

Japanese and American Design through Russel Wright

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Introduction

This paper attempts to clarify the significance of preparing and implementing the Russel Wright plan. Among the many design improvement campaigns in postwar Japan, this plan was considered one that was implemented most effectively in its initial stages. In light of the fact that Japanese design approached American design rapidly following World War II and made the methods and systems of American design its own to achieve success, it is necessary to show the importance in Japanese design history of this plan which served as the starting point. As a background, I will also show the simultaneous progress of attention and consideration of American design in the pre-war Japanese design world, where the influence of functionalism stemming from the Bauhaus movement started, and will scrutinize the evaluation of Russel Wright in that context. In these investigations, I will also examine the Russel Wright plan immediately after the war and consider the conditions that affected its realization. Specifically, in this study, I want to present an overview of postwar industrial design practice and a consideration of the significance of its continuity, beginning with an examination geared toward an evaluation of Wright in the context of design activities of the pre-war period as the starting point whereby Japanese postwar design began a mass movement veering toward American design.

1. American Design in the Prewar Japanese Design World, Focusing on R. Wright

The origin of modern design in Japan, as in various other countries, began with the implementation of functionalism advocated by the Bauhaus school established in Weimar, Germany in 1919 under the leadership of W. Gropius. In Japan, the Keiji Studio, which was formed in 1928, embarked on the first experiments in that style. This was an organization of devotees formed in October 1928 by Chikatada Kurata (1895-1966), who taught interior design at the Tokyo Advanced Polytechnic School (*Tokyo Koto Kogei Gakko*), and his disciples and was prompted by their studies of German literature. They primarily designed and tested the suitability of furniture for Japanese people and Japanese homes and presented four exhibitions over the period from 1929 to 1937. Based on these results, they also tried mail-order sales of standard furniture in cooperation with women's magazines in 1930 and 1936. However, more systematized research and experiments were developed in an organized manner by the National Academy of Industrial Arts, which was established in March 1928 by the Ministry of Commerce

and Industry. In 1933, Bruno Taut was invited to the Academy while he was visiting Japan, and in keeping with his proposal, standardization research called master models (Fig. 1) was started.



fig.1 Kihan-Genkei(Standard Model)

Michiji Suzuki, Isamu Kenmochi, Katsuhei Toyoguchi, Junkichi Okayasu, and Tsuyoshi Ogata were selected as assistants and carried out research and testing on functional design. Taut presented his Glass Pavilion at the German Work Federation (Werkbund) Exhibition held in Cologne in 1914, and he attracted attention for his expressionist approach. He later designed public collective housing units in the city of Magdeburg, and he pursued efficiency and individuality in his designs. This background also drew attention in Japan, but he left Germany in May 1933, which was under the control of the Nazi regime, and went to Japan on an invitation by the International Architecture Congress. In his famous debate about standardization with Muthesius and Van de Velde at the 7th Annual German Work Federation (Werkbund) Conference in 1907, Taut strongly supported individual inspiration in design in opposition to Muthesius, and in this way, it was an irony of history that he would later guide Japanese research in standardization. However, it is undeniable that the strong aesthetic approach incorporated into his design activities strongly appealed to young designers at the Academy. In Japan, this was because, in the 1920s, before functionalism gained wide recognition as a major movement, many architects and designers had been obsessed with the expressionism of E. Mendelsohn and others. To achieve the national goal of increased exports, the National Academy of Industrial Arts worked firstly to improve products made using traditional Japanese techniques and secondly to conduct scientific research of industrial arts. Research in standardization, belonging to the second category, was not considered a research topic of primary importance, and research was in fact abandoned after Taut left. In this way, in prewar Japan, the wellspring for the concepts and practice of modern design was almost in its entirety dictated by Germany.

