

A Japanese William Morris: Yanagi Sôetsu and *Mingei* Theory

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Yanagi Sôetsu (1889–1961)¹ was a philosopher and a leader of the *Mingei* movement in Japan. *Mingei* literally means ‘art of the people’, hence folk-crafts. Yanagi created *Mingei* theory in the 1920s. It was one of the first modern crafts/design theories in Japan. The *Mingei* movement developed a nationwide campaign for the revival of folk-crafts from the 1930s onwards, its members united and nourished by a cultural ethnic nationalism. *Mingei* theory is essentially a set of ideas about a ‘criterion of beauty’ in which Yanagi created a concept of the supreme beauty of hand-made folk-crafts for ordinary use, made by unknown craftsmen working in groups, free of ego and of the desire to be famous or rich, merely working to earn their daily bread.²

Yanagi Sôetsu was born in Tokyo, into a distinguished upper-class family. He experienced the turmoil of Japanese modernisation. His views reflect metropolitan culture, his upper-class background, and the complex struggles of the intellectuals of the time to find a Japanese cultural ethnic identity in an environment of overwhelming westernisation.

His life can be divided into four stages. The first stage is westernisation. He read vigorously and thoroughly absorbed western science, philosophy, literature and art. He acquired the most updated knowledge from the West, surprisingly without a big time lag. For example, he followed the current issues in art by reading major European art magazines such as *The Studio*. The Post-Impressionists’ concept of ‘primitive art’ was particularly influential. *The Post-Impressionists*, written by C. L. Hind, published in 1911, so excited Yanagi and his friends that they continued discussions ‘every night throughout the week’.³ In 1912, he published an article, ‘Revolution in Art’ which is a digest of Frank Rutter’s book of the same title published in 1910, and in 1913 he translated Roger Fry’s essay in the catalogue of the ‘Manet and the Post-Impressionists’ exhibition held at the Grafton Galleries, London, in 1910. His translation appeared in *Shirakaba* (White Birch), an influential magazine which concentrated on Western art and literature⁴ of which Yanagi was a founder. He also absorbed anti-rational ideas during his ten years of intensive research into various branches of mysticism, including Christian mysticism, Sufism, Zen Buddhism, and philosophy, in particular, the thoughts of his contemporaries, William James and Henri Bergson. He was also fascinated by William Blake whom he first learnt about from Bernard Leach. When he was writing a book on Blake, Yanagi lived in Abiko, a rural area famous for its lagoon, and created there a sort of artists’ and writers’ colony with the ideal of ‘back to the country’, probably inspired by Tolstoy, the British Arts & Crafts Movement and the Wolpsswede group.

Through his research on mysticism, he developed his interests in medievalism,

gothic art and religious art. He read Emile Mâle's *Religious Art in France in the Thirteenth Century* (1898) and absorbed its aesthetic narratives of medievalism such as that treating of 'the beauty of the grotesque'. He also absorbed the idea of ethnic art with its emphasis on moral and religious purity.

At the second stage, Yanagi's interests shifted from West to East as he began to apply his now thoroughly absorbed Western knowledge to Eastern art. He discovered the beauty of Korean art and created his controversial theory of a 'beauty of sadness' which saw the characteristics of Korean art as reflections of its sad history. This sadness can be expressed in the shape of pots, in designs such as 'flying cranes and clouds' and 'willow and ducks', and in lines and white colours. This was his application of ethnic art particularly in the colonial context – Korea was a Japanese colony from 1910. This theory of a 'beauty of sadness' was later criticised in Korea as 'colonial aesthetics'. During this application exercise, Yanagi also developed his concept of national and ethnic identity in art based on the modern Western concept of the nation.

