special ability to express different moods. This method acquired its established place as the standard stage set-up." (*NHK TV Art Reader*, page 90)

It is interesting to see that for as much as this was the standard method, there was a natural affinity between the stage equipment of the traditional performing arts, with their frequent changes of scene, and the sets for TV dramas, with their repeated assembly and disassembly.

Kodate: One difference is that as an ordinary carpenter I would not normally work on shrines and temples. But if you come into this world, from the start you need to be making castles and all sorts of other things. In this sense, it is an interesting environment. There is nothing they don't have here.

Incidentally, designers work by illustrating the floor plan use shifted dimensions instead of the actual dimensions, drawing on charts called prop sheets that have special grids. How exactly does this work?



A flatbed is laid out over the floor, on top of which the set is erected.

The set is erected on top of base platforms that measure roughly 3×6 *shaku*⁴⁾ (since 1 *shaku* is 30.3 cm this corresponds to about 90×180 cm). This surface forms the floor, called flatbed, of the structure.

As already mentioned, the dimensions of the windows, doors, and fittings are standardized, such as 1-space objects (5 *shaku*, 6 *sun*, 5 *bu*; about 171.2 cm) and 2-space objects (11 *shaku*, 6 *sun*, 5 *bu*; about 353 cm). Likewise, the thickness of the pillars on either

side of windows, doors, and fittings is standardized, namely 3 *sun* 5 *bu* (about 10 cm) for a private residence and 5 *sun* (about 15 cm) for a palace.⁵⁾ The actual dimensions are not reflected in the drawings, however. Instead, the designer will always draw one construction element per grid measure. This relieves the designer of having to measure with a ruler each and every one of the actual dimensions of windows, doors, and fittings while drawing and speeds up preparation of the drawings. This is because it is always a race against time.

However, if there is a deviation in the thickness of a pillar, naturally a discrepancy in the actual dimensions will result. From this point on, the skills of the set-building staff come into play. Set-building work requires the ability to discern from looking at the drawing the adjustments that are necessary in order to make the set correctly fit into the studio as it is being put together. For instance, when a base has been ordered with dimensions at odds with the flatbed (a "no-good base"), where and how to make what kinds of adjustments takes experience and skill to decide. If estimates prove overly generous, even tearing down a studio wall may become necessary. In the world of TV, where battling against time is unavoidable, the ability to work, in a positive sense, with a sort of "inaccuracy" that does not exist in real architecture, is a necessary skill.⁶⁾ This requires an almost telepathic kind of communication at the day-to-day level between the designer and the staff who build and assemble the scenery props.

Mitsuharu Sakuma, who is still active as an expert in set building, used to work for a private TV station before coming to NHK after hearing that NHK had a staff shortage in the scenery props department. Initially coming just to take a look, after having his skills tested he ended up staying. Aged 21 at the time, he has since moved on to go independent with a company specializing in scenery props, which he has been operating to this day.

Mitsuharu Sakuma and Saburo Kodate, who handled production, formed a highly successful partnership. At the shop floor level of scenery props, the work is divided into production and set building. We asked the two why that is the case.



Mitsuharu Sakuma

Set building

Born 1949 in Chiba Prefecture. Initially at a private TV station responsible for TV drama and popular music shows. Moved to NHK in the 1970s. Subsequently founded and to this day has operated Miki Enterprise (now Miki Project), a company specializing in scenery props.

Sakuma: Actually, doing both production and set building together is best. Having said this,

working with scenery props is a 24-hour full-time job, with rising time pressure the greater the number of programs. And if there are live broadcasts, of course one needs to adjust to those. As a result, work schedules get chopped up. For one, this makes it difficult to work together with the production work site (the parts of scenery props are built at the work site and transported from there to the studio).

Kodate: Presumably the issue is efficiency. Inevitably much of the decoration/set-building work takes place at night.

Essentially, it would be ideal if the same staff who have produced a set also build it, because no one else knows better how the parts fit together. However, unless it is divided up, the work load is too heavy. This must have been a consideration.

Since time doesn't allow for building and assembling a set in the studio, the work must be completely split into production and set building on a rotating basis, without wasting time. The process is actually similar to housing construction. The production side prepares the parts by cutting the building materials, applying bond, and measuring dimensions. Set-building work generally comprises none of these activities on the assembly site and involves almost only *naguri* hammer and nails as workers assemble the parts in accordance with the drawings.

Kodate: In terms of urban house building, the equivalents are carpenters and construction workers. In house building, the carpenter only takes the drawings and gives instructions in the form of "this part here needs to look like that" because almost the entire assembly is done only by construction workers. I think it is the same kind of relationship.



2016 NHK Taiga Drama Series *Sanada Maru*

Set building

(Photographed October 31, 2015)

Unlike motion pictures, with time for preparations and building, in the case of the Taiga Drama series, for example, the 50 episodes continuing for a year require filming almost every week. That means repeated assembling and disassembling each time. But the studio must not be occupied only by that program. (Today the Taiga Drama and the Serialized TV Novel series have studios for almost exclusive use but in the past one studio was shared between both programs.) The shooting went on until late at night. The next morning, a completely different set stood in the studio. Even the performers were perplexed. But behind all this are significant amounts of hard labor and skill.

Sakuma: Another problem is the practice of studio availability. The same set that is in place now may be used for next week's filming but when filming for a counterprogram is scheduled, the set needs to be taken down and reassembled again later. Assuming nine hours left until the morning, actually we were lucky to have four or five hours' time for set building. We did some smart things, though, like when the filming was taking too long, we patched up as much as possible outside the studio and loaded the set onto a pull frame (a wagon set, that is, a scenery prop erected on a low base with wheels attached for quick changes of scene) so that it would suffice to just move the props into the studio. During those four or five hours, staff could hardly be more focused on their work. That is because anyone found dallying would be yelled at to speed up (laughs).

Sakuma tells us, "Staff for the next set change came in even during filming and did the disassembly work when no filming was going on," describing the hectic atmosphere on-site. The first mention of research and testing of the "set drive-in method," where the set is loaded on a pull frame and transported where it is needed, appears in the 1966 edition of the *NHK Yearbook*. It is also mentioned that in 1969 the method was used for a long-term set used in the *Ten to Chi to* Taiga Drama. Full-scale use of the method started in the 1970s.

Back then there existed a fixed measuring stick often referred to as a "fool's rod," but it is not known since when, and why it had that name. When affixing a transom (wall)⁷⁾ to two pillars, holding up this rod of a specified length (5 *shaku* 7 *sun* 8 *bu*, corresponding to about 175 cm) to the two pillars would suffice for determining the position where the transom needed to be affixed, and saving the labor of taking a measurement each time this action was performed. It was only thanks to all windows, doors, and fittings having the same dimensions that this tool could work the way it did.

This is why in every talk about television as a work place "time" is inevitably a keyword. It is fair to say that television has given birth to an unprecedented characteristic system for scenery props, distinct from the motion picture industry and the theater with their less rigid time regimes.



