Chapter 1

Aesthetics in Japan

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This chapter discusses aesthetic concepts often associated with Japanese design. First, a brief discussion about the concept of Japanese minimalism is presented, situating it within broader conversations about art and design in Japan. This discussion also underscores a relevant point about Japanese aesthetics: that, unlike previous Western discourses on aesthetics, Japanese aesthetic values are present not just in what might be considered "high art," but also in the everyday objects and practices that one regularly encounters – bowls, teacups, flowers, seasonal celebrations, and so on. In this sense, aesthetic life in Japan is not viewed as a luxury or as something confined to specific cultural contexts, but as a sensibility embedded within everyday experience. This discussion is followed by an overview of a handful of Japanese aesthetic terms relevant to discussions of Japanese design. For each of these key terms, a brief discussion of their origin is provided, along with examples of where the aesthetic emerges. While often associated with simplicity and restraint, these concepts also encompass more elaborate and expressive forms. As a whole, they show the diversity of approaches within Japanese aesthetics and their significance in both artistic contexts and everyday encounters.

1 Minimalism

Contemporary Japanese design, like many of Japan's great artistic traditions, is often described as minimalist. Although modernist design in several countries - particularly in Europe, including Sweden and Germany - adopted a minimalist approach from the mid-twentieth century onward, I have previously highlighted that Japanese minimalism is rooted in "underlying ideas from Japanese Zen Buddhism that drive a seemingly intuitive preference towards minimalist forms, a preference evident in traditional artifacts and also in contemporary art and design."[1]

Furthermore, while Japanese minimalism is often expressed in modernist or contemporary design, minimalist forms can be observed in Japanese artworks, craft, and architecture long before the modern and contemporary eras.

Although minimalism is an observable trend in much Japanese art and design, as we will see throughout this book, not all Japanese design can be simply characterized as minimalist. Numerous examples feature elaborate patterns and vivid colours, and some appear densely composed. Nevertheless, minimalism remains a recurring theme in contemporary Japanese design, evident in logos, household products, and architecture. A minimalist design invites us to engage with its form deeply. As Sōetsu Yanagi (1889-1961), the philosopher who founded the Japanese *Mingei* (folk crafts) movement, stated:

> Before we begin to express our thoughts, we first have to listen to what the object has to say. In our appreciation and awareness of beauty, we must first of all rein in our tongue.[2]

More recently, graphic designer Kenya Hara (Born 1958) claimed that in Japanese design aesthetics "simplicity is a concept to be understood in opposition to complexity, redundancy, and excess."[3] Many of the aesthetic concepts below further elaborate on this shying away from excess and complexity, though some concepts present an exception to this tendency.

Prior to exploring specific concepts, though, it is important to note the role that Japanese aesthetics play. As Saito points out, aesthetic values in Japan are not confined to the kind of works one might encounter in an art gallery but are essential to the objects we interact with in everyday life:

> While there are distinct art media in the Japanese aesthetic tradition, including those familiar to the West, such as painting, sculpture, literature, music, and theatre, as well as more unique ones like flower arrangement and tea ceremony, there is a prevailing aesthetic sensibility that permeates everyday objects and activities

[1] Paul Haimes. "On Japanese Minimalism." In: *Contemporary Aesthetics* 18 (2020). Accessed: 2026-04-28. URL: https://contempaesthetics.org/2020/09/24/on-japanese-minimalism/.

[2] Soetsu Yanagi. *The Beauty of Everyday Things*. Trans. by Michael Brase. Penguin UK, 2018, 282.

[3] Kenya Hara. *Designing Design*. Lars Müller Publishers, 2018, 42.

Figure 1: A ceramic teacup, referred to as *yunomi*. Traditional arts and crafts, as well as modern and contemporary design, exhibit minimalist qualities in Japan.

> such as cooking, packaging, and seasonal celebration. I regard those everyday objects and phenomena to embody Japanese aesthetic sensibility most eloquently, which in turn sharpens people's aesthetic sensibility and nurtures aesthetic appreciation of the mundane.[4]

This framing from Saito highlights that aspects of Japanese aesthetics are not just abstract ideals but sensibilities embedded in both material culture and everyday experience. A handful of these more prominent ideas – *ma*, *yūgen*, *wabi-sabi*, *mono no aware*, *shibusa*, and *iki* – are explored below. This is not to suggest that these are the only notable aesthetic concepts in Japan, but they are particularly useful in analyzing traits observable in modern and contemporary Japanese design.

2 Ma

The first of these is *Ma*, a concept often translated as "space," "gap," or "negative space." *Ma* is not simply emptiness but the interval that gives form and meaning to what surrounds it. I have suggested that it "implies an interval between elements in design, such as those in rock garden landscapes (karesansui)."[5] Isozaki captured this sensibility vividly:

> 'Perceive–Blankness,' 'Voice–Silence,' 'Void–Fill;' employing pairs of contrasting concepts, [he] tried to juxtapose the negative and the positive. This is not an obliteration of the negative by the positive; on the contrary, it not only admits the existence of the negative space, but it also 'fills into' the positive without turning the

[4] Yuriko Saito. *Everyday Aesthetics*. Oxford University Press, 2007, 3–4.

[5] Haimes, see n. 1.

negative into the positive.[6]

Figure 2: The zen rock garden (*karesansui*) at Ryōanji temple in Kyoto. Such landscapes are said to evoke the aesthetic quality of *ma*.

The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy expands on this by noting that *Ma* "is not so much an absence as a presence, the silence between sounds that makes rhythm possible."[7] Saito also underlines its everyday relevance: the spacing of paving stones in a garden path or the pauses in a conversation require active perception, reminding us that emptiness can be as structured and meaningful as presence.[8] This aesthetic sense is often expressed when describing artwork through the phrase *yohaku no bi*, meaning "the beauty of blank space", particularly in arts such as *sumi* ink painting and calligraphy.[9]

3 Yūgen

Yūgen is a central Japanese aesthetic ideal, particularly in *Nō* theatre, as articulated by the *Nō* actor and playwright Zeami (1363-1443). It refers to a profound, ineffable beauty – suggestive, mysterious, and deep, rather than overt or explicit. Zeami describes it through images such as

[6]Takahiko Iimura. *Between Two Worlds: Intermedia and Expanded Cinema*. Taka Iimura, 2002, 45.

[7]Michele Marra. "Japanese Aesthetics." In: *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Ed. by Edward N. Zalta. Fall 2020 Edition. 2020. URL: `https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2020/entries/japanese-aesthetics/`.

[8]Saito, *Everyday Aesthetics*, see n. 4.

[9]Tadanori Kasashima, Nobuyuki Kayano, and Arata Shimao. *Yohakuron: Shoga bi e no shotai [Invitation to Calligraphy & Painting: On Negative Space]*. Ed. by S. Kiryu and T. Shiomi. Gijutsugakusha, 2022.

"a lonely snowless peak among many snow-clad mountain tops" or "a silver bowl filled with snow."[10] This first example is a common theme in Japanese visual arts – *sumi* ink painting, especially (Figure 3). Shinkei offers examples like "the glimpse of the moon through clouds" or "a single white blossom amidst bamboo."[11] *Yūgen* values subtlety, implication, and depth of feeling, often conveyed through minimalism, mystery and understatement. In poetry, theatre, and the visual arts, it emphasizes suggestion over direct expression, evoking emotions beyond words.

Figure 3: A *sumi* ink painting depicting Mount Fuji. Such landscape artwork is said to evoke the aesthetic ideal of *yūgen*. Japanese ink painting also demonstrates ample use of white space.

4 Wabi-Sabi

Wabi-Sabi embraces incompleteness, impermanence, and rustic simplicity. It arose in the sixteenth century as a reaction against the ostentatiousness of Chinese-inspired art forms, and is an aesthetic closely associated with the tea ceremony, especially (Figure 4). As I have noted previously, it "is derived from Zen Buddhist thinking as a focus on simplicity and an acceptance of imperfection."[12]

It is worth considering the origins of this term, and the art forms that it has been applied to. As Saito notes, it is "derived both from sabishi (loneliness) and sabi (rust), sabi refers to the austere, stark, and rustic atmosphere conjured up primarily in haiku, but also in other liter-

[10]Saito, *Everyday Aesthetics*, see n. 4.

[11]Saito, *Everyday Aesthetics*, see n. 4.

[12]Haimes, see n. 1.

Figure 4: The tea-house of Takatora Tōdō, a high-ranking military commander from the early Edō period, first built around 350 years ago. The tea house is now situated within the grounds of Ueno Zoo in Tokyo.

ary expressions, the tea ceremony, and Nō theater. Because of its association with rust, it also refers to agedness."[13] In other words, *wabi* connotes austerity and rusticity, while *sabi* refers to weathering, solitude, and the patina of age.

Landscape imagery also appears in the definition of *wabi* given by tea masters. Takeno Jōō (1502-1555), for example, cites the following poem by Fujiwara no Teika (1162-1241) to illustrate *wabi* :

> Looking about / Neither flowers / Nor scarlet leaves, / A bayside reed hovel / In the autumn dusk.[14]

The aesthetic is perhaps best expressed by Kenkō in his *Tsurezuregusa* (Essays in Idleness): "Are we to look at cherry blossoms only in full bloom, at the moon only when it is cloudless? ... Branches about to blossom or gardens strewn with faded flowers are worthier of our admiration."[15] In embracing what is unfinished or in decline, *wabi-sabi* offers a counterpoint to contemporary ideals of perfection and consumer culture. Saito extends this observation to everyday life, showing how ordinary objects—a chipped teacup (*chawan*) or a weathered wooden fence—can embody the *wabi-sabi* ideal of imperfection.[16] This focus on impermanence and incompleteness resonates strongly with another Japanese aesthetic sensibility: *mono no aware*.

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[13]Yuriko Saito. "Japanese Aesthetics." In: *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*. Ed. by Michael Kelly. 2nd ed. Oxford University Press, 2014.

[14]Saito, *Everyday Aesthetics*, see n. 4.

[15]Yoshida Kenko. *Essays in Idleness: The Tsurezuregusa of Kenko*. Trans. by Donald Keene. Columbia University Press, 1967, 33.

[16]Saito, *Everyday Aesthetics*, see n. 4.

5 Mono no aware

Mono no aware is often translated as "the pathos of things" or "empathy toward things." It describes an emotional awareness of the fragility of life and the fleetingness of beauty. Davies and Ikeno contrast this with Western traditions, where beauty is treated as a more objective or logical category: "aware is a concept based on the feelings of Japanese people."[17]

The poignancy of *aware* lies precisely in its transience: "Though fragile, this kind of beauty creates a powerful experience for the observer, since it must be fully enjoyed in a specific period of time."[18]

Horst Hammitzsch has even suggested that "wabi-sabi is the end result of mono no aware."[19] Donald Richie describes the feeling as: "A 'sympathetic sadness' caused by contemplation of this world ... a gentle pleasure found in mundane pursuits soon to vanish, a content created in the knowledge that one is with the world and that leaving it is, after all, in the natural state of things."[20] Similarly, Makoto Ueda characterizes *mono no aware* as: "A deep, empathetic appreciation of the ephemeral beauty manifest in nature and human life, and therefore usually tinged with a hint of sadness, [though] under certain circumstances it can be accompanied by admiration, awe, or even joy."[21]

This sense of ephemeral beauty is often illustrated through the example of cherry blossoms, which are in full bloom for only a short period each year (Figure 5). The philosopher Motoori Norinaga (1730-1801) further explains that "to recognize their beauty and to be moved by feeling that they are deeply beautiful is to know mono no aware."[22] Impermanence was a notable feature of Japanese aesthetics highlighted in the writings of British author Lafcadio Hearn (1850-1904), known for introducing Japanese culture to the English-speaking world in the late nineteenth century, writing about its culture, folklore, and daily life:

> Generally speaking, we [in the West] construct for endurance, the Japanese for impermanency. Few things for common use are made in Japan with a view to durability. The straw sandals worn out and replaced at each stage of a journey, the robe consisting of a few simple widths loosely stitched together for wearing, and unstitched again for washing, the fresh chopsticks served to each new guest

[17] Roger J. Davies and Osamu Ikeno. *The Japanese Mind: Understanding Contemporary Japanese Culture*. Tuttle Publishing, 2011, 12.

[18] Davies and Ikeno, see n. 17, 15.

[19] Horst Hammitzsch. *Zen in the Art of the Tea Ceremony*. Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980, 54.

[20] Donald Richie. *A Tractate on Japanese Aesthetics*. Stone Bridge Press, 2005, 48.

[21] Makoto Ueda. *Literary and Art Theories in Japan*. University of Michigan Press, 1967, 45.

[22] Yuriko Saito. "The Japanese Appreciation of Nature." In: *British Journal of Aesthetics* 25.3 (1985), pp. 239–251.

Figure 5: The aesthetic concept of *mono no aware* is said to be illustrated through the cherry blossoms (*sakura*), which only bloom for a short period each year.

> at a hotel, the light shoji frames serving at once for windows and walls, and repapered twice a year; the mattings renewed every autumn, – all these are but random examples of countless small things in daily life that illustrate the national contentment with impermanency.[23]

Although closely related, *mono no aware* has not garnered the same level of attention in the West as *wabi-sabi*. Nevertheless, given their interconnection and emphasis on impermanence, discussion of one often entails reference to the other, and it is possible that interest in *mono no aware* will gradually increase outside Japan.

6 Shibusa

Shibusa, or *shibumi*, is an aesthetic of subdued elegance and quiet taste. It resists ostentation, favouring moderation and refinement. It is, as Yanagi notes, a timeless aesthetic that never bends to the latest trends and fads.[24] I have described it as follows: "A sense of subtle elegance is captured in the Japanese word shibui (adjective) or shibumi (noun), terms usually translated as elegant, austere, refined, and simple, but also bitter and astringent."[25]

The *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* classifies *shibusa* as "austere elegance,"[26] noting its kinship with *sabi's* "elegant simplicity." Whereas *mono no aware* evokes emotional intensity,

[23]Lafcadio Hearn. *Kokoro: Hints and Echoes of Japanese Inner Life*. English. Dover Publications, 2012, 8.

[24]Yanagi, see n. 2.

[25]Haimes, see n. 1.

[26]Marra, see n. 7.

shibusa cultivates a more restrained sensitivity – a refinement that appreciates quiet subtleties and deepens with time. This is an aesthetic that relates, partially, to wabi-sabi: "Shibumi may be an expression of the sabi part of wabi-sabi, which can imply a simple elegance but without the connotations of rust or antiquity that sabi can otherwise suggest."[27] Furthermore, though some might consider the aesthetic of shibusa to be of the past, I have argued that it also applies to the present, and therefore is relevant to contemporary design. Consider, for example, how Donald Richie described the aesethetic as being one of "the use of subdued colors, simple patterns, singers with unostentatious deliveries, actors who blended with the ensemble."[28] Might something like the products of Muji (Figure 6) also count as examples of shibusa?

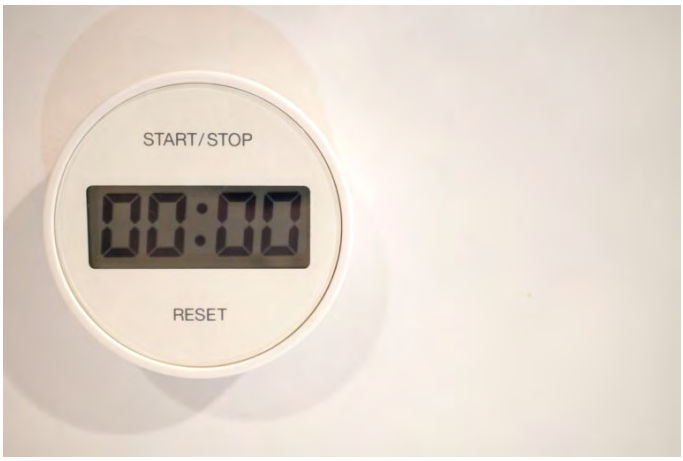

Figure 6: MUJI kitchen timer, designed by Hiroshi Seki and Yohei Kuwano. I have argued that such modern and contemporary design can exhibit qualities of *shibusa*.

7 Iki

While *shibusa* suggests restraint, *iki* is an aesthetic of chic stylishness, closely tied to the urban culture of Edō-period Japan. It was particularly associated with the merchant classes (*chōnin*) and with the pleasures of the city. The vibrant culture and flamboyance of pleasure quarters (*ukiyo*) during the Edō period, captured so poignantly, and most famously, in the woodblock prints of Hokusai (1760-1849), Utagawa Hiroshige (1797-1858), and Kitagawa Utamaro (1753-1806) (Figure 7), demonstrates that Japanese design has always encompassed both simplicity and flourishes, or both subtlety and style. It is easy to visualize this aesthetic in the colourful kimono styles that persist to this day, or even in the buzzing nightlife found in several districts of contemporary Tokyo or Osaka.

