

A Reevaluation of William Morris's Influence in Japan¹

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The Mingei movement, which began in Japan in the 1920s and continues today, has almost always been discussed as one which revolved entirely around Yanagi Sōetsu (1889-1961), a religious philosopher and the apparent founder of the movement.² The movement, and Yanagi's theory on the beauty of folk crafts, have been known to the West particularly after World War II through a number of publications in English, the most famous being *The Unknown Craftsman*, adapted by Bernard Leach and first published in 1972.³ More recently, two touring exhibitions based on Yanagi's collection at the Japan Folkcraft Museum (Mingeikan), have been organised in the West: *Mingei: The Living Tradition in Japanese Arts* (Glasgow, Sunderland and London, 1991-92) and *Two Centuries of Japanese Folk Art* (Massachusetts, Nebraska, California and Texas, 1995-97).

Yanagi presented his craft aesthetic in a series of articles published in 1927. It consisted of a number of principles: first, that the purest beauty of craft is found among ordinary objects; second, that the essence of the beauty of ordinary crafts is their simplicity of shape, warmth of character and spirit of service (*i.e.* ease of use); third, that their beauty springs not from the creativity of the individual producers but from the concerted efforts of the multitudes over generations; fourth, that their beauty is thus free from the individualism which has caused the degradation of art and craft, and is therefore superior to works of art bearing individual names; fifth, that the characteristics of their beauty come from the fact that they are made in large quantities so the economy of the production process drives individual fancy out of the objects - the producers, therefore, were not conscious of the beauty they create; and sixth, that because it is impossible to return to the unconscious past in this age of consciousness, the future of the crafts can only rest on individual producers. To achieve the purest beauty of craft, however, the individual craft artist must strive to erase his or her individuality and surrender to the power from without.

Curiously, until recently there had been few critical studies of Yanagi and the Mingei movement in either Japan or the West. For most people, Japanese or non-Japanese, Yanagi's vast knowledge of Western philosophy and religion, and of numerous difficult Buddhist texts, perhaps seemed too daunting to allow them to criticise him. In addition, the body of his writings includes his answers to, and counter attacks against, criticisms made during his lifetime. There are questions, however, which have been repeatedly asked but remain unanswered - such as the vexing problem of the position of individual craft artists (such as Hamada Shōji, Kawai Kanjirō, Serizawa Keisuke and Munakata Shikō) within a movement which considered the beauty of folk crafts superior to works by individual craft artists.⁴

However, when one steps back from Yanagi's actions and writings, and places the Mingei movement in the context of the wider contemporary development of the crafts in Japan, one begins to see a different picture in which most of these important questions are answered. In most publications on the Mingei movement, its history is

described as commencing with Yanagi when he, together with Hamada Shôji and Kawai Kanjirô, coined the word *mingei* (craft with the characteristics of common people). However, this narrative ignores the significance of the earlier development from which the notion of *mingei* sprang. Why this is so will become clearer later in my article.

The origin of what we call the Mingei movement can be traced back to the time when Bernard Leach took up pottery, which was early in the 1910s.⁵ Around this time Tomimoto Kenkichi, a progressive student of architecture and design, acted as an interpreter for Leach and his teacher Kenzan, and then began making pottery himself.⁶ The style of this pottery was derived from old English folk art and other Western and Middle-Eastern traditions. Tomimoto became acquainted with these traditions at the South Kensington Museum (now the V & A), and while travelling in the Middle East between 1908 and 1910.

Leach and Tomimoto not only experimented in pottery but in prints and other crafts, and designed exhibitions in an unconventional manner. Their works and activities were innovatory, and as such had an extremely strong and lasting impact on many young Japanese artists and craftsmen. For some time, this younger generation of artists had been seeking new kinds of expression that would reflect their recently established, largely Westernised, urban life. Their works struck a sympathetic chord in a new consciousness among the artistic community. This new consciousness, which one may call a modern culture, emerged among the urban intellectuals from the beginning of the century. One important element of this new culture may be seen as exoticism. Living in a now fully developed urban society in which information about Western cultures and art movements was readily available, these intellectuals began to see not only foreign cultures but also their own past, their rural culture, as exotic. In this context, one must point out the effect of Japan's colonisation of Taiwan in 1905 and annexation of Korea in 1910. A strong sense of cultural superiority often accompanied this taste for exoticism; for example, Masaki Naohiko, the president of the Tokyo School of Fine Arts, spoke thus of 'native crafts' in 1913:

Recently, natives' art has become fashionable. As our culture becomes more advanced, people begin to prefer objects which represent the opposite. As everything from the social structure to our everyday life is becoming more and more complicated and sophisticated, and so is our work, it is natural that we seek our repose in simpler objects.⁷

Masaki illustrated this with pictures from his collection - mostly from the South Pacific, North America and the Middle East.

