



**MINGEI
/
ART
WITHOUT
HEROES**

Contents

FOREWORD <i>Living with Mingei</i> YOSHIZAWA TOMO	00	CHAPTER 7 <i>From Mingei to Modern: The growth of Japanese design</i> NAOMI POLLOCK	00
CHAPTER 1 <i>Introduction</i> RÓISÍN INGLESBY	00	CHAPTER 8 <i>Ceramics and the Craft Problem</i> AARON ANGELL	00
CHAPTER 2 <i>Morris, Mingei and Studio Crafts: The transformative idea of the art of the people</i> YUKO KIKUCHI	00	CHAPTER 9 <i>Making Everyday: Mingei in practice for a sustainable environment</i> ADAM SUTHERLAND	00
CHAPTER 3 <i>The Role of Joseon in the Early Mingei Movement</i> DASOM SUNG	00	PROFILES Fukasawa Naoto Hamada Tomoo Oikawa Waka Higeta Tadashi Hirano Kaori Akiko Hirai Nakagawa Shūji Oki Izumi Ōtsuchi Sashiko	00 00 00 00 00 00 00 00 00
CHAPTER 4 <i>Appropriate Charm and Fundamental Honesty: Textiles and the Mingei aesthetic</i> ANNA JACKSON	00	Glossary	00
CHAPTER 5 <i>Kokeshi: Kawaii Mingei and the consumption of Japanese popular culture</i> OKAZAKI MANAMI	00	Bibliography	00
CHAPTER 6 <i>Objects on Display: Mingei, museums and department stores</i> SAM THORNE	00	Contributors	00
		Acknowledgements	00
		Index	00





Morris, Mingei and Studio Craftsy

The transformative idea of the art of the people

As a term and an idea, Mingei (usually translated as ‘the art of the people’) is both a twentieth-century Japanese invention and a modern concept that has developed in multiple cultural centres worldwide. In the nineteenth century, William Morris shaped the English Arts and Crafts movement around the idea of the art of the people in theory and practice.¹ The concept was widely disseminated, including via the Mingei movement in Japan. However, its translation into regionally specific cultures, and the objects produced by makers who are part of those cultures, created something beyond what has conventionally been described as Morris’s ‘influence’, as the Mingei movement clearly shows. In the latter half of the twentieth century, we can identify a multi-directional evolution of the idea of the art of the people, while in the twenty-first century we can observe its revival alongside our contemporary interest in community.

Transnationality and the capacity to be transformative are key requirements for imagining and visualising our current goal for a sustainable world underpinned by diversity and inclusivity. Postcolonial thinkers question the concept of ‘culture’ in different ways and problematise it as neither reflecting lived reality, nor providing equal opportunities because of the retention of old power

relations and institutional systems. In order to make multiple ‘cultures’ visible, some useful ways of looking at them have been suggested. For example, Édouard Glissant proposes the idea of ‘creolisation’ as a token for understanding the whole world.² Jean Fisher argues for the term ‘syncretic turn’ as a normative state of culture in which there are continual ‘altering relations’ between the powerful and less powerful.³ This contrasts with Homi Bhabha and Néstor García Canclini’s ‘hybrid’,⁴ which Fisher regards as pointing to a binary power relation between original culture and that which it influences. Meanwhile, James Clifford, Edward Said, Paul Gilroy, Shu-mei Shih and many others have investigated the situation of diaspora and proposed theories of travelling, translation and transnationalism.⁵ The world they propose is imbued with commonalities but also has many differences between, ruptures with and resistance to specific, local values. This postcolonial condition of multiple cultures is also described as a ‘chaos-world’ and a ‘jungle’ in a complex, positive and creative sense, in order to reject the idea of totality implied by globalisation.⁶ It recognises unpredictable, under-represented new creations with elements of untranslatability. Informed by these postcolonial perspectives on cultures, this chapter