After his involvement in Korean art, Yanagi turned his eyes to Japan, and his initial interest was in Buddhist religious art, particularly *Mokujikibutsu*, wooden Buddhas which were thought to be carved by a travelling monk called Mokujiki Shōnin (1718-1810). It was while he was researching on *Mokujikibutsu* scattered all over Japan, that he found folk-crafts in Japan. In 1925 he used for the first time in his writings the term 'innate and original' beauty of Japan (*koyūna/dokujino nihon no bi*) in reference to *Mokujikibutsu*. It is a legend that he coined the term *Mingei* with his potter friends, Hamada Shōji and Kawai Kanjirō in 1925 while travelling. *Mingei* is in fact an abbreviation of *Minshūteki Kōgei* which means 'crafts of the people'. So in 1925 the *Mingei* movement began. Yanagi wrote what came to be regarded as the bible of *Mingei* theory titled *Kōgei no Michi* (The Way of Crafts) and organised the first Japanese folk-crafts exhibition in Tokyo in 1927. He also created a guild of craftsmen in the same year, which was similar to the idea of William Morris's Morris & Co which I will refer to again later. In 1929, he was invited by Harvard University to lecture on Japanese art for one year. His lecture series was entitled the 'Criterion of Beauty in Japan'. This clearly articulated the innate and original Japaneseness in Japanese folk-crafts, and remains as the crystallisation of his concept of national and ethnic identity in art which was gradually developed through his early studies on philosophy and Korean art. *Mingei* theory began showing nationalistic aspects more than craft aesthetic philosophy.

Yanagi founded the Association of Japanese Folk-Crafts in 1934 and published a new magazine, *Kōgei* ('Crafts'). This magazine was published in limited numbers during the period 1931-1941, printed on exclusively selected Japanese hand-made paper with covers of hand-woven cloth and lacquer. It is one of the most beautiful book designs in Japanese book history. He and his friends such as Itō Chōzō, Jugaku Bunshō and Serizawa Keisuke further developed their interests in book design and printing, inspired by Morris, Cobden-Sanderson⁵ and Jean Grolier.⁶ Then eventually in 1936, Yanagi established the Japan Folk-Crafts Museum in Tokyo, and this became the central institution of the *Mingei* movement, and still exists as such. The idea of this museum was greatly influenced by the Nordiska Museet in Skansen, Stockholm in Sweden, established by Artur Hazelius (1833-1901) as long ago as 1873. Yanagi actively travelled all over Japan, carrying out his research on folk-crafts, collecting, taxonomising, exhibiting and preserving.

In the third stage, from the late 1930s to 1945, Yanagi developed his interests in the crafts of Okinawa and the Ainu within Japan, and the crafts of Japanese colonies such as Taiwan and Manchuria. He extensively applied his medieval and primitive rhetoric and his 'criterion of beauty'. His political stance became increasingly ambiguous in his evaluation of the crafts of Japanese colonies and in his arguments over Japanese 'innate and original' beauty, which he somehow managed to develop in harmony with the ultra-nationalist ideologies, regionalism and pan-Asianism associated with Japanese Imperialism.

During his fourth and last stage, after the Second World War, Yanagi had close connections with a Buddhist scholar, Suzuki Daisetz. He developed *Mingei* theory within a framework of Buddhist aesthetics. His *Mingei* theory was first established in Western rhetoric but now completed in Buddhist rhetoric. He undertook lecture tours all over Europe and the USA with Hamada and Leach, and made a profound impact on Western craftspeople at the important International Conference of Craftsmen in Pottery & Textiles at Dartington Hall in 1952, presenting papers entitled 'The Buddhist Idea of Beauty' and 'The Japanese Approach to Crafts'. These two papers were included by Leach in *The Unknown Craftsman*, under the same title for the first paper but the new title, 'The Responsibility of the Craftsman', for the second.

The hybrid nature of *Mingei* theory becomes apparent when examined alongside the ideas of John Ruskin and William Morris. Yanagi mentioned their names, but he was a great self-publicist, and in his many writings he strongly emphasised the originality of his *Mingei* theories and their independence of any precedents. Many critics in Japan also supported Yanagi's claim to genuine originality and his views have not been seriously questioned until recently. His claims, however, need to be re-examined against firstly, the backdrop of cultural nationalism in Japan which became prominent around the 1890s and continues to the present day, and secondly in the context of the popularity of John Ruskin and William Morris in Japan from the 1880s.