Nonetheless, in the 1930s as a result of improvements in industrial production, in Japan as well, interest was generated in world trends and different types of design methods that suited the mass production that had become a reality. For example, Shichiro Hasegawa (1913-) entered the design department of the Imperial University's School of Art in 1932, where he learned about design trends in North America and Europe from professor Izumi Arai and was involved in editing "desegno" published by the design department. At about this time, he showed interest not only in

Bauhaus, but also in American design, and he wrote "the industrial designer, which is a new occupation of the 20th century developed chiefly in the U.S. . . . takes as its premise a reform in aesthetic concepts, which had come to seem immutable to date." He gave Raymond Loewy, Walter Dorwin Teague, and Henry Dreyfus as examples. However, at the same time he said, "The industrial design of the U.S., which is pursuing a new style that regards the mechanical structure with secondary importance in certain aspects, is one bad manifestation moving in the direction of highly developed U.S. commercialism and it is not necessarily in accord with the proper union of manufacturing and art that we are pursuing." In this statement, it is clear that his own stance was close to that of functionalism. Within that context, everything from the "world renowned existence of Raymond Loewy" to "Russel Wright who aestheticized the desk and home goods and Chicago's Barnes and Reinecke and others that are aiming for maximum effect with minimum material in Sakiya pure bath goods and light industrial products" is touched upon, and I would like to focus on the overlaps between these and the designers who were employed in the postwar.

In 1939, Terri Beryl Suleimann² was invited from Germany, which was Japan's ally. This was in accordance with the primary objective of the Academy, which was the expansion of exports. She had experience in selling at department stores, and it was Suleimann who probably taught marketing to the Japanese design industry before Wright. However, the key design factions only acknowledged this as a preliminary step that revamped the native Japanese techniques, and so they probably could not grasp this perspective. This was also the reason that Charlotte Perriand, who was well-known as one of the contributors to Le Corbusier, was also invited in June 1940. In June of the following year, she presented the results on her study in Japan in the "Tradition, Selection, and Creation" Exhibition and attracted wide attention among many Japanese designers (Fig. 2). At this time, the Japanese army had advanced into French Indochina, and Perriand later attended the Japan Design Exhibition held in Hanoi in December, where she presented some of her work created in Japan, and by doing so, clearly demonstrated why she was invited.

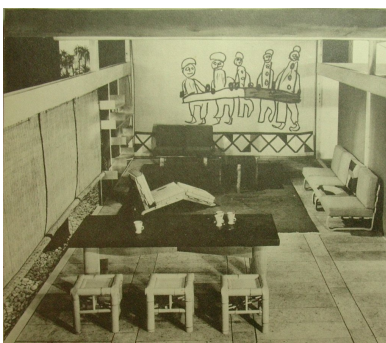


fig.2 C.Perriand Exhibition "Tradition-Selection-Creation", 1941

Starting in November 1940, Wasaburo Mizumachi, head of Department No. 3 in the National Ceramics Research Center, was dispatched from the National Academy of Industrial

Arts for a survey on industrial arts in North and South America. After visiting Argentina and Brazil, he stayed in New York for about half a month from the beginning of May of 1941, and he visited department stores such as Macy's and Wanamaker and stores specializing in furniture and ceramics such as Jensen, Plummer, and Pitt Petrie in an effort to understand the trends in sales and consumption. He visited the studio of P. Freigang as an industrial designer, but it seems that the technical level did not leave an impression on Mizumachi's trained eye for ceramics. Upon returning to Japan, he reported the results of his survey with numerous photographs in a booklet entitled "An Industrial Arts Summary of North and South America." At department stores, Mizumachi saw that goods in the classic style and goods in the modern style were not mixed at sales sites and were sold in clearly divided camps (Fig. 3). Of the latter, he frankly noted that Wright's reputation exceeded his expectations gleaned from print: "I came across many items that were made from the designs of the famous industrial arts designer Russel Wright. The name of Russel Wright is a familiar name in foreign magazines, but I did not know that it was actually sold to this extent." Perhaps for this reason, diagrams of Wright's works were the most numerous that were introduced among American designers (Fig. 4). However, the indoor space of functionalism and the modern style had not quite crossed over to Japan, and as a result, no efforts had been made for the design of suitable livingware. Mizumachi also pointed out that although works with an Asian influence by American craftsman such as Stanmeyer and Panzri were being used, the only Japanese products that were being exported were cheap, mass-produced ones. This report would likely have been widely read among those involved in design at that time and so it is probably something that generated a new awareness of Wright's value and reputation.