The introduction of the unit piece and new problems

Managing and operating scenery props—The mid-1970s and beyond

For scenery props, which need to be built for each filming (and disassembled after the end of the program), a transition started in 1975 to the concept of "unit pieces,"⁸⁾ which are "fixed sets" owned by each program. The idea was to turn parts like pillars, walls, and windows, doors, and fittings into units which could be reused over and over. Furthermore, this idea evolved into the concept of the "base design," (starting in 1996), as a combination of the "base set," which shifts from program specific-use to shared use between programs, and the "option set," which is unique to each program.

Cutting back on art operations expenses seems a natural development to us today from an environmental perspective, but back then there were designers who refused to use sets they didn't fancy. As a consequence, set-building staff of scenery props came to be involved not only in set building and removal but also in the management and operations of scenery props. This gave rise to new problems.

Sakuma: We needed to pick up from respective storages what we needed and later separate it out again and return it to its original storage places. This takes a lot of time and effort. Determining the methods for the management of scenery props as well as how to disassemble them and stack them consumed huge amounts of time. Considering that the locations of art props in storage are prone to be forgotten, this required large amounts of time, effort, and money.



Storage of windows, doors, and fittings today

Moreover, finding a way to build sets without hammering nails into pillars and walls was for many years a problem awaiting a solution. For putting up transoms in the *Dokuganryū Masamune* Taiga Drama (1987), instead of using nails a "joint method" was adopted where parts are combined with metal fittings. Metal fittings were fastened to the pillars, the transom was fitted with corresponding metal fittings, and with the crossbeam then hooked into the pillar-side fittings a solid structure was in place. This reduced damage from reassembling the scenery props again and again and also resulted in time and labor savings. In the old days, on occasion filming would have to be stopped because of a brightly reflecting nail head in the set. Nowadays screws suffice in almost all places where otherwise nails would be used, so this is no longer a concern. On the other hand, there are now young people who don't know how to use a *naguri* hammer. Kodate sighs, "The *naguri* hammer is still needed. Because you never know what's going to happen on the shooting site. Like shooting on location, or so on."

Kodate: The biggest problem today is that one cannot learn the craft without building difficult sets. You just forget how it's done. If you haven't done it for some time—the roof of a castle is in the end quite intricate. And those supposed to teach the craft will be left scratching their heads as they try to recollect how it's done. Passing on skills, I guess that's what it's called, until now used to happen through learning by watching. I am afraid teaching could give us problems in the future.

Kodate and his colleagues, having themselves created the golden era of television, know that we cannot go against the times. In these days, their generation might feel concerned. .

3. Landscaping—Gardeners who create "Nature"

Once the scenery props are in place, the surroundings are decorated with trees (plants, flowers and trees) and rocks. The landscaping artists create "nature" in the studio. But the horticultural part is not all, because an "imitation nature" comprised of hills and fields across the four seasons as well as lake backdrop is also brought in. That is, in an artificial environment, a contradictory vista is created. Toshinobu Konaka, who has been working with NHK since the *Minamoto no Yoshitsune* Taiga Drama (1966), recalls that it has been a struggle. This work too is a race against the clock.



Toshinobu Konaka
Landscaping

Born 1946 in Akita Prefecture. Joined Tokoen (now Greenwise) as landscaping staff in 1965 and was assigned to handle NHK productions in 1970. Currently representative director of Office Risuke LLC.

Konaka: I arrive at five in the morning and build up the scene, which must be completed by nine. At nine a staff rehearsal takes place. The gardener, the scenery props people, and the small props people, they all come together. We hold a meeting to consider things like the angle the camera will capture. Up to a point, we have to be punctual. The filming ends around eleven or twelve. Then we take everything apart: first the small props artist, then the gardener, then the scenery props artist. Then the scenery props artist starts building, I come in next, and last of all it's the small props artist again. This process we repeat over and over. When it's really bad, we sleep for one or two hours somewhere on a chair or in the studio. During the production of *Taiyo no Oka*, a drama with Hisaya Morishige in the main role (1966–67), we had sets of double-decker beds where we crawled in to sleep, maybe from a youth hostel or a hotel. When things take too long, the scenery props artist gets flustered and when I walk in while the small props artist is still taking everything apart, there is bound to be another quarrel (laughs).

Nowadays I use a lot of artificial leaves. Back then, for walls and mountain ranges I nailed fresh trees to the base platform. Once when morning came around, the film director called me over to complain that the nailing was done badly and made me take everything down and redo it over a length of three meters.

The distant view that appears on the screen is called the *to'omi* ("background");

originally a term referring to scenery props used in kabuki plays). Nowadays we can enlarge a photograph and print it on a screen, but in the old days a "mountain scene background" would have to be built by affixing fresh trees to a base platform arranged to display a mountainous background. Actually, there is more to it than nailing fresh trees to a set. According to Toshiaki Nishida, who by happenstance came to do landscaping work for television after experience as a child actor in an NHK program, he had some challenging work waiting for him when he attempted to bring a large tree into the studio.

Nishida: There were lighting fixtures above and the tree would have hit them. Anyway, bringing a tree into the studio just like that was not possible. So we prepared only the trunk. The day before, we went to Lake Sagami to cut some Japanese red pine. We separated the branches from the trunk of the harvested tree and brought both into the studio. For reassembly we would carry 3-*sun* and 5-*sun* nails in our mouths. Everyone earnestly hammered in each nail head as it appeared—as far as the nail would go. They were also quite heavy, otherwise they wouldn't go in. We used a large number of nails for that. Actually to the point that our mouths appeared entirely black. In this way we kept hammering away and building.



Toshiaki Nishida
Landscaping

Born 1943 in Tokyo. Appeared in a children's program during the Uchisaiwai-cho era of NHK. Later worked in studio landscaping and subsequently moved to Tokoen (now Greenwise). Currently representative director of Real LLC.

Moreover, like in a real garden, only flowers and trees will not do. Landscaping also requires rocks and stone garden lanterns. These are all quite heavy.

Nishida: For the decoration of the surroundings it takes hundreds of kilograms, even tons of real rocks. Also the big trees weigh several tons. Most of the work is done using human labor. When it hits the limit, forklifts and truck-mounted cranes can be used with difficulty in the studio, depending on the place. If the studio is large enough, one can drive right in with a 4-ton or 6-ton truck. In small studios that is not possible. In that case, everyone needs to roll up their sleeves.

With trees it's the same story. In the old days we used to suspend them from above. But from the time around the Tokyo Olympics (1964) this changed, so that trees were erected on a pull-frame. This was quite unstable. In any case, those trees are heavy, and although they have

settings, it's scary to be around them.

Even so, they still need to be suspended with wires from above. Wires have more or less thickness, and depending on their thickness, they become visible. This is why wires are scorched black, referred to as wire coating, before they are suspended. Otherwise they would pick up and reflect the light from the lighting fixtures, something that mustn't happen.



