
On Self-expression: Some Considerations on *Katazome* and Printmaking in Mingei Crafts

—自己表現について：民藝における型染と版画への考察—

Rosanna Rios

1936年、柳宗悦が民藝館を創立した時、彼と民芸運動のメンバーが集め、民芸と見なした工芸品を専門とする常設会場を設けるといふ、柳の目的は達成された。柳がその民芸理論で主張するのは、職人が「無私のアプローチ」で制作する必要性、「無名の工人」になること、制作プロセスにおいて複製技法を徹底することであった。しかしながら、この「無名の工人」のモデルは、一部のメンバーの作品が民藝館のコレクションに加えられ、民藝館での展覧会に紹介されたため、芸術/文化シーンでそれらが注目されてしまうことになった。つまり民藝の当初の理念が矛盾にさらされることになったのである。本研究ノートではこのことを、柚木沙弥郎の活動をもとに考察する。柚木沙弥郎は芹沢圭介の弟子であったテキスタイルアーティストで、柳の工芸思想に倣い、型染や版画の技法で作品を制作した。本稿では特に、型染と版画の技法において、この「無私のアプローチ」がどのように達成されたかを調査した。

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1. Fine Arts and Crafts

Artists develop through their work a kind of language, a way of configuring different elements that they choose when pursuing their activity in a certain technique.

This language enables the artist to create a message, which will be interpreted by the viewer/receiver, and the tools they choose to create this message will be limited by the technique. A sculptor works with space and its relationship with mass and weight. A painter uses color, lines and planes to construct the artwork, however, infinite possibilities are given in each technique, and depending on how skillful and experienced an artist is, they will develop an expression that could be unique, thus the combination of the artist's intention and the work's countless possibilities for interpretation configures what Eco describes as an *open product* (Eco 1989, 3-5).

This artistic expression, which comes from a series of trials and errors that take place in the studio or working space, require a number of decisions made by the artist in accordance with what they consider a "good piece". In crafts, what could be described as a "good piece" will be in direct relation to the aesthetic considerations in which that particular craft is created. If we look specifically to crafts developed in Japan within the Mingei movement, led by Soetsu Yanagi, these considerations were intrinsically connected to the beauty of ordinary objects, with a utilitarian

purpose in everyday life, and made by a nameless artisan (Yanagi 2017, 83-86).

So, we may ask ourselves, how is a craft different from an artwork? And how were crafts developed in the Mingei movement? First, it becomes necessary to explain the meaning of Mingei, as described by Soetsu Yanagi. According to Yanagi, the word *mingei* which literally means "crafts of the people", surged as an appropriate term to refer to folk craft, and it was coined by combining the kanji *min* (民) meaning "the masses" or "the people", and the kanji *gei* (藝) meaning "craft", he conceived this word after long discussions with Shoji Hamada and Kanjiro Kawai. In the current paper we will refer to folk crafts as Mingei, in line with Yanagi's notion of this craft movement, it is important to understand that depending on the historical context from which we are considering the notion "folk crafts", it might contain other meanings, however for the current paper we will subscribe to Yanagi's notion of folk crafts.

Thus returning to our previous consideration, we can find the first difference between crafts and artworks, a craft is intended for the masses, whereas artworks are intended for a specific group of people who will value and appreciate the art object depending on how important or well known the artist is (Yanagi 2017, 75-76).

We then come to the second difference, the reputed artist's name and the nameless artisan. An artist, especially, the modern artist was

considered to be a person with special abilities, whose artistic practice depended on a muse that came down to inspire them and facilitated the creation of artworks. In contrast to this incredibly gifted human, is the artisan, a common person who doesn't work as an individual, but instead creates craft objects in a workshop with other artisans, in great quantity, on a daily basis, and without any intention of being distinct from everyone else (Yanagi 2017, 85).

It is important to state that Japan, has a long tradition of *Kogei* (工芸), which means handicrafts, but to understand the atmosphere under which the Mingei movement took place, first it is necessary to understand the context that led to the emergence of this crafts movement. In the archipelago, the era previous to the crafts movement was a time of great political and social change. In the Meiji period (1868- 1912), which brought modernization and westernization to Japan, the country opened up to new ideas and subsequently changes in the way people assumed national identity (Encyclopaedia Britannica, n.d.).

2. The Mingei movement in Japan

Soetsu Yanagi, the founder of the Mingei movement was born and raised in the middle of these radical changes. His ideas and notions that later built the philosophy of what he called folk crafts (Mingei), were fed by foreign thinkers, such as William Morris, among others (Kikuchi 1994, 252-256). Also, his recurrent trips to Korea, China and Taiwan and his great admiration for the folk crafts he saw in these places, urged him to establish what became the Folk Crafts Museum in 1936 (The Japan Folk Crafts Museum, n.d.). As a thinker, he also felt the need to define a distinctive philosophy that would group Japanese folk crafts according to certain standards of beauty.