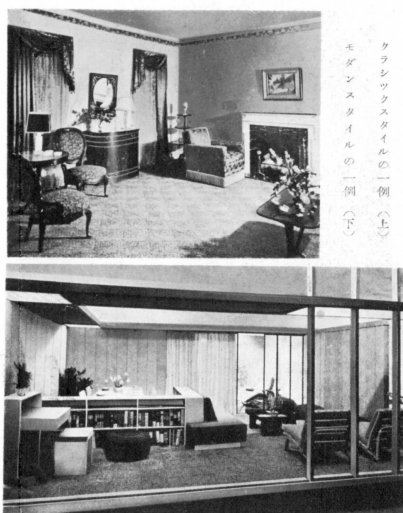


fig.3 Two ways in American Design

Reported by Mizumachi



Fig.4 Introduction of Wright's Works

As odd as it may sound, the purpose of the visit was a market survey for expanding sales routes to the continental U.S. The Japanese government, which had intermittently been expanding military conflagrations in China since 1931, was on the other hand, continually pressing for economic growth through expanded export trade to Europe and the U.S. In addition, the following people also made visits for similar purposes: Kado Sugita (craftsman) in 1937 to Europe, Toyochika Takamura (craftsman) in 1941 to Mexico and North America, Takao Miyashita in 1938 (professor at the Tokyo Advanced Polytechnic School) to Europe and the U.S. However, with the start of war with the U.S. in December 1941, the policy of expanding exports was completely abandoned as the central concern shifted to a basic policy for conserving resources in wartime. In October and November 1941, the Ministry of Commerce and Industry presented National Lifestyle Exhibits designed by the National Academy of Industrial Arts in Tokyo and Osaka that attracted wide attention and promoted modular furniture that was on display. This was the work of Kenmochi and various others who were once involved in the master model standardization research. The following year, these efforts resulted in the promotion of unit furniture under the name of National Furniture (Fig. 5), and in 1943, these were displayed in combination with the life-size standard housing models designed by housing corporations. In this way, the research on master models that started in the 1930s become the most important research topic for the National Academy of Industrial Arts during wartime by the researchers with the standardization of industrial materials being pursued as a part of the policy for conserving wartime resources. They were also involved in research and development work on adhesives and new materials as applied military technology for airplanes. Accordingly, although the functionalism school was aware of American design by Wright and others before the war, the movement was incorporated into the wartime system before it could pursue its course.



fig.5 National Furniture

2. Russel Wright Plan: Foundations and Concepts

In the magazine *Design News* (*Kogei News*) in 1948, Wright was mentioned second in an article by Shinji Koike (1901-1981) describing the world's top designers where he wrote "Russel Wright has been a pioneer in the creation of a new design world" in which the "American modeling

world has achieved truly remarkable growth and development.” In this way, interest in Wright quickly began to grow in the Japanese design world right after the war. Before the war, Koike was known as the person who introduced Bauhaus, and he was involved in editing work at the National Academy of Industrial Arts during the war. After the war, he taught in the engineering department of Chiba University, and in 1968, he worked to establish the Kyushu Institute of Design.

On 3rd December, 1955, Russel Wright visited Japan for 5 days before embarking on a tour of Asia³. He visited the Japan Productivity Center (JPC), which had just started in February of that year, and the Japan External Trade Recovery Organization (Japan External Trade Organization (JETRO) from 1961) to observe the effectiveness of their activities. On December 5, Wright visited the National Academy of Industrial Arts in the Tokyo suburbs. Photographs commemorating the event were taken by the National Academy of Industrial Arts, but the purpose of his visit and the content of any talks are unknown. However, the commemorative photographs that were taken by the Academy suggest that he heard explanations of the results of research and development being carried out in the Academy at that time and that he spoke with employees about prototypes (ceramics, lacquer ware, molded plywood tableware). (Figs. 6-9)



fig.6-9 Russel Wright at the Industrial Art Institute

Wright stated, “Their connection with product design is poor, but their efforts in design are earnest and quite valuable.” Wright visited again in February 1956, and he was impressed by the bamboo baskets at fish markets, colorful arrangement of food in cooking, and the flower wreaths used in celebrating store openings, and he sensed the potential in Japanese design. On the other hand, he was disappointed by the mindset of companies such as Nihon Toki in Nagoya that

emulated American designs. Based on these observations, Wright commented, "The Japanese have a great design tradition.... Of course, all traditional livelihoods must meet the demands of the 20th century. Each culture can add certain expressions to change and adapt to these conditions." As a result, he says, "I think that the Japanese are throwing away their traditional Japanese handicrafts which took extensive effort to develop. They need to create these works and show their ability as designers to adapt to product designs for 20th century lifestyles." It is clear that Wright's impressions at that time and his expectations for Japanese design became the original outline of the later plan.