FIG 3 Utagawa Toyokuni, *Fireworks at Ryōgoku Bridge*, woodblock print on paper, Edo (Tokyo), 1820–5, Victoria and Albert Museum

clothing and textiles of the less affluent also reveal the popularity of *katazome*. Cotton fabric stencil-dyed with a motif of chrysanthemums and scrolling vines forms the basis of this sleeping coverlet (*yogi*; fig. 4). Shaped like an oversize kimono, it was originally stuffed with raw cotton and would have wrapped around the sleeper to provide extra warmth on a cold night. The *yogi* reveals how, for poorer members of society, every textile was a highly valued possession to be endlessly repaired, patched and

re-stitched with fragments of fabric, resulting in a layered, patchwork collage. This type of textile is known as *Boro*, meaning 'rags'.

The paste used with stencils was also employed freehand, a technique called *tsutsugaki*. In this method, a design is drawn on the cloth with rice paste squeezed from a paper tube (*tsutsu*). As with *katazome*, the paste forms a protective coating that prevents the colour penetrating when the cloth is dyed. While the use of



FIG 4 Sleeping coverlet (*yogi*), recycled and stitched cotton (*boro*), Japan, 1850–1900 | Credit: Karun Thakar Collection, London/ © Desmond Brambley

stencils allows for repeat production, *tsutsugaki* designs are unique and thus more expensive. As a result, this technique tended to be used on textiles made for special occasions such as festivals and other celebrations that marked important stages of life. Many are associated with weddings. Brides would be accompanied to their new home with a trousseau of gifts that would include many textiles, one of the most important being a richly decorated bedding cover, or *futonji* (fig. 5).⁸ Square or rectangular in shape, in contrast to *yogi*, *futonji* were particularly suited to bold, pictorial imagery. Marriage covers featured auspicious motifs designed to bring good fortune to the couple in their new life together. This example depicts the mythical *hōō* bird, symbolic of peace and prosperity and the female counterpart of the dragon. Its many feathers represent the virtues of truthfulness, propriety, righteousness, benevolence and sincerity. *Hōō* are generally depicted, as here, with a paulownia tree, which, according to legend, is the only plant on which the bird will alight. As well as indigo blue, this *futonji* features other dyes, which would have been obtained from common plants.⁹ These would



FIG 5 Bedding cover (*futonji*), cotton, freehand paste-resist dyeing (*tsutsugaki*), Japan, 1870–1910, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford

have been brushed on first, within the paste boundaries. These areas would have then been completely covered with paste before the fabric was dipped in the indigo vat. Once the desired blue shade of the feathers was attained, they would be covered with paste. More immersions would have created the blue leaves, which again would then be resisted with the paste, and the fabric dipped again and again until the dark blue of the ground was achieved. Celebratory *futonji* would be used on the wedding night, after which they would be carefully stored and used only on special occasions or for important guests. The survival of so many *tsutsugaki futonji* is due to their being treasured in this way.

As *tsutsugaki* was a freehand method of drawing on fabric, the range and style of designs was limited only by the talents of the dyer. Despite the individualism inherent in this process, the recurrent use of popular motifs places them within the Mingei canon, and they tend to be associated specifically with rural communities. Yet *tsutsugaki futonji* and other textiles were also a feature of city households, of the lives of rich merchants as well as farmers. *Tsutsugaki* is essentially the same technique as *yūzen*, named after the

Yanagi in 1927, which marked the beginning of a lifelong involvement with the Japanese Mingei movement. An encounter with *bingata* textiles in an exhibition the following year provided the inspirational spark that set Serizawa on the path of his future career and creativity. On this, his first actual trip to Okinawa, he was able to study *bingata* techniques in depth with the few workshops that had survived the loss of royal patronage. During his lifetime Serizawa created a great diversity of stencil-dyed textiles in a wide range of formats, including kimono, *noren* (doorway curtains), book illustrations and screens. In one way this appropriation of an Okinawan technique by a Japanese artist may be viewed as indicative of the submission of the islands not only to political but also to cultural control by the mainland. Yet as one of the most important and influential textile artists of the twentieth century Serizawa did much to ensure the continuing survival and appreciation of *bingata*. In this screen (fig. 10) he used the technique to create the most direct and powerful image of Okinawan identity possible, a map of the island itself. In vignettes around the map, Serizawa depicted various images of Okinawan life and cultural activity. One of these shows *bingata* fabrics, another the cloth being worn.

