

Fall 2026 Arts of Asia Lecture Series
Unknown Makers, Lasting Beauty: Rethinking Fine Art Across Asia
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Mingei in Japan and the Postwar United States

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This talk explores the Mingei (folk craft) movement in modern Japan and its transmission to the United States after World War II, focusing on ceramics as a central site of exchange.

Themes

- Defining Mingei: objects, ideology, and “craft” vs. “art”
- The Mingei movement (mid-1920s–) and E. Asian modernity; parallels with the British Arts and Crafts movement and the Deutscher Werkbund
- Cultural identity: Whose “folk”? What “craft”?
- Post- World War II transmission: Mingei and American studio pottery

Key Terms

- Mingei (民芸・民藝): folk craft or folk art, term coined in the mid-1920s; shortened from *minshūteki kōgei* (民衆的工芸), “people’s craft”
- *bi no hyōjun* 美の標準: Yanagi’s “criterion of beauty”: natural, simple, intimate, sincere, plural, and selfless
- *bishu mibun* 美醜未分: beyond beauty and ugliness
- *chokkan* 直観: intuition / direct perception
- *mumei*: 無名: anonymous
- Nihon Mingeikan: The Japan Folk Crafts Museum, Tokyo (1936–)
- studio pottery: ceramics made by an individual artist-potter in a small workshop
- *tariki* 他力: Buddhist “other-power”
- *yō no bi* 用の美: beauty in utility

Timeline

- 1910–1945: Japan’s colonization of Korea
- 1916: Yanagi’s first trip to Korea
- 1920: Leach and Hamada open the Leach Pottery, St Ives, England
- 1924: Yanagi and the Asakawa brothers open Korean Folk Art Museum, Seoul
- 1926: Yanagi, Hamada, Kawai, and Tomimoto issue prospectus for the Mingeikan
- 1929-1930: Yanagi teaches at Harvard; organizes two exhibitions
- 1936: Mingeikan opens in Komaba, Tokyo; financed by Ōhara Magosaburō
- 1940: Leach publishes *A Potter’s Book*
- 1945–1952: Allied Occupation of Japan

- 1952–1953: Yanagi, Hamada, and Leach tour the United States, including Black Mountain College and the Archie Bray Foundation
- 1955: Hamada and Tomimoto designated “Living National Treasures”
- 1972: *The Unknown Craftsman* published in English
- 1978: Mingei International Museum opens, San Diego

Major Figures in Japan

- Hamada Shōji (1894–1978): ceramist, co-founder, later Mingeikan director
- Kawai Kanjirō (1890–1966): ceramist, co-founder
- Bernard Leach (1887–1979): British ceramist, in Japan 1909–20; principal interlocutor for Mingei to English-speaking audiences
- Tomimoto Kenkichi (1886–1963): ceramist, early collaborator
- Yanagi Sōetsu (Muneyoshi) (1889–1961): writer/ philosopher, co-founder, central spokesperson for the movement through writings, lectures, and museum work

Major Figures in the U.S.

- Karen Karnes: potter-in-residence, Black Mountain College during 1952 visit of Yanagi, Hamada, and Leach
- Warren MacKenzie (1924–2018): Leach apprentice; brought Mingei ideals to the Midwest; professor, University of Minnesota
- Susan Peterson (1925–2009): Ceramist; in publications and television introduced Hamada and Mingei to many; professor, University of Southern California
- Daniel Rhodes (1911–89): Ceramist; author of book on *Tamba* folk pottery; professor, Alfred University
- Peter Voulkos (1924–2002): leading postwar ceramic artist; acknowledged influence from Hamada and Japanese ceramics

Suggested Readings

Primary Sources:

Kawai Kanjirō, *We Do Not Work Alone: The Thoughts of Kanjiro Kawai*. Trans. Yoshiko Uchida. Kawai Kanjirō’s House, 1973 (2nd ed.).

Leach, Bernard. *Beyond East and West*. Faber and Faber, 1978.

Yanagi Sōetsu. *The Beauty of Everyday Things*. Trans. Michael Brase. Penguin Books, 2019.

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Secondary Sources:

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Bambling, Michele and Tamae Sagi, *Kawai Kanjiro: House to House*, Japan Society, 2026.

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- _____. [Translations of poems by Kawai Kanjiro](#) in *Botsugo 50 nen Kawai Kanjiro: kako ga saite iru ima, mirai no tsubomi de ippaina imai*, ed. Sagi Tamei. Mainichi Press, 2016.
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- Lynn, Martha Drexler. *American Studio Ceramics: Innovation and Identity, 1940 to 1970*, Yale University Press, 2015.
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- Moes, Robert, Amanda Mayer Stinchecum, and William B. Hauser. *Mingei: Japanese Folk Art from the Montgomery Collection*. Art Services International, 1995.
- Nakami, Mari. *In Pursuit of Composite Beauty: Yanagi Sōetsu, His Aesthetics and Aspiration for Peace*. Trans Pacific Press, 2011.
- Peterson, Susan. *Shoji Hamada: A Potter's Way and Work*. Weatherhill, 1996.
- Special Issue: Mingei Revisited: In Search of the Ethical Pot*. *Studio Potter* 25.1 (1996).
- Trembley, Nicolas. *Mingei are You Here?* London: Pace Gallery, 2013.
- Wilcox, Timothy, ed. *Shoji Hamada Master Potter*. London: Lund Humphries, 1998.

Additional Resources:

- Chiaki Ajioka lecture: "[Mingei, Hamada and Leach: International Waves of Influence](#)" [Japan Folk Crafts Museum](#)
- [Mingei Film Archive](#), founded by Marty Gross
- [Mingei International Museum](#)
- [Modern Japanese Ceramics Image Database](#)
- Nelson-Atkins Museum, "[Bridged by the Love of Clay: Trace the connection between artists in Japan, England, and the U.S. Midwest](#)"
- NHK International Corporation, "[The Mark of Beauty: Mingei](#)"