Landscaping work today; the ground is prepared with moss; real plants (in the box) are used for the finishing (in the studio of the NHK Taiga Drama *Hana Moyu*)

The Taiga Drama *Minamoto no Yoshitsune* (1966) features a large pine tree with an FRP-molded outer tree bark that is hollow like a roof tile. At the time, a number of designers hated it because it did not look natural. Today however, when FRP trees are set up alongside real ones, it is no longer possible to see the difference any more.

Another problem is that sometimes summer vegetation is needed in winter. Nowadays, since there are now many non-native kinds found in Japan, much care is taken in historical period dramas. With a pained smile, Nishida recalls that designers originating from motion picture industry would demand: "Never mind what it takes. Just get it."

But in TV production with its time constraints, and also budget constraints, how close to the ideal can one get?

Nishida: If the realism of plastic-made props can be increased by another notch, I think we will get all of plastic's three key benefits, that is, being non-soiling, fast, and lightweight. The old ways really put a heavy load on the body and can take their toll on your health. For example, sand has always been scattered in the studio since the old days. If it were only sand, there would be no dust. But after about three days, the potted plants positioned in the corners turn dry, and the soil gets mixed in with the sand. Around the last day, there is a fair amount of dust in the air. For the actors and the staff working there, it's an unhealthy environment.

Inside the studio, where no sunlight ever reaches, both real people and real plants are doing their best to get the work done.



For the 25th episode, titled *Ichijoji Sagarimatsu* (broadcast on October 3, 1984), of the *New Large Format Historical Period Drama Miyamoto Musashi* all filming was done in Studio 101, the largest of the NHK studios. "We built paths between the paddy fields and poured water and I am not sure how many truckloads of soil were brought in. About 80 percent of the studio was paddy fields." (Nishida)

4. Special effects⁹⁾ **—How to make imitations look real**

The scenery props set up in the studio were decorated with trees and plants that were imitations but were getting closer to looking natural. On top of this, special effects are used to get yet another step closer to a natural appearance. Special effects is a catch-all term for everything that is moving on the screen, that means, natural phenomena like rain, snow, fog, wind, and flowing water, but also fires, earthquakes, and all kinds of contraptions. Kohei Yoshitome, a music academy graduate, started working on *Sanbiki no Samurai* (1963-64) of Fuji TV, the same year the Taiga Drama series started at NHK. In this way, historical period drama has accompanied Kohei Yoshitome throughout his life.



Kohei Yoshitome
Special effects

Born 1942 in Sapporo, Hokkaido. Started out with special effects work for Fuji TV. Came to NHK in 1970 as representative of Special Effects Co., Ltd. In the 25 years that followed, was responsible for many TV dramas. In 1978 worked as movie director on the ATG movie *Shin Ningen Shikkaku*.

Yoshitome: Special effect methods were analog and handmade to the extreme. It was the time when TV dramas turned increasingly realistic, when I was by chance working as special effects specialist at Fuji TV. It started with a cut-and-paste contraption for *Sanbiki no Samurai*. At that time I received a commission from NHK.

For the rain and snow scenes, since the sound effect guy had the equipment, I borrowed that or I brought some it in from the company. Immediately after completing my commission, I signed a contract with the Art Center (now NHK Art). It was not only for dramas, but just about everything from the *Kōhaku Uta Gassen* ("Year-end Song Festival") to educational dramas.

Yoshitome also did rock face constructions with the landscaping staff.

Yoshitome: It's all about making it look picturesque, let's say, a narrow path between boulders, dense-looking trees, clods of soil, some more rocks, if you will. Shortly before the Tokyo Olympics, expanded polystyrene (EPS), the material of our dreams, entered our world. The motion picture industry also started using it. It was the most useful material for achieving weight reductions. It proved particularly invaluable for rock formations.

Pulverized EPS was also a favorite for replicating falling snow. There was an EPS manufacturer in Asakusa. When I went there to take a look, they had EPS flakes from large sizes down to fine dust. When I used a plastic bag full of those for a program, the fine granules got into actors' noses, putting the action on hold. EPS snow has been giving me countless problems, but the machines are getting increasingly better and by now somehow the flakes have come to look like snow.



FRP-made rocks heaped up outside the scenery props storage

When I let it snow using EPS from the studio's cat walk (an elevated work path), flakes gather on the lighting batons. It can happen that on the next day during the filming for a different program some of that snow comes floating down onto the set. When that happens the lighting staff and scenery props staff always get mad at me.

Yoshitome: For the gardenscape of samurai houses, good-looking plants and trees are used. When after a summer scene a winter scene follows, the designer is in a rush and urges me to get done with the snowscape. Back then, foam-type artificial snow became available, which looked real enough but hardened up wherever it settled. Sprayed onto a plant, it was impossible to remove it. At that time our snow scenes gained high praise, but the landscaping people were complaining about it: "See how it sticks. No way that we can use this plant again." Since that time, good-looking plants are no longer used when snow scenes are involved.

Previously the NHK broadcasting center had a soil-filled studio for film production.¹⁰⁾ When Yoshitome was responsible for the *Mominoki wa Nokotta* Taiga Drama series (1970) he was told by director Naoya Yoshida to "turn the whole of Studio 100 into a snow-covered mountainscape." Because this happened at the time when spraying machines were yet to make an appearance, on a base platform beset only with plants, he created a snow-covered mountainscape out of cotton, EPS, and salt.



**Set with the snow-covered mountainscape
for the *Mominoki wa Nokotta* Taiga Drama (1970)**

Yoshitome also rented a truck for transporting ice to the studio that was scraped off the Yoyogi gymnasium's skating rink. To prevent the ice from melting too soon, it was brought in immediately before the filming. The entire floor staff helped scattering it over the studio floor.

The biggest failure concerns the use of fire. He had previously covered the scene depicting *Honnoji no Hen* four times in various historical dramas, but from the director in the sub-control room came the order "More blaze!" As a result, the whole set burned down, forcing the filming to be suspended for one or two weeks.

"In this industry, the pursuit of realism is an immutable law, and how to make imitations look real is the craft that matters," according to Yoshitome. It is also work with disaster just one step away.

5. Painting and decorating operations (ageing and pictorial art production) —Pictorial art coming into its own with color TV

Scenery props are mostly made of wood and almost all of it is colored. For example, even plain wood is painted with transparent varnish. The purpose is to suppress halation from the lighting and to prevent fingerprints during set building. This is particularly necessary for sets that are used over long periods of time. Next comes the work of paper hanging staff (base paper, wall paper, and the paper of the *fusuma* sliding partitions), a process called dressing. Then comes the "ageing," depending on the content of the program, which adds the necessary real-life atmosphere and historical flavor.