Hence, returning to this comparison between arts and crafts, as we mentioned before, Japan had a long tradition of *Kogei*, even before the Mingei movement was even raised into Yanagi's

thoughts. Traditionally, families led by a *shokunin* (職人), or craftsmen, carried on a tradition of a specific technique such as textiles, ceramics, wood and lacquer, amongst others, passed on from one generation to the next. Every family member pursued a task, in accordance with the specific technique that was developed in that household, and in that way, the family made a living. Art, as a concept from the Western ideal, wasn't introduced until the 19th to 20th century (Ulak, n.d.).

Yanagi saw this special quality in Japanese crafts and developed a theory that would highlight it and make it the basis of a national creative expression. But it was not through arts precisely that he sought this expression. In Europe, modern art was taking place and experiencing major changes in the way artists developed their creative expression. With the invention of photography and the industrial revolution that occurred between the 16th and 17th centuries, especially pictorial artists had difficulty finding a new *raison d'être* different from mere representation (Verhoogt 2019, 300-301). Although these ideas and major changes were merging into Japanese society after it opened to the world, in everyday life, crafts traditions continued to sustain families through many generations. Therefore, it is understandable that in Japan, despite the Meiji restoration, or perhaps as a response to the rapid changes that were occurring in the country, crafts continued to be an important part of the lives of common people, and these crafts that embellished common people's lifestyles, were more compatible with Yanagi's idea of Japanese expression.

According to Yanagi's notion, there were specific techniques in crafts that suited his notion of Mingei, and these were textiles, ceramics, wood and lacquer, metal, sculpture and pictorial art that were used to make everyday objects. In his essay referring to his notion of Mingei, he describes which kind of objects could be included in the Folk crafts category; he explains it broadly in what he called *The beauty of miscellaneous things* (Yanagi 2017, 87-99).

In this section, special attention is given to this notion of the “nameless craftsmen”, as Yanagi calls them, who created handicrafts within his category of folk crafts (Yanagi 2017, 91). From Yanagi’s point of view, these were the people who worked in dark workshops, without the need of recognition, but with the firm conviction of serving people. By drawing a parallel between the artisan and the artist, it could be said that the artisan is deprived of ego, because their aim was not to sign the work or to be acknowledged for their creation.

However, this formula might be appropriate to the ideals contemplated by Yanagi, in the creation of the basis of the Mingei movement, when he first developed his notion of Folk crafts. But with time, there were a few representatives of the movement who made names for themselves, including Kanjiro Kawai, Shoji Hamada, Bernard Leach, Keisuke Serizawa, to mention a few. Samirou Yunoki, a living textile artist, who was Serizawa’s pupil, developed his work in crafts towards the latter half of the 20th century until today, and his work has also become a part of the Folk Crafts collection. In the following section Yanagi’s Folk Crafts collection’s emergence will be introduced, and subsequently the use of reproduction techniques in Yunoki’s works will be discussed.

3. Soetsu Yanagi’s Folk Crafts Collection

Once the Folk Crafts Museum was founded, exhibitions that displayed works of the group’s members became a constant activity in the Museum. Yanagi created a vast collection of crafts consisting of ceramics, textiles, wood works, *Otsu-e*, *Mokujiki* sculptures (The Japan Folk Crafts Museum, n.d.), amongst others. His aim was mainly to enhance not only crafts he collected from his travels to Korea, China, Taiwan, and Japan, but also eventually, crafts created by the artists who were grounded in the ideas that led to the establishment of the Mingei movement, which also became a part of this collection.

In order to understand Yanagi’s notion of

a collection, first it is necessary to grasp his connection to the objects he collected. If we look closely at Yanagi’s experiences with folk crafts, we can grasp how the encounter with an object that he considered valuable, in terms of aesthetic significance, became a personal story that would connect him with that specific object. He also believed that in the past people valued everyday objects more because they were born of a tradition of humble craftsmanship and thus beauty was enhanced with daily usage (Yanagi 2017, 78-79).

Since the act of collecting became an important activity for the Mingei movement, it is important to address the fact that exhibiting the collection was the next move after gathering and organizing the objects. These objects placed in an institution such as a museum made them accessible to the general public, but also made them valuable assets and Yanagi was well aware of this. But how can we distinguish an artifact worth collecting, in other words worth exhibiting in a museum, from one that has no apparent value, and where can we place crafts in the art and culture system as a collectable asset? To help us understand the context and system underlying this, the following diagram based on A.J. Greimas’ “semiotic square” (Greimas and Rastier 1968, 86-105), explains

