

100 Years of Mingei Movement in Japan

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Abstract

From October 2021 to February 2022, the Museum of Modern Art in Tokyo hosted an interesting exhibition on Mingei Movement, founded by the religious philosopher Muneyoshi Yanagi | Sōetsu (1889-1961). This Movement meets important references in Ruskin's thinking and its development was very important in the early XX century. After 60 years after the death of Sōetsu this exhibition has been an important occasion to reflect again on the values of this Movement and its influence on the arts and the next generation of artists in Japan. But why is Mingei, the Folk Crafts Movement that originated in the early 20th century, the focus of so much attention nowadays? What's the role of this Movement today? This article aims to introduce this Movement in the Occidental context and to open a dialogue on the value of the traditional arts and the local culture.

Keywords: Japan, Art & Craft, Mingei Movement, Muneyoshi Yanagi, John Ruskin.

Why is Mingei, the Folk Crafts Movement that originated in the early 20th century?

The end of the Edo period (1603-1867) had marked the beginning of a new chapter in the history of Japan and the return of the Imperial Family with the beginning of the Meiji period (1868-1912) had built the conditions for a dialogue with the West.

In fact, it is only from the Meiji period (1868-1912) that Japan reopens its doors to the outside world with the consequent cultural colonization that was absolutely essential and obligatory, although the ways in which this same took place are very distinct from what history has handed down to us compared to other geographical contexts.

However, it is only from the end of the nineteenth century that the encounter between East and West will be strengthened, not only in its economic and commercial assumptions but mainly from a cultural point of view. The research conducted in recent years by the writer is a testimony to this complex but interesting history (Niglio, 2010; 2011; 2016).

In this specific historical period, many Japanese scholars begin to explore Western culture through the different fields of knowledge and confronting each other on the cultural level. Surely the applied arts sector has been the one most interested in this dialogue with the West.

In the early XX century it is inserted the interest in the theories of the British writer and art critic John Ruskin who although he never visited Japan, the echo of his "revolutions" did not take long to manifest themselves within a country in strong cultural and economic recovery immediately after the fall of the Tokugawa shogunate. It should be clarified, however, that the widest diffusion of Ruskinian theories in Japan occurred only in the first half of the twentieth century.

An interesting doctoral thesis by the Japanese scholar Yuko Kikuchi presented at the London Institute in 2004 analyzes the *Mingei* theory, short for the term “minshū kōgei” or “art of the people” which finds interesting cultural references in the English Arts and Crafts and therefore in the theories of John Ruskin but also of William Morris. This theory is a starting point for reflecting on the cultural relations between West and East and on the evolution of the different values attributed to art and architecture (Kikuchi, 1994; Kikuchi, 2004).

Promoter of this theory was the philosopher Soetsu Yanagi (1889-1961), also known by the name of Yanagi Muneyoshi, a pupil of Suzuki Daisetsu (1870-1966) Zen specialist who had spread the Eastern philosophical-religious culture in the West and had also influenced the studies of the English Bernard Leach who together with Yanagi and Shoji Hamada had strongly supported the craft culture, especially that related to the production of ceramics (Yanagi, Brase, 2018).

The Mingei Movement challenged society's narrow definition of art. Traditionally, many people think of art as something produced only by artisans, separate from functional items produced by craftsmen. Mingei instead focuses on everyday objects produced by average people, as opposed to highly refined works of art produced by professional artists. Mingei can also be seen as a response to Japan's rapid industrialization, as it elevates things made in large quantity by the hand's of the common people, rather than in a factory. In this way, it can also be seen as a method of cultural and historical preservation. Every item you see in a Mingei exhibition has its own story from a certain region of Japan, and each one was threatened by obsolescence with the rise of factory production in Japan. A similar process of industrialization was occurring in Europe at this time, leading to the Arts and Crafts Movement in England, meant to preserve traditions of handmade functional objects. Soetsu Yanagi synthesized these ideas with Buddhist principles of simplicity to form the Mingei Movement.

[<https://www.toki.tokyo/blog/2016/12/12/mingei-the-revival-of-japanese-folk-art>]

Who is the founder?