Especially in historical period dramas, picture scrolls (the picture scrolls on display in the alcove of Japanese rooms), pictorial art for *fusuma* sliding partitions, and other wall decorations which differ depending on the era must be produced in large numbers. The NHK broadcasting center (Tokyo, Shibuya Ward) has employees who have been producing this kind of pictorial art for over thirty years. One of them is Yoshiyuki Takahashi. Starting from the stage art department of the Haiyuza Theater Company, he moved to the NHK Art Center in 1977 with the objective to work mostly in pictorial art. In the eyes of Takahashi it appeared wasteful to outsource most of the pictorial art work, as NHK had been doing back then, even though the space and environment for this kind of work at NHK were impeccable. Takahashi jumped in headlong to be hired, and bit by bit he took on this responsibility.



Yoshiyuki Takahashi

Painting and decorating operations

Born 1944 in Iwate Prefecture. Moved from the Haiyuza Theater Company to Asahi TV, Nippon TV, and in 1977 to the NHK Art Center (now NHK Art). Enjoyed established reputation for reproductive pictorial skills. In 1991 produced pictorial art for 72 *fusuma* sliding partitions for the motion picture *Tenkawa Densetsu Satsujin Jiken*. In 1998 was honored with the 6th Hashida Award (Art Division).

Takahashi: We get the sets that the carpenters build. We apply color for ageing and to bring out the character of the period, and produce pictorial art. Compared with 1977 when I joined NHK, the level of ageing today is completely different. Specifically, back then the diffusion of color TV in Japan was just about complete, and the picture representation in people's living

rooms was still coarse. Compared with the perfectly natural appearance that we saw when we checked our work on the NHK monitor, the TV picture I got to see back at home looked completely grainy. All things considered, what we showed people was good enough at the time.

At the Haiyuza Theater Company I did the stages for new theater and opera, and in commercial TV I also did the stages for studio productions. When I arrived at NHK, their ageing was superficial. People were mostly young and unable to do a proper job. I showed them by way of demonstration how to do it. I explained that ageing needs to have areas of greater expressiveness. Up until that time, ageing at NHK showed little variation and looked restrained.

In the 1970s, color TV broadcasting had entered its golden age. Broadcasting started in September 1960. Four years later during the live transmission of the Tokyo Olympics, it had developed beautifully and kept evolving in pace with the high economic growth rates at the time. Also television's artistic side advanced to meet the requirements of color TV. "As the main programs came to be broadcast in color, adjustments were made, such as large-surface coloring, the colors of unpainted wooden flooring, pillars, windows, doors, and fittings, *tatami*, down to the color of the *shoji* screens in historical period dramas." (*NHK Yearbook* 1969 Edition). In 1973 color TV production was approaching 9 million units and subsequently started to decline, suggesting that color TV diffusion throughout the country was complete. Full penetration was achieved around 1977, the year when Takahashi started out in this work. It is fair to say that he has lived the color TV era.

Takahashi: I got to do the paintings for the *fusuma* sliding partitions, which I enjoyed until the end, starting with the *Onna Taikōki* Taiga Drama (1981). The more one delves into it, the more complex and numerous are the problems that turn up. I also had many discussions with the designer, which was helpful. With the Taiga Drama, the directors and designers change each year. This gives rise to competition between designers, who always demand something more spectacular that surpasses the previous design (laughs). With my predecessor in pictorial art production, the pictures were always the same, whether Kamakura Period or Edo Period. But the designers wanted the pictorial art to be consistent with the period of the historical setting, for example, that a Heian Period drama should have pictorial art in the style of the Heian Period. My predecessor felt that the same as last time would be good enough, which left designers frustrated. A cooperative approach formed, and about two years later I took on this type of work.

Going by the testimony of Takahashi, at least before the shift to color TV, he did not adjust his pictorial art output to the specific historical era.¹¹⁾ Perhaps the study of the historical

evidence did not find much consideration. The Taiga Drama had four or five historical research staff assigned to it, and Takahashi felt he wanted to produce pictorial artwork that was true to the historical evidence. It was at the time of *Tōge no Gunzō* (1982) when the designer approached Takahashi with the request to do the pictorial art work. Takahashi then worked on the Teikanzu wall painting of the room where the shogun performed official business at Edo Castle.

Takahashi: It was painted in the style of the Chinese *kara-e* picture. People are donning gold and silver braided garments. The emperor is seated on a chair, while the vassals are bowing their heads. The picture was difficult to paint. The scene has lots of people, and I painted them all. Unless they are carefully depicted, eyes and nose and everything, it would have looked goofy. With a surface 2 *ken* by 9 *shaku* (altogether 360×270 centimeters) for the alcove and sliding partitions, it took about three months to paint everything. This is why it was a fight against time.

Senior staff asked me why I was doing all this when the details wouldn't be discernible anyway. And I was criticized a lot for using up that much time. But I didn't care. Because I liked what I was doing. This is what it was like, the whole time, every year. I did it for the designers with their "make something greater than the year previous" requests, which I felt I wanted to accommodate. I enjoyed that.



A basic *fusuma* sliding partition painting of Edo Castle for the *Atsuhime* Taiga Drama (2008), the last work by Takahashi at NHK; it was used also later in various other programs (Bottom: Partial enlargement)

The introduction of the "basic *fusuma* sliding partition painting"

Despite the efforts that went into painting such pictures, such was the strong sense of competition between the designers that each time previous works would be discarded. Apparently, the designer in charge for a given year would also be unwilling to let the following year's designer use the same picture. Given the considerable wastefulness in this handling, from around 1990, the concept of the "basic painting" was introduced into pictorial art.

Takahashi: Producing these pictures takes a lot of time, and throwing them away like this year after year equals a loss of property for NHK. Thus, with the arrival of high-definition TV and satellite broadcasting, the concept of the "basic *fusuma* sliding partition painting" emerged.

For the production of a basic *fusuma* sliding partition painting, first the painter needs to go looking for an actually existing example. As a result, Takahashi came to accompany the staff who went on location hunting each year.

Takahashi: We traveled from one temple to the next, and even got special admission to Nijo Castle and were shown around the interior. Although there are books on Nijo Castle, if one takes a look at the art history shelves, many pictures are not shown. This is the kind of material we want. It is impossible to tell how an object was actually created only from looking at a photograph. One needs to see the actual thing.

Curators at Nijo Castle have been making reproductive drawings for decades. So I went into their archives and discussed the drawings with their experts. When I showed them photos of the pictures I made at NHK, they were quite impressed and motivated. This is how far we pushed ahead when doing the basic *fusuma* sliding partition paintings.

There were problems, however. Basics are kept in storage and used many times each year. But they are not stored in rooms that are dimmed like actual castles or shrines and temples. Instead they are used under the glaring lighting of the studio.

Takahashi: Indeed, there were problems. Compared with the previous way of painting, everything needed to be changed, the paint as much as the base paper. The chalk paint that we had been using loses its color after about three years in the studio.¹²⁾ Also the paper of the

fusuma sliding partitions was weak and was prone to become detached and tear. Basics would be props in constant use at NHK and therefore changes needed to be made. With the cooperation of a paint merchant, we developed paints that do not fade, using mineral materials such as yellow ocher, copper, and red iron oxide. For paper we picked the same *kumohadama* paper that is used by Japanese-style painters.