As an acclaimed Mingei artist-craftsman, with the contradiction this implies, Serizawa was able to transcend cultural and ideological complexities.¹⁸ In 1956 he was honoured as the Holder of an Important Intangible Cultural Property, popularly known as a Living National Treasure. This system had been introduced by the Japanese government the previous year as part of their efforts to ensure that historic practices, including dyeing and weaving, were preserved in the face of the increased Americanisation of Japan following the war. The Committee for the Preservation of Cultural Property created a special category for Serizawa, that of *katazome*, or stencil-picture dyeing. This recognised the rich pictorial expression of his work, although the techniques Serizawa employed were no different to *katazome*, other than that he undertook all the stages, including the cutting of the stencils, himself.

The Okinawan weaver Taira Toshiko (1921–2022) was made a Living National Treasure in 2000 for the creation of *bashōfu*, cloth woven from the fibres of the thread-banana plant (fig. 11).¹⁹ The processing of the fibre is labour-intensive and highly skilled, but the resulting light,

FIG 10 Serizawa Keisuke, six-fold screen, silk, stencil paste-resist dyeing (*bingata*), Tokyo, c.1940, Victoria and Albert Museum





Kokeshi

Kawaii Mingei and the consumption of Japanese popular culture

Kokeshi are simple wooden dolls crafted in the Tōhoku region of northern Honshu island since the Edo period (1603–1868). Loved for their unassuming charm and rustic appearance and characterised by their rudimentary form, kokeshi consist of a round head on top of a long cylindrical torso, and lack arms and legs. They are usually embellished with floral motifs painted with calligraphic precision on the torso. Over time, kokeshi have taken on various identities, from an exemplar of Mingei austerity, to minimalist design object, to a souvenir epitomising the pinnacle of kitsch and back again.

Dento, or traditional, kokeshi are made in Tōhoku by artisans who adhere to craft lineages and undergo an apprenticeship with a recognised practitioner. They are classified into 12 strains according to their shape, bodily decoration and facial features. The most common strain is the Naruko kokeshi, which typically have tranquil-looking facial expressions and are adorned with abstract chrysanthemum patterns (fig. 1). The other 11 types are the Yajiro, Kijiyama, Zao, Tsuchiyu, Nakanosawa, Togatta, Nanbu, Tsugaru, Yamagata, Sakunami and Hijiori (fig. 2).

Kokeshi were originally made from scraps of wood in Tōhoku *onsen* hot spring villages, by kijishi woodworkers, and were intended as children's toys. They were sold to farmers who visited for *tōji*, a practice where agricultural

workers would stay at onsen inns for several weeks to recuperate over the snowy winter season. These farmers gave these dolls to their children and grandchildren, who played with kokeshi much in the same way that people play with modern dolls now. Even today, it is rare to find a traditional kokeshi artisan who is not in a remote mountain village in Tōhoku. Turned on a lathe, the dolls are made from local wood types such as dogwood and zelkova; stacked lumber piles outside the ateliers are an indicator that a woodworker is inside.