Muneyoshi Yanagi (Sōetsu) was born in Tokyo Prefecture (Tokyo Metropolitan) on March 21, 1889. He was the third son of Narayoshi Yanagi, who had the title of Marine Major General. He studied at Gakushuin School and graduated from Tokyo University. His major was the Philosophy of Religion. Sōetsu was the nephew of Jigoro Kano and started to live in Abiko, Chiba Prefecture (Abiko City) after being invited by Kano.

Yanagi was a philosopher of religion who focused on writing as he spearheaded the Folk Crafts Movement, but in fact he was a highly talented artist as well. He showed his gift for design and editing in various fields, sketching the objects he collected, designing fonts, cropping, and arranging photographs, making drawings for buildings and products, and creating mountings for Otsu-e and other paintings (Gardiner, Hamada, Kawai, Longenecker, Yanagi, and others, 2006; Yanagi, Brase, 2018).

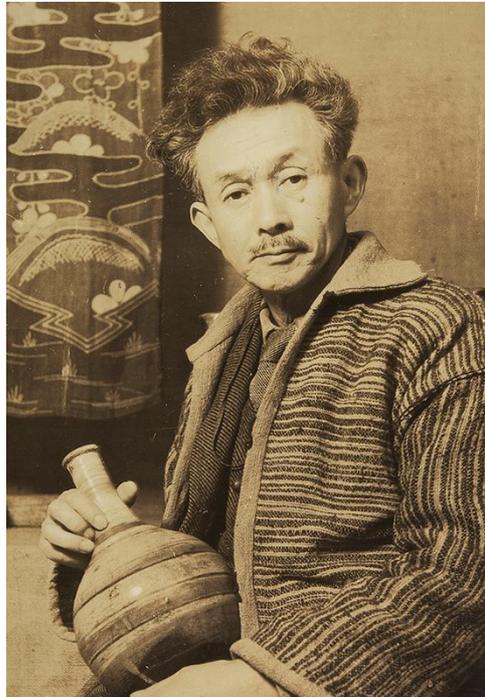


Fig.1. Yanagi Muneyoshi (Soetsu) in homespun jacket at the museum, 1948,
 Source: The Japan Folk Crafts Museum

In 1914 Yanagi had been invited to take care of the preservation of Joseon Dynasty ceramics in South Korea, and this convinced him to found the Museum of Korean Folk Art in Seoul in 1924. Surely this experience inspired him to look more closely at the folk art of Japan as well. On this occasion he had begun to study Buddhist art in various parts of Japan and had developed an appreciation for the uniqueness of each Buddha sculpture. This led him to coin the term "mingei" in 1925 along with Kanjiro Kawai (1890-1966) and Shōji Hamada (1894-1978).

The name "mingei" combines *min* (民), meaning ordinary people, and *gei* (芸 or 藝, the same font used in geisha), which means art, and is also an abbreviation of *minshuteki kōgei* (民衆的工芸), which literally translates to folk industrial arts. In essence, Mingei refers to the art of ordinary people. In 1926, Yanagi had officially announced the Mingei Movement in Japan.

Over the next ten years, Yanagi devoted himself to the development and dissemination of the Mingei philosophy throughout the country, culminating in the opening in 1936 of the Japan Folk Crafts Museum.

Today this is a museum in Komaba Park, Meguro, Tokyo, Japan, dedicated to the craft art of ordinary people. The museum was founded in 1936 by Yanagi Sōetsu and Hamada Shōji succeeded him as director. Yanagi himself designed the main hall of the museum, and in 1999 the building became a Registered Tangible Cultural Property of Japan, and still houses exhibits to this day.



Fig.2. Tokyo, Meguro, Komaba Park, Japan Folk Crafts Museum. Façade. Source, Olimpia Niglio 2021



Fig.3. Tokyo, Meguro, Komaba Park, Japan Folk Crafts Museum. Interior. Source, Olimpia Niglio 2021

The principles of Mingei Movement

Soetsu Yanagi, in the 20s of the twentieth century was the promoter of the Mingei theory whose purpose was to encourage the recognition of the values of anonymous art contrary to a culture influenced by the West, mainly committed to enhancing the art of great personalities.

The Mingei theory aimed, in fact, to seek the values of originality, uniqueness and local cultural recognition of an anonymous art, generated by artists and artisans who handed down ancient traditions with their hands. The reference was not the "genius" in the Western way, as referring only to these few works overtime would have produced mediocrity. Otherwise, the Mingei theory valued that art expression of local traditions, of anonymous artisans, an economic art, used by the population daily and therefore functional.

