

## A STUDY OF THE SIGNIFICANT INFLUENCE BY SHIN-BUDDHISM TO THE TRUELY ORIGINAL JAPANESE CRAFTS DESIGN

Satoru Kiyosawa

*Mukogawa Women's University, Japan*

**Keywords:** Shin-Buddhism, mingei (folk-crafts), tariki (power contrary to our own intentional power), anonymous

### Introduction

Shin-Buddhism ("Jodo-Shinshu" in Japanese, a school of Pure-Land Buddhism founded by Shinran in 12<sup>th</sup> century) which has been being developed and elaborated identically in Japan since then and its religious and spiritual way of thinking might be very deep, basic and influential factors for Japanese very original and traditional crafts-designs including architecture. Through Soetsu Yanagi's critics, thesis and writings, I would like to make it clear to a certain extent.

### About Soetsu Ynagi

Soetsu Yanagi was born in 1889 and graduated from the literature department of Tokyo Imperial University in 1913, majoring psychology. Proficient in English and with a deep feeling for art, he became associated with the Shirakaba-literary-group in which he played a responsible part for interpreting Western art to Japan.

In 1936 he completed the present Japan Folk-craft Museum in Tokyo through his efforts. With the good company of the friendly and great potters such Kanjiro Kawai, Shoji Hamada and Bernard Leach, he sought out anonymous craftsman of all kinds throughout the country and encouraged their works. He also wrote prolifically and profoundly on all aspects of aesthetics, finding his inspiration in Japanese and Oriental folk-crafts, folk-cultures and religions especially Buddhism. His personal collection of folk-crafts is the nucleus of the Japan Folk-craft Museum-Collection. He died in Tokyo in 1961.

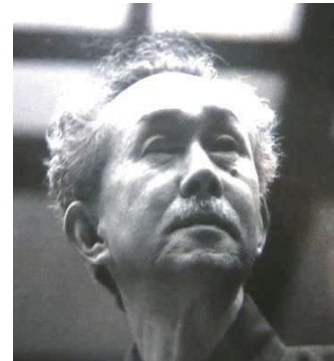


Fig.1: portrait of Soetsu Yanagi

### Designs without designers

A genre of the identical and very original Japanese folk crafts designs which I try to deal with might be able to be said "design without designers", just like Bernard Rudofsky named a genre of certain very attractive and interesting architecture, "architecture without architects". This concept mostly fits to Yanagi's definition of "mingei" (Yanagis original words meaning folk-crafts for ordinary use made by unknown craftsman).

Generally speaking, observing the whole fields of crafts-designs, in contrast with “mingei”, we find another kind of crafts-designs which are typical world-famous “Japonesque”, authentic Japanese designs, refined and gorgeous, made by historically famous “meijin” great artists and craftsmen. Those works had been mainly for aristocrats, feudal lords and big temples. On the contrary, “mingei” have been characterized such as unknown, ordinary, vernacular, inexpensive, anonymous, and native,

## About Shin-Buddhism

At first, I write a brief history of Shin-Buddhism. Shin-Buddhism was established by Shinran in 12<sup>th</sup> century. Historically Japan was the most eastern final point to which Buddhism had reached from India via China and Korea. Another route of Buddhism was bound for the south-east Asia, the teachings of which force believers and especially monks to experience hard training and to abandon their daily usual lives.

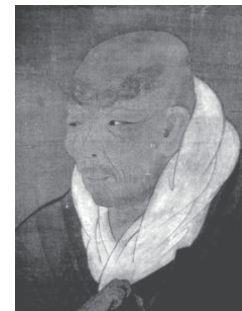


fig.2: Shinran

In contrast, the former Buddhism en route to the east is mainly for usual people. Its requests are very ordinary and easy so that people can be with it all through their daily lives. In China Buddhism was mainly elaborated and developed to Pure-Land Buddhism, the teaching of which is the basis for Shin-Buddhism by Shinran and his master Honen who studied Chinese Pure-Land Buddhism teachings.

