

Mingei Materialised

Yanagi Sōetsu (21 March, 1889 – 3 May, 1961), also known as **Yanagi Muneyoshi**, was a Japanese art critic, philosopher, and founder of the *mingei* (folk craft) movement in Japan in the late 1920s and 1930s.

Theory

The philosophical pillar of *mingei* is "ordinary people's crafts" (*minshūteki na kōgei*). Yanagi's theoretical and aesthetic proposition was that beauty was to be found in ordinary and utilitarian everyday objects made by nameless and unknown craftsmen – as opposed to higher forms of art created by named artists. In his first book outlining his concept of *mingei*, originally published in 1928, he argued that utilitarian objects made by the common people were "beyond beauty and ugliness", and outlined a number of criteria that he considered essential to "true" *mingei* folk crafts.

Yanagi's main focus was on beauty. The beauty of folk crafts, he argued, lay in:

- (1) The use of natural materials and "natural" hand-made production;
- (2) Traditional methods and design;
- (3) Simplicity;
- (4) Functionality in form and design;
- (5) Plurality, meaning that folk crafts could be copied and reproduced in quantity;
- (6) Inexpensiveness;
- (7) Beauty was also be found in the fact that folk crafts should be made by anonymous – or "unknown" – craftsmen, and not by well-known named artists.
- (8) Finally, there was the "beauty of health", whereby a healthy attitude during the manufacture of folk crafts led to healthy crafts. In other words, beauty and folk crafts were the product of Japanese tradition – a tradition which he emphasised by saying that *mingei* should be representative of the regions in which they were produced and make use of natural materials found there.

Yanagi's book *The Unknown Craftsman* has become an influential work since its first release in English in 1972. In it, he examines the Japanese way of viewing and appreciating art and beauty in everyday crafts. At the same time, however, – and by his own admission – his theory was not simply a craft movement based on aesthetics, but "a spiritual movement" in which craftsmen should work according to ethical and religious ideals, if beauty was to be achieved. In this respect, it may be argued that he chose to express his vision of "spirituality" through the medium of folk crafts and was, as a result, concerned with *how* folk crafts were made, rather than with these crafts as objects in themselves. Provided that they were made according to a certain set of rules laid down by himself, they would naturally accord with his concept of "beauty".

Direct Perception and Self Surrender

Yanagi's main emphasis was on beauty which, in his opinion, was unchanging, created by an immutable spirit. Sung period ceramics, or medieval Gothic architecture were products of the same spirit; "true" man was unchanging, unaffected by cultural or historical background. The present and the past were linked by beauty.

In order to appreciate such beauty, argued Yanagi, one should not allow previous knowledge, prejudice, or subjectivity to cloud one's judgement. This could be achieved by means of what has been variously translated as "intuition", "the seeing eye", and "direct perception" (*chokkan*), whereby a craft object should be seen for what it is, without any prior knowledge or intellectual analysis coming between object and onlooker. It thereby directly communicated the inherent beauty of that same object.

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If *chokkan* was an "absolute foot rule", it also defied logical explanation and was, therefore, very much part of his "spiritual" approach to aesthetics and the appreciation of folk craft beauty. But *chokkan* was also a method of aesthetic appreciation that could be applied, and recognised, by *anyone* provided he or she perceived things "directly".

In other words, if *chokkan* was "subjective" or "arbitrary", then it was not "direct" perception at all.

The other half of Yanagi's theory of beauty was concerned with the spiritual attitude of the craftsman (as opposed to that of the person appreciating a craft object). For crafts to be beautiful, he said, the craftsman should leave nature to do the creating; salvation came from outside oneself, from what Yanagi called "self surrender" (*tarikidō*). *Tariki* was not denial of the self so much as freedom from the self. Just as an Amidha Buddhist believed he could be saved by reciting the *nenbutsu* prayer and denying his or her self, so the craftsman could attain a "pure land of beauty" by surrendering his self to nature. No craftsman had within himself the power to create beauty; the beauty that came from "self surrender" was incomparably greater than that of any work of art produced by "individual genius".

Post-war developments

Many of Japan's traditional ways were destroyed following the country's defeat in the Second World War. The outbreak of the Korean War in 1950 led to the Japanese Government instituting a system designed to protect what it considered to be the National Treasures of Japan and individual artist-craftsmen – popularly known as "national treasures" (*ningen kokuhō*) – who were deemed to be holders of important cultural skills (*jūyō mukei bunkazai*). The spread of Yanagi's ideas was helped by these developments so that, by about 1960, the concept of *mingei* had become known not just to a small group of people living in Tokyo, Kyoto and Osaka, but — as a result of publicity by the media — to almost everyone in Japan.

This resulted in enormous consumer demand for hand-made folk crafts, which many people thought included such things as tooth-picks and log cabins, as well as more mainstream crafts.

This demand came to be labelled the "*mingei* boom" and continued until the mid-70s, since when it has gradually declined until becoming almost irrelevant to contemporary Japanese in the 2000s. Nevertheless, craftsmen who had been struggling to make ends meet before and just after the Pacific War, suddenly found themselves comparatively well-off; potters in particular benefited financially from the "boom". With all the publicity surrounding folk crafts, new kilns were set up everywhere. So far as the purists were concerned, however, the day of the "instant potter" had come to accompany the other "instants" of everyday life in Japan – coffee, noodles and *geisha*. The average craftsman, they said, was interested in *mingei* for the money that was to be made from it, rather than for its beauty. It was little more than an urban elitist fad.

The *mingei* boom led to a number of paradoxes affecting Yanagi's original theory of folk crafts.

- (1) Yanagi had argued that beauty would "be born" (rather than "created") only in a "communal" society, where people cooperated with one another. Such cooperation bound not only one man to another, but man to nature. Folk crafts were in this respect "communal arts". However, consumer demand for *mingei* objects led to increased mechanisation of production processes which, in themselves, relied far less on cooperative work and labour exchanges than they had in the past.
- (2) Mechanisation also led to less reliance on, and use of, natural materials – something that Yanagi had insisted upon as essential to his concept of beauty – something which also deprived modern *mingei* of its specifically "local" qualities.
- (3) Both media exposure and consumer demand encouraged the emergence of the artist-craftsman (*geijutsuka*) intent on making money, and to the gradual disappearance of the less profit-motivated "unknown craftsman".
- (4) Consequently, *mingei* as "folk craft" gradually came to be seen as *mingei* as "folk art".