As I have explained regarding the relation between *shibusa* and *iki*: *Iki* is often used to

[27] Haimes, see n. 1.

[28] Richie, see n. 20, 40–1.

Figure 7: The painting *Three Beauties of the Present Day* (*Tōji San Bijin*) from Kitagawa Utamaro. Kitagawa was one of several woodblock artists who captured the vibrancy of the Edō period.

suggest something analogous to chic, stylish or elegant. While some objects may exhibit qualities of both *iki* and *shibumi*, the latter implies something more subtle and humble, and not necessarily fashionable or stylish.[29]

The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy identifies three core aspects of *iki*: composure (*ikiji*), coquetry (*bitai*), and resignation (*akirame*),[30] the latter of which suggests that its beauty may be, like that in mono no aware, only fleeting.

Saito describes how Shūzō Kuki (1888-1941), an art critic and philosopher who wrote the seminal 1930 work *The Structure of Iki*, "saw a typical manifestation of *iki* in the resolute and proud, but at the same time restrained and gentle, behaviour of the yūjo (literally: 'play-woman')."[31] This scenario suggests a worldly sensibility – stylish and playful, but perhaps shaded by an acceptance of impermanence. *Iki* therefore contrasts with the quiet dignity of *shibusa*, offering a more urban, fashionable – even colourful and playful, expression of taste. Here, we see that Japanese aesthetics are not reducible to a single formula of necessarily relying on minimalism or restraint.

[29]Haimes, see n. 1.

[30]Marra, see n. 7.

[31]Saito, *Everyday Aesthetics*, see n. 4.

8 Summary

The concepts introduced here show how Japanese aesthetics cultivate sensitivity to impermanence, subtlety, and restraint. Yet they also demonstrate a breadth that includes other qualities such as vibrancy, colour, and style. Furthermore, Japanese aesthetics are not confined to art objects or high culture but are embedded in daily practices, materials, and our perceptions of them. As Saito has argued, aesthetic life "is neither [a] dispensable luxury nor inconsequential triviality."[32] Many everyday experiences in Japan, such as appreciating the weathered surface of a teacup (chawan) or the fleeting charm of cherry blossoms (*sakura*), are imbued with aesthetic qualities that are often subtle, understated, and impermanent. On the other hand, the vibrancy of some kimono textiles, for example, shows us a different side of Japanese aesthetics. In either direction, we are reminded that such refinement of taste is not an occasional luxury but a persistent reality of everyday life, if we take the time to pause and appreciate it.

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[32] Saito, *Everyday Aesthetics*, see n. 4, 8.

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Chapter 2

The Mingei Movement

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This chapter explores *Mingei*, a term synonymous with Japanese folk crafts. *Mingei* refers to everyday utilitarian objects, including textiles, woodwork, lacquerware, porcelain, and pottery from Japan, Korea, and China. Established as both a movement and a theory in the mid-1920s by Sōetsu Yanagi, together with potters Shōji Hamada and Kanjirō Kawaī, *Mingei* emphasized the value of craft rooted in the accumulated knowledge of anonymous makers and the needs of ordinary life, rather than individual artistic expression. Yanagi critiqued modern art culture for privileging named artists and distancing them from real communities, as well as from the local materials and methods employed by traditional artisans. This chapter provides an overview of the historical context in which *Mingei* emerged, the criteria Yanagi identified in folk crafts, and the movement's ongoing influence on modern and contemporary design.

Figure 1: Sōetsu Yanagi, c. 1950 — the founder of the *Mingei* movement in Japan. Photographer unknown.

1 Mingei – Craft With Characteristics of the Masses

Mingei emerged as both a movement and a theory in the mid-1920s, initiated by Sōetsu Yanagi (Figure 1), and later joined by potters Shōji Hamada (1894-1978) and Kanjirō Kawaī (1890-1966) (Figure 2). The term encompasses "folk arts" such as textiles, woodwork, lacquerware, porcelain, and other pottery from Japan, Korea, and China produced since the sixteenth century, which Yanagi described as *zakki*, or "everyday things." Yanagi originally termed this concept *minshū-teki kōgei*, meaning "craft with characteristics of the masses," before abbreviating it to *Mingei*. When questioned about his interest in the folk arts of the people, Yanagi responded:

> almost no one has taken up the contributions of these humble craftsmen and given them their due valuation ... Art historians and collectors, on the contrary, have been biased in favour of individual artists ... The artist thereby has been kept locked up in his ivory tower of individualism and is out of touch with the people.[1]

Yanagi believed that the value of craft resided not in individual self-expression but in the collective wisdom of anonymous makers. He regarded folk crafts as forms underpinned by communal values, grounded in tradition and the practical needs of ordinary people, rather than the ambitions of individual artists. The following sections discuss the historical context of *Mingei's* formation, its conceptual foundations, the qualities Yanagi identified in *Mingei* works, and the movement's enduring influence on modern and contemporary Japanese design.

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[1] Soetsu Yanagi. *The Unknown Craftsman: A Japanese Insight into Beauty*. Trans. by Bernard Leach. Kodansha International, 1989, 204.

Figure 2: Pottery by Yanagi's associate Kanjiro Kawaī, c. 1920s.

2 Japan opens up

Mingei drew on both indigenous and imported ideas at a time when Japan was rapidly opening up to the world, and the world, especially Europe and North America, was simultaneously becoming curious about Japan. Following Japan's isolationist Edō period (1600-1868AD), Japanese products and knowledge became popular throughout Europe and the Western world through emigration and cultural exchange during the Meiji (1868-1912AD), Taishō (1912-1926AD), and early Shōwa (1926-1989AD) periods. By the late nineteenth century, Japan's influence was so strong that even renowned European artists like Vincent Van Gogh (1853-1890) drew inspiration from Japanese artists.

At the same time, Japanese scholars were turning to Western scholarship to provide a framework for their own ideas. For example, Japanese philosophers such as Kitarō Nishida (1870-1945) and D. T. Suzuki (1870-1966) turned to German thinkers such as Edmund Husserl to help establish their own philosophical underpinnings.[2] Though the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century was a time of rapid social and technological change in Japan, the cultural and aesthetic influence of Western countries caused great concern from some quarters within the country. For instance, the novelist Junichirō Tanizaki (1886-1965) lamented the effect that modernization had on Japanese culture and arts in his seminal 1933 extended essay *In Praise of Shadows*, fearing that Western machines would distort Japanese arts.[3]

Furthermore, as interest in Western design, arts, and crafts increased in Japan, Yanagi –

[2]Kitaro Nishida. *An Inquiry into the Good*. Trans. by Christopher Ives and Masao Abe. Yale University Press, 1990; D. T. Suzuki. *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism*. Grove/Atlantic, 2007, p. 144.

[3]Junichiro Tanizaki. *In Praise of Shadows*. Trans. by Thomas J. Harper and Edward G. Seidensticker. Vintage Classics, 2006.

Figure 3: Kawaï's house, built in Kyoto in 1937, now functions as a museum in his honour. The house is furnished with several *Mingei* objects.

though himself also keenly influenced by Western ideas – felt it essential to promote Japan's traditional arts and crafts, which he saw as on an equal footing with their Western counterparts. Writing in the late 1950s, Yanagi claimed that "it is about time Japan divested itself of Western hero worship and began returning some of what it has received."[4] He also tried to highlight what he saw as unique characteristics in Japanese folk crafts, as well as the aspects of Japanese thought which he believed drove their development – often drawing sharp contrasts between Japanese thought, which he saw as being heavily influenced by Buddhism, and European thought, especially, which he saw as deriving from both Christianity and ancient Greek philosophy.

3 Conceptual underpinnings of Mingei theory

Two interrelated strands underpin much of Yanagi's thought. First, he provides an appreciative account of the Buddhist culture that developed in Japan and the material artifacts it produced. Second, he critiques industrial capitalism, advocating for the value of handmade goods in contrast to mass-produced commodities, whose affordability often compromises quality.

Yanagi makes several references in his writings to Mahayana Buddhism (that is, the Buddhism that developed in India several centuries after the Buddha's death, spreading to China, Japan, Korea, and beyond) as being the root of the characteristics inherent in *Mingei* works,

[4]Soetsu Yanagi. *The Beauty of Everyday Things*. Trans. by Michael Brase. Penguin UK, 2018, 144.

and highlights them in the folk crafts of both Japan and Korea especially. Consider, for example, Yanagi's description of a Karatsu jar which had a crack repaired through the *kintsugi* ("gold joining") technique of repairing broken pottery with lacquer mixed with powdered gold:

> In Zen Buddhism there are such sayings as 'All is clear, openly revealed', and it is this notion that gives this jar vivid life, with the harmony of its plump, round shape and its dark-black fluent brushwork for the crests. However, the piece was not aiming at harmonious elegance. Here the dualism between the beautiful and the ugly was broken. Here the utmost in spontaneous beauty was achieved. This is a living example of the Diamond Sutra's exhortation to 'awaken the mind without fixing it anywhere.'[5]

Similarly, Yanagi contemplates the creation of a simple dinner plate, comparing the artisan's subconscious production to the faith of a lay Buddhist believer:

> It is nothing more than a simply made object of the type often looked down upon as common and coarse. It displays no overweening pride, no flashy effects. The artisan who made it gave little thought to what he was making or how it would come out. Just as a Buddhist devotee will continually repeat a religious chant as a means of achieving salvation, an artisan will repeatedly turn a potter's wheel and make identically shaped pieces ... without knowing all that there is to know, his hands continue working swiftly in the process of creation.[6]

Yanagi identified deep and profound beauty in the simple handmade processes of everyday artisans, which resulted in works characterized by asymmetrical shapes and other imperfections. Although Yanagi claimed to have developed his *Mingei* theory independently while examining the characteristics of folk crafts from Japan and neighbouring regions, it is probable that he drew significant inspiration from the British Arts and Crafts movement of the late nineteenth century, particularly from the ideas of William Morris (1834-1896) and John Ruskin (1819-1900). This movement advocated for handmade crafts produced within communal guilds during a period of rapid industrialization in the British Isles.[7] Yanagi was aware of Morris and his movement, which emerged in response to the decline in quality following the British Industrial Revolution. Leach notes discussing this movement with Yanagi, although Yanagi never explicitly acknowledged its influence on his own thinking about folk crafts.[8]

A strong connection existed between the two movements. Both Yanagi and Hamada maintained close relationships with the British potter Bernard Leach (1887-1979), who was deeply

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[5]Yanagi, *The Beauty of Everyday Things*, see n. 4, 62.

[6]Yanagi, *The Beauty of Everyday Things*, see n. 4, 29–30.

[7]Yuko Kikuchi. *Japanese Modernisation and Mingei Theory: Cultural Nationalism and Oriental Orientalism*. London: Routledge Curzon, 2004.

[8]Bernard Leach. *Beyond East and West: Memoirs, Portraits and Essays*. Faber & Faber, 2012.

Figure 4: Photograph of William Morris at the age of 53. Photograph by Frederick Hollyer in 1899.

involved in *Mingei* activities and invited Hamada to co-found a pottery studio in the United Kingdom. Leach, belonging to a younger generation than Morris and Ruskin, was a member of both William Morris's Arts and Crafts Society and the Red Rose Guild in Manchester, which he "regarded as the northern branch of Morris's counter-industrial movement."[9]

Morris (Figure 4) was known for strongly advocating that artisans creating handmade goods work in guilds, such as in his seminal 1894 work *Art and Labour*, where he noted that guilds were:

> At first of the nature of benefit societies ... [which eventually] developed [into] craft-guilds, or associations for the protection and regulation of handicrafts. All these guilds aimed at freeing the individual from the domination and protection of the feudal lord, and substituting for that domination the authority and mutual protection of the associated guild-brethren.[10]

Yanagi's views closely parallel those of Morris, as both perceived capitalism as detrimental to the aesthetics of objects. Both advocated for the guild system, in which artisans working with their hands rather than machines could preserve the integrity of their crafts:

> Now that capitalism has killed handcrafts, the only way is through the guild system. The finest crafts of the past were produced under it. Guilds and crafts were inseparable. Beautiful crafts were the outcome of the co-operation between craftsmen.[11]

[9] Leach, see n. 8, 164.

[10] William Morris. *Art and Labour*. 2006. URL: `https://www.marxists.org/archive/morris/works/1894/artlabour.htm`.

[11] Yanagi, *The Unknown Craftsman*, see n. 1, 208.

Furthermore, Yanagi, like Morris, advocated for handmade objects over the cheaper products resulting from industrial mass production:

> Industrialism has been of service to mankind, but at the cost of the heart, of warmth, friendliness, and beauty. By contrast, articles well made by hand, though expensive, can be enjoyed in homes for generations, and, this considered, they are not expensive after all.[12]

After Yanagi's death, Leach visited Japan and used the term "Arts and Crafts" to describe the movement established by Yanagi and his colleagues. It is evident that Yanagi was familiar with Morris and the British Arts and Crafts movement, and likely aimed to establish a comparable movement in Japan.

Nevertheless, *Mingei* served as a widely adopted conceptual framework for appreciating not only Japanese crafts but also those from neighbouring regions such as Korea and China. This expansion was not without controversy, particularly given its development during the period of Japanese occupation of the Korean peninsula.[13] Yanagi and his colleagues promoted Korean folk art and ceramics between the two world wars by organizing exhibitions in both Japan and Korea and visiting remote Korean villages to observe crafts firsthand. Despite criticisms directed at Yanagi during and after his lifetime, he maintained a sustained interest in Korean crafts, which he continued to praise until his death in 1961.

4 Qualities of Mingei works

What qualities distinguish a work as Mingei? Yanagi states that they are "those crafts that are deeply embedded in the life of ordinary people."[14] He further highlights two essential qualities: "One ... that they are things made for daily use. Second is that they are common, ordinary things."[15] When asked to describe the strengths of Mingei works, Yanagi stated:

> They are never made for other than use; they are inexpensive; they are made in quantity sufficient to serve masses of people daily. Their quantity production means repeated practise in their technique, thereby freeing them from ailments arising from artfulness. They are made without obsessive consciousness of beauty; thus we catch a glimpse of what is meant by "no-mindedness", whereby all things become simplified, natural, and without contrivance. These are the qualities that provide a permeance of strength throughout the social and aesthetic edifice.[16]

[12] Yanagi, *The Unknown Craftsman*, see n. 1, 107.

[13] Kikuchi, see n. 7.

[14] Yanagi, *The Beauty of Everyday Things*, see n. 4, 4.

[15] Yanagi, *The Beauty of Everyday Things*, see n. 4, 4.

[16] Yanagi, *The Unknown Craftsman*, see n. 1, 203.

Beyond these points, Yanagi's writings do not provide a strict checklist for what constitutes a *Mingei* work. However, it is valuable to examine how he elaborated on the aforementioned qualities in the works he admired.

Mingei theory is interested in folk crafts that arise from a community of artisans, working with traditional methods that have likely been passed down through several generations, using local materials. These qualities were among several that Yanagi highlighted when he emphasized the need for local regions to be dedicated to crafts:

> What is needed to revitalize folk craft is the strengthening of provincial distinctions, the support of family kilns, the effective use of handicraft traditions, and a solid foundation based on local materials. These are the factors that will produce good workmanship, for they are positioned on a secure, natural basis.[17]

Buddhist concepts underpin several Japanese aesthetic sensibilities. For example, Yanagi considers Japanese aesthetic concepts such as wabi-sabi to reflect an intuitive "awareness of the Zen Buddhist concept of muji,"[18] meaning "no ground." (This term is distinct from the company MUJI, which is known as *Mujirushi Ryōhin*, meaning "no-brand good products.") This sense of *muji* manifests in an aesthetic preference for objects that are "plain, solid-coloured, and un-patterned,"[19] which Yanagi regards as "the highest level sensibility."[20] He specifically identified Korean porcelain pottery as the most striking example of this aesthetic.

The term *getemono* (meaning "crudely-made thing": *gete* meaning unskilled, and *mono* meaning thing or object) is fundamental to understanding the appeal Yanagi found in folk crafts. Previously used in a disparaging sense to imply that something was poorly made and amateurish, Yanagi reappropriated the term as a positive quality in his perspective on folk crafts.