Mingei theory was created at a time when Ruskin and Morris were very popular. Their works were translated and introduced in various academic fields from the late 1880s. According to my research, at least 102 items on Ruskin and 139 items on Morris had been appeared⁷ before Yanagi published his own seminal work on *Mingei* in 1927. In the field of art and aesthetics, Iwamura Tôru, a leading art critic, and Tomimoto Kenkichi, a versatile Morrisian designer and potter, are notable before Yanagi. Tomimoto's article on Morris, published in 1912, was one of the earliest extensive pieces on the designer. Tomimoto also founded a design company in 1914, with ideas similar to those of Morris & Co. He later became involved in the *Mingei* movement and was at one time a very close friend of Yanagi, but his role in the formation of *Mingei* theory has long been neglected.⁸ A journalist, Murobuse Kôshin also published three bestselling books in the 1920s that provided a digest of ideas by modern thinkers in the West with particular reference to Marx, Tolstoy, Ruskin and Morris. He also popularised the ideas of Guild Socialism.

Two Japanese critics who have questioned Yanagi's claim to originality were a Morris scholar, Ono Jirô, and a *Mingei* critic, Idekawa Naoki. Ono said, 'in order to truly absorb Morris's ideas, we Japanese need to critically assess Yanagi's activities and theories',⁹ and Idekawa claimed 'Mingei theory is a direct descendant of Ruskin and Morris'.¹⁰ In this country, Brian Moeran has also pointed out Yanagi's Morris connection. I tend to agree with Ono, Idekawa and Moeran.

I shall now briefly outline Yanagi Sôetsu's key ideas of *Mingei* theory by comparing them with the ideas of William Morris as well as John Ruskin. Yanagi classified crafts into four categories:¹¹

- i. *Folkcrafts* or *getemono*: 'unselfconsciously hand-made, and unsigned, for the people by the people, cheaply and in quantity, as, for example, the Gothic crafts, the best work being done under the Medieval guild system'. *Ge* of *getemono* means 'ordinary' or 'common', and *te* means 'by nature'. It applies to common household objects and has a derogatory tone. It is a concept in opposition to *Jôtemono*, artistic and refined objects of a higher nature, including *Individual/Artist Crafts* and *Aristocratic Crafts* in Yanagi's classification.
- ii. *Individual/Artist Crafts*: 'made by a few, for a few, at a high price. Consciously made and signed. Examples, Mokubei or Staite Murray' (Wedgwood in Yanagi's original).
- iii. *Industrial Crafts*: 'such as aluminium saucepans, etc., made under the industrial system by mechanical means'.
- iv. *Aristocratic Crafts*: 'examples, Nabeshima ware in Japan under the patronage of a feudal lord or Stanley Gibbons in England' (*Makie* in Yanagi's original).

Yanagi's theory was formulated on the first category. He prized *getemono*, common household objects hand-made by unknown craftsmen. William Morris prized the decorative arts, which he called the 'lesser arts' in contrast with the 'higher arts'. Their ideas share a modern aesthetic which contests the historical distinction of high and low art, by prizing handcrafts by unnamed ordinary people.

Yanagi's *Mingei* theory is centred on ideas of what he calls the 'criterion of beauty' which defines the supreme beauty of folk-crafts or *getemono*. It was most clearly summarised in a seminal book titled *Kôgei no Michi* (The Way of Crafts), published in 1927, and its essence was translated and adapted by Bernard Leach in 'The Way of Craftsmanship' in *The Unknown Craftsman*. Besides *Kôgei no Michi*, Yanagi gives an illustrated representation of his ideas in a series of articles with the same title, the 'Criterion of Beauty', published in 1931 after returning from lecturing at Harvard University. It is not known whether Yanagi intended it or not, but it uses the same method as A. W. Pugin's book, *Contrasts*, published in 1836, contrasting the ugliness of Victorian architecture with the beauty of Gothic architecture. Yanagi's ideas were refreshingly new in the 1920s in Japan, when little value was attached to folk-crafts or *getemono*, and largely overlap with those of Ruskin and Morris.

Yanagi's main project, developed from his medievalism, also has similarities with those undertaken by Ruskin and Morris. Yanagi idealised the medieval environment as one in which makers could create objects of supreme beauty. Both Ruskin and Morris were also medievalists. The Middle Ages for Ruskin and Morris were a time when aesthetic feelings, social life and religious sensibilities were truly unified in an Age of Faith. Although the social system was hierarchical, everybody could find a meaningful relationship with society.