Shin-Buddhism was so fit to Japanese ordinary people's minds and ways of lives that it spread quickly all over the country. Since then, Shin-Buddhism was rooted very deeply into Japanese people's ways of thinking, behaviors and lives. It was said that its believers were almost one third of national population until Meiji-era and even now it is the most powerful Buddhism sects with 10% of national populations (12 million believers and 80 thousand temples).

The main thing for Shin Buddhism-believers is just to chant a short phrase called “nenbutu”(namu-amidabutu) meaning one's whole trust, devotion and dependence to Amida Buddha (Amidanyorai), the main existence who are thought to support everything about one's birth to death in spiritual way. Amida's actions including encouragement and salvation were called “tariki” (another power which is very different from one's own) in contrast with “jiriki” (one's own intentional powers and endeavors).



Fig.3: Amida Buddha

Yanagi thought and theorized “tariki” as the main important factor to realize very attractive and beautiful crafts-designs we could find traditionally in our ordinary daily lives. Here I write about Yanagi's discoveries and analysis of Japanese one special aspect of the origin of design-creations through people's religious attitude and their ways of life. It was quite rare, I think, that to analyze real designed things through not objective factors such as technique, materials, functions, aesthetic standards and so on, but through spiritual factors especially religious minds and attitudes. In such sense, his writings are very unique and suggestive to study

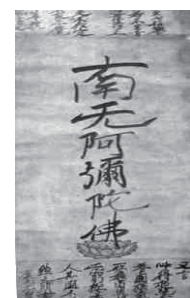


Fig.4:”nenbutsu”letters by Shinran

about the origins of creations of designs including architecture. Only John Ruskin who influenced and played the very important part for the beginning of that “arts and crafts movement” by William Morris in England has a kind of similarity in his insists for the Gothic Revival and appraised manufacturing by the pious middle age people.

## Quoting Buddhism-word to develop the theory

Yanagi was a philosopher and scholar of religious theories especially versed into mysticism ones written by William Blake. Through his study about mysticism, and combining it with rather Japanese Buddhism ideas, he claims very important three factors to analyze and theorize the phenomenon and object. First is making much of the anti-rational ways of perceiving reality. Second is the concept of intuition, direct insight (tyokkan, jikige) and implicitness (sokunyo). He came to define these concepts as crucial for knowing reality and for perceiving true beauty, as he considered that a glimpse of reality is grasped by all the artistic creators. In his “mingei” theory, he argues that absolute beauty is perceived by intuition and not intellect. Third is the concept of nothingness (mu), void (kuu) and unknown (mumei). In “mingei” theory, he creatively adopted these words such as unknown (mumei) and no-thought (mushin), non-duality (funi) and other power (tariki) to define his last ideal situation in which the true beauty exists in the realm where there is no distinction between the beautiful and the ugly.

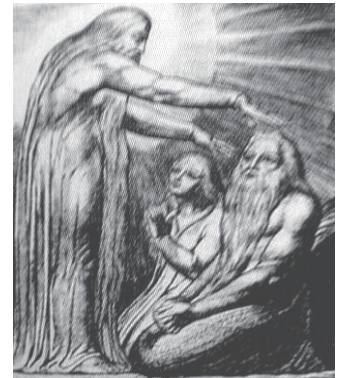


Fig.5: W.Blake’s drawing

## Open-eyes for Japanese folk-crafts “getemono”

In coincidence, he encountered a Korean white porcelain (hakuji) faceted jar presented by his friend. This encounter was absolutely decisive for him to open his eyes for attractiveness and interests in crafts-designs. In the development of the “mingei” movement, Yanagi’s involvement with Korea is extremely significant, because his interests in Korean crafts preceded his interest in Japanese folk- crafts and predated his creation of the criterion of beauty. He wrote.

