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On Not Knowing the Unknown Craftsman

I

In the book *The Unknown Craftsman* (1989[1972]),[1] Soetsu Yanagi sketches out an idea of craft perhaps more radical than any before or since. In a complete inversion of our normal hierarchy of values, he argues for the anonymous 'crafts of the people', or 'mingei', which he considers to be the healthiest, most vitally alive and spiritually deep products of a culture, products that provide a benchmark for other art and design. In contrast, he regarded the Western idea and practice of the fine artist as dangerously self-conscious, and the quest for individuality and self-expression in art and craft as totally misconceived.

I first read *The Unknown Craftsman* in the early 1990s, during my defection from sculpture to craft. It spoke to everything I found attractively different in the craft that excited me: a Dail Behennah basket, a Gordon Baldwin pot, a Mike Abbot greenwood chair. Of course only the last of these is in any way a 'traditional' craft product. The others sit very much within the new tradition of 'studio crafts', objects made by individuals in a context much closer to fine art than the economics of a peasant society. Yet all seem to embody the unique possibilities of the handmade, the encounter between maker and simple materials that is deeply human and, in some sense I could not quite define, spiritual.

In a deep sense, the last twenty years of my work have been an effort to clarify this paradox ... in what way can work made within the context of contemporary studio craft embody those qualities that allowed Yanagi to make such an extravagant claim for the 'crafts of the people', for mingei?

This paper is a personal attempt to answer the question. It will look at the Zen Buddhist practice that underpinned Yanagi's ideas, and which has informed my own making. And it will be a reflection on that making. Fortuitously, or synchronistically, it was in the three months prior to presenting this paper, spent mainly during a residency in Philadelphia at the Center for Art in Wood, that I began to see more clearly the resolution of this paradox through making. So this paper will draw extensively on my experience of that time as a practical demonstration parallel to the more theoretical aspects.

II

Yanagi was born into the great modernisation of Japan that began at the end of the nineteenth century and that, in a generation, turned what had still been an essentially mediaeval society into a major modern power, the original Asian 'tiger economy'. For the Japanese of the early twentieth century, modernity and the West were synonymous and, like other forward thinking intellectuals, Yanagi immersed himself in Western culture and ideas. He was very familiar with the writing of Ruskin and Morris, and with contemporary developments in painting and sculpture.

This had led many writers on Yanagi into what could be argued to be an appalling act of cultural misappropriation, in seeing his significance only in terms of a wider dissemination of European arts and crafts ideas, a Japanese Morris, a footnote. Where Yanagi's Japanese context is actually acknowledged, it is now common to link it to the development of nationalism and the militaristic colonialism of the 1930s, which had such disastrous consequences for the world. So it is safer, if we approve of Yanagi, to stay well clear of Japan.

But even if we agree with the recent scholarship that has challenged Yanagi's assertions that his ideas on craft were both wholly original and wholly Asian in their origins, there has in fact been a serious neglect of the Buddhist context within which he explicitly framed his work. This was no simple use of an acknowledged Asian or Japanese background, but the result of a deep and sustained relationship with D.T. Suzuki, the Buddhist scholar whose writing and teaching were and remain pivotal in the spread of Zen Buddhism to America and Europe.

The West has recently become much more open to the contributions of 'secularised' Buddhist practices (such as mindfulness and meditation); what Yanagi proposes is that the making and using

of craft objects can be, and even normally has been, an unacknowledged spiritual practice. That the problem it addresses is, to use a phrase borrowed from Zen Buddhism, 'the great matter of life and death', or in terms more familiar in the West, that of 'the human condition'.

In making his claims for the value of mingei, Yanagi was not arguing from a moral, sociological or political point of view, but from what he would have characterised as an aesthetic position, one absolutely engaged with our experience of the everyday world rather than with transcendental abstractions. His argument is about the material consequences that result from the different ways in which identity and a sense of self are formed by makers. It is in many ways a case study, looking at how these individual and collective identities are formed and operate, how makers approach and solve the problems raised by practising their craft, and how this is manifested in the objects they make.

The argument is based on a Buddhist analysis of the effects of the process by which we are all mutually and continuously creating identities and a sense of 'self'. Our identities are inevitably partial, temporary and contingent, but we struggle to make them appear consistent, stable and enduring. This struggle limits the flexibility and appropriateness of response to any situation. The attempt to separate out a stable and coherent 'self', that in turn confronts a world seen as 'outside', brings about a distortion of perception, judgement and action, the inevitable consequence of which is experienced as 'suffering'.

Our experience as 'artists' can be seen to be simply one instance of the whole problem of being human, our identities as artists a part of the fabrication of partial truths and fantasies that we all use to navigate our lives. Yanagi argues in effect that it is the nature of the identities constructed as 'fine artists' that limits the freedom and quality of their work, and that this is clearly visible in the vast bulk of what we call the 'fine arts'. By contrast, it is the essential anonymity of the mingei makers, their failure or inability to function as uniquely defined individuals, that disrupts this process, paradoxically allowing them a more genuinely free and creative response, evident in the objects that they make.

In fact, as early as the sixteenth century, the first great tea masters of Japan, trained in Zen Buddhism, had begun to recognise the unique value of what Yanagi would come to call mingei. They had begun to use and value cheap Korean imports intended for holding rice as their tea bowls, the very centre and focus of the emerging tea ceremony. Tea caddies and flower vases might be found from similarly unregarded and repurposed objects. The tea masters had come to choose these simple everyday objects because they felt they embodied a different kind of beauty, ultimately a deeper and richer kind than could be found in the use of rare and exotic materials and the tour de force of skill and patient labour normally characteristic of courtly arts across the world.