With the arrival of high-definition TV, we noticed that we needed to have movie-quality ageing (test broadcasting for practical use began in 1994 and actual digital high-definition broadcasting started in 2000). The pictorial art group around Takahashi went to undergo training at the Kyoto Uzumasa Film Studio. Ageing and materials used in the motion picture industry were different from ours. "At that time, we came to understand that our form of ageing had been theatrical stage ageing."

Takahashi: We really went to temples to see how their pictorial art was different from ours. We went this far to achieve the same depiction methods. I heard that NHK receives inquiries from viewers asking whether the paintings are borrowed from the temples. NHK then explains that the paintings are national treasures which never leave the premises except for display in a museum, and that NHK is no exception to the rule. Besides, the dimensions are normally completely different.

Takahashi retired from the shop floor at NHK shortly before reaching 65 years of age and returned to the Haiyuza Theater Company where he studied his craft in his twenties. He now also serves as an instructor for the next generation.

6. Small props (procuring, transporting, decorating) **—Ideas conceived on-site bring depth to programs**

The term "small props" is also used as a general noun, but the specialized literature says the following. Small props used for plays are further subdivided into stationary and movable props.

"People require a large number of objects and implements in their everyday lives. They put up curtains in front of their windows and set up stoves and *kotatsu* heaters. For their meals they use knives and forks, chopsticks, and bowls. When leaving the house, they take an umbrella with them. These innumerable daily-life articles are small props. They are divided into those affixed to buildings, e.g., curtains or stoves, called 'stationary props,' and articles incidental to acting, e.g. knives and forks or umbrellas, referred to as 'movable props.'" (NHK

Art Reader, page 106)

Keizaburo Ueno liked the carpentry angle of scenery props, but owing to his small frame he was considered a better fit for small props, a responsibility which he then took on. The somewhat indiscriminate manner of his deployment was not necessarily off target. The work with small props involves procurement, transportation into and out of the studio, and decoration. While scenery props, as we have seen in the foregoing, require 24-hour activity at full throttle and considerable instantaneous force, small props conceivably call also for sensitivity and attention to detail.

Ueno found himself struggling for want of a senior instructor, but after a few years was charged with the responsibility for historical period dramas. In addition to the tasks mentioned above, according to Ueno, the scope of small props also includes work that the uninitiated might consider the domain of the costume staff.



Keizaburo Ueno
Small props

Born 1941 in Wakayama Prefecture. Joined the NHK art division in 1959 as temporary staff, charged with responsibility for small props. Subsequently transferred to the NHK Art Center (now NHK Art).

Ueno: For the filming of Sengoku Period dramas, I was shown how to put on the warriors' armor. This work is performed unassisted. It starts with the footgear and ends with putting on the mask. I have to stand by during the filming. When the filming has ended, I have to remove the armor again. This too is part of the work with small props. I start with putting the straw sandals on actors' feet, then put on the shin protectors and quickly work my way to the top. At the end comes the helmet. Since I am working alone, for outfitting a large crowd from bottom to top it takes an enormous amount of time. I found it was easier to first to put on the straw sandals and the shin protectors, which I would do alone one actor at a time and then let the actors move aside. This helped to significantly reduce the number of people on-site and made working there easier. I think this method is used today also for armor. Well, I don't want to brag only because I came up with a bit of an idea. (laughs).

Ueno's approach to working on set was inspired by thoroughly reading the screenplay. Although it was not directly required of him, he came up with various ideas.

Ueno: There is one story that I remember because it happened just after I had started. The

scene is a mother and her child visiting the father, who is hospitalized with an illness. The script had no lines for the child. To me the child actor appeared to be at a loss about what to do with the situation. Meanwhile the director was engrossed in working with the actors. At the end of the rehearsal, I approached the director. "The kid has nothing to do and looks like he is just hovering around. For the filming tomorrow, what if the kid brought with him a drawing he had made of his dad's face?" I was praised for this proposal. The child actor had still no line, but handing the picture to the moribund father improved the exchange between father and mother. I think that proposing ideas also when working with small props can add depth to a program. That's the kind of work it is, in my view.

Tomoji Kondo did stage work at the Meijiza Theater before he came to the NHK Art Center. Since then his sole responsibility each year was the Taiga Drama. This is what his weekly schedule entailed.



Tomoji Kondo
Small props

Born 1944 in Tokyo. Came in 1975 from the Meijiza Theater to join the NHK Art Center (now NHK Art). Responsible for the Taiga Drama series each year from *Ogon no Hibi* (1978) until *Hachidai Shōgun Yoshimune* (1995).



**For the decoration, small props are brought onto the set in cardboard boxes
(studio of the NHK Taiga Drama *Hana Moyu* (2015))**

Kondo: On Monday two weeks before filming I get three days' worth of role charts from production. I check how far this matches up with the screenplay and place orders for the

artwork. After the ordering comes the rehearsal for that week's filming. The filming takes three days from Tuesday to Thursday. Since there are three days of filming, the decorating needs to be done in the morning when the scenery props are ready. That means I have to stay over and start early in the morning. This way, the entire small props to be used are brought in by the small props (procurement) company, piled up on a cart outside in front of the studio. When the scenery props staff are finished (with set building), I bring the small props onto the set and complete the decorating. This is the kind of work it entails.

Back then we used to have studio technical meetings at nine in the morning and the decorating needed to be done in time for the start of the meeting. The filming on-set starts in the afternoon. Considering that there are three days of filming (Taiga Dramas are 45 minutes per episode), 15 minutes of filming per day would do (laughs). On Friday, a historical research academic comes to give a lecture. All staff are there to listen. This routine then repeats week in week out.

Naturally, period historical research is necessary also for small props.

Kondo: Period historical research was the most difficult part. At historical research meetings, we would discuss matters based on the screenplay with historical research academics. Be it buildings or stationary props, we research and build objects consistent with the specific period, and set up the props. The periods change completely from one year to the next, from the Heian or Kamakura Periods to the Sengoku Period, each time with entirely different historical evidence. Initially I did decoration all the time. Later this was commissioned to a service company, and I transferred to art operations promotion charged with coordinating total art operations.

Moreover, at the NHK Art Center, "small props implements" naturally included small props, but there was involvement with consumables, windows, doors, and fittings, landscaping, special effects, that is, many things beside scenery props, and also the art budget needed to be managed. However, starting in the 1990s, the procurement, transportation, and decoration of small props was outsourced to specialized service companies. Along with this change, the small props function at the Art Center, now under the name of art operations promotion, was charged with an art producer-like function, which included budget administration. With the progressing differentiation of art operations, a comprehensive control function became necessary.

Growing experience tells a plain-spoken story

Hideo Take'e has been working for over 30 years at NHK responsible for small props in a specialized service company.



Hideo Take'e

Small props

Born 1951 in Tokyo. Joined Fujinami-Kodougu (a small prop company) as a part-timer worker. Transferred to small prop specialist company Telefit Co., Ltd. After time working with TBS and Fuji TV, became responsible for NHK productions. Currently business division chief manager.

