

21 March – 22 September 2024, William Morris Gallery, Lloyd Park, Forest Road, London E17 4PP

Photos by Jill Fanshawe Kato

The beautiful William Morris Gallery is the location for a most exciting exhibition of traditional Japanese folk art, better known as Mingei.

What is Mingei?

In the early years of the 20th century Japanese traditional crafts were in danger of dying out and were looked down on, due to Japan's rapid industrialisation and westernisation.

A group of artists, potters, writers and cultural influencers coalesced into the 'Shirakaba' group, spearheaded by the art critic and philosopher Soetsu Yanagi, concerned to reverse this trend.

Members included the potters Shoji Hamada, Kanjiro Kawai, Kenkichi Tomimoto and Bernard Leach, who spent much of his life between Japan and England. All would have been familiar with the Arts and Crafts Movement created by William Morris in England and Tomimoto wrote a biography of Morris.

In 1926 Yanagi coined the word 'Mingei' 民芸 to describe the type of rural crafts endangered, *min* 民 = folk and *gei* 芸 = art, and thus the MINGEI UNDO or Folk Craft Movement was established. Rural crafts included ceramics, textiles, wood, bamboo, paper, metal, toys and lacquer. Mingei objects should be handmade, functional, simple, made in quantity, inexpensive and anonymous, using local materials and showing locality. 'Objects Born not Made' according to Yanagi, who had long treasured the aesthetics of Korean crafts before turning his attention to Japan.

The Mingei movement celebrated and promoted the unique design ethos of rural crafts, leading to the founding of the Mingeikan (Japan Folk Crafts Museum) in Tokyo in 1936, which still exists.

Hamada and Leach

In 1920 Bernard Leach returned to England with his friend Shoji Hamada and established the Leach Pottery in St. Ives, Cornwall. Hamada built an Asian style wood firing kiln, establishing the high temperature reduction fired daily use pottery which continues today. Later Hamada returned to Japan to establish his workplace in Mashiko, but the two kept in contact and later toured internationally

with Yanagi to promote the values of Mingei. Through their writing and ceramic work Mingei values became internationally recognised and absorbed into the studio pottery movement.

Pottery Student

In the 1970's I visited Japan and encountered 'Mingei' type pottery in quantities in restaurants and houses, inspiring me to study pottery there for 4 years. Even the cheapest restaurant served exquisite food on handmade ceramics from various kilns. A grilled fish would appear on a rectangle of blue and white porcelain, or a pink cake on a small plate shaped like a cherry flower, because cherries were in bloom. Pottery would change with the seasons, as did the food. The ethos of the tea ceremony and Mingei tinted ceramic culture. My favourite restaurant even had a row of large plates by Shoji Hamada displayed on the wall and sometimes used.

So enchanted was I by Japanese pottery that I ended up studying ceramics there for 4 years, which gave the opportunity to visit many of the 100+ pottery villages and towns making every type of ceramics, from individual sophisticated art works to Mingei kilns producing daily use rice bowls, teapots and sake utensils. Being a poor student I could only afford to buy Mingei ceramics with local character, which I purchased here and there and have treasured ever since.

One such treasure I encountered in a Tokyo flea market was a teapot painted by Masu Minagawa (Photo 1). Meeting her in Mashiko decided Shoji Hamada to establish his workplace in that village of anonymous craftspeople, a village rich in clay, minerals and rice straw ash left after the rice harvest which is a key glaze ingredient.

Onta

Designated a 'National Intangible Cultural Property' by the Japanese government, the pottery village of Onta in Kyushu is the epitome of Mingei values. A creaking, groaning, splashing sound echoes throughout the valley as water-driven log beams rise and fall year in, year out, crushing rock into clay powder to be processed and dried to usable throwing clay. (Photo 2) Established in 1705, this community of 10



Masu Minagawa teapot (Photo 1)



Logbeam clay crushers in Onta (Photo 2)



Onta potter Shigeki Sakamoto (Photo 3)



Chattermark plate by Onta potter Haruo Yanase (Photo 4)

pottery families embodies sustainability. I met potter Shigeki Sakamoto (1937-2023) in his workshop (Photo 3) and bought his green-glazed teapot, also a large chatter-marked platter from Haruo Yanase (Photo 4), the typical design of Onta ceramics of white slip on brown clay.

Okinawa

The tropical Japanese island of Okinawa has a rich culture of locally-inspired crafts, ceramics, textiles and glass. Ceramic lions stand guard on roofs to ward off typhoons and malevolent spirits. As well as daily use pottery, large tsubo are used to store sake, funeral urns are decorated with dolphins to cheer the deceased and unique crescent-shaped 'dachibin' hip flasks were taken to the fields for refreshment (Photo 5). The founders of the Mingei Movement recognised the unselfconscious beauty of Okinawan crafts. Invited to have an exhibition there, in 1997 I spent a month making pots in Okinawa and met many potters. A sake vessel with sgraffito fish design by potter Jiro Kinjo (1912-2004) is shown here and a fish design plate by his son Toshi (Photos 6 and 7).

Mingei Exhibition

William Morris and John Ruskin founded the Arts and Crafts Movement from the 1860's, Morris's words were 'Have nothing in your house that you do not know to be beautiful or believe to be useful'. The founders of the Mingei Movement in Japan knew of the reforming influence of the Arts and Crafts movement and it would have been an inspiring template for the Mingei movement. It is fitting that the exhibition Art Without Heroes:Mingei should be held at the house of the designer and reformer in London, with a range of beautiful and useful Japanese crafts representing the Mingei ideal.

Curator Roisin Inglesby has created three sections, of 19th, 20th and 21st century, the latter posing the question 'does the concept of Mingei still exist and if so, what is it?' This exhibition is a thought-provoking treat for visitors in our present times.

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Okinawa 'Dachibin' (Photo 5)



Jiro Kinjo sake bottle (Photo 6)



Sgraffito fish plate by Toshio Kinjo (Photo 7)