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Seeking for the Legacy of the Unknown Craftsmen – William Morris and the *Mingei* Movement

In William Morris's utopian romance *News from Nowhere* (1891), the Guest who has come from Victorian London to this future England admires the pipe he is given (37):

> She disappeared again, and came back with a big-bowled pipe in her hand, carved out of some hard wood very elaborately, and mounted in gold sprinkled with little gems. It was, in short, as pretty and gay a toy as I had ever seen; something like the best kind of Japanese work, but better.

To the Victorian aesthetic, which Morris partly shared, Japanese handicrafts represented the best specimens of laborious and deft works executed by human hands. However, a new Japanese aesthetic movement, the *Mingei* Movement, soon superseded this old stereotype, giving a significant impetus even to followers of Morris's own Arts and Crafts Movement. Furthermore, Morris himself would provide the inspiration for this movement.

It was 1926 when Yanagi Sôetsu (1889-1961), a Japanese art critic and thinker, coined the word *mingei* with two potters, Kawai Kanjirô and Hamada Shôji, at the great mountain monastery of Kôya-san. This marked the start of the *Mingei* [Folkcrafts] Movement in Japan, which set out to reappraise folkcrafts positively and encourage their development.

The term *mingei* is an abbreviation of *minshûteki kôgei*, by which is meant the production of simple, handmade objects for everyday use. In Japan, Yanagi was the first person to value the beauty of common utensils and use them as indicators of the quality of life (*Handicrafts*, 356). *Mingei* refers to objects made not by machinery but by the hands of common people for common people. Yanagi also called such common things *getemono* [lesser arts], as opposed to *jôtemono* [greater arts], using the terminology that Morris had employed in his Arts and Crafts theory half a century earlier. While *jôtemono* are handmade works which are created not for practical use but for aesthetic need, *getemono* are handicrafts which can be produced economically and plentifully.

Yanagi proclaimed himself the pioneer of this approach to folkcrafts. He did, however, recognize that in the world of aesthetics, there had been several predecessors with the same insight. These were the early masters of the "Way of Tea," John Ruskin and William Morris. Yanagi drew heavily on the insights and theories of these earlier thinkers, absorbing and using their ideas freely to construct his folkcraft theory and to overcome their limitations.

A look at Yanagi's background makes clear how he was able to incorporate both Western and Eastern thought into his theory. Born in 1889, he was brought up in an intellectual atmosphere characterized by a keen desire to pursue freedom of thought and to learn from the West. In 1910, as a young student at the Imperial University, he started with his friends a monthly magazine called *Shirakaba* [*Silver Birch*]. One of the aims of *Shirakaba* was to introduce Western arts and ideas to Japan. Giotto, Tolstoy, Rodin, Schopenhauer, and Aubrey Beardsley were among the magazine's favorite topics. Also, Yanagi's friendship with Bernard Leach led him to William Blake, whose significance was still unrecognized even in England at the time. Thus Yanagi started his career as a thinker, passionately searching for inspiration in Western thought.

As a British socialist, William Morris was not unfamiliar to Japanese intellectuals in the early twentieth century. But any recognition of him as an artist had to wait until 1912, when a young artist, Tomimoto Kenkichi (1886-1963), introduced Morris as a pattern designer in an article entitled "The Story of