In order to recreate a medieval environment in modern society, Yanagi established a guild to resuscitate craftsmanship. His ideas were influenced not only by Ruskin and Morris, but also by the Russian Anarchist theorist, Pyotr Alekseevich Kropotkin (1842–1921) in his book *Mutual Aid*, and by Arthur J. Pentty (1875–1937), the British Guild Socialist and an architect, in his book *Restoration of the Guild System*.

It would be most difficult without a change in the social system. Under present conditions folk-crafts are dying, bad factory products are increasing, and the artist-craftsman works for the collector...

In my opinion, now that capitalism has killed handicrafts, the only way is through the guild system. The finest crafts of the past were produced under it... Beautiful crafts were the outcome of the co-operation between craftsmen.

Associations for mutual help and preserving order. Order involves basic morality. The morality guaranteed the quality of the products. It gave the work its character, guaranteed its craftsmanship, and refused to allow bad work to be sold.¹²

Encouraged by Yanagi's ideas, the craft guild called *Kamigamo Mingei Kyôdan* (Kamigamo Folk-crafts Communion) was established in Kyoto in 1927 by four craftsmen. They created woodwork (mainly furniture), metal work, textiles and did interior designs. Their major works were exhibited in the Folks crafts Pavilion at the Imperial Exposition for the Promotion of Domestic Industry in Ueno in 1928. The Pavilion itself was designed by Yanagi, and created by the *Kamigamo Mingei Kyôdan*. Inside the Pavilion, Yanagi's collection of folk-crafts, and furniture and other crafts created by the *Kamigamo Mingei Kyôdan*, were exhibited with the concept of total co-ordination. This idea of total co-ordination is similar to Morris's Red House which was designed by Philip Webb with interior decoration, furniture and other crafts by Morris's friends.

Ruskin founded the Guild of St. George in 1871, and under its name he carried out various projects which ranged from craft guilds and land reclamation, to running a tea shop, and even road sweeping. However, in terms of craft-guilds, Yanagi's ideas have more in common with those of Morris & Co. and the guilds of Morris's followers such as A. H. Mackmurdo, W. R. Lethaby and C. R. Ashbee in the British Arts & Crafts movement.

Yanagi, Ruskin and Morris certainly shared the same ideas. They all prized craftsmanship and handicrafts. They were all medievalists, having as their ideal a society in which art and morality were united. However, there are several differences, which I see as evidence of Yanagi's originality. One of the most important of these relates to Morris's key belief in the idea of 'pleasure in labour'¹³ or freedom in creativity. Yanagi always spoke of a Divine power which he called 'grace given by heaven',¹⁴ rather than of 'pleasure' and 'freedom'. A Japanese critic, Idekawa Naoki, emphasises Yanagi's belief that the craftsman was a 'human machine'¹⁵, destined for labour-intensive repetitive work, who could yet unconsciously create beautiful things with the help of nature, tradition and Divine power. According to Yanagi, a conscious artistic faculty was a disease which prevented the creation of supreme beauty. For Yanagi, 'no-mindedness'¹⁶ was the key factor in making craftsmen free from this disease. Morris, on the other hand, while praising 'art of the unconscious intelligence',¹⁷ placed his hope for the future in a 'new art of conscious intelligence'.¹⁸

In order to attain 'no-mindedness', Yanagi emphasised 'discipline', relying on Nature and surrender to 'the Other Power' or *Tariki*, the reliance on the grace of Buddha, as opposed to *Jiriki* or the 'Self Power', attaining Enlightenment through self effort:

[The Craftsmen] may be unlettered, uneducated and lacking any particular force of personality, but it is not from these causes that beauty is produced. He rests in

the protecting hand of nature. The beauty of folk-craft is the kind that comes from dependence on the Other Power (*Tariki*). Natural material, natural process, and an accepting heart – these are the ingredients necessary at the birth of folk-crafts'.¹⁹

According to Yanagi, relying on 'the Other Power' actually means makers following tradition, using traditional methods, traditional natural materials and traditional forms and designs.