[The shape of the jar tells you more than just the shape. Through the beauty of the jar, you can understand the mind of the people, the culture of the period, its natural background and the relationship between the people and beauty.] He found in it the Korean people’s sadness, beauty of sadness, which, he thought, is the original beauty of Korea.



Fig.6: Korean faceted jar

Then his interests were bound for quest what is the real original beauty of Japan, and after the quite considerations, he encountered with that common household-objects called “getemono” (means unskillfully handmade by local unknown craftsmen). Here I will show one typical example of “getemono”. It is a sansui-dobin, tea/soup pot with landscape patterns, from Mashiko-kiln, very old and traditional. About this sansui-dobin, Yanagi especially praised ones created by an illiterate and poor artisan called Mas Minagawa (1874-1960) who for more than sixty years had been decorating 500-1000 sansui dobbins a day with quick repetitive traditional patterns, as having extraordinary beauty. These pots are unsigned, inexpensive, ordinary kitchen-items without any intentional making of individuality.



Fig.7: sansui-dobin pot by M. Minagawa

Though such observations and researches, Yanagi summarized criterion of beauty as follows, beauty of handicraft, intimacy, function, health, naturalness, simplicity, tradition, irregularity, inexpensiveness, plurality, sincerity and honest toil, selflessness and anonymity.

He wrote. [Getemono clearly revealed the identity of our race with their beauty rising from nature and the blood of our homeland, not following foreign technique or imitating foreign countries. Probably these works show the most remarkable originality of Japan.]

By Yanagi and his companies and followers, getemono-crafts named “mingei”, which means “art of the people” now has become part of the Japanese language.

Bernard Leach who always supported and stimulated Yanagi’s studies wrote.

[Living beside a kiln deepened his interests and caused Yanagi to consider the issue of craftsmanship in our time, especially the transitions attendant upon the change from local folk-crafts to individual, or artist craftsmanship. Naturally the English movement under William Morris was the subject of many discussions, and I clear recollect how he questioned me about an equivalent term for peasant or folk art in Japanese. No word existed, and he finally composed the word “mingei”, which means “art of the people”.]

## **Buddhism and “mingei”**

Combining Japanese art and his own Buddhist ideas, Yanagi began to develop the ideas of preaching his Buddhist aesthetics. His objective was to clarify what interpretation of the world of beauty is possible from a Buddhist point of view and to explain the Buddhist basis on which the nature of beauty stands.

He wrote. [I was most attracted to the part concerned with the relation between zen and nenbutsu-prayer in Suzuki Daisetsu’s writings and I am looking forward to reading more intensively.]

He was sharply drawn to Buddhism, particularly to nenbutsu or Shin-Buddhism, the Pure-Land School and “myokonin” (wondrous good men) who are the most humble and purest Shin-Buddhism nenbutsu-believers being particularly rich in faith. He began calling mingei-myokonin (wondrous good objects) drawing an analogue with “myokonin” to describe objects in stead of people, as if to suggest that folk-crafts made by unknown craftsmen had true beauty and were the most pure and ethical of all objects.

## **Conclusion**

According to Yanagi, creativity is not recognized by most unknown craftsmen. It is rather, the divine power which he called “grace given by heaven”, expressed through craftsmen’s labor but not recognized by craftsmen themselves at the human level. Craftsmen are destined for labor-intensive repetitive work just like chanting “nenbutsu” again and again, and they unconsciously create beautiful things with the help of nature, tradition, and the divine power called “tariki” which works beyond the human level. Yanagi explains the power of unconscious creation by using such Buddhist ideas. Conscious artistic sense is a disease which prevents makers from creating supreme beauty. No-mindedness is the key factor that frees craftsmen from disease.

To attain this no-mindedness, Yanagi emphasized the power of discipline relying on nature and surroundings to the other power (“tariki”, the reliance on the grace of Buddha which is a



main idea of Shin-Buddhism Shinran preached) against the concept of “jiriki” (self power, attaining enlightenment through self-effort). [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-crafts is the kind that comes from dependence on the other power” tariki”.]

