

Chapter 2

The Mingei Movement

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Published 2026, last updated 2026-05-19



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Please cite this work as

APA

Haimes, P. (2026). *Exploring Japanese Design*. <https://www.ritsumei.ac.jp/haimes/japanesedesign/>

Chicago (Notes & Bibliography)

Haimes, Paul. *Exploring Japanese Design*. Self-published, 2026. <https://www.ritsumei.ac.jp/haimes/japanesedesign/>

MLA

Haimes, Paul. *Exploring Japanese Design*. Self-published, 2026. <https://www.ritsumei.ac.jp/haimes/japanesedesign/>

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 Kawai, *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 Kawai (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.

¹Soetsu 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 Kawai, 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 Edo 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 –

²Kitarō 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.

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



Figure 3: Kawai'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,

⁴Soetsu 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

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

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

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

⁸Bernard 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 handicrafts, 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

⁹Leach, see n. 8, 164.

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

¹¹Yanagi, *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 permanence of strength throughout the social and aesthetic edifice.¹⁶

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

¹³Kikuchi, see n. 7.

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

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

¹⁶Yanagi, *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 *Mujirusbi 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

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

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

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

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

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

²²Yanagi, *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.

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

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

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

²⁶Tohoku Bureau of Economy, Trade, and Industry. *Traditional Crafts of Japan: Toboku*. 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, Kawai, 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, Kawai, 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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