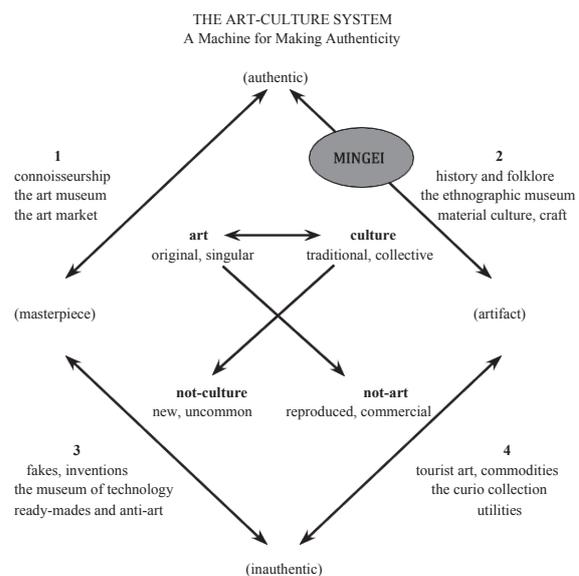


Figure 1. James Clifford, *The predicament of culture: On collecting art and culture*, 224.

how the art-culture system can be organized according to authenticity, in this example Clifford offers a map to place these objects in the field of history and institutions (Clifford 1988, 224).

As seen in this diagram, objects are classified according to “relative value” and within the “contexts” that fit them more adequately and in which they constantly flow. In Clifford’s map, we can identify specifically defined zones. “(1) the zone of authentic masterpieces, (2) the zone of authentic artifacts, (3) the zone of inauthentic masterpieces, (4) the zone of inauthentic artifacts. Most objects – old and new, rare and common, familiar and exotic – can be located in one of these zones or ambiguously, in traffic, between two zones” (Clifford 1988, 223). This flow or change from one zone to another is usually the case, for example, when an “artifact of enduring worth or rarity”, is placed in a Museum, as an asset of material culture, and subsequently becomes part of a collection. The reasons for the selection of specific objects are usually defined by cultures that are vanishing, or because there are few assets in stock of that particular culture. In regard to Yanagi’s creation of the Folk Crafts Museum, his aim was to display objects that according to him were being disregarded as simple utility objects. In Clifford’s map we placed Mingei crafts on zone 2, because they are objects that belonged to the handicrafts category, but in the act of collecting them and placing them in the Museum, they became a part of Japanese material culture. The handicrafts field was something that was ignored, and through Yanagi, who sought to highlight the tremendous beauty these handicrafts represented for Japanese Crafts, the museum was founded. He wanted to create a space that in his words would be significant for “the history of craft ware and aesthetics”, a reference of Japanese Crafts for future generations (Yanagi 2017, 213).

It’s possible that Yanagi could foresee a future where crafts were less in demand, or completely discontinued, and he pursued to rescue what was still in constant flow and give it the “value” he

considered it deserved. In order to collect the handicrafts the members of the Mingei movement travelled around the country to search in second hand shops for what they considered to be “beautiful items”, according to Yanagi’s ideal. The question that was previously raised is, after the collection was assembled, how did the Mingei movement artists’ works become collectible items, and as active members, how did this “nameless craftsmen” role come into play? There seems to be a paradigm in terms of this selflessness, between the crafts objects they collected, and the works the members created that eventually also became collectable assets in the Folk Crafts Museum.

On this aspect, Shirato mentions that according to many Mingei critics the collection that was left at the Folk Crafts Museum includes many things that do not fall under the nature of Mingei, either because they were artifacts made for the royalty of aristocrats, for example some *Bingata* goods, or had a high cost that made them inaccessible to common people, or works that were not made by nameless artisans (白土 2011, 22-23).

In the following section we will consider reproduction techniques used by folk artist Samiro Yunoki, and whether these techniques hindered self-expression, as stated by Yanagi in his Mingei theory.

4. Reproduction in Crafts

As we mentioned before, handicrafts are intended for everyday life, to be used by a great number of people, whereas in fine arts something unique is created, a one of a kind piece that usually finds its way to the art market or art museum. In the Mingei movement, as part of the basis of what was considered folk crafts, Soetsu Yanagi established that the objects had to be reproducible in mass quantity and available at a very low price. For this purpose, the techniques that were used to create these handicrafts played an important role.

Samiro Yunoki developed works in *Katazome* and printmaking. *Katazome* is a Japanese traditional

technique that was broadly used to dye kimono. It is usually named stencil dyeing because it consists of transferring or repeating a pattern, that was previously designed and cutout on a special paper called *katagami*, onto a fabric, using a dye-resist paste known as *nori* (柚木 1969, 3). Printmaking consists also of transferring a design or drawing but most usually onto a piece of paper, however, various materials are used for the matrix image that is transferred repeatedly onto the paper, wood, metal, stone, acrylic, etc (James 1884, 7-9). Yunoki's work entailed a design or drawing, which was later repeated through these reproduction techniques that supposedly hindered personal expression. However, he also explored the field of book illustration and poster design, and if we look closely at the illustrations and pattern designs, some similarities can be found in the subject matter depicted.