During the formation of mingei-theory, Buddhist terms, “jikige” which he adapted into modern terms, “chokkan” (direct-insight) and “sokunyo” (implicitness), were emphasized as undifferentiated ways of perceiving beauty, instead of differentiated ways of perceiving beauty by intellects and logics. In the later stage of his Buddhism aesthetics, his emphasis was on undifferentiated states of beauty itself. These he called “funi” (non-dual entirety) and “bishu-mibun” (un-differentiation of beauty and ugliness).



Fig.8: typical mingei old pot

All the above sentences are the main part of my paper. And finally, I write briefly extending this study for architecture

### Architecture and “mingei”

Yanagi’s studies and writings about mingei had a sort of influence to architecture. He wrote about Tea ceremony-aesthetic which established by tea-masters especially Sen-Rikyu in 16<sup>th</sup> century. The concept adopted into Tea-house architecture-design is natural, vernacular, unknown and humble which exactly fit to criterions for beauty of “mingei” proposed by Yanagi. Those kinds of tea-house-design originated in Korean peasants’ traditional houses. Japanese Tea-masters digested them and refined it by their own Japanese ways. And more original Japanese traditional naïve architecture might be Japanese peasants’ houses called “minka”(means peoples’ house), about which Yanagi almost did not write, also fit to his mingei-theory.



Fig.9: a minka in Tohoku

Studies about minka mainly had been done by folklorist such as Kunio Yanagida and were not analyzed through architectural or designing point of view. Only Wajirou Kon did it, but his studies were focused on just recording real documents and physical terms about them. He could not step forward to study about architectural and aesthetic meanings of them.

In 1974 American architect-historian Bernard Rudofsky’s “architectures without architects” was published. That book showed us beautiful, interesting and attractive architectures and landscapes all over the world. It was one of the important key to open architects’ and architectural researchers’ eyes to this kind of architectures, which eaded the new architectural study-theme such as design-survey-studies, conservation-studies, and also leaded the publishing of progressive and suggestive books such as Vincent Scully’s “The shingle style today”, Robert Venturi’s “Learning from Las Vegas” and that “white and grey” arguments at MOMA NY. They had quite impacts on contemporary architectural design-movements and developments.



Fig.10: San Jimignano

## Closing words

Yanagi's mingei-theory suggests us not only the true value of under-estimated and neglected folk-crafts designs, but also the importance of spiritual and religious factors, which lies behind actual, technical and intellectual way of designing.

From this point of view, considering of architectures today, significant, important and excellent works reflecting Yanagi's former suggestion might be Shosin Fujimori's, and reflecting his latter suggestion might be Louis Kahn's, Peter Zumthor's or Seichi Shirai's, which impressed and moved us not superficially but deeply.

In these days, such architectures are quite rare. So to quest true architecture, again we have to face more sincerely with a spiritual, philosophical and religious attitude toward its design like Soetsu Yanagi did toward folk-crafts and crafts-design.

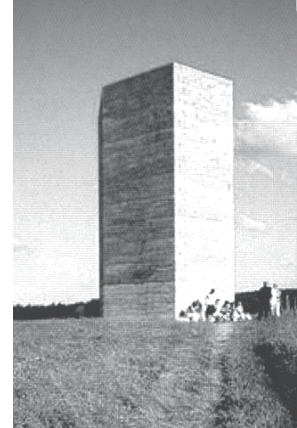


Fig11: Bruder Klaus Chapel by P. Zumthor

## References

- [1]kougei no michi. 工芸の道
- [2]tyousenjin wo omou. 朝鮮人を想う
- [3]kougei bunka. 工芸文化
- [4]myokonin. 妙好人
- [5]getemono no bi. 下手物の美
- [6]bi no houmon. 美の法門
- [7]Unknown Craftsman. 民芸の美:英訳版



Fig.12: Akino Huku Museum by S. Fujimori