Take'e: I started with the release and return of small props for contemporary dramas. Beginning with the *Taiheiki* Taiga Drama (1991), I worked as standby decorator on the set. Until then I used to bring small props to the studio, and together with the small props staff from the Art Center and our own company, we decorated the scenery props and small props, with the Art Center staff taking over set building in the studio. When the filming was over, I collected the props and went back. That's how it worked.

According to Take'e, up to a point there is a pattern for the use of small props. Take for example the sitting room. Among the veterans of drama production from the old days there were fixed rules as to what needed to be on set, for example in the living room would be a doll case, a medicine box, and a hot water pot. For example, there was a time when it was enough if the bookshelf in the study was lined with encyclopedia volumes. Take'e, who started working as a full-fledge professional in small props on the production sets of NHK, had a head-on introduction to a trade plied by true craftspeople.

Take'e: Senior staff meet up with the film director and the designer to hear how they want things done. We are third or fourth down the pecking order and cannot attend those meetings. That means we are helpless without explanations from the chief. Then we do whatever the chief says. "Put this here and that there." "Yes, sir!" we reply and do the decorating as we are told. Then of course the chief has his own ideas, and what we just did may get changed later. This is how experience builds up. In the course of decorating for a number of productions, obviously one learns quite a bit. And the next time, it becomes your own work. You start by imitating the old hands and after a number of shoots you have the ability to make the procurement fit the film for which it's intended.

A favorite phrase of senior staff was "wide and shallow." Because the range from ancient times to the future is so vast. How much knowledge one has of the types and manners of handling of props, that is the key issue. Staff who have no knowledge are neither able to order props, nor do the decorating, nor help actors put on their costumes.

Experience is even more important when it comes to historical period dramas.

Take'e: By accumulating experience, strange as it may sound, people learn for each historical period to match the right props with the different epochs, like what props for the Edo, Heian, or Muromachi Periods. Through this buildup of experience, people acquire the ability to competently use the props for each historical age. When a program has started, I study the textbook literature for the particular period. It lays the groundwork for growing knowledge.



**Handle with care—precious small props of historical value
(studio for the NHK *Hana Moyu* Taiga Drama)**

Following in the footsteps of the good, new materials develop

Changes in filming methods did their part in changing decoration with small props. In the old days, studio dramas were filmed using "pedestal cameras" that were bulky and heavy. There was no wall in front of the camera, and the set was built so as to accommodate the position of the camera for the filming. Today, cameras have shrunk down in size and their position has shifted onto the set. A camera that is on the set can capture everything, all 360 degrees of the set. Small props need be four-sided, and their quantity has increased, making redecorating more complicated. The *Takeda Shingen* Taiga Drama (1988) marked the point at which things changed.

Take'e: To be sure, also in the case of the three-wall set, props need to be put into place when the camera comes in from the opposite side. Walls had to be removed and put back, and each time there was cleaning up to do. With the four-wall set, everything is in a fixed position. However, as the location of the camera is changed, all the small props on the shooting side need to be moved, and afterward be returned to their original positions. This process is

repeated over and over.

Oftentimes off-the-rack props and old props do not have what the situation requires. Especially when new technologies are born, production is preceded by much research.

Take'e: With the arrival of high-definition TV, everyone was worried what our foil-wrapped imitation bamboo swords would look like (honed bamboo used in place of bladed weapons). Should we paint them with silver color? Or use swords made from duralumin, which has a metallic appearance closely resembling the real thing. But those were not usable for fighting scenes. In the end, we decided to keep the imitation bamboo swords without any changes.

When 4K started, we needed to think about the camera. Specifically, what would *shoji* screens, furniture, swords, and injuries look like? We started tests to check the actual appearance of the camera image, until we were satisfied that it would be alright. When new technologies emerge, stage art often holds fast to the old ways instead of making progress, which may be an impolite way of putting it, but if something is tried and tested, we stick to it.

Having said that, in the realm of small props, along with the changing times, armor using new materials is developing rapidly. Old-style armor used to be manufactured with the real thing in mind and thus was heavy. But for small props, the first priority is the people who have to wear them.

Take'e: Heavy armor makes actors tired without offering any difference in the appearance of fighting scenes. The metal plates inside are replaced with a lighter material. This is what the staff in charge of armor suits asked the service company for small props to produce. When we had the prototype, more meetings followed, and adjustments were made. The end product is what actors put on. Currently we have started making the armor of Yukimura Sanada for the *Sanada Maru* Taiga Drama (2016).

At the time of his first historical period drama, Take'e had no idea how armor was put on and avoided touching it for fear of causing damage. Today he is an indispensable craftsperson for small props.

7. Art operations promotion

—A jack of all trades controlling the art operations shop floor

As already mentioned, the person responsible for small props at the NHK Art Center was charged with art operations other than scenery props. Beginning in the 1990s, the

"decoration" part of the small props was outsourced to specialized companies. As "art operations promotion," responsibilities changed to the function of overall art production.

However, a function called "art operations promotion" existed already before that time. Kiyoshi Hashimoto, art designer with knowledge of the founding years, recalls in the "Broadcasters' Testimony" that he himself named it.

Hashimoto: Art operations promotion, that name was chosen by myself together with Mr. Okouchi, a staff member at the NHK art department. Back then, when making the rounds of the hinterlands we needed to do things like get the troupe together, double as backstage staff, blow a flute when there was no curtain raising bell and then jerk the curtain open, and after the performance put everything down on the luggage ticket,¹³⁾ small props and costumes and everything, and take it to the station. We called this activity "promotion." Mr. Okouchi, who was from the Theater Association, mused that only with a designer, things would hardly function, but luckily, there was "promotion." Before we knew it, the name art operations promotion had stuck.

This is not about a big function or overall art production but intended to unify in one hand the many fragmented art-related operations that happen in the background. According to Hashimoto, "art operations promotion tasks" were formalized at NHK at an early stage. Newcomers had to do art operations promotion tasks first, and needed to understand background work before they were allowed to work with the performance department.

Incidentally, the *NHK Yearbook* says under the term "production promotion": "A person in charge of production who controls all work that is related to art operations in the studio and cooperates with performance operations," (1954 Edition); and "A production promoting function. It aggregates the diverse art-related operations of each unit and connects the work of the performance-related staff and filming technical-related work with actual issues that exist in the studio." (1956 Edition) Judging from the content of the task, the meaning is about the same as "art operations promotion." The function also entails connecting the art operations shop floor with the performance function. As it seems, it was considered a task that should be experienced by aspiring performers.