One of the artists on whom Leach and Tomimoto had a strong impact was Hamada Shôji (1894-1978). Hamada went to a technical school to study ceramics, but was determined to make pottery in the style developed by Leach and Tomimoto rather than in the highly refined and skill-oriented styles of traditional Japanese ceramics. Hamada visited Leach and offered help in setting up a kiln at St Ives in Cornwall. Here Hamada - who grew up in Tokyo and worked in Kyoto - met British artists and intellectuals, such as Eric Gill, who chose to live the simple life in the country.⁸ They served their guests not with Doulton or Wedgwood ware but with locally produced slipware plates and bowls which were in perfect harmony with their surroundings.

This was the direction in which Hamada was determined to proceed. On his return to Japan in 1924, Hamada began foraging in antique shops and markets in Kyoto for pieces to his taste and for his creative use.⁹ In other words, his experience in the West opened his eyes to objects which were otherwise taken for granted in Japan. Hamada's behaviour at first puzzled his friend Kawai Kanjirô, who had established himself as an extremely skilled ceramist yet was not satisfied with his work and was searching for a new direction. Yanagi Sôetsu was also living in Kyoto at the time. The three men quickly discovered their shared interest in simple folk crafts, and a strong friendship was formed. It was during this period that Yanagi developed his Mingei theory.

It is important to note, however, that Hamada Shôji had doubts about Yanagi's Mingei theory being used as a formula for appreciating all art and craft.¹⁰ Yanagi's theory was a synthesis of his previous spiritual journey in search of truth through religion, science and psychology. When he 'discovered' the beauty of folk crafts, he identified his aesthetic with spiritual truth. The notion that ordinary crafts made by ordinary artisans for use in everyday life could have a supreme beauty was a kind of enlightenment for those who read Yanagi's passionate writings. The lack of logic in some of his arguments was overlooked. His was a revolutionary theory which completely overturned the conventional artistic hierarchy.

The similarities between Morris's writings and Yanagi's Mingei theory are unmistakable. Yanagi, however, insisted on the originality of his ideas, declaring that he had not known of Morris's or Ruskin's ideas before he formulated his own theory. Most of Yanagi's followers do not question the validity of this claim.¹¹ Western scholars, on the other hand, have tended to see a strong influence of Morris on Yanagi. Brian Moeran has been the most persistent advocate of this view.¹² Elizabeth Frolet, a French artist and scholar, is another who considers that Yanagi's inspiration came largely from Morris.¹³

My view is that the circumstances in which Yanagi's theory was formed suggest that he could not have been unaware of Morris and his ideas. However, I also believe that there are too many other Eastern and Western ideas which certainly influenced Yanagi to say that Morris's was the main influence on him. For example, there is a striking resemblance between Emile Mâle's representation of the Gothic craftsmen faithfully following the rules of image production - in his book *The Gothic Image: Religious Art in France in the Thirteenth Century* (1902) - and Yanagi's description of the selfless artisan who unconsciously created beauty. This has somehow escaped the notice of Mingei historians, although they know that Yanagi read and wrote about Mâle's book some years before forming his Mingei theory.

Some people, including Bernard Leach, but particularly Japanese scholars such as Mizuo Hiroshi and Jugaku Bunsho, hold that Yanagi actually surpassed Morris in that Yanagi 'raised' the aesthetic appreciation of folk crafts to a spiritual level.¹⁴ For those who believe that spiritual discourse has a higher value than artistic discourse, it may be so. One may argue, however, that by presenting a personal aesthetic as universal truth, Yanagi created confusion. Firstly, he completely cut off his aesthetic from history and made it a kind of gospel which claimed that once your eyes were opened to this truth, you were able to understand beauty. This was precisely what Hamada feared and warned against. To the extent that Yanagi's writings opened up new possibilities of seeing beauty in objects that had never been considered beautiful,

this provided the freedom of a modern sensibility. Yet, at the same time as Yanagi did so, he shackled his readers to his formula - a pre-set value which determined what was beautiful and what was not.