In his writings, Yanagi sometimes used the term *shibui* or *shibumi*, which he described as a simple, subtle beauty. He considered *shibui* to be an aesthetic sense "outside of time, a truth that is always new and fresh."[21] Through this aesthetic, Yanagi suggested that folk crafts have a timeless beauty that does not simply follow trends.

As noted above, utility is a key aspect of *Mingei* crafts, and one that Yanagi explicitly ties to the virtue of humility. He states that "Utility demands faithfulness in objects; it does not condone human self-indulgence."[22] Similarly, he argued that "crafts that aim at making a contribution to life should eschew individual ambition. It is far better to strive for the plain and

[17] Yanagi, *The Beauty of Everyday Things*, see n. 4, 15.

[18] Yanagi, *The Beauty of Everyday Things*, see n. 4, 159.

[19] Yanagi, *The Beauty of Everyday Things*, see n. 4, 159.

[20] Yanagi, *The Beauty of Everyday Things*, see n. 4, 159.

[21] Yanagi, *The Beauty of Everyday Things*, see n. 4, 156–7.

[22] Yanagi, *The Unknown Craftsman*, see n. 1, 143.

natural. This is more in keeping with the ideal of beauty."[23] Yanagi also considered utility integral to the humility of the artisan: "In creating an object intended for practical use, the maker does not push himself to the foreground."[24] These statements illustrate that, for Yanagi, the utility of an object is inseparable from a modest aesthetic grounded in simplicity and restraint – an aesthetic that arises from the humility of the artisan. After all, for Yanagi, the creators of folk crafts "are not famous artists but anonymous artisans."[25]

5 Mingei today

Today, craft practices in Japan are officially certified – carrying the *dentō* (traditional) mark – under the Traditional Industries Law, requiring that items meet several conditions:

- The item must be a craft product
- The craft product must serve a purpose in everyday life
- The main production process must be done by hand
- The production must be done using traditional techniques or methods
- Traditional raw materials must be the main source of materials for production
- Artisans conducting production or involved in that production must not be negligible in number in the given area.[26]

The emphasis on handmade, everyday objects crafted from local materials in regions with significant artisan communities clearly demonstrates the influence of Yanagi's thought across these criteria. The *Mingei* movement emerged during a period of rapid industrialization and modernization in Japan. Contemporary design discourse often distinguishes between design and craft, identifying industrialization as a key dividing line. However, Japanese design history reveals a deep interconnection between these domains. Contemporary Japanese design would not exist without the nation's rich craft tradition. Sōri Yanagi (1915-2011), son of Sōetsu, became a prominent product designer and managed the Japan Folk Crafts Museum in Tokyo (Figure 5). Currently, the renowned product designer Naoto Fukasawa (born 1956), known for his work with MUJI, Sharp, Samsung, and other companies, manages the Japan Folk Crafts Museum.

[23] Yanagi, *The Beauty of Everyday Things*, see n. 4, 16.

[24] Yanagi, *The Unknown Craftsman*, see n. 1, 143.

[25] Yanagi, *The Beauty of Everyday Things*, see n. 4, 4.

[26] Tohoku Bureau of Economy, Trade, and Industry. *Traditional Crafts of Japan: Tohoku*. Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry. URL: `https://www.tohoku.meti.go.jp/s_kokusai/craft_en.html` (visited on 05/07/2026).

Figure 5: The Japan Folk Crafts Museum, known in Japanese as the *Nihon Mingei-kan*, was established by Yanagi in 1936, in Meguro, Tokyo.

The minimalist ethos of *Mingei* artisans, many of whom preferred anonymity, also influenced the company MUJI, which typically does not disclose the identities of its product designers. Even the company's name clearly draws inspiration from the anonymity that Yanagi advocated. In recent years, interest in Mingei has increased both in Japan and internationally, as evidenced by the establishment of the *Mingei* museum in San Diego, California, and the permanent exhibition of *Mingei* items within the Japanese art section of the V&A Museum in London. Numerous permanent exhibition spaces throughout Japan, from the museum founded by Yanagi in Tokyo to Kumamoto in the southwest, also display *Mingei* works.

A notable paradox characterizes the contemporary legacy of *Mingei*: despite Yanagi's consistent emphasis on anonymity and communal production, current *Mingei* exhibitions often highlight the works of central figures such as Yanagi, Hamada, Kawaī, and Bernard Leach. While this focus is not attributable to Yanagi himself, it is nevertheless ironic that exhibitions dedicated to a philosophy of collective, anonymous craftsmanship frequently elevate the calligraphy of Yanagi and the pottery of Hamada, Kawaī, and Leach as exemplary representations of a movement intended to diminish individual authorship.

Tanizaki's concerns regarding Western influence in Japan remain relevant in the context of contemporary developments. Although Japan adopted Western modes of mass production, fashion, and especially the modernist design ethos of the early postwar period, such as Yūsaku Kamekura's design for the 1964 Olympics, a continuity with traditional craftsmanship persists. The aesthetic and philosophical sensibilities of pre-industrial artisans continue to inform the practices of many contemporary Japanese designers, illustrating an enduring influence of craft tradition on modern and contemporary design.

6 Summary

Emerging during a period of industrialization and cultural exchange, the *Mingei* movement sought to reaffirm the value of everyday craftsmanship grounded in local materials, Buddhist sensibilities, and collective traditions. Rather than representing a mere aesthetic preference for handmade objects, the movement embodies a philosophy that unites utility, humility in both object and artisan, and communal creativity imbued with tradition. Although Yanagi's ideas developed through engagement with both Japanese and Western thought, his emphasis on anonymity, simplicity, and functional beauty constituted a distinctly Japanese response to the excesses of early twentieth-century modernity. While clearly partially inspired by William Morris, Yanagi's perspectives reflect a thinker deeply immersed in Japanese traditions. The ongoing influence of *Mingei* on Japan's traditional industries, contemporary design practices, and the global appreciation of Japanese craft, underscores its enduring significance.

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Chapter 3

Pottery and Textiles

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This chapter offers an overview of pottery and textile design in Japan, emphasizing their historical development, regional diversity, and lasting cultural significance. Although both practices originated from everyday use, they embody sophisticated principles derived from local materials, techniques, and traditions. The chapter first examines pottery, tracing the emergence of regional kiln cultures and the development of distinctive styles throughout Japan, including the impact of international exchange in regions such as Kyushu. Subsequently, it addresses textile design, detailing the spread of cotton production and the evolution of key techniques such as *shibori*, *katazome*, and *yūzen*.

The subsequent discussion illustrates how both pottery and textiles exemplify the close relationship between craft and design in Japan. Despite industrialization and modernization, traditional methods, patterns, and materials continue to influence contemporary practice.

1 Pottery in Japan

Pottery traditions in several regions of Japan have developed over centuries, with the history of Japanese pottery extending back to the Jomon era (c. 14,000-300BC).

The major regions of traditional Japanese pottery emerged at different times, developing according to both local resources and cultural demands. Among these, the most enduring and historically significant are known as the Six Ancient Kilns (*Nihon rokkoyō*), which represent the foundations of Japan's ceramic tradition and continue to define regional identities today.

- ***Seto*** (Aichi Prefecture) – noted from the Kamakura period (1185-1333AD) for its pioneering use of glazes, giving rise to the generic term setomono for pottery.
- ***Tokoname*** (Aichi Prefecture) – one of the oldest and largest kilns in Japan, active since the Heian period (794-1185AD), famous for large jars and later red-clay teapots.
- ***Shigaraki*** (Shiga Prefecture) – producing rustic wares from the medieval period, much admired for their natural ash glazes and earthy tones.
- ***Tamba*** (Hyōgo Prefecture) – with roots going back to the late Heian, known for functional stonewares with subtle firing effects.
- ***Echizen*** (Fukui Prefecture) – flourishing by the Kamakura period, valued for unglazed jars with natural ash finishes.
- ***Bizen*** (Okayama Prefecture) – among the most ancient, dating to the late Heian period, and renowned for high-fired, unglazed stoneware relevant to tea culture.[1]

Although these six kilns represent the core of Japan's medieval pottery tradition, new centres emerged in Kyushu through international exchange at the beginning of the Edō period (1603-1868AD), particularly with Korea and China. These interactions gave rise to some of the most influential styles in Japanese ceramics.

2 Kyushu pottery

Hasami, in northern Nagasaki Prefecture, and nearby Arita, in Saga Prefecture, are among several towns in Kyushu renowned for Japanese porcelain. Despite their shared history, these towns developed distinct styles that persist today. Hasami ware is noted for its simple, modern designs, while Arita ware is characterized by elaborate blue glazing and Chinese-inspired motifs (Figure 1). The origins of these industries can be traced to the Imjin War (1592-1598AD),

[1] K. Mori, ed. *Rokukoyō o tazuneru: Seto · Tokoname · Echizen · Shigaraki · Tanba · Bizen*. Visiting the Six Ancient Kilns: Seto, Tokoname, Echizen, Shigaraki, Tanba, Bizen. Tokyo, Japan: Heibonsha, 2019.

Figure 1: Example of Arita ware (artist unknown), from Arita village, Saga. Despite being only 6km from Hasami, Arita ware has maintained much more detailed motifs compared to Hasami ware.

during which Japan invaded Korea and forcibly relocated tens of thousands of people, including many craftsmen and potters.[2] Despite significant challenges, these artisans established kilns throughout western Kyushu. A Korean potter, Ri Sam-Pei (Referred to as "Sanbee Kanagae" in Japanese), is credited with introducing Korean porcelain techniques to Arita and Hasami after discovering kaolin clay deposits at Mount Izumi (Figure 2). Although his historical existence is debated, monuments and shrines across Kyushu continue to honour him and other (unknown) Koreans as the founders of porcelain production in the region.[3]

Figure 2: A monument to the Korean potter Ri Sam-Pei in Arita. The inscription here at the Izumiyama Quarry reads "Porcelain mine discovered by Ri Sam-Pei."

Korean pottery, characterized by its stark, white, and minimal aesthetic in contrast to the more patterned and colourful Chinese forms, significantly influenced Kyushu's porcelain, par-

[2]S. Turnbull. *The Samurai Invasion of Korea 1592–98*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury USA, 2008.

[3]P. Haimes. "Museums, Memory, and the Korean Legacy in Japanese Porcelain Pottery." In: *Conflict and Empire in East Asia to 1945 in Heritage, Memory, and Museums*. Ritsumeikan University, Kyoto, 2025.

ticularly in present-day Hasami ware.[4] Sōetsu Yanagi of the Mingei movement regarded Korean ceramics as the highest expression of the *muji* (plain, unpatterned) aesthetic, a view shared by Kanjirō Kawaī, who travelled to Korea with Yanagi and Shōji Hamada in the 1930s.[5]

Yanagi attributed the tender, sorrowful qualities of Korean crafts to the peninsula's history of suffering, a theory he termed the "beauty of sorrow" (*hiai no bi*), which later informed the Korean concept of han. Although han theory remains controversial, it has gained some acceptance in Korea, and Yanagi's perspective continues to influence Japanese discourse on Korean crafts. Notably, Yanagi publicly condemned Japan's actions in Korea while promoting Korean crafts.[6] The impact of Korean pottery on Kawaī was so profound that he temporarily ceased production, resuming around 1949 after wartime disruptions, motivated by a renewed interest in exploring original ceramic expressions.[7]

The influence of Korean craftsmanship is particularly evident in Hasami ware, which features simple, modular forms that contrast with the ornate, Chinese-influenced Arita ware. The stylistic divergence between Hasami and Arita, despite their proximity, reflects their distinct target markets: Hasami potters adopted mass-production techniques to supply affordable goods for daily use, while Arita potters focused on Chinese-style ornamentation to fill a market gap during a decline in Chinese exports in the 1600s.

Figure 3: Today's Hasami ware continues the minimalist tradition, and a clear split in style between pottery from Hasami and Arita remains clear.

Both towns owe a considerable debt to the Korean artisans who were forcibly relocated to the region, a historical fact often minimized or omitted in western Kyushu's museums and publications, which frequently use euphemistic language such as "brought back" instead of "abducted." A more thorough acknowledgement of this history would more accurately reflect

[4]Haimes, see n. 3.

[5]Soetsu Yanagi. *The Beauty of Everyday Things*. Trans. by Michael Brase. Penguin UK, 2018.

[6]Yanagi, see n. 5.

[7]Haimes, see n. 3.

the profound impact of Korean potters on Kyushu pottery and Japanese design.[8]

3 Brief overview of other pottery regions

Other notable pottery centres in Kyushu include Arita (which, as previously noted, contrasts with Hasami ware through its elaborate, Chinese-inspired porcelain), Karatsu in Saga Prefecture (known for stoneware with simple glazes, once favoured for tea ceremony ware), and Satsuma in Kagoshima (recognized for earthenware with crackled glaze and ornate over-painting).

Figure 4: A vase created by Kanjirō Kawaī, on display at the museum housed at his former residence. The work shows clear influence from Korean pottery.

Beyond Kyushu, Mashiko in Tochigi became prominent as the home of Shōji Hamada and played a central role in the studio-pottery revival of the early postwar period. In Kyoto, the Higashiyama neighbourhood developed a vibrant pottery scene, largely due to Kanjirō Kawaī, whose house still features a public pottery kiln. Each region possesses a distinct history of materials, techniques, and influences, reflecting Japan's regional diversity. Figure 4 shows an example of Kawaī's work.

4 Kiln designs

Traditional Japanese kilns are wood-fired and constructed on slopes. Two primary designs are prevalent: *Anagama* (a tunnel-shaped kiln) and *Noborigama* (a multi-chambered climbing kiln), both introduced to Japan from China via the Korean peninsula. Bernard Leach, who collaborated closely with members of the *Mingei*movement, described Kanjiro Kawaī's *Noborigama*-style kiln as follows:

> The sloping yard at the back of the house belonged to Kawai, and upon it stood his steep 'climbing kiln.' The best part of the first two of the eight chambers he kept

[8] Haimes, see n. 3.

Figure 5: The kiln at the back of Kawaī's house in Kyoto, built in the *Noborigama* style.

> for his own work. The rest were hired out approximately by the cubic foot to a group of other local potters, each of whom had a locked wooden shed containing their own pots and saggars, for which a rental was paid according to the value of the anticipated resulting firing. This sharing of large kilns was an old custom of Kyoto potters.[9]

Kawaī's kiln remains in use in present-day Kyoto and is viewable at the *Kawai Kanjiro Memorial Museum*, located at the house he designed and formerly inhabited (Figure 5). Interest in Japanese pottery remains robust, partly due to the efforts of Yanagi and his associates. While the *Mingei* movement promoted all forms of Japanese folk craft, its association with pottery is especially notable. Two of the movement's three central figures, Hamada and Kawaī, along with their close associate Leach, were accomplished potters, which contributed to the movement's prominence in pottery.

5 Japanese textile design

Japan has a rich textile tradition, ranging from the distinctive indigenous aesthetics of the *Ainu* in Hokkaidō to the *Ryūkyū* motifs of Okinawa, influenced by neighbouring cultures. While regional traditions remained distinct, the widespread adoption of cotton served as a unifying force, transforming production and consumption across the archipelago. The introduction of a cotton species suited to Japan's climate during the Edō period brought significant social and economic changes and facilitated increased interregional trade.[10]

During the Edō and Meiji periods, rural populations increasingly engaged in textile production, which was often considered more profitable than crop cultivation, though its stabil-

[9] Bernard Leach. *Beyond East and West: Memoirs, Portraits and Essays*. Faber & Faber, 2012, 210.

[10] Thomas Murray and Virginia Soenksen. *Textiles of Japan: The Thomas Murray Collection*. Foreword by Anna Jackson. Munich: Prestel, 2019, p. 520. ISBN: 978-3-7913-8520-4.

ity was subject to weather conditions. This expansion of trade made cotton products accessible throughout Japan, including remote areas, and individuals across social classes, from merchants to samurai, wore cotton garments. Although textiles made from animal skins, including fish, exist in Japan, this discussion focuses primarily on cotton-based textiles.[11]

Figure 6: Example of a wall hanging, usually referred to as *kakejiku* or *kakemono* (simply meaning "hanging thing"), using the *shibori* technique. Created by Machiko Haimes.