Nowadays, kokeshi are admired as interior design items, and passionate collectors around the world gather at conventions and on social media platforms. Much like members of the British Arts and Crafts movement who advocated for a 'simplicity in design and manufacture and a need to allow the quality of materials to speak for themselves',¹ fans often talk of the materiality of kokeshi and the affective qualities inherent in the wood, such as the 'warmth'. The dolls are often described as having a 'comforting' presence and described in terms 'beyond visibility', where the item is given agency and a perceived ability to 'heal'.² Artisan Shiratori Yasuko (b.1961) describes the appeal of kokeshi for adult women as 'stemming from the wood itself. People like that it has an earthiness and



FIG 1 Naruko kokeshi by Okazaki Yasuo | Credit: Okazaki Manami

FIG 2 A group of kokeshi in traditional and modern styles
Credit: Okazaki Manami



it is soothing as it is something from nature, the wood was once a tree that was alive.³

The history of kokeshi is sparsely documented, but the Iwamatsu Naosuke manuscript, an invaluable document from 1860, records the activities of woodworkers in the Sakunami district, Miyagi prefecture. This document by the woodworker Iwamatsu was passed down through the generations of his family and describes his professional activities, including the making of kokeshi. It is the first known written record of kokeshi and states that they were made in the region from the late Edo period. They were already commodified as goods sold by *kijishi* rather than simple domestic playthings, when the document was written.

During the Meiji era (1868–1912), when Japan underwent rapid industrialisation, mass-produced goods such as kitchenware and toys flourished. While the proliferation of celluloid and vinyl figures saw the demise of kokeshi as a children's doll, in the early twentieth century they acquired a new set of adult fans fuelled by an interest in folk crafts driven by the Mingei movement. Academics of the time such as Shibusawa Keizo (1896–1963), Arisaka Yotaro (1896–1955) and Yamanouchi Kinzaburo (1886–1966), who established Gohachi, a folk toy shop that opened in Ginza in 1937, espoused the beauty of Tōhoku's

getemono, or utilitarian, unrefined items. The Mingei movement itself was 'radical, modern and progressive', and it was mostly educated urbanites who turned their gaze to Tōhoku and its wares.⁴

The Mingei movement founder Yanagi Sōetsu (1889–1961) and designer Serizawa Keisuke (1895–1984), alongside architect Bruno Taut (1880–1938) and Modernist designer Charlotte Perriand (1903–1999), visited the Tōhoku region multiple times to research the folk architecture and items used in daily life. As advocates, they also brought awareness of the cultural richness of Tōhoku, which was often 'regarded as a backward and marginal region', and promoted the notion that 'activities of the people and life in Tōhoku are connected to the present'.⁵ Rather than being redundant, these European designers saw rural crafts as applicable to contemporary sensibilities and Japan's drive to modernise. Yanagi himself went to Tōhoku more than twenty times between 1927 and 1944; his trips fed into his work as a curator for major department stores such as Matsuzakaya and Takashimaya, which hosted exhibitions of folk craft. Although kokeshi were not a major part of Yanagi's (admittedly highly subjective) categorisation of 'Mingei', there is one doll in the collection he created for the Japanese Mingei Museum, a Zao kokeshi likely from the late nineteenth century, blackened with use



FIG 4 Toyoguchi Katsuhei,
Spoke Chair, 1963
Credit: Tendo Co., Ltd

in shape, colour or texture. A connection to the past can be evident even in a cup or cushion that seems entirely new.

Though Perriand's aim was to create contemporary household goods, tradition was the starting point for the works she authored while in Japan. Instead of separating herself, Perriand sat alongside artisans, using rough sketches and simple models to communicate and repeatedly refine her ideas. In her hands, bamboo became frames for chairs and chaises and woven straw, historically used for raincoats, their upholstery (fig. 3). For the French designer, the Japanese craftsperson's materials became her palette, their assembly methods her scaffolding. Despite the visible connection to Mingei, Perriand's forms were decidedly modern and her products were intended to have broad, international appeal. In 1941, a collection of her works was displayed in an exhibition titled 'Selection, Tradition, Creation' held at the Tokyo department store Takashimaya, enabling the Japanese public to view her experimental pieces (see p. 00).⁸

While Taut, Perriand and others demonstrated ways that craft could be transformed and repurposed, the task of converting the methods and materials used by Mingei makers into mass-market products filtered down to local creators. Those first home-grown designers included Yanagi Sōri, who

created a wide range of products over the course of his career, Toyoguchi Katsuhei (1905–1991), known for innovative furniture (fig. 4), Yoshitake Mosuke (1909–1993), who specialised in cast metal, and Kenmochi Isamu (1912–1971), who pioneered the field of interior design in Japan.