Likewise, the NHK internal newsletter *Network NHK*, in an article from the "One-Page Work Explanation" series, explains the work of the art operations promotion manager as follows. "Art operations promotion imparts specificity, categorizes, and selects based on the screenplay and in accordance with the performance plan, all of small props, costumes, wigs, footwear, consumables, special pictures, and animals, etc. For 'historical period dramas' props must be selected consistent with the historical evidence of the period in question. This requires historical research, and investigation also with regard to customs and manners and the style and appearance of the period concerned. It is not simply about 'choice.' The props

selected must be consistent with the props list drafted by the set designer and the art related budget for the program frame, and must be ordered one by one on that basis." (Mitsukouchi; 1962:14)

The tasks of "art operations promotion," explained in these straightforward terms, was assumed by the NHK Art Center (now NHK Art). Kunio Shiono, one of the staff responsible for this task, was assigned to "scenery props" when he joined the NHK Art Center, and after a year and a half transferred to "small props," where he worked as a "jack of all trades," doing all kinds of work including "donning an apron, driving vehicles, and fixing *naguri* hammers."



Kunio Shiono

Art operations promotion

Born 1955 in Nagano Prefecture. Joined NHK Art Center (now NHK Art) in 1978 after doing part-time work there as a student. Worked in scenery props, small props, and art operations promotion. Currently executive board member.

Shiono: I remember the following episode. While reading the screenplay, the designer complained that a plate that the film director had specifically ordered did not fit the occasion. Someone was sent to the warehouse in a hurry to ask for a plate. By the time he came back the filming was already over. Enraged, the person walked into the studio, smashed the plate in front of everyone, and yelled "Don't mess with me!" (laughs) Back then we also handled cooking. [Author's note: Currently this is outsourced to a specialized service company.] The art operations promotion function comprises three to five staff per drama including the team head. For the Taiga Drama it is six staff. As minor figures, we really had to do every kind of work. Whatever the film director or the designer may want, our role was to get it done.

There was a scene to be filmed where in her room a young woman is looking at the photograph of a soldier. At the rehearsal this was indeed the picture of a soldier, but for the actual filming a staff member played a prank on the actress by replacing the soldier's photo with that of an actor who she was seeing at that time. At the actual filming the camera captured the actress with a beautiful smile on her face. "It shows that the involvement on the part of the staff is really strong." according to Shiono. A little idea to get a good shot can make the program so much more interesting.

Incidentally, while today the screenplay is distributed to all crew, twenty years back only the chief of staff had a copy. "The underlings didn't even know the casting."

Shiono: The film director marked the cuts on his script. The assistant director and everyone else then had to copy this information by hand from the director's script. Copy machines were still rare back then. This is why we had no idea where the director made cuts when we came onto the set. The camera people also had to borrow the script from the film director and copy the cuts to their own scripts. The cameraman had the script attached to the side of the camera and did the switching while looking at the script. Using this situation to my advantage, I always snuck over to the camera to look at the script for my work even though I didn't have my own copy. Anyway, the script with the cuts was something we underlings were not permitted to have, as if it was sacred. Only the film director, the assistant director, and designer had copies.

In the course of time, Shiono, now thoroughly trained and experienced, was charged with the important function of art operations promotion, with complete control over the art operations shop floor including the budget.

Shiono: The producer and the designer tell me that they need me to do a given program within a budget of 10 million yen, or 20 million yen, for example. I plan the budget, apportioning respective amounts for scenery props, small props, and trees and plants. Then the designer might say, no, there are some more scenery props I want to have made. That means I then have to trim expenses somewhere else to cover the cost. I prepare a new budget plan and while giving clearance for some items keep making adjustments for others. This is how it plays out in actuality. This is the work of the art producer, in today's parlance.

What comes next, when the props are ordered, is not an item-by-item contract. Instead, contracts transform into "creativity deals." For example, if the scene requires a certain kind of drawing room, the contract specifies no details, like the number of seats, but is just for one drawing room at a certain price. This does not work without having the confidence of the designer and requires competence as art producer.

Shiono admits with a pained smile to having no training in art and being unable to draw a proper picture. Since there are designers who are accomplished at drawing, the charming part of this work lies in controlling how best to use the budget and how to spend or not to spend money in order to realize what the designer draws up. "I just wanted to make a good program—that was my thinking. That was my only wish," says Shiono, who is still today firmly established in the world of television art, a world he entered just by chance.

8. Summary and outlook

In the foregoing, we took a look at the work of the art staff who create the studios for historical period dramas. In the following, we will summarize the information that we have received through the testimonies about the individual operations.

- For all operations in television art the question of how to save time appeared as an overriding issue. The reason is that television's mission was to put out programs constantly every day, every week. Initially the principle of "build and destroy" was adopted from the theatrical stage. However, given television's special nature, TV art evolved differently from the theater or the motion picture industry with its respectively slow pace of production.

- At the shop floor for scenery props, which constantly has to operate at full capacity, production and set building are entirely separate tasks. It is akin to the relationship between carpenters and construction workers, only here it is for the building of an "imitation" house. For ease of assembly and disassembly, it was necessary to manufacture windows, doors, and fittings, etc., of identical dimensions. In order to accelerate the production of drawings, the designers who prepare them give no precise measures. To an extent, this was left to adjustments to be made by the staff who built the sets using scenery props. We also heard that this way of operating required a sort of telepathic cooperation and know-how. Over time, scenery props changed from the "build and destroy" principle to the introduction of unit pieces. This gave rise to new issues, namely the management of props.

- Efforts to replicate nature in the artificial environment presented by the studio, in addition to being a fight against time, struggled in dealing with living matter. Since large trees lose their natural appearance when set up in unaltered form in the studio, trunk and branches were separated and reassembled. When plastic-made tree replications became available, a more natural-looking ambience was attempted through a mixture of artificial and natural trees. Described as "fast, light-weight, and non-soiling" by landscaping staff, the shift marks a point of attainment pursued by studio operations.

- "Special effects," which at NHK is treated as a category of art operations, concerns everything on the TV screen that moves, including all natural phenomena as well as fires, earthquakes, and contraptions of all sorts. Special effects staff have on an ongoing basis been introducing advances in technology as they occur and have pursued and implemented improvements.

- An eye-catching feature of studio sets, especially with regard to historical period dramas, is the elaborateness of the pictorial artwork for *fusuma* sliding partitions. During the age of black-and-white TV, this kind of pictorial art production did not require much in the way of historical research. However, with the arrival of color TV and in preparation for 4K and 8K standards, mounting effort was invested in pictorial art production. Based on the study of

originals the quality of reproductions has also risen. Like the introduction of unit pieces of scenery props, the concept of basic pictorial artwork was born. *Fusuma* sliding partitions of a quality that could be mistaken for original artwork were produced with a view to use in multiple programs.

- Small props is a category of operations where staff can add depth to programs by reading the screenplay and coming up with ideas on set. Another must for the staff in this realm is to build up knowledge of historical evidence, considering that programs treat all periods across the time scale from ancient to future. No less important is reducing the burden on actors by producing small props that are lightweight and consistent with the original article. Small props is the kind of work where the road to professionalism requires own effort at gathering experience, learning, and accumulating a battery of knowledge.

- The mission of art operations promotion is to unify the entirety of tasks related to TV art production. Originally derived from the concept of advancing theater operations, it has existed also as the link between performance and art operations. As specialty fields are becoming increasingly sub-divided, art operations promotion fulfills an important function in controlling those sub-divisions and managing appropriate budget allocation. These operations have evolved into the basis of the role of art producer.