Another serious problem with Yanagi's theory, which Hamada pointed out, was that when Yanagi illustrated his argument with examples of folk craftworks, he did not fully explain why he selected them out of the tens of thousands of other objects of similar kinds which would also apparently satisfy his criteria for beautiful objects. The fact that they were selected by Yanagi with his celebrated connoisseurship was not mentioned, as Yanagi wanted to generalise from the objects' beauty rather than to draw attention to his own good taste.

Hamada's criticisms were very important as they anticipated the direction in which Mingei theory would develop. By the time he voiced his concern in 1931, a new movement was emerging, in Tottori, a coastal city on the Sea of Japan, led by Yoshida Shôya, an ear, nose and throat doctor and ardent admirer of Yanagi. Yoshida interpreted Yanagi's theory as a practical manual for appreciating and creating beauty; he and others like him believing that if the older artisans produced beautiful objects through repetition of the same shapes and patterns, properly guided artisans would also be able to produce beautiful objects even in the modern age. These were the people who eventually overwhelmed the more cautious readers of Yanagi's writings and became the mainstream Mingei movement, particularly after the war. For them, the movement started when Yanagi first perceived the beauty of folk crafts.

The earlier group, Leach, Tomimoto, Hamada, Kawai and Yanagi, shared their love and admiration of folk crafts. The individualistic pursuits of craft artisans (as most of them were) happily coexisted with their admiration for extraordinary pieces of old folk ware. Yoshida Shôya and others who became the mainstream Mingei movement, however, held that one should despise individualistic crafts, because Yanagi despised them. Ironically, it was the high profile of the artists under its wing, like Hamada and others, and later, Munakata Shikô or Serizawa Keisuke, that promoted the Mingei movement as a whole. How, then, did these artists and craft artists reconcile their position in a movement which, as a principle, condemned individualism? The answer was that they did not take Yanagi's theory at its face value and, contrary to popular belief, did not let his theory guide their work. As to Hamada and Kawai, for example, they simply shared Yanagi's taste for 'extraordinary mingei'. The younger craft artists of the movement, on the other hand, were fostered by Yanagi's discernment and encouragement, as well as the brotherhood-like support within the group. In this light, it is significant that Kuro da Tatsuaki, a woodwork artist who set up a cooperative (under Yanagi's suggestion) in 1927, claimed that it was Shôya, rather than Yanagi, who popularised the word mingei.¹⁵

To conclude the first point: once the self-contradictory nature of Yanagi's Mingei theory and the different degrees of his influence (or non-influence) on the members of the movement are acknowledged, it follows that a discussion of Morris's influence on Yanagi and the Mingei movement now needs to be more specific as to how the influence was effected and to what degree.

Yanagi and his Mingei theory were not the major recipient of Morris's influence in terms of the development of modern Japanese crafts. A more significant and far-reaching influence of Morris's ideas and practice can be observed in Tomimoto

Kenkichi, a student of architecture and design who became a potter. Inui Yoshiaki wrote of Tomimoto in 1986:

The core task in modernising ceramics, that is, to break through the practice of copying traditional styles, and to establish the concept of originality, was first achieved by Tomimoto, and he did it in a most spectacular manner.¹⁶

Tomimoto is usually considered to be the one who bridged the gap between Morris and Yanagi by introducing Morris's ideas to him. Tomimoto wrote a two-part article on Morris which was published in 1912 in a very influential art magazine called *Bijutsu Shinpo*. There is a general unwillingness to acknowledge Morris's influence on Tomimoto himself, however. The single ground for this unwillingness, it seems, is the fact that Tomimoto once wrote that he had been disappointed to find no originality in Morris's work.¹⁷

Tomimoto was the champion of originality in craft design. He is famous for his aphorism 'never make patterns from patterns', and, faithful to this motto, he took pride in drawing from nature to create all the patterns for his craft. Because of his commitment to originality, his above comment on Morris has been taken out of context, and as a consequence his repeated praise of Morris and acknowledgment of his debt to Morris have been all but ignored. One can fairly argue that Tomimoto was an independent craft artist, and his debt to Morris in his practice as a craft artist lay deeper than his introduction in print of Morris's ideas to the Japanese public. My intention here is to highlight Morris's influence on Tomimoto as he interpreted Morris, rather than to examine whether his interpretation was valid. Tomimoto was by no means a scholar of Morris, and one must not overestimate his competence in the English language as well as the research opportunities during his limited sojourn in Britain (twelve months from December 1908 and less than a month in April 1910 before returned to Japan). Let us look at two aspects of Morris's influence on Tomimoto here. The first is Morris's approach to craftmaking in which he mastered various skills while always keeping them under the control of his aesthetic. In the 1910s, craft production in Japan was strongly dominated by the conventional idea that skill was the most essential value in craftwork. When Tomimoto adopted Morris's attitude, it became the fundamental power in breaking through this concept of craft production in Japan.