Japanese textile design, similar to Japanese pottery, demonstrates the integration of craft and design, with traditional techniques such as *kasuri* (ikat), *shibori* (tie-dye), and *yūzen* (hand-painted silk) coexisting alongside contemporary reinterpretations. Motifs from kimono patterns, *kamon* (family crests), and regional weaving traditions continue to influence modern graphic and product design, underscoring their enduring impact. Yanagi articulated this principle in his observations on pattern:

> Pattern emerges when the excessive has been excised and only the essential remains. There is nothing superfluous; it is speech without words, concise and succinct. What has not yet been fully simplified is not yet a pattern. In that sense, patterns are not a form of decoration but an expression of non-adornment. Yet this simplicity must not be interpreted as rough-hewn elision. In Zen terms, it is 'an all-inclusive void.' It includes all and signifies all ... Pattern is movement within quietude, a state in which opposites are one. There is no pattern without quietude; there is no pattern without movement.[12]

The emphasis on simple, understated forms in Japanese patterns reflects a broader aesthetic continuity that connects traditional and modern practices. Patterns historically used in kimono

[11] Murray and Soenksen, see n. 10.

[12] Yanagi, see n. 5, 74–5.

design and other traditions are evident not only in contemporary kimono but — as we will see in subsequent chapters — also in motifs adopted by graphic designers and interactive designers.

Several principal techniques are employed in Japanese textiles. *Shibori* is an advanced tie-dye method in which cloth is bound, stitched, or folded before dyeing to produce intricate patterns (Figure 6). Each variation yields distinct effects; for example, *itajime* creates geometric shapes, while *kanoko shibori* results in small, dotted patterns.

Another technique, *katazome*, utilizes stencils and rice-paste resist to block areas of cloth from dye, enabling highly repeatable patterns that range from abstract motifs to representations of nature.

Figure 7: Example of a modern *yūkata*, similar to a kimono but much lighter, designed using the *yūzen* method.

A significant development in the seventeenth century was *yūzen*, a freehand painting technique that employs rice-paste resist (*nori-oke*) to delineate areas where dye should not penetrate. This method enables the creation of highly detailed motifs, often depicting seasonal flora, birds, or landscapes. Unlike *shibori* or *katazome*, *yūzen* is notably more pictorial and illustrative (Figure 7).

In objects such as *obi* (belts), it is common for threads to be dyed prior to weaving (Figure **??**). Two primary types of dyes are used: plant-based dyes (*shokubutsu senryō*), derived from natural sources such as indigo (*ai*), persimmon (*kaki*), safflower (*beni*), and madder (*shikon*), which produce subtle, layered colours that age gracefully (Figure 9); and synthetic dyes (*kagaku senryō*), introduced in the late nineteenth century, which allow for reproducible colours and significantly expand the range of possible hues.

Figure 8: Cotton being dyed with plant-based indigo dye at a weaver's shop in the Nishijin district of Kyoto.

Figure 9: Cotton being dried after being dyed with indigo and safflower dyes. At a weaver's shop in the Nishijin district of Kyoto.

6 Bashofu

Although the discussion here has focused on textiles made from cotton, there is one significant exception worth mentioning: the *bashofu* cloth of Okinawa, which Yanagi referred to as "One of Okinawa's most remarkable achievements."[13] This is a material created from the fibre of bananas.

As with other kimono designs in Japan, pattern plays a significant role. Yanagi describes the process of creating *bashofu* as follows:

> First the patterns to be used are decided. Then threads are prepared for dyeing by tying them with the skins of the banana plant and threads left over from the weaving. The patterns are those of old, each one of which has been assigned a distinctive name. Dyeing is done in indigo and brown. In olden days yellow and red

[13]Yanagi, see n. 5, 95.

Figure 10: Example of a *bashofu* kimono, from the Second Shō dynasty — the final dynasty of the Ryukyu Kingdom (1469-1879AD). From the collection of the Tokyo National Museum. Photographer unknown.[15]

> were also employed, but now it is only these two ... When the dyeing is finished, the thread is woven on a loom. The woven cloth is then completed by boiling it again.[16]

Yanagi claimed that although this fabric does not receive as much attention as those from the mainland, there were villages (in his lifetime) in the north of Okinawa's main island, Naha, where every woman knew how to make *bashofu*. Nevertheless, today the town of Kijoka on the island's north is the centre of contemporary *bashofu* production. Beyond kimono design, the fabric is now utilized for a number of other products, such as curtains and tablecloths.[17]

7 Summary

A joint examination of pottery and textile design is warranted, as both disciplines combine simple materials with sophisticated techniques to produce elegant forms and subtle patterns. This chapter traced the development of pottery traditions, including the Six Ancient Kilns and later centres in Kyushu, as well as textile techniques such as *shibori*, *katazome*, and *yūzen*. Throughout both crafts, traditional techniques, materials, and nature-inspired motifs continue to inform contemporary practice. The enduring interest in these traditions, both within Japan and abroad, is partly attributable to the *Mingei* movement. Together, pottery and textiles form a

[16] Yanagi, see n. 5, 98–9.

[17] M. Bartok. "Bashū Culture Weaves Its Spell in Kijoka." In: *The Japan Times* (June 2012). URL: https://www.japantimes.co.jp/life/2012/06/03/travel/bashfu-culture-weaves-its-spell-in-kijoka/.

foundation of Japanese craft and design and remain central to Japan's cultural identity, and its international appeal.

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Chapter 4

Ink Brushes, Seals, and Printmaking

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This chapter examines four ancient yet foundational art forms that have played a central role in the development of Japanese visual culture over several centuries. Each continues to exert a significant influence on contemporary Japan, serving both as sources of cultural export and as living traditions that permeate society, including contemporary design practice. While other visual arts have developed in Japan, such as *Nihonga* — a term for modern painting using traditional Japanese materials — and *yōga* (Western-style painting), the focus here is on ink-based practices that predate both movements.

The chapter first explores Japanese calligraphy (*shodō*) and the closely related art of sumi ink painting (*sumi-e* or *suibokuga*), analyzing their shared materials, techniques, and philosophical foundations. It then addresses the use of seals, such as *inkan* and *hanko*, as both practical tools of authentication and forms of artistic expression. Finally, the discussion turns to woodblock printing (*mokuhanga*), an art form central to Japan's global artistic identity and one that continues to attract significant interest both domestically and internationally.

1 Brush and Ink: Japanese calligraphy and sumi ink painting

Japanese calligraphy, referred to as *shodō*, has a long history, going back to the sixth century (Asuka period), when Chinese *kanji* characters were first introduced to Japan from China via Korea. Since Japan had already developed a spoken language ...

> these newly-arrived ideograms were given two different pronunciations: the original sound from its Chinese use, and the Japanese way of pronouncing that same vocabulary item's meaning.[1]

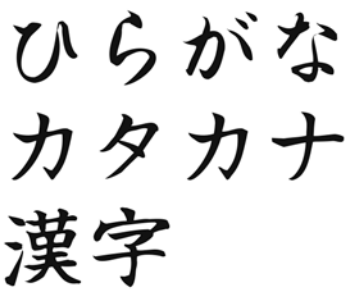

Figure 1: The three scripts of the written Japanese language, from top to bottom, *hiragana*, *katakana*, and *kanji*. Here, they are written left-to-right, but Japanese can also be written top-to-bottom or right-to-left.

Unlike the characters within alphabet-based writing systems, "a single ideogram of kanji is a 'word' carrying a specific meaning."[2] As will become evident in this and subsequent chapters, this ideogrammatic basis of the Japanese written language yields interesting forms of expression that are not easily achieved in alphabet-based languages.

Following the introduction of *kanji*, calligraphy was primarily used for official documents, the transcription of Buddhist sutras, and inscriptions. By the eighth century (Nara period), Japanese writing began to develop more distinct characteristics, diverging further from the Chinese language. In addition to *kanji*, *kana* – meaning both the *hiragana* and *katakana* writing systems – emerged, creating a more distinctly Japanese style of writing (Figure 1):

> Hiragana was developed from the sosho (cursive) style of writing, to become a graceful, flowing, semi-formal writing style known as the "grass" style ... Katakana,

[1] Shozo Sato. *Shodo: The Quiet Art of Japanese Zen Calligraphy: Learn the Wisdom of Zen Through Traditional Brush Painting*. Tuttle Publishing, 2014, 16.

[2] Sato, see n. 1, 16.

> in contrast, was developed from what is known as the kaisho [square] style, and reflected one simple portion copied from a kanji ideogram. Therefore the katakana symbols are more square in shape.[3]

Hiragana was regarded as a more graceful form of expression and was often referred to as the "women's style" of writing. In contrast, *katakana* was adopted by Buddhist priests and government officials and was thus considered the "male" style of writing, a distinction that is perhaps unique among writing systems.[4] Both *kana* systems were used to represent the syllabary of spoken Japanese.

Figure 2: A depiction of Fujiwara no Sukemasa by Yōsai Kikuchi (1788-1878AD). Fujiwara is among the three figures most crucial to the foundation of calligraphy in Japan.

The most significant figures in this early development of written Japanese were the three masters of calligraphy, referred to as *Sanseki* ("three brush traces"): Ono no Michikaze (894-966 AD), Fujiwara no Yukinari (972-1028AD), and Fujiwara no Sukemasa (944-998AD) (Figure 2). All were active during the Heian period (794-1185AD), and are credited with establishing a uniquely Japanese style of calligraphy. Each blended Chinese techniques with Japanese writing forms, helping to popularize the use of *kana* alongside *kanji*, and creating a more fluid, expressive script that influenced generations of Japanese calligraphers.[5]

In contemporary Japanese calligraphy, four principal styles of character scripts are commonly taught, though a fifth related to the design of carved seals is also worth mentioning here, given its importance to past and present typography in Japan. See Figure 4 as a visual reference for these styles:

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[3] Sato, see n. 1, 16.

[4] Sato, see n. 1.

[5] N. Nagayoshi. "Nihon shodō riron-shi josetsu: Sesonji-ke ni yoru shodō riron taikeika no kokoromi [An Introduction to the History of Japanese Calligraphic Theories: An Effort to Systematize the Calligraphic Theory by the Sesonji Family]." In: *Calligraphic Studies* 28 (2018), pp. 29–42. DOI: 10.11166/shogakushodoshi.2018.29.

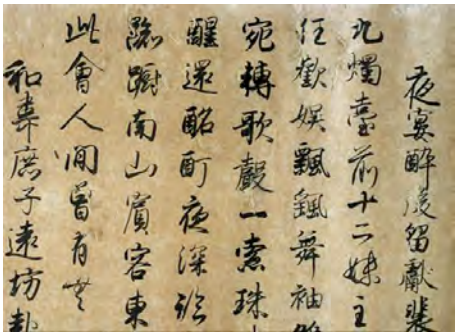

Figure 3: An excerpt from *Hakushi shikan* (An anthology of poems), written by the Chinese poet Bai Juyi (772-846AD), with text said to have been written by the calligrapher Fujiwara no Yukinari. From the collection at Tokyo National Museum.

- ***Reisho***: This script is often referred to as the "cleric's script." This was influenced by the *Tensho* style, created for seals a generation earlier.
- ***Kaisho***: A simplified version of *Reisho*, and considered the "correct" form of writing. It is considered the most legible script.
- ***Gyosho***: A slightly cursive style that is less formal than *Reisho* and *Kaisho*.
- ***Sosho***: This is a style analogous to cursive handwriting in Western languages. This is considered the least formal style of writing but is therefore highly artistic.
- ***Tensho***: A script style originally created through the carving of seals such as inkan and hanko, as discussed later in this chapter.[6]

Figure 4: Typefaces displaying the two characters for the word *shodō* (calligraphy) based on styles of Japanese scripts that have evolved over the centuries, from calligraphy and seal carving.

Although printing techniques such as *hanki-insatsu* (woodblock printing) have existed since the introduction of *kanji* to Japan, calligraphy has persisted into the contemporary era

[6]Sato, see n. 1.

as both a means of communication and an artistic pursuit. Calligraphy was not the only art form to develop in China and later in Japan that utilized brush and ink.

From the twelfth century (late Heian to Kamakura period) onward, Zen Buddhist monks exerted a strong influence on both calligraphy and ink painting, emphasizing simplicity, spontaneity, and expressive brushwork. Ink painting, known in Japan as *sumi-e* or *suibokuga*, began during the twelfth century, introduced from China by Japanese Buddhist monks who studied there.[7]

It was not until the fifteenth century (Muromachi period), though, that *sumi-e* developed into a more distinctively Japanese art form. In particular, Sesshū Tōyō (1420–1506AD) developed a distinctly Japanese style, emphasising simplicity, asymmetry, and Zen-inspired forms. Later, Jakuchū Itō (1716–1800AD), sometimes referred to simply as Jakuchū, further advanced the form in the Edō period, creating intricate, detailed compositions while working in the mostly monochrome tradition.

Figure 5: Jakuchū's eighteenth-century painting *Abunishokeizu* (Chickens with a Gadfly), on display at the Hosomi Museum, Kyoto.

Throughout these periods, *sumi-e* primarily employed ink of varying shades, predominantly monochrome, with minimal or no use of colour. Despite this limitation, the forms produced are highly expressive, and many artists continue to work in the sumi medium today, maintaining traditional techniques while occasionally incorporating modern influences.

In both *sumi-e* and calligraphy, the minimalism associated with the aesthetics described in Chapter 1 is evident. These art forms are highly expressive, and their appreciation "involves more than simply making judgments regarding the marks on paper, but also calls for an appreciation of the bodily movements that created the work."[8]

[7] K. Katori. *Kyokasho: Tanoshii suibokuga I – Kiso [Textbook: Fun Sumi-e Painting I – Fundamentals]*. International Sumi-e Association, 2012.

[8] David E. Cooper. "Japanese Aesthetics." In: *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Ed. by Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman. Winter 2022. Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2022. URL: `https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/japanese-aesthetics/`, sec. 7.

Negative space plays a crucial role in the overall composition of both art forms, reflecting the *ma* aesthetic. Consider this description of one of the most well-known landscape paintings of Sesshū, *Splashed Ink Landscape* (*haboku sansui-zu*):

> The mysterious grace of his most celebrated landscape painting derives as much from the space that is left un-touched, the invisible and absent ... as from what is painted and visible. The work appears incomplete, still in the act of formation, and the dramatic negative spaces created by the mists allow the various forms to dissolve and blend into one another ... this negativity invites the viewer into the painting to actively complete it.[9]

Although both media rely primarily on monochromatic, often simple and sometimes abstract compositions that leave much of the paper untouched, calligraphy and sumi ink painting have produced a wide variety of expressive works using the most economical means. Both art forms depend on four essential materials (Figure 6):

- Brushes
- Sumi ink, and water to dilute it with
- Japanese paper, referred to as *washi*
- *Hanko* and *inkan* seals as a form of signature – explained in further detail below.

Figure 6: Tools for creating *sumi-e* work: A water container, brushes, a *sumi* ink stick, an ink stone (*suzuri*) for grinding the *sumi* and mixing it with droplets of water (usually added with a dropper called a *suiteki* — not pictured), and a dish for mixing the ink with more water.

[9]Cooper, see n. 8, sec. 7.

Sumi ink is made from the soot of burned wood, oils, or pine resin, mixed with animal glue and formed into solid sticks. Common wood sources include pine, cherry, and maple, and the choice of material affects the ink's richness and tone. While black ink is most typical, sumi can also produce brown or bluish tones, offering subtle variations for expressive effects.

Artists grind the ink stick on an inkstone with a small amount of water to create liquid ink, allowing them to control the darkness, density, and texture. The brush, usually made of animal hair, responds to subtle changes in pressure, producing expressive lines.

Sumi-e techniques include layering washes of diluted ink to create atmospheric depth, employing dry brush strokes for texture, and varying the brush's pressure and speed to convey movement or emotion. Unlike many other forms of painting, such as watercolour, *sumi* artists typically paint foreground objects first and add the background later.

Figure 7: *Sumi-e* work depicting orchids. This is one of the four classic themes that Japan inherited from China, referred to as *shikunshi* (the "four gentlemen"). Work by Machiko Haimes.

Drawing from the traditional Chinese curriculum, common themes include the *shikunshi*, or "four gentlemen": bamboo, orchids, plum blossoms, and chrysanthemums.[10] Buddhist motifs, such as cloud dragons (*unryū*), are also prevalent (Figure 8), as are landscapes featuring mountains and water, referred to as *sansui*.[11]

Another common theme is characters from the *Chōjū-jinbutsu-giga* (often translated as "Scrolls of Frolicking Animals and Humans"), originally created by unknown monks, sometime in the twelfth or thirteenth centuries (Figure 9).