In 1955, Wright visited the New York Japan Consul General Hisashi Murata and stated that, "There is a demand for superior Japanese handicrafts in the U.S. market and because they are not competing with U.S. goods, growth of these U.S.-bound exports would be expected. However, at present, the U.S. market is filled only with inferior cheaply crafted products and Americans have not been introduced to anything they truly desire. For that reason, Japan should adopt a thorough policy of promoting U.S.-bound exports." He proposed the following as a concrete plan.

(1) Have suitable U.S.-bound export products selected by U.S. specialists from among Japanese regional handicrafts that have yet to be introduced to the U.S. market. For the purpose of this selection, select four U.S. designers and four merchandisers with the assistance of the ICA (U.S. International Cooperation Agency) and send them to Japan to find goods by touring through different areas.

(2) Hold a private exhibition in New York of the selected products with the full data needed for trade provided. Limit invitations to this private showing to purchase managers for U.S. department stores and be aggressive in business talks and develop new export routes.

(3) In order to popularize Japanese handicrafts among the U.S. public after the private show has ended, continue to hold traveling shows in the U.S. for those products.

(4) Wright will collaborate in this plan making sufficient use of his experience and his position in the U.S. market.

This is probably an outline of the main points of the proposal prepared by Wright in the following year entitled "Promotion of the Finest Japanese Handicrafts". The elements of this plan, excluding the U.S. traveling show of (3), were basically executed in their entirety later, indicating that Wright's proposals were extremely practical.

In September 1965, the Small and Medium Enterprise Agency of the Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI) had already invited J. Guillozet, and for about 20 days, he provided guidance on ceramics, woodcrafts, lacquer ware, and other products for the American market through the eyes of an export buyer. He selected products that could be exported from National Academy of Industrial Arts prototypes and works exhibited by industrial design shops around the

country. Also, Giraldi and Saboka (Fig. 6) visited Japan in July 1957 at the invitation of the Japan Productivity Center for providing guidance in industrial design, and they taught until September. Both of them were recommended by Wright.

Murata, who received this proposal, returned to Japan in December 1956 and became the Deputy Minister of the Trade Bureau in the Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI). In that capacity, he made efforts to obtain a budget to carry out the proposal, but he did not meet with immediate success. In May 1958, MITI established a design section, which became responsible for implementing the plan. In fiscal 1959, at last, it became clear that grants and other budget money would be available, and the Russel Wright Committee was started in January 23, 1960, an agency paper was published starting from May, and a written plan was sent to Wright in March. It was decided in September that the visits and selection, which were key points of plan implementation, would be carried out in March and April of the following year. However, approval by the ICA of the employment of Wright himself was having trouble coming through. For this reason, in October, JETRO (Japan External Trade Organization) dispatched overseas project manager Toru Udo for direct talks with the ICA and Wright, and he negotiated with Wright himself in New York. Wright had a meeting on plan implementation with plan headquarters personnel at Haneda Airport en route to Taiwan on December 14. In December 15, a plan promotion request was issued by the Japan Productivity Center to U.S. ambassador Palmer in Japan but in the end, a response came down from the ICA that it would not be possible to dispatch Wright, and so it was decided that other designers would be employed following a schedule that had already been prepared on the Japan side. A request was made of the Japan Trade Center in New York to select people and Diamond, J. Guillozet, and B.B. Zients were chosen. It was also decided that in place of Wright, B. McDermott, L. Lietzke, and M. Rothenberg would also be sent from the ICA, and the outline of the plan was finalized in the middle of December.

3. The Implementation and Results of the Russel Wright Plan

In Japan, the Russel Wright plan was known as the "Japan Handicrafts U.S.-Bound Export Promotion Plan," and the project's promotion center was located in JETRO. Designers and traders from the U.S. were invited through government grants via the ICA. The project entailed the discovery and selection of traditionally produced goods (including those made of wood and bamboo, ceramic, glass, metal, and the like) that could contribute to Japan's exports to the U.S., transporting the products to the U.S., and exhibiting them. Of the plan expenses, the ICA paid for the travel and living expenses for the four American designers, the Small and Medium Enterprise Agency bore the travel and living expenses for the four dealers, and the Trade Bureau handled transportation and exhibition costs from the sample purchases.