In *Katazome*, craftsmen must execute a number of steps in order to complete one piece. The attention they must pay to every step makes them abandon an individual approach that is very commonly seen in painting, for example, which is a more direct form of expression. One of the most important steps in *katazome* is designing and cutting the *katagami*. This becomes the pattern that is subsequently repeated on the fabric. Yanagi had some considerations on pattern that, as described in his essay, made it suitable for reproduction. "Pictorial depiction" as opposed to pattern, is an individual pursuit, because the artist often has an intention to stand out through the work, and even create something that might not be accessible to a large group of people. Whereas pattern takes important elements from nature to create a form that will be used and understood by many cultures, it is a universal representation (Yanagi 2017, 109-111).

On the other hand, printmaking, which is also a mass production technique used mainly for book's illustrations and manuscripts, was always intended to reach a wide audience (Strange 1904, 1-2). However, according to Yanagi, another aspect of

printmaking—especially woodblock printing—that places it in the category of crafts, is its "indirect means of expression". This means that the image is not directly represented on paper, but has first been designed and then carved on wood, to be transferred on the paper, thus imposing certain restrictions in technique and execution, and hampering self-expression (Yanagi 2017, 160).

Within printmaking there are various types of prints, apart from woodblock, for example etching, lithography, copperplate and monotype, to mention a few; but, in Yanagi's words "the carving of a woodblock encompasses the greatest restriction on freedom" (Yanagi 2017, 160). Therefore, there is a clear difficulty in achieving self-expression through printmaking, which made it suitable for Folk Crafts. This apparent selflessness made the printmaker prone to achieving beauty that ultimately resulted in reproducible crafts. In Yunoki's case, he learned printmaking techniques at Atelier MMG, in Tokyo and produced works using lithography, linocut, monotype, carborundum printmaking, stencil, embossing and mimeograph techniques (益田 2013, 96-102).

Within these techniques, the ones that are closer to *Katazome* are linocut, stencil (*Pochoir*) and mimeograph because they involve making a cutout of the motif that will be represented on a matrix to be repeated many times by inking and transferring it onto the paper; the other techniques involve drawing on stone or glass and transferring the images onto paper afterwards. In general, printmaking makes the artisan achieve a certain level of selflessness; due to indirectness in the execution, the image is not drawn directly on the support. In most of Yunoki's prints the motifs are easily recognizable, making it a kind of representation understandable to everyone. According to Masuda, Yunoki's work went beyond the Folk Crafts movement by exceeding the "useful beauty" (用の美) notion in his patterned fabrics. He later remarks that *Pochoir* (stencil) is a technique used in France to illustrate books, it was used by Matisse to create the illustrated book

Jazz (1947), *Pochoir* was not considered a Crafts technique (益田 2017, 20-22). Does this suggest that Yunoki surpassed the field of Crafts and entered the field of Fine Arts?

Looking into Yunoki's work in textiles and printmaking, it is possible to detect a unique expression in the way he freely goes beyond the medium, as if crossing that line that hinders self-expression, he becomes the storyteller of the tales that are portrayed in his works. The hands that express these tales through various motifs find in mass reproduction techniques a way to reach a great number of people, but also a way to build Yunoki's unique universe. It's possible that at the beginning of his career as an artisan Samiro Yunoki followed the Mingei movement ideals of the nameless artisan, but as his curiosity and exploration into various techniques and media grew wider, he probably crossed the line of crafts to develop his own expression.

Conclusion

Soetsu Yanagi's Mingei movement sought to hinder self-expression by encouraging crafts creation through mass reproduction techniques; the craftsmen were expected to be nameless artisans, humble towards their creations. Nonetheless, with time, the members of this movement became well known, and their exhibitions at the Folk Crafts Museum became important cultural and artistic reference points in Japan. The handicrafts at the Folk Crafts Museum became a part of Japan's material culture.

Samiro Yunoki, who created works in *katazome* and printmaking as an active member of the Mingei movement was devoted to crafts and particularly to Yanagi's ideal. However, we can unveil in his work a unique expression that transcends any medium he explored, almost as if questioning this aimed selflessness in the Mingei movement. Yunoki's self-expression in *Katazome* and printmaking seemed to overcome this "restriction of freedom" imposed by the technique,

and in this particular respect poses a paradox in the context of Yanagi's pursuit of "indirect means of expression".

Further inquiry into the Mingei movement ideals, both at the time of its creation, and in its later evolution is warranted; such research may show that the original notions stated by Yanagi altered over time. In the present inquiry, the focal point is self expression in reproduction techniques as seen through Samiro Yunoki's works, but certainly the spectrum would broaden if other Mingei members' works were to be examined in conjunction with Yanagi's ideals.

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