Throughout the history of *sumi-e*, artists have also frequently integrated calligraphy into their paintings, combining visual and textual expression in works known as *shigajiku* ("poem-

[10]K. Katori. *Kyokasho: Tanoshii suibokuga II – Shikunshi [Textbook: Fun Sumi-e Painting II – The Four Gentlemen]*. International Sumi-e Association, 2012.

[11]Kinsui Katori. *Kyokasho: Tanoshii suibokuga VI – Sansuiga 1 [Textbook: Fun Sumi-e Painting VI – Landscape Painting 1]*. International Sumi-e Association, 2015.

Figure 8: Cloud dragon (*unryū*) painted on the ceiling at Kenninji temple in Kyoto.

Figure 9: *Chōjū-jinbutsu-giga* (Scrolls of Frolicking Animals and Humans). Created by unknown monks in the twelfth or thirteenth centuries.

and-painting scrolls").

2 Hanko and Inkan: Marks of identity

Another significant import from the Chinese mainland to Japan around the seventh century was the use of carved seals for personal and official authentication. These seals were "objects specifically designed to serve as transmitters of impressed images."[12]

Originally used by government officials to validate documents, seals gradually spread to the aristocracy and later to the general population. Unlike, say, the design of coins for a commonly-

[12]M. C. Root. *The Art of Seals: Aesthetic and Social Dynamics of the Impressed Image from Antiquity to the Present*. Kelsey Museum Publications Series. Ann Arbor, MI: Kelsey Museum of Archaeology, University of Michigan, 1984. URL: https://lsa.umich.edu/content/dam/kelsey-assets/kelsey-publications/pdfs/The_Art_of_Seals.pdf, 7.

used currency, the design of seals is an endeavour that allows for a great deal of expression:

> An essential aspect of the production of a sealing is its intimate and even unique link with the individual or institution which uses it. This link is based partly on symbolic aspects of the seal design ... But it is also based on the importance of the individual act of applying the seal to produce an impression.[13]

Seals continue to play a significant role in contemporary Japan, serving as personal signatures for both official and informal purposes, even as the country gradually transitions to more digitized workplaces and governance.[14] Different types of seals are used according to the level of formality. For example:

1. A ***mitomein*** is used for everyday documents, such as parcel deliveries or office paperwork.

2. A ***ginkōin*** is designated for banking and financial matters.

3. The most important seal is the ***jitsuin***, which must be registered at the local city hall and is required for major legal or financial transactions, including purchasing property, obtaining a mortgage, or buying a car. Registration ensures that each seal is uniquely associated with its owner, thereby helping to prevent forgery or misuse.[15]

The red ink or paste used for seals, known as *shuniku* Figure 10), is typically made from a mixture of finely ground cinnabar (a mercury sulphide pigment), castor or rapeseed oil, and silk or plant fibres to produce a dense, slightly sticky consistency. This allows the impression to adhere cleanly to paper or parchment, leaving the distinctive vermilion-red mark that signifies authenticity.[16] The design of seals is also considered an artistic practice that continues to this day.

Characters are often engraved in *tensho* (seal script), as mentioned above, or other decorative styles that can range from highly formal to freely expressive, depending on the intention of the carver. Over time, this has developed into a distinctive art form, and it is not unusual to see exhibitions showcasing particularly expressive seals that reflect their creators' individual sense of style and expression. Finally, these seals are often used in Japanese artworks, including calligraphy and sumi paintings, serving as the artist's signature (e.g., Figure 7).

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[13] Root, see n. 12, 8.

[14] D. G. Prawiro et al. "Technology Adaptation in Japan's Work Culture: Usage of Electronic Signatures (E-Signatures) in Post-COVID-19 Japan." In: *Engineering Proceedings* 74.1 (2024), p. 66. DOI: 10.3390/engproc2024074066.

[15] L. Maurizi. *"Hanko" and "Inkan": Japanese Stamps and Personal Seals*. Nippon.com. 2016. URL: https://www.nippon.com/en/features/jg00077/.

[16] Sato, see n. 1.

Figure 10: An artist's *hanko* and *shuniku* red paste. The paste has a dense, sticky consistency.

3 Woodblock prints in the floating world

Few images from Japan are as globally recognizable as Katsushika Hokusai's (1760-1849) *The Great Wave off Kanagawa* (c. 1831), known as *Kanagawa-oki Nami Ura* in Japanese (Figure 11). This woodblock print, or *mokuhanga*, exemplifies a technique that became one of Japan's most celebrated art forms.

Woodblock printing is notable for two primary reasons: it was among the earliest Japanese art forms to gain international attention when Japan opened to the world in the late Edō and early Meiji periods, and it represented one of the first examples of mass production in Japanese art, enabling intricate, painterly images to reach a broad audience.

Figure 11: Hokusai's 1831 work *Kanagawa-oki Nami Ura* (*The Great Wave off Kanagawa*). This work is one of the most reproduced artworks in the world.

Despite a persistent rumour that such prints were once used merely as wrapping for ceram-

ics exported overseas, Davis points out that this story "has always seemed to me to be a myth. Yet it is so persistently and perennially invoked that I began to wonder: Where did it come from?"[17]

In reality, throughout the Edō period, *ukiyo-e* prints circulated widely in Japan, depicting the energy and colour of the so-called "floating world," *ukiyo*. This encompassed Edō's (present-day Tokyo) urban entertainment districts, including *geisha*, *kabuki* theatre, *sumō*, and various forms of both refined and popular, sometimes disreputable, amusement:

> Prints were exported and sold to European collectors as works of art long before the Impressionists came on the scene, and it is quite clear from period evidence that people in Japan saw these prints as 'art' centuries earlier.[18]

Ukiyo-e artists worked within a collaborative production system involving painters, carvers, printers, and publishers, yet the artistry remained deeply rooted in individual skill. As Davis observes:

> The skilful use of brush and ink to render an image was central to the ukiyo-e artist's task. These illustrator-designers were trained as painters. The brush was their primary tool, its practice the foundation for their art.[19]

Although prints were mechanically reproduced, each impression retains subtle differences in colour, registration, and pressure, revealing the hand of the maker.

Woodblock prints are created through an intricate process that has not differed significantly since the Edō period. Prior to printing, the artist's design is redrawn on thin *washi* paper, and pasted onto several wooden blocks – one for each of the individual colours used.[20] Next, non-printing areas are carefully carved away, leaving raised surfaces for inking. The process starts with cutting registration marks (*kento*) in the corners and along one side of the block. Accurate alignment is essential, especially for multi-colour works:

> The kento marks... allow for precise registration of subsequent colour impressions. Each colour requires a separate block, and the artist must carefully align the paper for every print.[21]

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[17] J. D. Davis. *Picturing the Floating World: Ukiyo-e in Context*. University of Hawai'i Press, 2021, 5.

[18] Davis, see n. 17, 6.

[19] Davis, see n. 17, 13.

[20] M. Bożyk. "The Technique of Traditional Japanese Woodblock Print as Interpreted by Contemporary Artists." In: *IN & AW Journal* 2.2 (2021), pp. 68–78. URL: `https://systeminawjournal.asp.krakow.pl/index.php/inaw/article/download/72/131/523`.

[21] Bożyk, see n. 20, 72.

The drawing is then affixed to the prepared surface with rice glue (*nori*) and cut along its outlines so that the raised areas will hold the colour. The block is then secured and aligned for precision in multi-colour printing, using a board with a special railing affixed, known as a *hanga sagyōdai*.[22]

Before printing, the pigments and brushes are prepared. As Bożyk describes, the pigments are blended with the *nori* glue and applied to the block using a *maru-bake*, a round brush designed to spread the colour — either evenly or by creating delicate tonal gradations known as *bokashi*. Printing is done by hand, using a circular pad called a *baren* to press the paper against the inked surface:

> When the paint has been applied, the moistened paper is placed on the wood and pressed with a baren – a special circular pad covered with bamboo sheath. The pressure and circular motion of the hand allow the paint to be transferred evenly.[23]

Finished prints are then dried and sometimes given a gloss coating.[24]

Figure 12: *Kameido Umeyashiki* (Plum Park in Kameido), created in 1857 by Hiroshige. This work was later reinterpreted by Vincent Van Gogh.

Though contemporary artists continue to work in the medium, Hokusai remains almost undoubtedly the most famous woodblock artist both within and outside Japan, and his name is synonymous with *ukiyo-e*. Yet, he was just one of many practitioners working in the medium.

[22]Bożyk, see n. 20.

[23]Bożyk, see n. 20, 72.

[24]Bożyk, see n. 20.

Katsushika Hokkei (1813-1818; a student of Hokusai) and Utagawa Hiroshige (1797-1858), for instance, produced refined images of everyday life and landscapes that rival Hokusai's in composition and atmosphere.

Indeed, Hiroshige would later influence Western painters – most famously Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890), who produced his own versions of Hiroshige's works, admiring their flattened perspective, strong lines and vibrant colours (Figure 12).

4 Summary

This chapter introduced four traditional art forms that continue to influence both Japanese and global visual culture. Beyond admiration for historical figures such as Hokusai, the development of calligraphy, *sumi* ink painting, seal culture, and woodblock printing shows a shared concern for simplicity, balance, and sensitivity to materials. Each uses the most limited means to achieve a wide range of expression, where restraint and empty space are as significant as the forms used. These practices form a visual tradition that still strongly influences how art and design are understood in Japan. As later chapters will show, these older ways of working persist, continuing to inform how Japanese designers think about form, rhythm and space today.

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Chapter 5

Graphic Design

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This chapter provides an overview of the history and defining characteristics of graphic design in Japan, tracing its development from the early Meiji era to the present. While Japanese graphic design incorporates international trends, traditional arts and crafts remain significant influences on contemporary practice. The chapter first clarifies the term "graphic design," then examines the rapid modernization of the Meiji era and the profound changes leading up to the Second World War. It also surveys developments from the postwar period to the present. Finally, the chapter highlights key characteristics, such as distinctive approaches to typography and innovative uses of colour and motifs, that reflect the enduring impact of Japanese arts and crafts traditions.

1 A Word about Graphic Design

Before proceeding, it is important to clarify the meaning of the term graphic design. The designation "graphic designer" originated in the early twentieth century, during a period when

Japan, alongside Western Europe and the United States, experienced rapid modernization following the nineteenth-century Industrial Revolution. Graphic design is fundamentally concerned with mass communication, specifically the creation of visual imagery through mass production. To illustrate the scope of graphic design by the early twenty-first century, design historian John Heskett described its pervasiveness as follows:

> Switch on the television, browse the Internet, walk down a street, read a magazine, or go into a store, and we are confronted with a huge array of signage, advertising, and social advocacy on a variety of scales. Some images will be permanent – a street sign, for example – but ... a much greater proportion of communications is ephemeral, such as newspapers and advertising materials.[1]

Regardless of size, scale, or duration, the primary responsibility of a graphic designer is often described as "making visuals and type play nice in space."[2] In essence, graphic designers construct visual compositions that integrate imagery and typography, guided by established design elements and principles. As with graphic design globally, Japanese graphic design exhibits similar foundational concerns of ...

> an insistence upon [characteristics such as] contrast, planned visual hierarchy, and typographic continuity ... In large part, this is due to intercultural exchange between Europe, Russia, the Americas, and Japan that has occurred since the Meiji Restoration of 1868.[3]

2 Early Modernization

Japanese graphic design is generally thought to have begun shortly after the Meiji Restoration of 1868. The Meiji era introduced Western printing and advertising methods, including new forms of graphic printing. This period also saw the influence of European art movements such as Art Nouveau (1890s-1910s) and Art Deco (1920s-1930s), as well as Western methods of product packaging and movable type.[4]

By the early twentieth century, commercial art — referred to as *shōgyō bijutsu* in Japanese — had become established.[5] Department stores, publications, and emerging brands played a significant role in shaping modern visual culture during this period (Figure 1).

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[1] John Heskett. *Design: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press, 2005, 55.

[2] Rebecca Hagen and Kim Golombisky. *White Space Is Not Your Enemy: A Beginner's Guide to Communicating Visually Through Graphic, Web & Multimedia Design*. 4th ed. CRC Press, 2024, 1.

[3] Ian Lynam. *Fracture: Japanese Graphic Design 1875–1975*. Set Margins, 2024, 31.

[4] Lynam, see n. 3.

[5] F. Fu. *Japanese Typography, Lettering, and Commercial Art in the Early Twentieth Century*. Conference presentation, ATypI. 2019. URL: https://atypi.org/presentation/japanese-typography-lettering-and-commercial-art-in-the-early-twentieth-century/.

Figure 1: The first issue of the magazine *Fujin Gahō* (Illustrated Women's Gazette), published in 1905. The work shows a clear influence of European art movements such as Art Nouveau.

A notable development was the decision by several Japanese designers and artists to study at the Bauhaus (1919-1933), a leading design school and movement that influenced design education worldwide, including in Japan.[6] After the Bauhaus closed under increasing Nazi pressure, these designers returned to a Japan marked by rising nationalism and imperial expansion, which ultimately led to conflict in the Asia-Pacific. During this era, many Japanese designers — including Iwao Yamawaki (1898-1987), Michiko Yamawaki (1910-2000), and Yusaku Kamekura (1915-1997) — were involved in producing state propaganda.[7] Japanese design at this time combined traditional motifs with the modernist aesthetic associated with the Bauhaus (Figure 2).

3 Postwar Modernism and the Rise of Corporate Identity

In the early postwar era, a new modernism was taking hold in Europe and America, which had a strong influence on Japanese design by the 1960s. A representative and noteworthy work from this era was Yūsaku Kamekura's design for the 1964 Tokyo Olympics, which had a distinctly international outlook and appeared to avoid any overt references to Japanese motifs, due to sensitivities over any strongly nationalist sentiment in the wake of the Second World War.[8]

[6] Paul Haimes. "On Japanese Minimalism." In: *Contemporary Aesthetics* 18 (2020). Accessed: 2026-04-28. URL: https://contempaesthetics.org/2020/09/24/on-japanese-minimalism/.

[7] Lynam, see n. 3.

[8] Toshino Iguchi. "Reconsideration of the World Design Conference 1960 in Tokyo and the World Industrial Design Conference 1973 in Kyoto: Transformation of Design Theory." In: *Proceedings of*

Figure 2: The first issue of Nippon magazine with a cover designed by Ayao Yamana (1897-1980), a periodical aimed at an international audience, published in 1934.

Kamekura's design integrated a Japanese sense of spatial balance with what was known as the International Typographic Style, characterized by clean, minimalist typefaces such as Helvetica (Figure 3).[11]

During the 1960s and 1970s, designers such as Ikko Tanaka (1930-2002) and Hiromu Hara (1935-2006) further developed a Japanese aesthetic that merged Western modernism with traditional Japanese visual motifs, influencing corporate identity, packaging, and poster design for companies like Mitsubishi, Nissin, and MUJI. By the late twentieth century, Japanese graphic design began to be recognized internationally, as seen in work produced by Tanaka and others for MUJI and other global-facing Japanese companies.[12]

4 From the Bubble Era to Contemporary Minimalism

During the 1980s and 1990s, as Japan's economic bubble deflated, the nation's visual culture became closely associated with bright neon colours. This aesthetic notably influenced the futuristic visuals of Ridley Scott's 1982 film Blade Runner, which depicted a dystopian Los An-

the 5th International Congress of International Association of Societies of Design Research (IASDR 2013). Tokyo: Chiba University, 2013. URL: `http://www.design-cu.jp/iasdr2013/papers/1183-1b.pdf`.

[11]Josef Müller-Brockmann and D. Q. Stephenson. *Grid Systems in Graphic Design: A Visual Communication Manual for Graphic Designers, Typographers, and Three-Dimensional Designers*. 19th ed. Niggli, 2022.

[12]Lynam, see n. 3; Kenya Hara. *Designing Design*. Baden, Switzerland: Lars Müller Publishers, 2007.

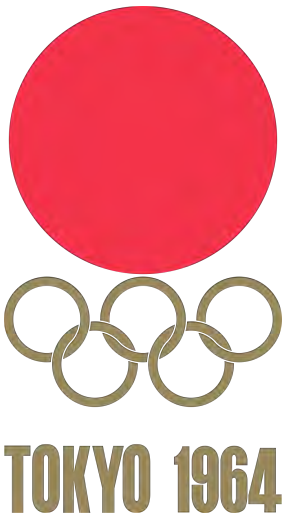

Figure 3: Yūsaku Kamekura's logo for the Tokyo 1964 Summer Olympics.[10] Kamekura insisted that the red circle represented the sun and not Japan's flag.

geles characterized by neon-lit, Japanese-inspired imagery.[13] The highly saturated visual style was often accompanied by dense informational content, a feature still observable in the busiest districts of Tokyo and Osaka (e.g., Figure 5), but also in the web and software interfaces of many Japanese companies.[14] Some analyses suggest that the popularity of cluttered and information-rich designs may reflect consumer preferences or the implicit and ambiguous nature of communication in Japanese society.[15]

By the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, however, Japanese design began to adopt a more subtle and introspective character.[16] As I have previously observed, "much contemporary Japanese graphic design has a tendency to use ample negative space and wide letter-spacing."[17] Thus, the prevalence of cluttered advertising and digital interfaces in the contemporary era may represent exceptions within the broader trajectory of Japanese visual culture.