The list below shows the eight people who were actually dispatched in 1960 along with their position and title at the time.

Joseph Guillozet: Joseph Guillozet Co., Cleveland, Ohio

Patricia Keller: Freelance designer, resident of Japan since 1957

Bernard Benjamin Zients: Vice-president of Gimbel Brothers department store

Ralph Chipurnoi: Vice-president and purchasing manager for Eastman-Columbia

Bernard A. McDermott: Smith, Scherr & McDermott, Akron, Ohio. Member of the American Society of Industrial Design

Mort L. Rothenberg: Smith, Scherr & McDermott, New York. Member of the American Society of Industrial Design

Luke Lietzke: Akron Art Institute, Ohio. Member of the National Design Group Implementation Committee, American Association of Designers, and the Midwest Designer Committee

Robert von Neumann: University of Illinois, Urbana, Illinois

The invited staff jointed with Japanese designers, interpreters, and agency staff and was divided into four teams from March until July as shown in Table 1. They visited examination sites, exhibition halls, and factories all over Japan to select products that could be exported and provide guidance in the directions to take with designs. They engaged in a flurry of tireless activity as they carried out their discovery and guidance at a total of 106 sites in 47 prefectures by traveling over nearly all Japan (Fig. 10-13).



fig.10-13 Selection by American Advisors

Table 1. Implementation of the Russel Wright Plan

Group No.	Visiting dates	Invitees	Government designers	Private-industry designers	Regions visited (number of sites)

These activities resulted in the selection of a total of 3798 products as shown in Table 2. Of these products, 51% could be exported immediately. Looking at the selected product types, it comes as no surprise that woodcrafts and ceramics were numerous because they were produced in larger quantities. However, it is clear that the invited staff also felt that distinctive Japanese techniques such as bamboo and lacquer should also be used in export products. Guidance provided by the American side was extremely practical and diverse and covered marketability, sales procedures

(advertising, export procedures, etc.), and design methods (American tastes, development direction, ways of using regional differences, etc.) for Japanese handicrafts in the U.S. This information and advice was particularly valuable to local Japanese manufacturers to whom overseas information was not readily available. By providing methods and constructive advice for selling that were otherwise difficult to obtain at public examination sites, these activities incited interest in selling to overseas markets and created opportunities for realizing it. After the tour, most of the items in class A and some in class B were collected at MITI as selected products in August, prices were set, and editing of catalogs was completed. A trial exhibition was held in Tokyo from October 13 to 19, and then 1797 products were sent to the U.S. on December 16 in a project of unprecedented scale.

Table 2. Selected Products

Classification	Classification definition	I	II	III	IV	Total
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Table 3. Breakdown of Types of Selected Products

Product type	Quantity	Number drawing interest	Number eliciting concrete sales talks
Bamboo	159	26	17
Wood, Lacquer	349	74	67
China	361	71	75
Glass	35	12	3
Plastics	24	4	1
Metal	105	21	35
Fiber	73	5	0
Toy, doll	361	24	10
Furniture	24	7	3
Interior	136	7	6
Daily goods, others	161	5	0
Total	1,788	256	217

In New York, the basement and first floor of the Japan Trade Center was used from February 28 to March 9, 1961 to hold a private exhibition entitled “Handicrafts of Japan” (Fig. 14). Not including items damaged en route from Japan, the site exhibited about 1788 products based

on a design by the Japanese painter Genichiro Inokuma⁴ who resided in the U.S. This exhibition was opened as a trade show, and although the general public was not allowed admittance, 853 people visited the exhibition. In San Francisco, the basement and first floor of the Japan Trade Center was used on March 11 and 12 to hold an exhibition under the direction of Jerry Sission (Fig. 15). In these two exhibitions, visitors expressed specific interest in 256 products in New York and 433 products in San Francisco. In New York, business talks were started for 217 products. At the end of the exhibition, the dispatched staff held report presentations in six cities from April to May, and this brought the work of this plan to a close.