Contrary to the art required by the main museums and artistic institutions, Soetsu Yanagi analyzed the values of everyday objects: for example, the craftsmanship used for the realization of objects related to the tea ceremony, or even the realization of ceramics for domestic use in Okinawa and Hokkaido but also in Korea and Taiwan (Sastre de la Vega, 2008).

The main aims of this Movement clarify the commitment of Yanagi and the critical fortune in the world of art and crafts.

Mingei art should be produced in large quantities by hand. The hand-made nature of this art is at the core of the Mingei Movement, and the fact that it is produced in large quantities is related to the utilitarian aspect of Mingei.

Mingei art should be inexpensive, simple, and practical in design. Unlike ornate luxury items, the simplicity and inexpensiveness is what should give this art its charm. An expensive, complex item would not be readily accessible to the masses, betraying the fundamental ideas behind the movement. The design should also have arisen naturally over time to best suit the needs of those using it.

Mingei art should be not only functional, but also actually used by the masses. Yanagi argued that the beauty of these objects comes from their actual usage, not simply being admired. Their use also gives them their cultural and regional authenticity.

Mingei art should represent the region in which it was produced. This reflects Japanese culture's appreciation for regional variation, and indeed Mingei art often has distinguishing characteristics unique to specific regions of Japan. Each object represents a small cultural legacy that gives it a value beyond its aesthetics.

Traditionally, Mingei art is anonymous, and individual artists should not expect recognition. However, modern attitudes have changed on this principle. The idea is that they should be appreciated as objects of the masses, not attributed to specific artisans. However, in modern times, many people agree that society should embrace and celebrate the artisans and craftspeople who help keep traditions and culture alive and that this should be reflected in how the government designates certain people as Living National Treasures.

[<https://www.toki.tokyo/blogt/2016/12/12/mingei-the-revival-of-japanese-folk-art>]

These principles today regulate many craft activities that characterize the individual prefectures of Japan from North to South. Surely the *Mingei Movement*, even if today little studied and little known by the younger generations, has had the merit of enhancing spontaneous art, everyday art, the art of ordinary people and has contributed to putting the value of people and communities back at the center.

Certainly, this Movement has favored the development of local arts and the enhancement of local cultures, a principle that is the basis of the educational program “Reconnecting with your culture” which since 2021 is also active in Japan. In fact, this educational program, like the *Mingei Movement*, is helping local communities to rediscover their cultural roots and share their identities and historical heritage. All this contributes to the knowledge of our historical roots and to the enhancement of our cultural heritage.

Contemporary developments

The philosopher Yanagi in Japan gave ample space to traditional aesthetics and to all those themes that had already found in the German philosopher Immanuel Kant important reasons for reflection in the *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (Critique of Judgment) of 1790 when he examined the concepts of beauty and sublime highlighting the role of sensations and feelings in the experience of aesthetic judgment. Even for Kant as for Yanagi craftsmanship, even if contemporary, had a different value from aesthetics because it had much closer relationships with the history of the place, with the materials, with the functions required by users, with the techniques handed down and therefore had in itself greater conservative values. So the aesthetics of contemporary art (Kant, 2007) was quite another thing.



Fig.4 Some works from the exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in Tokyo (December 2021)

Precisely because of this continuous reference to the past, through intangible references of Japanese cultural traditions, the Mingei theory finds a valid starting point for reflection within the programs aimed at enhancing local cultures.

The exhibition project at the Museum of Modern Art in Tokyo (October 26, 2021, February 13, 2022) testifies to this continuity for the research and enhancement of local craftsmanship and opens important reflections on which to continue to confront ourselves in the next future in dialogue with the most contemporary arts.

Today the sustainability of these handcrafted processes is very important. Indeed, with this exhibition, promoted by The National Museum of Modern Art, is possible to [...] *re-examine the potential of the Folk Crafts Movement, which identified already existing local resources and reorganized relationships among people*. All this helps us to reflect on the importance of putting people's creative heritage and the value of community resilience back at the center. All this will help us to achieve a society that is more aware and respectful of its needs and resources and to contribute to the principles issued by the United Nations 2030 Agenda for the sustainability of the world and our lives.

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