Yanagi and *Mingei* theory are widely known in the West, particularly for their so-called 'Oriental' philosophic slant which gave a new dimension to Western interest in issues of crafts and craftsmanship. I often come across favourable and uncritical acceptance of *Mingei* theory in the West, where there is a tendency towards over-mystification and an over-emphasis of its esoteric aspects. However, far from being 'authentically' Oriental in outlook, as is generally assumed, *Mingei* theory is a hybrid theory, highly eclectic in its concepts, with core ideas from many European sources, such as British (particularly Ruskin and Morris), Scandinavian and German craft philosophies of the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century, and Buddhist rhetoric and ideas from Japanese Tea Masters of the sixteenth and seventeenth-century. The purpose of this article has been to emphasise the hybrid nature of Yanagi's *Mingei* theory and to encourage a more critical assessment of its origins and aims.

NOTES

- ¹ Japanese names are all given in Japanese order, *i.e.* surname first. Officially Yanagi's given name is pronounced Muneyoshi but I use Sôetsu by which he is more popularly known. Sôetsu is the On-yomi pronunciation of the Chinese character for Muneyoshi.
- ² I would summarise Yanagi's *Criterion of Beauty* as follows:
 1. Beauty of handcrafts.
 2. Beauty of intimacy.
 3. Beauty of use/function (functional in form and design).
 4. Beauty of health (moral nature of makers and physical nature of objects).
 5. Beauty of naturalness (made with natural materials).
 6. Beauty of simplicity (form and design).
 7. Beauty of tradition (method and design).
 8. Beauty of sincerity and honest sweat (by unknown craftsmen, not for money greed).
 9. Beauty of selflessness and unknown (made by unknown, unlearned and poor craftsmen).
 10. Beauty of inexpensiveness.
 11. Beauty of plurality (objects which could be copied and produced in large quantities).
 12. Beauty of irregularity.
- ³ Yanagi Sôetsu, *Yanagi Sôetsu Zenshû* [Collected Works of Yanagi Sôetsu], (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobô 1981), I, p. 567.
- ⁴ *ibid.*, I, pp. 706–716.
- ⁵ Thomas James Cobden-Sanderson (1848–1922), printer and book-binder, also a founder of the Doves Press.

- ⁶ Jean Grolier, book collector, and associated with elaborate gold decorations of book-binding.
- ⁷ For Morris's reception in Japan, see K. Makino, C. Shinagawa, S. Ito, 'Nihon deno Morisu Kenkyû Bunken Mokuroku' [*A Bibliography of Morris Studies in Japan*], *Morisu Matsuri eno Shôtai*, (Keyaki Bijutsukan 1991).
- ⁸ For further information, see Yuko Kikuchi, 'The Myth of Yanagi's Originality: The Formation of *Mingei* Theory in its Social and Historical Context', *Journal of Design History*, Vol 7, No 4, (1994), pp. 247–266.
- ⁹ Ono Jirô, Kubo Satoru, 'Wiriamu Morisu to Yanagi Sôetsu' [*William Morris and Yanagi Sôetsu*], *Graphication*, 12, 1979, p. 3.
- ¹⁰ Idekawa Naoki, *Mingei: Riron no Hôkai to Yôshiki no Tanjô* [*Mingei: Collapse of the Theory and Establishment of the Style*], (Tokyo: Shinchôsha 1988).
- ¹¹ *Yanagi Sôetsu Zenshû*, op. cit., 8, p. 211.
- ¹² Yanagi Sôetsu, adapted by Bernard Leach, *The Unknown Craftsman*, (Tokyo and New York: Kodansha International 1989), p. 198 and p. 208.
- ¹³ May Morris (ed.), *The Collected Works of William Morris*, (London: Longmans Green & Co. 1910–15), XXII, p. 42.
- ¹⁴ Yanagi, 'The Japanese Approach to Crafts', (Dartington Conference Papers 1952), p. 22.
- ¹⁵ Idekawa, *Mingei*, op. cit., p. 70.
- ¹⁶ Bernard Leach translated this as 'state of going beyond all forms of dualism' in *The Unknown Craftsman*, p. 228.
- ¹⁷ *The Collected Works of William Morris*, op. cit., XXII, p. 12.
- ¹⁸ *ibid.*, p. 12.
- ¹⁹ *The Unknown Craftsman*, op. cit., p. 200.