fig14. Exhibition in NY



fig.15 Exhibition in SF

The Russel Wright plan was clear in its goals and in its process from selection to exhibition and business talks, and had a tremendous significance in educating domestic business people and garnering publicity for foreign markets. Both MITI, which sought a concrete policy for expanding exports, and the business world recognized the effectiveness of its methods. In its mission statement, the Japan Productivity Center mentioned the “invitation of leading authorities” including those in industrial design. For this reason, in fiscal 1960, plans for the following year were initiated and on February 24, 1961, in other words, prior to the New York private exhibition, the promotion committee provided an explanatory session for the prefectures and cities. In fiscal 1961 at the initiative of JETRO, a selection committee with representatives of MITI, the Industrial Arts Research Institute, and the Japan Designer Craftsman Association took charge of selection and guidance, and in 33 prefectures and cities, selection was carried out as in the previous year, so-called “2nd exhibitions” were held in Japan, and 349 items were sent to the U.S. for exhibition. In fiscal 1962, the plan was partly revised for export promotion operations including the European market, and it was implemented continuously through fiscal 1964 as the comprehensive "Japan Handicraft Export Promotion Plan." It can be said that the plan's effectiveness and systemization continued to live on. It was also a great opportunity for designers to learn by refining their improvements in Japanese design through the eyes of overseas buyers. In this sense, Wright's initial points were put fully into practice, and the issue of how Japanese design incorporates traditional elements began to be addressed.

As shown in the separate table, the detailed implementation history of this plan did not engage Wright himself despite the requests on the Japan side. However, it seems natural that Russel Wright's name would be used for the plan given that his drawing up of the original proposal and his level of participation through to implementation.

Conclusion: The Two Meanings of the Russel Wright Plan

Needless to say, the year 1960 when the Wright plan was implemented was a year of significant turnarounds in Japan's postwar politics. It was the year of the revision to the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty and the opposition movement to it. The Japanese government, in order to rise above these political issues thus had to further emphasize 100 years of U.S.-Japan friendship. We can probably look at the awarding of the holding of the World Design Conference in the same context. At the very least, it was likely that these reasons played a part in the strong assistance by the industrial sector for these operations. Likewise, it is clear that the aim of this Russel Wright plan developed based on assistance from the Japan Productivity Center and JETRO was to not simply export expansion policy, but it also sought to achieve political stability from further economic growth by using stronger ties to the U.S. market for realizing actual trade expansion. In addition, it was important that practical issues were raised so that Japanese designers would make not only cheap products but would also find out what was needed to truly bring their products to the international stage. As the Japanese economy continued its substantial growth and achieved success, the major obvious design issues that were raised would later recede into the background. And now, after the collapse of the bubble economy and post-modern discourse, it is time to generate long-absent discussion in these issues.

Notes

1: Among these people, Isamu Kenmochi (1912-1971) had the most impact in Japanese postwar design after these experiments in functionalism. He associated with Isamu Noguchi and the Eames couple. He coined the term "Japanese modern" to refer to the method of representing Japanese aesthetics as modern design, and along with Kenzo Tange, he was a leading figure in postwar Japanese design.

2: Suleimann was born in 1902 and graduated from the Berlin Academy of the Arts (*der Akademie der Kuenste Berlin*). She was a pupil of Bruno Paul and engaged in interior decorating, and design and creation of craftwork. She worked as freelance in Budapest. She performed, designed, and created the interior decoration for the governor's mansion, foreign minister's residence, and the Japanese embassy military room.

3: During his stay, Wright received an invitation from his new friend "Kenmochi" and was given a warm welcome at a long-established inn and charcoal dealer in Kyoto, where he stayed. In

contrast to Nagoya, he was able to thoroughly enjoy the companionship of tea ceremony and local intellectual groups. He was also amazed when he found a book showing the construction methods of traditional Japanese wooden architecture while in Kyoto, and he purchased it immediately. Cf. Russel Wright "Notes on Japan" 1956.

4: Genichiro Inokuma (1902-1993) was a close friend of Kenmochi who introduced Isamu Noguchi to Kenmochi. In 1949, they established an architecture and design department in the new production company where Inokuma belonged and exhibited their works there.

5: It is felt that the visit to the U.S. by the Crown Prince and Princess in September of this year was an effort to strengthen U.S.-Japan ties for political purposes.

History of the Russel Wright Plan