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[13]David S. Roh, Betsy Huang, and Greta A. Niu, eds. *Techno-Orientalism: Imagining Asia in Speculative Fiction, History, and Media*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015.

[14]Paul Haimes. "Zen and the Art of Website Maintenance." In: *Interactions* 23.1 (2015), pp. 20–21. DOI: 10.1145/2847596.

[15]Haimes, "Zen and the Art of Website Maintenance," see n. 14.

[16]Lynam, see n. 3.

[17]Haimes, "On Japanese Minimalism," see n. 6.

Figure 4: By the 1990s, MUJI's branding, despite the company's name literally meaning "no brand," was internationally recognized.

Figure 5: The Shin-Ōkubo neighbourhood in Shinjuku, Tokyo.

5 Characteristics and Practices in Contemporary Japanese Graphic Design

Japanese graphic design – and logos especially – often draws on elements of traditional Japanese culture. This trend has continued despite the adoption of modernist – and later postmodernist – design principles from the United States and Europe from the early postwar period onwards.

For example, family crests (*kamon*) are sometimes adapted into logos. The tradition of kamon stretches back over a thousand years and remains an influence in contemporary visual identity design – for example, the Japanese passport features the Chrysanthemum Crest (*kiku-mon*) of the Japanese imperial family. Seal culture (*inkan*, *hanko*) has also played a role: these

Figure 6: The Japanese passport, which features the Chrysanthemum Crest (*kikumon*) of the Japanese imperial family.[19]

personal signature stamps were adopted in Japan from China around the seventh century, and their graphic form continues to influence mark-making in Japanese design (Figure 7).[20]

Figure 7: *Inkan* design by Chisato Sato, 2023.

[20]Lynam, see n. 3.

6 Typography and the Japanese Writing System

Japanese typography occupies a central place in the country's design identity. It's not unusual to see Japanese characters combined in interesting and novel ways. The structure of these characters lends itself well to being joined through strokes, creating logo marks in creative ways.

Figure 8: Example logo saying eel (*unagi* in Japanese) where the first character is elongated and made to look like an eel. This is a common logo motif for restaurants specializing in eel.

It is also common to see hybrid combinations of Japanese characters and Latin-based letters (*rōmaji*), especially in branding contexts. Such mixtures create fresh opportunities, but also design challenges around font pairing, hierarchy, and balance.[21] A classic example of typographic iconography is the word *unagi* (eel). The first character (*u*) is often stylised in restaurant logos to resemble an eel, turning the writing itself into a pictorial logo (Figure 8). That the Japanese writing system has its origins in logographic characters — meaning those where a single character represents an entire word or idea — means that the characters lend themselves well to the creation of logos.

Font categories familiar to Western designers – such as serif and sans serif – also exist in Japanese typography, but with particularly expressive ranges (Figure 9). Serifs may be very thick or very thin; sans serif fonts may range from rigid to fluid. Script fonts can mimic elegant calligraphy, messy handwriting, or even children's writing for a playful feel. Some typefaces used in formal contexts, such as the passport shown in Figure 6, use a *shōten* — a small type of *tensho* (seal script) — strongly influenced by the design of *inkan* and *hanko*.

Because Japanese designers often incorporate multiple scripts (*kanji*, *hiragana*, *katakana*) alongside *rōmaji* (for transliterating Japanese words into Latin-based characters), typographic decision-making is more complex than in many Western contexts. Despite this complexity, many Japanese designs achieve clarity, balance, and visual harmony. Kyoto-based designer Motoyasu Okumura explains his inspiration behind the design decisions made in the branding

[21] K. Ong. "Typography in Contemporary Japanese Branding." In: *Visual Culture Journal* 12.3 (2019), pp. 45–61.

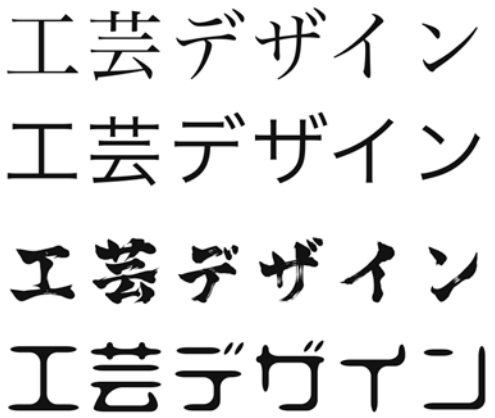

Figure 9: Four different typefaces spelling out the word *kōgei dezain* (craft design). From top to bottom, a serif script, a sans serif script, a brush script, and a *shōten* small seal script.

shown in Figure 10 (Original in Japanese, translated by the author):

> I wanted to incorporate a Japanese pattern, so I used ginkgo leaves as the background design, in keeping with the shop's name, which means "Ginkgo" in Japanese. The navy blue colour is inspired by the indigo of a kendo uniform, since the owner has experience in kendo. The layout (of both text and visual elements) was designed with both Japanese and modern elements in mind. The sign is made of rain-resistant tarpaulin and was designed with a *noren* (a traditional Japanese curtain) in mind.[22]

Beyond the tasteful use of both Japanese and Western typography, the design illustrates how contemporary branding can draw on traditional Japanese motifs, materials, and spatial concepts to create a strong sense of cultural identity, while still retaining a sense of newness.

7 Japanese colour theory

Another important aspect of Japanese graphic design is the approach to colour. Traditional Japanese aesthetics continue to exert a strong influence on how Japanese graphic designers use colour. There is generally a tendency toward restrained palettes, though this was sometimes ignored during the final decades of the twentieth century, reflecting the extravagances of the bubble-economy era. Otherwise, there is a strong preference for harmony and balance in colour combinations.

Seasonal associations are particularly prominent. For example, it is not unusual to see packaging and branding featuring cherry blossoms (*sakura*) in spring, or muted reds, oranges, and browns to symbolise the changing leaves of autumn.

[22]Motoyasu Okumura. Personal communication. 2026.

Figure 10: Branding and signage created for a yakiniku restaurant, by Motoyasu Okumura in 2020. The branding incorporates a script-style font, plus a *hanko*-style element, and latin-based characters.

A seminal contribution to colour theory in Japan came from Sanzo Wada (1883-1967), a painter and art educator. Wada created a work, referred to in English as *A Dictionary of Colour Combinations* (*Haishoku Sōkan*), which was first published in 1933.[23] This work was intended as a practical guide for designers and artists to work with harmonious colour combinations at a time when systematic approaches to colour were not fully developed in design theory.

Wada drew on colour combinations found in traditional Japanese crafts, including kimono fabrics, lacquerware, ceramics, and, importantly, nature – reflecting the cultural symbolism of seasonal changes in Japan. His system was considered a better representation of Japanese sensibilities regarding colour than the Western colour wheel and has remained highly influential in Japanese visual culture, providing ample references for Japanese artists and designers.[24] The examples shown in Figure 11 are just a few among hundreds that Wada created.

8 Summary

This chapter examined the historical development of graphic design in Japan, highlighting its close relationship with the nation's engagement with the Western world, the impact of the Second World War, and subsequent periods of reconstruction, economic growth, and stagnation. It also addressed the ways in which contemporary Japanese graphic design continues to draw

[23] Sanzo Wada. *A Dictionary of Color Combinations: Vol. 1*. Seigensha Art Publishing, 2018.

[24] Wada, *A Dictionary of Color Combinations: Vol. 1*, see n. 23; Sanzo Wada. *A Dictionary of Color Combinations: Vol. 2*. Seigensha Art Publishing, 2020.

Figure 11: Colour combination samples drawn from Wada, originally presented in sets of two, three, and four colours with CMYK values (converted here to hexadecimal). Examples include a two-colour pairing of blue (#0063b0) and seashell pink (#fdceb5); a three-colour combination of pale burnt lake (#752323), ochraceous salmon (#d2996f), and diamine green (#007d3b); and a four-colour grouping of warm grey (#97998f), red (#9d1f3c), calamine blue (#6dc6ca), and pale lemon yellow (#ffeca4).

from cultural traditions, the influence of the writing system and traditional practices on typography, and the distinct evolution of Japanese colour theory compared to Western approaches.

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Chapter 6

Environmental Design

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This chapter examines the evolution of Japanese architecture from early Buddhist temples and Shintō shrines to contemporary works by architects such as Tadao Ando and Kengo Kuma. It analyzes the influence of religious beliefs, environmental conditions, social structures, and foreign interactions on the built environment. It explains how principles such as flexibility, modular design, and harmony with nature consistently inform architectural practice. Additionally, the chapter explores the role of sound, emphasising how traditional elements in gardens, as well as more recent ambient music and other sounds, enhance the sensory experience of architectural space.

1 Early and Classical Periods

An exploration of Japanese architecture often begins with two foundational building types: Buddhist temples and Shintō shrines. The introduction of Buddhism from the Korean Peninsula began during the Asuka period (538-710 AD). Early temple complexes in Nara, such as

Figure 1: Hōryūji temple (founded 607 AD) in Nara is among the earliest examples of Buddhist-inspired architecture in Japan.

Hōryūji (founded in 607 AD), established an architectural vocabulary characterized by post-and-beam construction, modular planning, and extensive use of wood.[1] While these early structures drew heavily on Chinese and Korean influences, they were quickly adapted to local conditions. By 552 AD, three distinct shrine styles had emerged:

- *Taisha-zukuri*, exemplified by the main building (*honden*) at Izumo Taisha Shrine in Shimane Prefecture (Figure 2);
- *Shinmei-zukuri*, based on Nishina Shinmei Shrine in Nagano Prefecture; and,
- *Sumiyoshi-zukuri*, represented by Sumiyoshi Taisha Shrine in Osaka.[2]

These shrine styles have been reconstructed multiple times, and all remain observable today. Although generally considered to predate the introduction of Buddhism, their current forms reflect later reconstructions and preservation efforts, complicating efforts to distinguish indigenous from imported Buddhist elements. During the Asuka period, timber became the dominant building material, reflecting both an acceptance of impermanence and a practical

[1] Hideto Kishida. *Japanese Architecture*. Roche Press, 2008.

[2] Kishida, see n. 1.

Figure 2: People gather to celebrate the new year (*Hatsumōde*) at the main building of Izumo Taisha Shirne in Shimane.

emphasis on repair and rebuilding, likely influenced by frequent natural disasters such as typhoons and earthquakes. This approach contrasts sharply with Western architectural traditions, which often prioritize permanence.[3]

During the Nara (710-794 AD) and Heian (794-1185 AD) periods, architectural refinement paralleled the development of Japanese Buddhism and the imperial court culture, particularly in the capitals of Nara and later Kyoto. Court culture, which included literature, poetry, religious rituals, and aesthetics, emphasized refinement and restraint, resulting in architectural spaces that embodied these values. Interiors were typically softly lit, with space defined flexibly by sliding screens and structural intervals rather than solid walls, features that persist in traditional Japanese buildings.[4]

In the latter part of the Heian period, buildings such as Byōdō-in in Uji (Figure 3), south of Kyoto, exemplified a sensitivity to integrating architecture with the surrounding landscape. Verandas, gardens, and water features ensured that nature was an essential component of the architectural experience.

By the Kamakura period (1185-1333 AD), Zen Buddhism significantly influenced temple architecture, emphasizing simplicity and repetition. Decorative elements were minimized in favour of materials, spatial qualities, sound, texture, and shadow. In the Muromachi period (1336-1573 AD), these principles extended to domestic architecture. The development of *shoin-zukuri* (a form of residential architecture) introduced flexible interiors using tatami flooring and sliding partitions, enabling rooms to be organized according to function. Adapt-

[3]Lafcadio Hearn. *Kokoro: Hints and Echoes of Japanese Inner Life*. English. Dover Publications, 2012.

[4]Kishida, see n. 1.

Figure 3: Byōdō temple in Uji, Kyoto, first built in the Heian period.

ability, rather than fixed purpose, became a defining feature of Japanese architectural space.[5]

2 Edō period

During the Edō period (1603-1868 AD) under the Tokugawa shogunate, political stability, economic growth, and urbanization all drove architectural development. Buildings addressed practical needs such as defence and commerce, while also reflecting cultural ideals of aesthetic restraint and harmony with the natural environment. The era's strict social hierarchy, known as *shi-no-ko-sho*, divided society into samurai, farmers, artisans, and merchants, and this structure was visibly reinforced through the scale, layout, ornamentation, and access of castles, residences, townhouses, and urban planning.

Castles exemplified the combination of defensive and aesthetic considerations, featuring stone foundations, wooden structures, curved tiled roofs, and moats. Notable surviving examples include Edō Castle (now the Tokyo Imperial Palace), Osaka Castle, and Nijō Castle in Kyoto. Nijō Castle, which served as a Tokugawa residence and seat of power, is distinguished by interiors adorned with painted sliding doors (*fusuma*), ornate carvings, polished wooden floors, and formal reception halls that reflected samurai prestige.[6] Temples and shrines continued to evolve with varied designs, often using muted greys, bright red lacquer, or black finishes.

Simplicity, harmony with nature, and minimal decoration became characteristic features, particularly evident in structures throughout Kyoto and Nara, including the sub-temples of Myoshinji and Daitokuji. Urban architecture flourished. This saw the proliferation of town-

[5] Kishida, see n. 1.

[6] Kishida, see n. 1.

Figure 4: The *karesansui* (rock garden) of Zuihō-in temple at Daitokuji in Kyoto, designed by Mirei Shigemori.

houses (*machiya*) in districts across the country, including Osaka, Kyoto, Kanazawa, and the capital, Edō (modern-day Tokyo). These buildings were typically functional, with shops on the ground floor and living quarters above – a layout still observable in historic districts in cities such as Kyoto and Kanazawa today.[7]

Gardens were conceived as miniature representations of natural landscapes, underpinned by Zen aesthetics and incorporating elements such as ponds, bridges, rocks, and seasonal plants. These spaces carried spiritual and religious significance. For example, the garden at Ryōan-ji features fifteen stones, an auspicious number in Japanese culture, yet only fourteen are visible at any one time, symbolizing the impermanence of experience, incomplete perception through the use of negative space, and asymmetry.[8] At Zuihō-in, a monastery within Daitoku-ji in Kyoto, the rock garden includes stones arranged in the form of a cross, a design created by Mirei Shigemori (1896-1975) in 1961 to honour the temple's founder, Ōtomo Sōrin (1530-1587), a daimyo who converted to Christianity during a period of persecution (Figure 4). Although Shigemori did not explicitly acknowledge this symbolism, the arrangement recalls the practices of the *kakure kirishitan* ("hidden Christians") who concealed religious meanings within Japanese artefacts during two centuries of Christian persecution.[9]

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[7]Paul Haimes. "*Machizukuri* (Neighborhood Making): Collective World-Making in Traditional Japanese Neighborhoods." In: *Contemporary Aesthetics* 20 (Nov. 2022). URL: `https://contempaesthetics.org/2022/11/10/machizukuri-neighborhood-making-collective-world-making-in-traditional-japanese-neighborhoods/`.

[8]Gert J. Van Tonder and Michael J. Lyons. "Visual Perception in Japanese Rock Garden Design." In: *Axiomathes* 15 (2005), pp. 353–371.

[9]John Dougill. *In Search of Japan's Hidden Christians: A Story of Suppression, Secrecy and Survival*. Tokyo: Tuttle Publishing, 2012.

Figure 5: A replica *chashitsu* (tea-room) at Nezu Museum in Minamiaoyama, Tokyo.

Tea rooms flourished, particularly under the influence of Sen no Rikyū (1522-1591), who is credited with shaping the Japanese tea ceremony (*chanoyu*) into its present form, distinct from Chinese traditions, but with influence from both Japan's emerging domestic Zen aesthetics and — perhaps surprisingly — the Catholic eucharistic ritual, introduced to Japan during the latter years of Rikyū's life.[10] The architecture of tea rooms reflected the ceremony's emphasis on intimacy, simplicity, and ritual. Wabi-sabi aesthetics, which value rustic simplicity, imperfection, and the passage of time, were central to Rikyū's philosophy and design (Figure 5).