Tomimoto wrote:

I found [Morris's wallpaper designs] very interesting when I first saw them. As I became familiar with them, I came to be fascinated with them. The noble taste of the serious and gentlemanly artist deeply impressed me.¹⁸

And:

When I think of the time and effort Morris had taken, without help or teaching from others, in dissecting the details [of old carpets] and in carrying out many trials until he could weave them on his own, my respect for this man seems to acquire even more lustre.¹⁹

In fact, on returning to Japan, Tomimoto took out his great-grandmother's old loom from storage and himself began weaving.

[Morris] overcame great difficulties in having various products made in the way he wanted them. The works which he himself patterned - in various materials such as silk, cotton, linen or wool - show me, apart from their noble artistic value, that Morris trusted himself and was faithful to himself.²⁰

A revelation came to Tomimoto when he saw chintz and paintings hung side by side at the South Kensington Museum. The display struck home the idea that art and craft have the same value. Tomimoto concluded:

'The appeal of the individuality of the artist' or 'things that are infinitely beautiful' must be recognised not only in paintings and sculpture but also in weaving, metalwork and all other craftwork. Morris was a forerunner like no other in perceiving this, and I feel that he showed us the way through his own practice.²¹

Tomimoto thus learned from Morris his 'let's see what can be done' attitude, that is, to believe only in one's own taste when creating objects and follow it through. In Japan, this was a radical departure from the long-established craft-making practice, and Tomimoto immediately met strong resistance from the craft community. In fact, when Tomimoto devised a vase without a neck, other potters sneered at him, saying that he had only done so because he was not skilled enough to make the neck. On the other hand, his unconventional experiments and his numerous thought-provoking essays liberated many young craft artists from conventional ideas and practices. He was not alone in claiming that artists should follow their own taste and not any prescribed rules. But he was the first and certainly the most influential one in the field of the crafts. There were a number of craft movements developing during the 1910s and 1920s, and those who initiated these movements were often influenced by Tomimoto's progressive ideas and sensitivity.

As well as his commitment to the originality and integrity of the artist, social conscience was also fundamental to Tomimoto's life and work. He was deeply interested in Morris's socialist activities and conducted research into this aspect of his work while in London. Until after the war, however, he was not prepared to publicly admit this, nor publish his research, as this would certainly have meant imprisonment.²² One suspects that Tomimoto read Morris's lectures on art and society, and wished to contribute to Morris's cause in his individual capacity. This led him to turn to the possibility of mass-producing his designs so that people who could not afford his expensive pots could still enjoy his work. As early as 1917 he wrote:

This year, I began to desire to make craft which can be used by anyone for everyday life, at the lowest price possible. This is a very important matter for me, and I think it will have an important role in the direction I will proceed in.²³

He also wrote to Leach in 1918:

Since last year, I have been thinking about this: decorative arts must not be separate from everyday life. If people create decorative arts without thinking about everyday life, the work will be mere toys for grown-ups... I want to make cheap objects - particularly tableware. And I want to provide people with as much of it as I can. The quality of my vessels will certainly suffer, but to combat ordinary wares, I must have low prices as the weapon.²⁴

Tomimoto attempted mass production in different ways - from drawing designs himself on large quantities of bases made by others, to providing originals to have them reproduced. His efforts during the greater part of the 1920s were focused on devising patterns which were easy to copy. In 1929, as his first large-scale experiment, he went to Shigaraki, one of the old pottery regions, and drew iron-glaze patterns on thrown plates. Tomimoto was living in Tokyo around this time, and it became an annual event for him to leave Tokyo's cold winter for warmer pottery-producing regions and draw designs on a large number of bases made by skilled artisans.