Like many of the country's early practitioners, Kenmochi launched his career at the IARI. During his tenure there, Kenmochi developed the concept of 'Japanese Modern', which became an institute initiative in 1953.⁹ Integrating Mingei and modern design, this term referred to a wide range of new furnishings whose materials and construction evoked tradition. 'In this continuous search for "Japaneseness", "modern" and "good design" in design, Mingei stood out as a point of reference,' explains Yuko Kikuchi.¹⁰ In keeping with the Japanese lifestyle that emerged after the Second World War, the goods that exemplified Japanese Modern – chairs, ashtrays, lamps, glassware and the like – were familiar but fresh.

Kenmochi's quest led to collaborations with numerous factories, workshops and creators, both foreign and local. This included the Japanese American sculptor Isamu Noguchi (1904–1988), who had a stint of his own at the IARI. Together the two designed the Bamboo Basket Chair. Reminiscent of an *ikebana* flower basket, it consisted of

woven bamboo cushions supported by a steel frame (fig. 5). While visiting the United States, Kenmochi also interacted with American designers, such as Charles and Ray Eames and George Nelson. In 1954, Kenmochi left the IARI and launched his Tokyo practice soon after. Blending his knowledge of the design world and Japanese craft culture, Kenmochi was well positioned to help his country move forward after the devastation of the Second World War.

With the war receding and its economy growing, Japan modernised rapidly from the mid-1950s. As new offices, hotels and government buildings were built, the need for interior design grew too. Engaged in many of these large-scale projects, Kenmochi created comprehensive schemes whose elements – everything from sofas to silverware – embraced the abstract lines and planar surfaces of contemporary aesthetics while evoking the elegant simplicity of Japanese forms and natural materials. Designed in 1960 for the lounge of the Hotel New Japan, Kenmochi's Rattan Chair, an orb of woven cane indented in the middle for a colourful seat cushion, has a timeless appearance yet bows politely to Japan's long history with the material (fig. 6). Similarly, the Kashiwado Chair, created in 1961 for the



FIG 5 Isamu Noguchi and Kenmochi Isamu, Bamboo Basket Chair, 1950 | Credit: Noguchi Museum Archives, 02244. Photo: Isamu Noguchi. ©The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum, New York/ARS-DACS

Atami Garden Hotel, consists of layered wood slabs shaped and smoothly sanded to form an integrated seat, back and arm rests (fig. 7). Taking its name and bulky size from a then-popular sumo wrestler (fig. 8), the chair is still made by the furniture manufacturer Tendo Co., Ltd. It employs the



FIG 6 Kenmochi Isamu,
Rattan Chair, 1960
Credit: YMK Nagaoka Co



FIG 3 Pottery aquamanile in the form of a ram, green lead glaze, British, thirteenth century, British Museum

endgame of leisured boredom: a portable echo of the eighteenth-century dandy who paid an 'ornamental hermit' to stare at a skull for seven years in an artificial cave.¹⁶ In the *wabi* interior, then, camp becomes a third way, a path between seriousness and satire that is only reachable by those emerging from a privileged society oversaturated with culture and taste options. Perhaps this mentality can account for the divine craft object's uninhibited rise to popularity within the shopping heavens of the blue-chip gallery and the international art fair. It is a hybrid mode of lifestyle design: a specious admixture of conspicuous consumerism with artificial humility and a pick-and-mix of pseudo-spiritual aesthetics. Sontag saw the origins of camp in eighteenth-century Britain, with the craze for sham ruins and stone benches carefully painted to look like gnarled wood. Today we can perhaps see parallels in our appreciation of the divine craft object and the *wabi* interior: the projection of rustic modesty and sincere aspirations collapse into failed gravitas and a risibly hypocritical social context.