Rooms typically featured low entrances (*nijiriguchi*) to encourage humility, were small in size (often 4.5 tatami mats, or just over seven square meters), and included tokonoma alcoves for simple decorations such as scrolls, ink paintings, or flowers. Deliberately framed views connecting interior and exterior gardens became a recurring motif, not only in tea rooms but also in temples, shrines, and residential spaces.[11]

Wood continued as the primary construction material, providing flexibility and ease of repair, which was especially important in earthquake-prone regions. Roofs were frequently curved and tiled, and were sometimes adorned with mythical tiger-headed fish known as shachihoko.

Throughout the Edō period, castles, townhouses, temples, shrines, gardens, and tea rooms addressed various facets of daily life, political structures, and cultural and spiritual practices. Nevertheless, the stability characteristic of this era was soon to be disrupted.

3 Modernization and Western Influence

Following more than two centuries of limited international engagement, Japan confronted a rapidly industrializing global order characterized by advanced military and production tech-

[10] Dougill, see n. 9.

[11] Kishida, see n. 1.

Figure 6: Gokōmachi Church in Kyoto, designed by the office of William Vories. This is among hundreds of buildings in Japan designed by Vories and his associates.

nologies and expanding empires. The arrival of Commodore Matthew Perry and the United States Navy in the 1850s exposed the limitations of the Tokugawa shogunate's political and military systems. The Meiji Restoration of 1868 marked a pivotal turning point, after which architecture became a prominent expression of state-led modernization and a means to convey new concepts of progress and governance.[12]

By the late nineteenth century, Western architectural movements gained prominence in Japan, including the Gothic Revival (neo-Gothic) style promoted by John Ruskin and figures from the British Arts and Crafts movement. Several buildings in this style were built throughout Japan by the American architect William Vories (1880-1964) and his office (Figure 6).[13]

Neoclassical and Renaissance-style buildings also appeared. Brick construction became common, but widespread damage from the 1923 earthquake led to a shift toward reinforced concrete in urban areas. Art Nouveau and Art Deco styles influenced Japanese architecture, with the National Diet Building in Tokyo exemplifying the latter. Modernist architecture gradually emerged, influenced by the Bauhaus school and architects such as Kunio Maekawa (1905-1986) and Junzō Sakakura (1901-1969), who studied under Le Corbusier (1887-1965), noted

[12]Kishida, see n. 1.

[13]Omi Brotherhood Group. *Chronology of Vories, 1880–1964*. William Merrell Vories Library. Accessed May 12, 2026. URL: `http://vories.com/english/chronology/`.

Figure 7: The Edō Museum in Sumida, Tokyo opened in 1993 and was designed by Kiyonori Kikutake in the Metabolist style.

for his radical functionalism and frequent use of reinforced concrete.[14]

A significant figure in the late nineteenth century was British-French architect Josiah Conder (1852-1920), who was appointed by the Meiji government in 1877 as a professor of architecture at the Imperial College of Engineering (later part of the University of Tokyo). Among his students were Tōkuma Katayama (1854-1917) and Kingo Tatsuno (1854-1919), both of whom designed notable buildings in the Kanto and Kansai regions. Katayama's Kyoto National Museum (1895) exemplifies early Neo-Renaissance architecture in Japan, while Tatsuno's Tokyo Station (1914) survived the 1923 earthquake with minimal damage despite its brick construction.[15]

4 Postwar to modern and contemporary architecture

The aftermath of the Second World War left many Japanese cities devastated by bombing and fire, requiring rapid reconstruction with limited resources. Accelerated urbanization led to the construction of utilitarian buildings, with concrete becoming the dominant material. Western modernism, especially the influence of Le Corbusier and his use of concrete, played a significant role in shaping architectural practices during this period. By the 1950s, Kenzo Tange (1913-2005) emerged as a leading architect, most notably for his design of the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park (1955). His influence extended to the Metabolism movement of the 1960s, which was further advanced by architects such as Kisho Kurokawa (1934-2007) and Kiyonori Kikutake (1928-2011) (Figure 7).[16]

Although modernism exerted a strong influence throughout the second half of the twentieth century, a synthesis of modernist principles and traditional Japanese spatial design emerged

[14]John Zukowsky et al., eds. *Japan 2000: Architecture and Design for the Japanese Public*. Munich; New York: Prestel Verlag, 1998.

[15]Kishida, see n. 1.

[16]Zukowsky et al., see n. 14.

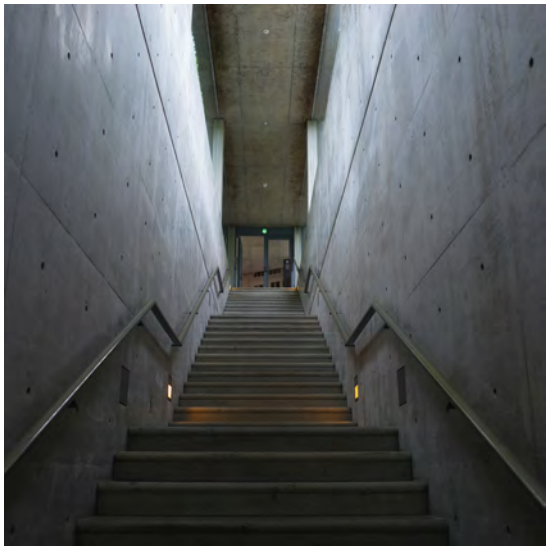

Figure 8: The new wing of the Oyamazaki Villa Museum of Art in Kyoto, designed by Tadao Andō in 1996.

in its final decades. This development is exemplified by the work of Tadao Andō (born 1941), whose use of smooth concrete, wood, and a focus on light reflects the influence of Zen aesthetics (Figure 8). Similarly, Kengo Kuma (born 1954) became a prominent architect by integrating natural materials and employing organic forms to achieve what he described as a "new form of wabi-sabi"[17] (Figure 9).

In the 1980s and 1990s, postmodern architecture also emerged in Japan, exemplified by the works of Arata Isozaki (1931-2022) and Toyō Itō (born 1941), which incorporated playfulness and eccentricity. By the 1990s, a shift toward minimalism became apparent, pioneered by Andō and further developed by Kuma and Itō.[18]

From the 2000s onward, architectural firms such as SANAA, led by Kazuyo Sejima and Ryue Nishizawa, advanced minimalism by, like Andō, emphasizing lightness, transparency, and nuanced spatial relationships, characterized by a continued blending of concrete, wood and other natural materials, and subtle references to traditional aesthetics. Although global influences remain, there is a pronounced emphasis on local traditions that reflect Japan's historical context. The integration of architecture within the community remains a central concern, characterized by the Japanese concept of *Machizukuri*, where neighbourhood development is a community effort.[19]

Cities such as Kyoto, which preserve neighbourhoods of cultural heritage, demonstrate

[17]Dana Buntrock. *Materials and Meaning in Contemporary Japanese Architecture: Tradition and Today*. Oxon, UK: Routledge, 2010.

[18]Zukowsky et al., see n. 14.

[19]Haimes, "*Machizukuri* (Neighborhood Making): Collective World-Making in Traditional Japanese Neighborhoods," see n. 7.

Figure 9: SunnyHills cake shop in Minami-Aoyama, Tokyo, designed by Kengo Kuma in 2013. The building's shape is inspired by a pineapple.

how contemporary architecture can be informed by the past: new designs need not replicate historical forms, but should maintain a sense of continuity with them.[20] On the other hand, Tokyo, in many parts, is a symbol of Japan's postwar boom – a modern city, but one that appears like it may have peaked in the last decades of the twentieth century. Despite a history of devastation from both the Second World War and natural disasters, a handful of neighbourhoods maintain Meiji, Taishō, and early Shōwa-era buildings and streets, such as Kagurazaka, Yanaka, and parts of Ueno. Areas such as these have become known for their retro aesthetic, complete with nostalgic streetlights, signage, and even through the decor of their traditional kissaten cafes and restaurants.[21]

5 Environmental sounds

Sound constitutes a significant yet often overlooked aspect of environmental experience. For centuries, Japanese architecture and its landscapes have been closely associated with the sounds that accompany them. Temples frequently feature large bells (*kane*) that resonate across the landscape, a phenomenon still common in cities such as Kyoto and Kamakura. Historically,

[20] Haimes, "*Machizukuri* (Neighborhood Making): Collective World-Making in Traditional Japanese Neighborhoods," see n. 7.

[21] All About Japan. *5 Retro Hangouts in Greater Tokyo*. All About Japan. Accessed May 12, 2026. 2018. URL: `https://allabout-japan.com/en/article/7087/`.

Figure 10: *Suikinkutsu* at Taizōin within the Zen monastery Myōshinji, Kyoto. These devices feature a cavernous pot submerged below the ground.

these bells have marked the passage of time, signalled the start of meditation, or indicated important religious events. For example, the *Joya no kane* (new year's bell) event on New Year's Eve involves ringing the bell 108 times to symbolize, in Buddhist tradition, the cleansing of the 108 earthly desires.

The interplay between sound and space appears in various distinctive forms. One noteworthy example is the *suikinkutsu*, a water-based acoustic installation sometimes found in temple gardens, from the Edō period to the present day. It consists of a ceramic pot with a small hole at the top buried underground, usually placed alongside a stone water basin, referred to as a *tsukubai*. Water slowly drips into the pot, where the sound echoes softly. A bamboo tube is sometimes placed near the opening, inviting visitors to listen, introducing an interactive auditory dimension to the garden.[22]

In recent decades, Japan's attention to sound has influenced the development of Japanese ambient music, often referred to as kankyō ongaku (environmental music). While ambient music is internationally associated with Brian Eno (born 1948), Japanese artists in the 1980s expanded the genre in unique ways. Inspired in part by Erik Satie's (1866-1925) concept of 'furniture music,' composers such as Hiroshi Yoshimura (1940-2003), Satoshi Ashikawa (1953-1983), and Midori Takada (born 1951) created works intended to integrate seamlessly into architectural spaces, including department stores, museums, and outdoor installations. These compositions were designed to blend with their surroundings rather than command attention, reflecting the Japanese emphasis on subtle, integrated sensory experiences.[23]

[22]Paul Haimes. "From Edo-Period Gardens to Kankyō Ongaku (Environmental Music): Appreciation of Environmental Sound in Japan." In: *Contemporary Aesthetics* 24 (2026).

[23]Haimes, "From Edo-Period Gardens to Kankyō Ongaku (Environmental Music): Appreciation of Environmental Sound in Japan," see n. 22.

Many of these works incorporated environmental recordings, as in Yoshimura's 1986 album *Green*, which blends soft electronic sounds with field recordings of natural elements. Other compositions were commissioned for exhibitions or designed to accompany visual installations. In all cases, sound is an integral component of the spatial experience rather than an isolated phenomenon, but one that sits in the background, rather than being overbearing.[24]

The integration of sound into everyday environments in Japan is also evident in practical applications. Urban spaces employ auditory cues such as spoken instructions on escalators and train platforms, vending machines that announce purchases, and devices that emit gentle chimes. These sounds facilitate navigation, establish predictable urban rhythms, and enhance accessibility for individuals with visual impairments, although the persistence of amplified noise in urban environments raises important questions about both political expression and individual rights to privacy.[25]

6 Summary

Japanese architecture has developed through a sustained emphasis on flexibility through frequent use of modular design and, in many cases, integration with the natural environment, with Japan's susceptibility to natural disasters having a significant impact on approaches to the built environment. Everything from early temples and shrines to tea rooms, gardens, and *machiya*, demonstrates how these forces have underpinned the design of spaces intended for religious practice, domestic life, and social and commercial interactions. While Western materials and architectural styles transformed the built environment from the Meiji period onward, many contemporary architects, such as Tadao Ando and Kengo Kuma, continue to reinterpret traditional principles in modern forms. Furthermore, the incorporation of auditory elements in gardens, and the more recent utilization of ambient music and other environmental sounds, demonstrate that Japanese architecture is a multisensory practice in which sound also significantly contributes to the spatial experience.

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[25]Daniel Dolan. "Cultural Noise: Amplified Sound, Freedom of Expression and Privacy Rights in Japan." In: *International Journal of Communication* 2 (2008), pp. 662–690; Kenji Kurakata and Ken Sagawa. "Development and Standardization of Accessible Design Technologies that Address the Needs of Senior Citizens." In: *Synthesiology – English Edition* 1.1 (2008), pp. 15–23.

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Chapter 7

Product Design

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This chapter traces the evolution of Japanese product design from the Meiji era through the postwar period and into the late twentieth century and beyond. It analyzes how industrialization, exposure to Western art and design movements, and shifting national priorities transformed both craft production and industrial design, while longstanding traditions continued to exert significant influence. The discussion begins with the gradual emergence of design as a distinct professional field, coinciding with the rise of mass production and urban consumer culture prior to the Second World War. The focus then shifts to the postwar era, when economic recovery, international exchange, and technological innovation enabled Japanese designers to redefine the relationships among industry, usability, and everyday life. Finally, the chapter examines how advancements in electronics, product platforms, robotics, interaction design, and materials science extended these concerns into new technological domains, highlighting persistent tensions between global influences and local values, as well as between innovation and tradition.

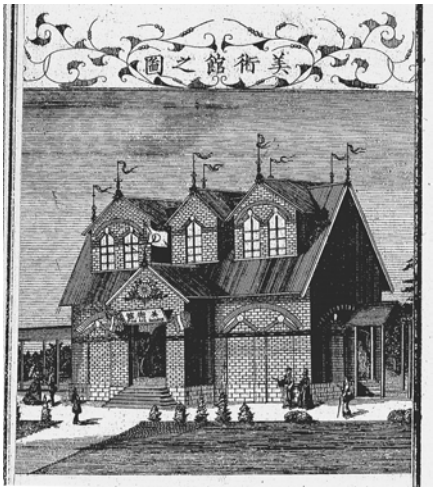

Figure 1: An engraving from an unknown artisan of a building from the First National Industrial Exhibition (*Naikoku Kangyō Hakurankai*), first held in 1877, Ueno, Tokyo.

1 Meiji era to World War Two

During the Meiji era, Japan underwent rapid modernization in politics, society, and technology, fundamentally altering domestic production methods. Industrial designers and craftspeople, like those in visual culture, adopted Western techniques and ideas, resulting in significant transformations in both industrial design and craft production. The government organized industrial exhibitions to showcase Japan's manufacturing sector to domestic and international audiences, which encouraged improvements in craft quality and supported the development of new decorative styles.[1]

Artisans in traditional disciplines such as ceramics, metalwork, and lacquerware faced the challenge of adapting their crafts to contemporary industrial mass-production techniques, paralleling developments during the Industrial Revolution in Britain and Europe. Some artists resisted mechanization, emphasizing handmade techniques, while others experimented with new methods and materials. The British Arts and Crafts movement, followed by Art Nouveau and Art Deco, exerted considerable influence in Japan around the turn of the twentieth century. During this period, Japanese artisans also gained international exposure through world fairs, including the *Naikoku Kangyō Hakurankai* (National Industrial Exhibitions), held in Tokyo, Kyoto, and Osaka (Figure 1).[2]

[1] Tōkyō Geijutsu Kurabu, ed. *Nihon no 20-seiki geijutsu [The 20th Century Art in Japan]*. Heibonsha, 2014.

[2] Tōkyō Geijutsu Kurabu, see n. 1.

Figure 2: The original Bauhaus building in Weimar, Germany, built 1904-1911. Bauhaus ideas had a strong influence on Japanese design and architecture. Photograph by Ralf Hermann.

2 A new discipline emerges

By the 1920s, industrial design in Japan was recognized as a distinct profession, paralleling developments in graphic design. This emergence coincided with the expansion of mass production and urban consumer culture. European movements such as the Bauhaus, which advocated for the integration of art and industry and a systematic approach to design, were particularly influential.

By the 1930s, Japanese craft and design – particularly metalwork and enamel – were facing significant industrial and artistic developments. They were influenced by two forces: on one hand, a growing market for Japanese exports, and on the other, the increasing use of industrial technology. Japanese enamel production featured new firing methods, enhancements to materials, and increasingly-complex decoration, leading to increased acclaim for Japanese enamelware internationally. It involved a mixture of both machine and handmade techniques, which created a new category of modern craft. Japanese enamelware in particular had strong recognition abroad, encouraging manufacturers to prioritize designs for Western tastes. At the same time, domestic craft associations were still attempting to preserve high artistic standards and maintain a uniquely Japanese identity within these modern crafts.

