

Creativity and Aging in Japan

By

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Japan has a long tradition of cultural and artistic appreciation, from tea ceremonies and flower arrangement, to unique forms of theater and dance. For many older people, post-retirement life offers a chance to pursue their creative interests with renewed vigor, sometimes revisiting past hobbies or learning something new. Anthropologist Katrina Moore (University of NSW), for example, spent time with older women learning the ancient and intricate art of masked performance called Noh. She learned that for women, perfecting the difficult vocal inflections and slow movements and subtle postures required for Noh allowed them to experience their bodies in new ways, "alive and invigorated, yet calm". In this way, the Japanese arts bring something to the experience of aging that goes well beyond simple "activity" or even personal creative expression, but a new way of being that embraces the sublime beauty, and even the liveliness of slowing down.



c. Misayo Shibamoto, Nihon Elder Life Kyokai

Japan has the longest life expectancy of any country in the world. As of 2016, there were over 65,000 centenarians in Japan, about 10,000 more than the USA, which has more than twice the population. With long lives has come long periods of dependent old age, with average estimates ranging from 8-11 years. For these individuals, creative pursuits like Noh are often impossible, and even simple activities like coloring pages can be a challenge. Many Japanese eldercare workers that I have spoken to were envious of the many art programs available in UK for people, from drama to special collaborations with museums. These kinds of opportunities are still rare in Japan, where staffing and budget constraints mean that arts programming in places like adult day care is minimal and dependent on the occasional volunteer-led initiatives.

One bright spot in this picture, however, is a recent initiative that brings the benefits of creative performance to both older people with advanced care needs and their family carers as well. Initially conceived of as a simple, indoor event that could be enjoyed by both carers and the people they cared for, fashion shows, complete with runways, make-up and music have become a surprise hit.

"We couldn't really do anything recreational since everyone's levels were so different, but when we thought about it, anyone can dress up," explained one of the organizers. We thought about designing things like aprons that could just be easily worn over clothing, but still allow participants to feel transformed. And there were so many results!"

Becoming a fashion model seemed to give people who usually hide from the public, a new visibility. "In the shows, people watching weren't clapping just for the clothes, they were also clapping because they appreciated that these were carers" an organizer explained. For the older people, many of whom modeled their clothes from a wheelchair, the cheers and clapping gave them a confidence that they were still able to do something creative.

She went on to explain how since they got a lot of media coverage for the events, different places donated clothing. In one instance a husband and wife, both of whom were living with dementia, dressed in a donated tuxedo and long white wedding gown. The man remarked that he realized how he had only been thinking of their relationship in terms of carer and cared-for, but seeing his wife in the gown, he remembered they were a couple, and that was the reason why he cared for her. "She's even more beautiful now than when she was young!" he said, and held her hand for the entire show.



Even something as simple as a fashion show can have profound transformative effects for older people, restoring dignity and a sense of accomplishment, reviving memories and feelings by creating a space of aesthetic play. The brightly colored frocks and accessories could make ordinary people extraordinary spectacles, living works of art.