How then, can the divine craft object be appropriately homed within the art world in a way that is neither patronising in its deployment nor throwaway in its quality? If it is unconvincing as an 'honest' and grounding presence among oscillating commodified trends of, say, formalism and figuration in painting, then what could be its right purpose? Craft in its 'proper' sense, with its implied use-value (however vestigial), doesn't need the veneer of art to justify its making. All legitimate art needs

the spirit of craft, however abstracted, to build genuine power. As the sculptor Richard Slee (b.1946) once remarked to me, 'to make great cinema, Hitchcock needed to have great craft'. Being able to do something well, to the level of minutiae not completely visible in the finished work, is the gift that craft practice, and some of its philosophies, give to the true artist, and therein perhaps lies a future of craft as a tool for improving workmanship in painting and sculpture. By this I do not mean 'craft' in the sense of a 'necessary' rediscovery of the skilful handling of materials within, for example, painting, but 'craft' as an embodied mode of self-knowing and self-commitment to one's chosen processes, however non-technical that process or rude the results. Craft can also be successfully explicit as an aesthetic reference for artists, but they must be careful neither to deploy this as a throwaway gesture, nor to fall victim to the occasionally circumscriptive excesses of the contemporary high-craft object itself.



FIG 4 Iga *hanaire* (flowerpot) [details TBC]

FIG 5 Peter Voulkos, *Tientos*, 1959, clay with iron glazes, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Purchase through a gift of Phyllis C. Wattis and gift of Gregory LaChapelle © Estate of Peter Voulkos



Akiko Hirai

Ceramicist Akiko Hirai (b.1970) moved to the UK from Japan in 1999 with the intention of continuing her studies in psychology. 'And then', she says, 'I met a potter.' Now based in Hackney, East London, for the past two decades Hirai has been developing her practice, which draws strongly on Korean ceramic traditions and focuses on the beauty to be found in the aged and the flawed.

An encounter in the British Museum with Lucie Rie's moon jar (see p. 00), an eighteenth-century Korean porcelain vessel gifted to Rie by Bernard Leach, sparked Hirai's interest in the form for which she is currently best known. Attracted by 'how it is jointed, its indentations, pin holes and stains on the surface, little chips and small ageing marks', Hirai understood the moon jar to be 'really precious', more beautiful and special thanks to the wear accumulated through the ageing process. Hirai's own moon jars, of which she has made dozens in different sizes throughout her career, are an exploration of this character that objects and – as she points out – also people acquire through the stress, trauma and pleasure of lived experience. Her pieces, constructed as one vessel rather than two joined together as in traditional Korean moon jars, are created through a process of pulling and pushing, adding pressure and weight to reveal the beauty in deformity and imperfection.

Growing up, Hirai experienced Mingei as an embedded rather than explicit presence. 'In my family environment, we had a lot of handmade things ... we would enjoy selecting our own rice bowl [from among several possible options]; everything my grandmother served would be on different small plates. You didn't think about it, but you enjoyed it every day.' More recently, however, she has been reading Yanagi Sōetsu's writings. Yanagi's belief that true beauty is something to be found within objects that do not intend to be beautiful resonates strongly with Hirai's own practice. The beauty



of the unexceptional, seen in relation to other things rather than standing out on its own terms, is one way in which she sees the presence of Buddhism in Japanese aesthetics, a stark comparison to the individualistic idea of beauty more prevalent in the West.

The influence of Korean ceramics remains strong in Hirai's work. 'Even though I started ceramics here [in London], I always come back to Korea.' This is evident in her continued interest in *kohiki*, a form of ceramic derived from Korean buncheong wares, typically involving an iron-rich clay body glazed in white slip. Over the years Hirai has repeatedly made bowls developed in her own way from a *kohiki* technique. The result suggests the ageing process of historical pots, evoking the long and complex relationship between people and the objects they make and use.