During the 1930s, functionalism gained prominence, emphasizing practical use, clarity, and efficiency in design. Bauhaus principles were widely adopted by industrial designers, graphic designers, and architects, although Michiko Yamawaki (1910-2000), a textile designer, was the only Japanese designer to have studied product design directly at the Bauhaus (Figure 2).[3] Urban modernity expanded, and mass-produced household objects and consumer products became increasingly popular.

With Japan's entry into the war, product design was subordinated to national mobilization

[3]Meg Miller. "From Weimar to Tokyo, We Trace the Origins and Influences of the "Japanese Bauhaus"." In: *AIGA Eye on Design* (Dec. 2019). URL: https://eyeondesign.aiga.org/from-weimar-to-tokyo-the-origins-and-influences-of-the-japanese-bauhaus/.

policies that prioritized efficiency and durability, requiring the use of scarce materials. Civilian products became more simple and standardized as factories shifted to military production. Designers and craftspeople operated under strict state controls, often experimenting with substitute materials such as wood and bamboo.[4] Opportunities for innovation were severely constrained, resulting in limited substantive progress in product design during the war years.

3 Early Postwar period

In the 1950s, industrial design in Japan gained momentum as the country rebuilt its manufacturing base following the Second World War. Initially, the emphasis was on producing inexpensive products, but attention soon shifted toward usability. Major companies increasingly focused on household items and electrical appliances.

The 1960s were a turning point for Japan, as the decade saw rapid economic growth that drove the expansion of the national economy, consumer culture, and social change. The 1960 World Design Conference in Tokyo was Japan's first major international design conference, where influential international designers – including Herbert Bayer (1900-1985) of the Bauhaus and Italian designer Bruno Munari (1907-1998) – gathered to discuss the social role of design beyond purely commercial concerns, alongside Japanese designers such as Yūsaku Kamekura (1915-1997), Kenji Ekuan (1929-2015), and Sōri Yanagi (1915-2011), the son of *Mingei* theorist Sōetsu Yanagi, as well as architects Kenzo Tange (1913-2005) and Kiyonori Kikutake (1928-2011).[5] The 1964 Tokyo Olympics further accelerated Japan's economic growth. Consumer society expanded rapidly, with cars, televisions, and other household appliances becoming widespread by the late 1960s. As Japan emerged as an economic superpower, companies faced increasing pressure to differentiate their products in order to compete within a growing mass-consumption market.[6]

Despite accelerating industrialization in the early postwar decades, the *Mingei* movement maintained significant influence. Sōetsu Yanagi's ideas remained influential after his death in 1961, offering an alternative to both the nationalism of the 1930s and the prevailing modernism of the mid-twentieth century.

Several designers attempted to reconcile mass production with principles from the *Mingei* movement. A notable example is Sōri Yanagi, who, like many prominent Japanese product designers, worked with various Japanese companies. Graphic designer Kenya Hara (born 1958) describes Sōri Yanagi's working process, which notably did not involve computing technology, even though such tools were widely available during Yanagi's later career:

[4] Tōkyō Geijutsu Kurabu, see n. 1.

[5] Tōkyō Geijutsu Kurabu, see n. 1.

[6] John Zukowsky et al., eds. *Japan 2000: Architecture and Design for the Japanese Public*. Munich; New York: Prestel Verlag, 1998.

Figure 3: Sōri Yanagi's butterfly stool, designed in 1954, is an iconic example of Postwar Japan's product design. The product is still sold today.

> I once visited Yanagi at his atelier, and found many plaster models of products on display. These full-scale plaster models, which he crafted without the use of computer simulation, carefully and repeatedly reshaping them by gently rubbing them by hand, reflected his determined pursuit of form adapted to utility; I felt great respect for that conscientious approach and unwavering conviction.[7]

This process demonstrates a clear influence from craft traditions and reflects the philosophy of Sōetsu Yanagi. Sōri Yanagi articulated ten principles of design:

- Creating a design is not about altering the surface appearance. It is about using originality and ingenuity to reform inner mechanisms.
- True beauty is born, not created.
- The concept of design is inspired by the action of designing.
- Design is not a solitary act.
- An entrepreneur more than anything else must possess a talent for products.
- Best sellers are not always the best in terms of design. The best designs do not always become best sellers.
- Talented designers are not solely responsible for good design.
- True design does battle with trends.
- Tradition inspires creation. Design is impossible without tradition and creativity.

[7]Kenya Hara. *Designing Japan: A Future Built on Aesthetics*. Trans. by M. K. Hohle and Y. Naito. Japan Publishing Industry Foundation for Culture, 2018, 36–7.

- Design is a social issue.[8]

It is difficult to imagine what this list from the younger Yanagi, whose *Butterfly stool* (Figure 3) is one of the most iconic works of modern Japanese product design, would look like without his father's philosophy and movement.

Following the oil shock of 1979, Japan shifted from resource-intensive industries toward lighter industries, distribution, and services. Technological advances enabled miniaturization and accommodated evolving consumer preferences. By the 1980s, these characteristics became hallmarks of Japanese design, alongside rapid developments in electronics, logistics, and information systems.[9]

Within this context, Japanese companies developed new approaches to product development. By the late 1970s, Japanese companies such as Sony and Kodak were at the forefront of creating product platforms. Design historian John Heskett explains:

> [Product] platforms group modules and components to serve a basic functional purpose, from which it becomes possible rapidly to develop and manufacture a variety of product configurations. This enables a basic idea to be modified rapidly in response to changing market or competitive conditions. A successful example was demonstrated by Sony after the initial favourable reception of its Walkman, launched in 1979, with the development of a basic functional module and an advanced features module. Each was the basis of warding off competition from followers, enabling a rapid succession of models to be launched to test a wide variety of applications and features at different levels of the market.[10]

The platform-based approach contributed to the emergence of several iconic Japanese products during this period. Sony's Walkman redefined music consumption by enabling private, portable listening, while companies such as Canon and Fujifilm developed compact and disposable cameras that emphasized portability and ease of use. In these examples, technological innovation was integrated with lifestyle appeal, positioning experiential qualities alongside functionality as central to the user experience. The widespread adoption of the product platform concept by major Japanese companies in the late 1970s and early 1980s has had a lasting impact on product development. As Heskett notes, these companies often

> have very large in-house groups, 400 designers being not unusual ... [many of whom are] designing minor variations of existing products in an effort to satisfy a broad range of tastes.[11]

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[8] Sōri Yanagi. *Design: Yanagi Sōri no sakuhin to kangae [Design: The Works and Philosophy of Yanagi Sōri]*. Yūhikaku, 1983.

[9] Zukowsky et al., see n. 6.

[10] John Heskett. *Design: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press, 2005, 109.

[11] Heskett, see n. 10, 47.

Figure 4: Naoto Fukasawa's CD player, designed in 1999 for MUJI.

Although Japan is no longer the economic powerhouse it was prior to the early 1990s, it continues to dominate specific fields, particularly camera development.

Alongside technological innovation and the expansion of consumer culture, designers also turned their attention to traditional craft. Designers such as Akioka Yoshio (1920-1997) integrated traditional materials and techniques into contemporary design contexts. Products such as tableware emphasized sustainability and the social conditions of their production, presenting craft not as a return to the past but as a viable alternative to mass-produced goods grounded in locality and promoting long-term use.[12]

During the 1980s, MUJI emerged as a counterpoint to the expanding consumer culture, while still operating within a retail capitalist framework. MUJI eschewed overt branding, and its products featured minimal ornamentation, emphasizing simplicity, restraint, and everyday usability (For example, see Figure 4). This approach resonated with consumers who were likely fatigued by the excesses of the bubble era.

The tensions between mass production and personal experience, global capitalism and regional identity, excess and restraint, and industrial efficiency and craft values were all brought into sharp relief during this period, and designers such as Akioka Yoshio and Sōri Yanagi demonstrated that at least some of these opposing forces could be productively balanced.

4 Robotics and Interaction Design

Though product design in Japan shifted direction in the 1980s in no small part due to technological advances, it is also worth considering Japan's sustained focus on robotics and related technologies – an area of technological development to which Japan has contributed for several decades.

[12]Zukowsky et al., see n. 6.

Figure 5: Softbank's Pepper robot, now manufactured by Aldebaran Robotics, is a service robot utilized in several customer-facing roles in Japan.

Since the 1960s, Japan has invested heavily in robotic design across a wide range of applications, including industrial robots, social robots, and more experimental humanoid robots. It is likely not a coincidence that the "uncanny valley" theory was proposed by a Japanese robotics researcher in the 1970s, Masahiro Mori (1927-2025), who perhaps foresaw that several researchers, both in Japan and internationally, would focus on attempting to make robots more human-like, an advancement that continues to evoke uncomfortable feelings in us human users.[13]

On the other hand, non-humanoid robots such as PARO, created at AIST (National Institute of Advanced Industrial Science and Technology) Japan, provided early examples of how social robots might have a significant role to play in healthcare – an area that Japan has a strong stake in, given both its rapidly ageing population and long-term labour shortages.[14] Non-humanoid robots are also being utilized in the services industry, such as in Figure 5.

Beyond robotics, Japan has made significant contributions to the field of interaction design. Naoto Fukasawa, who has worked with major companies such as MUJI, identifies as an interaction designer.[15] His approach challenges the assumption that interaction design must always incorporate the latest technologies, instead emphasizing human experience and every-

[13]Masahiro Mori. "The Uncanny Valley." In: *IEEE Robotics & Automation Magazine* 19.2 (2012). Trans. K. F. MacDorman and N. Kageki. Authorised English translation of the 1970 original, pp. 98–100.

[14]Takanori Shibata. "An Overview of Human Interactive Robots for Psychological Enrichment." In: *Proceedings of the IEEE* 92.11 (2004). National Institute of Advanced Industrial Science and Technology (AIST), pp. 1749–1758.

[15]Gary Hustwit. *Objectified*. Documentary film. 2009.

Figure 6: An early (2016) iteration of the IMSS project Interactive Modular Screen System by researchers at Tokyo Metropolitan University.

day behavior. Fukasawa's work seeks to provide what users require without their conscious awareness, an approach he describes as *muishiki*, or "without thought."[16] Numerous technologically advanced examples of innovative interaction design have emerged from Japan in recent decades. These include modular systems for built environments, such as the IMSS (*Interactive Modular Screen System*, Figures 6 and 7) project from Verl Adams and Tetsuaki Baba at Tokyo Metropolitan University, and Jun Rekimoto's Squama project from the University of Tokyo, both of which explore modular interactive systems as novel contributions to spatial design.[17]

Although these experimental prototypes have attracted attention within the design community, they have not yet been realized as commercially available products. Such approaches may be inspired by Japan's cultural tradition of *shōji* screens.

Another example of Japanese interaction design, and one more relevant to product design than spatial design, is Tetsuaki Baba's *Freqtric Drums* project.[18] This device, based on the human body's electrical conductivity, "turns audiences surrounding a performer into drums so

[16]Hustwit, see n. 15.

[17]Verl Adams et al. *IMSS Progress Exhibition*. Exhibition, System Design Gallery. 2019; Yuki Matsuoka et al. "Towards Combining the Beauty and Utility of Architectural Materials with Interactive Media Technologies: IMSS Project." In: *Proceedings of IPSJ Interaction 2016*. Mar. 2016, pp. 402–406. URL: https://www.interaction-ipsj.org/proceedings/2016/data/pdf/1C59.pdf; Jun Rekimoto. "Squama: Modular Visibility Control of Walls and Windows for Programmable Physical Architectures." In: *Proceedings of the International Working Conference on Advanced Visual Interfaces*. AVI '12. ACM, 2012. URL: https://lab.rekimoto.org/projects/squama/.

[18]Tetsuaki Baba, Taketoshi Ushiama, and Kiyoshi Tomimatsu. "Freqtric drums: a musical instrument that uses skin contact as an interface." In: (June 2007). DOI: 10.1145/1279740.1279827.

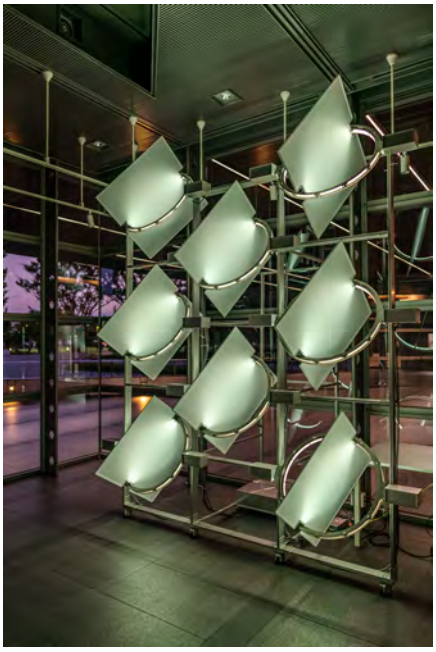

Figure 7: A later (2020) iteration of the IMSS project Interactive Modular Screen System by researchers at Tokyo Metropolitan University. Photograph by Verl Adams.

that the performer, as a drummer, can communicate with audience members as if they were a set of drums."[19] Unlike many interaction design prototypes, though, this one was made into a commercial product as a Doraemon toy, which was only available in Japan.[20] The prototype version is shown in Figure 8.

The art collective teamLab further advances interactive environments by employing techniques such as projection mapping, motion sensors, programmable LED (light-emitting diode) lights, and augmented reality to create immersive experiences that have expanded beyond Japan to other regions, including Asia, the Middle East, and Europe.[21] teamLab's exhibitions continue to draw on Japan's rich visual culture, referencing motifs such as the changing seasons, calligraphy, and traditional environmental design.

Beyond innovation in interactive technologies, advances in material sciences also suggest how products in the near future might develop. For example, although Japan's more traditional textile industry lost its dominance to Taiwan and Korea, and then they to India and China, Japan now leads the way in synthetic textile development. Kenya Hara explains:

> Synthetic fibres are more than a substitute for natural fibres. Maturing technology will reconcile the opposition between the artificial and the natural, and will move toward erasing the boundary between them. As technology continues to

[19]Baba, Ushiama, and Tomimatsu, see n. 18, 386.

[20]Tetsuaki Baba. Personal communication. 2014.

[21]teamLab. *teamLab*. `https://www.teamlab.art`. Accessed: 2024. 2024.

Figure 8: Tetsuaki Baba's *Freqtric Drums* project. The device creates music signals based on the human body's electrical conductivity.

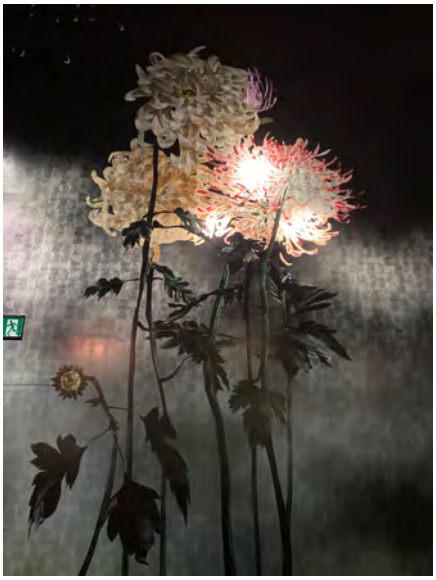

Figure 9: An interactive graphic from the permanent exhibition teamLab Biovortex in Kyoto. teamLab's work makes frequent references to traditional themes from Japanese arts and crafts.

> evolve, products with unique features that can't be evaluated on the same plane as natural fibres are being developed.[22]

Aside from more obvious applications such as the fashion industry, these fibres are used in a range of applications, from bulletproof and fireproof materials to fibre optics and electrical conduction. These developments point toward a future of Japanese product design in which advances in materials offer new creative and functional possibilities for everyday products, but also raise important questions about environmental impact and sustainability that designers will increasingly need to address.

5 Summary

This chapter has shown that the development of Japanese product design was, and continues to be, a continual negotiation between modernization and tradition. From the early challenges of adapting craft practices to industrial production, through postwar reconstruction and economic growth, designers consistently sought ways to balance functionality and cultural identity. The enduring influence of the *Mingei* movement, especially alongside the adoption of modernist and technological approaches, contributed to a design culture attentive not only to form and performance but also to social context and everyday experience. As later sections suggested, this sensitivity extended into emerging fields such as interaction design and robotics, where human behaviour, perception, and environment remain central concerns. Finally, advances in material sciences suggest new creative possibilities in product design, though not without ongoing concerns about environmental impact.

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[22] Hara, see n. 7, 135.

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