Set for the NHK program *Sakura Hōsara* (broadcast January 1, 2014)



Aged *shoji* screens from the same program

On October 9, 2013, after the conversation with Yoshiyuki Takahashi, responsible for pictorial art work, we toured the studio of the 4K drama production of *New Year Historical Period Drama Sakura Hōsara*, the (broadcast on January 1, 2014). The set is two-storied (mezzanine), and because cameras today are no longer pedestal-mounted, the camera can also reach up to the second floor of the set. Takahashi speaks with emotion.

Takahashi: With these two floors the atmosphere is different, just as one would expect. Plus, we have a real ceiling now. In the old days there were no ceilings because the lighting was coming from above. The ageing looks realistic too. This is the same environment as they have in motion picture industry. The real-life atmosphere is palpable.

Since there is a ceiling, the lighting and the ageing of windows, doors, and fittings and walls is of the same standard of quality as in the motion picture industry. Furthermore, both scenery and small props are as close to the originals as they can possibly get. And yet, they don't need to be real. What matters is whether or not they look real on the TV screen, and whether it is a good environment where performers and production staff can work to their full potential. A lot of research goes into ensuring both.

The times keep changing at an unforeseeable pace. In the world of TV art operations, what used to be common sense is overturned and innovation is constantly pushing forward. Then, in order to align our pace with the progress in art operations, what used to be impossible becomes the norm.

The work of the staff in the studio for historical period dramas has been undergoing a transformation that demands constantly higher levels, and this process will likely continue. That means, going forward, these more than 60 years of fighting against time will probably become a new, different kind of fight. And this is precisely what will lead the way to the future of television that we will create in the time to come.

Kyoko Hirotani

Notes:

- 1) "A project proposing to capture on film and preserve the testimonies of broadcasting staff involved at the shop-floor level in revolutionizing 20th-century broadcasting programs as they speak about the work and background of the broadcasting work taking place at the time," implemented by the Broadcast Creators Association of Japan, an organization established to promote communication among people working in broadcasting. Filmed starting in 1999.
- 2) Initially made from hot melt resin instead of FRP.
- 3) Whether the "core to core" or the "inner measure" methods are used differs depending on the

broadcasting station and motion picture company. For example, at Toei, the Kyoto and Tokyo studios respectively use the "inner measure" and the "core to core" methods.

4) Scenery props of historical period dramas continue to this day to be measured in units of *shaku*. In Japan the meter was adopted as the standard measure of length in January 1959. However, the *shaku* is a measure determined with reference to the human body and has its established place in the day-to-day life of the Japanese people (like the *tsubo* unit of surface area). However, at news studios and modern drama studios, etc., sets accurately measured in meters are also becoming more widespread today.

5) In keeping with the theatrical stage, private sector broadcasting stations routinely use 3-*sun* pillars. Pillars at NHK are slightly thicker at 3 *sun* 5 *bu*. The reason is unknown.

6) Sets at Toei, which produces motion pictures and TV programs in the same studio, are built to be essentially usable for both. Since the sets used are often permanent installations with pillars in fixed positions "roughly drawn charts are sufficient." (Takashi Yoshida, designer, Toei Kyoto Studios)

7) "'Transom' refers to a board decorated with lattice work or carving that is affixed to the space between the ceiling and the head jamb or the house frame." (*Gendai Shin Kokugo Jiten*) At the TV art production shop floor walls without lattice work or openwork are also referred to as "transoms" (walls).

8) In the early period of TV when stage scenery was painted on the set walls, "Fairly rigid norms were required for two-level scaffoldings and background decorations, etc., leading to efforts at specific 'unit set systems' for television." (*NHK Yearbook*, 1954 Edition) According to former NHK art division designer Seiji Koike, painted panels were stored according to dimensions and color and frequently reused. The "unit piece" can be regarded a further-developed form of this concept.

9) In the motion picture industry, special effects fall into the realm of performance.

10) After the relocation to the broadcasting center Shibuya, NHK produced filmed dramas until the transition to capture on video. (Matsui, 2010:60–66)

11) At a symposium of a historical research work group, the following personal impression came from NHK producer Yotaro Yashiki, who was responsible for many Taiga Drama series: "Of late, a lot more effort than before goes into detailed historical investigative work. I don't think that previously the checking went this far. Historical research is becoming stricter each year."

12) Chalk paint was used for pictorial art as background for stage plays. It was a paste consisting of whitewash with crushed sea shells admixed. Due to its low cost it was favored for covering large suffices but the color faded quickly.

13) "Passengers' hand luggage that railways and steamers held in safekeeping for transportation, or the voucher for such hand luggage. No longer in use." (*Gendai Shin Kokugo Jiten*)

Citations and references:

- Hirotani, Kyoko. *Formation and Transformation of "TV Art"; (Part II) Drama Set Design*. The NHK Monthly Report on Broadcast Research. April Issue. 2014.
- Ikawa, Norimichi. *Realism and Formal Beauty: The Motion Picture Art of Norimichi Ikawa*. Wides

Shuppan. 2009.

- Kasuga, Taichi. *Why the Historical Period Drama Will Die Out*. Shinchosha Publishing. 2014.
 - Matsui, Yasuhiro. *Testimonies of the History of Broadcasting—The Beginning of TV Broadcasting—"The NHK Film Drama Workshop" Which Produced Films Every Day*. The NHK Monthly Report on Broadcast Research. April Issue. 2010.
 - NHK Art, pub. *NHK Art—50 Years of History*. 2011.
 - Japan Broadcasting Corporation, ed. *NHK Yearbook*.
 - Japan Broadcasting Corporation, ed. *NHK TV Art Reader*. 1981.
 - Japan Broadcasting Corporation, ed. *20th Century Broadcasting History*. 2001.
 - Japan Broadcasting Corporation, Broadcasting Operations Office, Art Division, ed. *TV Art Handbook (for internal use)*. 1963.
- Nomura, Yoichi. *Authentic History of the TV Historical Period Drama*. Chikuma Shobo. 2014.
- Hirotoni, Kyoko. *Formation and Transformation of "TV Art"; (Part IV) The Creators of the Studio for Historical Drama, First Volume: Scenery Props, Landscaping, and Special Effects*. The NHK Monthly Report on Broadcast Research. December Issue. 2015.
 - Mitsukouchi, Kenji. "One-Page Work Explanation—Art Operations Promotion." Japan Broadcasting Corporation, ed. *Network NHK*. October Issue. 1962.
 - Japan Broadcasting Corporation, ed. *Broadcasting History of Japan*. 1965
 - Yashiki, Yotaro. "The Taiga Drama and Historical Research Viewed from the Production Shop-Floor." Oishi, Manabu; Historical Research Workshop, ed. *Producing the Taiga Drama—An Exposition on the Study of Historical Research*. Meicho Publishing. 2012.