Tomimoto encountered many difficulties, however, and envied Morris for what he thought was lacking in himself: 'What I admire most about William Morris is his power to unite and ability to lead'.²⁵ But the real cause of his frustration was the fact that he was ahead of his time. After the war, in 1947, he recalled:

About thirty years ago I made medium-size plates for use in the kitchen in ceramic-producing areas like Seto and sold them at around fifty *sen* each. The next year, however, those plates were sold as a kind of antique ware, at forty or fifty *yen* each [approximately 100 times the value]. I was saddened that things had gone in a completely different direction.²⁶

Yet he continued to persist with his experiments with mass production. In 1957, he created a brand called Tomisen under which his original works were mass-produced and distributed through a large craft company. Unfortunately, production ceased in the mid 1960s, soon after Tomimoto's death. Today, a brand called Tomihana, ceramics with copies of Tomimoto's patterns, is sold by the same company (Japan Craft).

Tomimoto was not the only artist who learned from Morris. But it was through this remarkable individual that Morris's ideas were made relevant for Japan, at a time when the modern Japanese spirit was ready to absorb them.

NOTES

- ¹ This article is an edited version of the paper of the same title presented at the Morris Centenary Conference at Oxford in June 1996. All Japanese names in the main text appear surname followed by given name.
- ² This is true in both Japanese and Western literature.
- ³ Published by Kodansha International, Tokyo.
- ⁴ This problem caused the split in the movement in 1953 when Miyake Tadaichi, a dedicated Mingei activist, left Yanagi's Japan Folk Craft Association and established a museum in which he displayed only folk crafts made by anonymous artisans.

- ⁵ Bernard Leach (1887-1979) arrived in Japan in 1909 after his encounter with Takamura Kotaro, arguably the most significant artist in modern Japanese art movements.
- ⁶ For a brief introduction of Tomimoto and his ideas, see Yuko Kikuchi, 'Tomimoto Kenkichi', *Crafts*, no.148, 1997, pp. 22-23.
- ⁷ *Bijutsu Shimpō*, vol. 12, no.6, p. 7.
- ⁸ Bernard Leach, *Hamada: Potter*, (Tokyo/New York: Kodansha International 1990 [first edition 1975]), pp. 131-32.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 149.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 168. Also see *Kōgei*, no. 1 (Tokyo: Rakuyōdō 1931), p. 29.
- ¹¹ I am aware that Yuko Kikuchi has challenged this common Japanese view in her recent publications: see for example, 'A Japanese William Morris: Yanagi Sōetsu and Mingei Theory' in *The Journal of the William Morris Society*, XII, 2 (Spring 1997), pp. 39-45.
- ¹² For example, see 'Yanagi, Morris and Popular Art', *Ceramic Review*, no. 66, 1980, pp. 25-26; 'Bernard Leach and the Japanese Folk Craft Movement: the Formative Years', *Journal of Design History*, vol. 2, nos. 2&3, 1989, pp. 141-42; 'Orientalism and the Debris of Western Civilisation: Popular Art Movements in Britain and Japan', *Europe & the Orient*, D. Gerstle and A. Miller (eds.), (Canberra: The Humanities Research Centre 1994), pp. 36-37.
- ¹³ 'Mingei: The Word and the Movement', *Mingei: The Living Tradition in Japanese Arts* [exhibition catalogue], (Tokyo/ New York: Kodansha International 1991), p. 13.
- ¹⁴ The comment by Leach was made during an interview with Professor Masaaki Maeda, on the latter's visit to St Ives in 1973. I discussed this point with Professor Maeda twice in 1992; Jugaku Bunsho, 'Uiriamu Morisu to Yanagi Sōetsu', *Kogei*, no. 100, 1939, pp. 27-30.
- ¹⁵ Kuroda Tatsuaki interview, recorded at Asahi Hall, Kyoto, 1976. A copy of this tape was kindly provided by Kuroda's son Kenkichi.
- ¹⁶ Inui Yoshiaki, *Tomimoto Kenkichi*, [exhibition catalogue], (Asahi Shinbunsha 1986), p. 171.
- ¹⁷ 'Autobiography' in *Iroe-jiki: Tomomoto Kenkichi*, (Tokyo: Japan Agency for Cultural Affairs 1969), p. 72.
- ¹⁸ Tsujimoto Isamu (ed.), *Tomimoto Kenkichi Chosakusha*, (Kyoto: Satsuki Shobo 1981), p. 423.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 439.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 436.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 445-6.
- ²² 'Autobiography', *op. cit.*, p. 72.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, p. 515.
- ²⁴ From an unpublished letter, courtesy of Tomimoto Kenkichi Memorial Museum, Nara.
- ²⁵ *Tomimoto Kenkichi Chosakushu*, *op. cit.*, p. 526.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 614..