Likewise for Yanagi, the attraction to the kind of objects he came to term 'mingei' was that he felt they were differently and more truly beautiful. And he came to believe that the important point about this beauty was that it could be found not only in individual examples, in a specific tea bowl for instance, but to some degree in each and every object produced within the people's crafts. The origin of this beauty he traced to the way of making within the crafts, where the tradition itself provided a set of materials, designs and techniques that allowed makers to overcome their individual limitations and collectively produce work of the highest standard. For Yanagi it was the lack of the need for individualism and self-expression, the essential anonymity of their way of working, that allowed these men and women to work so well.

These are the heroes and heroines of mingei, the 'unknown' craftsmen and women. They usually had low social status, were poorly educated, often illiterate, and badly paid for their labour. Their working conditions might be difficult or even dangerous, their livelihood insecure. And these were the makers Yanagi proposed as in one sense the model for all creative work.

Interestingly though, and this has seemed hypocritical to Western critics, Yanagi also actively supported those contemporary artists working in what he saw as the mingei spirit, the spirit of those anonymous craftsmen and women, even when their work showed a high degree of originality and individuality. The printmaker Shiko Munakata, for example, became very famous and successful, his woodblock prints fitting comfortably alongside European expressionism, but his work is nevertheless included in the museum Yanagi founded, the mingei-kan, the Museum of Japanese Folkcrafts.

But if this were not the case, then the work of those anonymous craftsmen and women would stand as nothing but a rebuke to those of us who are makers today; it would simply be an evocation of a lost

Golden Age, a past Utopia. And as Yanagi's writings made clear, he was very aware that the conditions under which the makers of mingei had worked, and were still working, were often harsh and unstable, no timeless rural idyll in any way. Our own conditions are different, and present new problems and opportunities, but the challenge that Yanagi made remains.

Contemporary makers practising studio crafts in the West are much more in the position of the fine artist than the maker of mingei. We rely on carefully constructed and cultivated artistic identities that co-determine our practice as makers, creating boundaries of which we are unaware, or perhaps even regard as axiomatic to our practice. We have lost our innocence, and our work may be the poorer for it.

This challenge is that if we take the crafts seriously, if we accept that a pot made by an anonymous, illiterate and probably exploited artisan might be deeper and more beautiful than almost any sculpture, then how far and in what ways is it helpful or harmful for us as makers to act or be treated as fine artists? How do we honour and live within the traditions of the crafts, both by allowing them to support and sustain us, and contributing to their further evolution?

III

What did Yanagi mean by 'beauty'? To ignore, or not to take seriously Yanagi's description of the specific beauty of craft, and its relation to Buddhist practice, is to betray completely the radical project of his thought.

Mention was made above of the tea masters who, from the sixteenth century on, influenced Japanese taste, to the extent that you can describe a Zen 'style'. You can easily chart the stylistic shifts. But the development of tea was not originally about 'style' in any form but a way of seeing the world and a way of acting in it. It was absolutely 'aesthetic' in the sense of being about the direct perception of the object through the senses – primarily, of course, the eye and hand. It was absolutely not 'aesthetic' if by that we mean 'what I like and what I don't like', or about style, or a 'world of beauty' divorced from everyday life.

The tea masters developed their practice in the spirit of Zen Buddhism. The aim of Zen (though the very idea of aim or goal is foreign to Zen) could be said to be simply to see the world as it is, and to 'act appropriately', that is to see the world without the layers of conceptualisation, categorising and judging through which we create our identity and sense of self. To step out of the box we label 'I'. One useful image of meditation is that of muddy sediment settling in a glass of water. When the water is disturbed, the sediment clouds our vision but, as it settles, the water becomes clear.

The tea masters were looking for objects they could use in the tea ceremony – bowls, caddies, water jars, spoons, flower vases – that had a beauty about them that could not be categorised. A beauty that did not depend on costly or rare materials, on age or newness, on the virtuosity or hours of labour of the maker, or on their reputation. A beauty beyond the normal distinctions between beauty and ugliness. A bowl like this could become a fitting part of the active meditation that the tea ceremony should be. It was this beauty that Yanagi found in the objects he brought under the banner of mingei.

So, to avoid misunderstanding: Yanagi's argument around the mingei, the 'people's crafts', was in the first place about looking and using, about perceiving and acting. In recognising and writing about finding this beauty in the works made by common people rather than great artists – or even great artisans – there would inevitably be implications that were social, economic, political and philosophical. But primarily it is a recognition of a particular quality of practical beauty.

The 'unknown craftsmen' – the unnamed men and women who created these beautiful things –were by and large uneducated and poorly rewarded. But the tea masters who had appreciated their work, like Yanagi himself, were highly educated sophisticates, with many resources at their disposal. They used the particular beauty of these objects to refine their senses, to see the world as it is more clearly through direct perception. This is a hard and long practice, in fact it is interminable, with no end in sight. It's a process, a sophisticated striving towards simplicity.

Yanagi felt that the contemporary artist is in a similar position to the tea master or Zen student. Needing to get 'out of the box' of knowledge, taste, opinion, career, identity, of self-expression, to move closer to the position of the makers of mingei.

IV

The influence of Zen Buddhism in Japan is well known, if still poorly understood in the West; the

most popular forms of Buddhism in Japan, the Pure Land Schools, and in particular Shin Buddhism, have barely been heard of. If Zen was influential within the nobility and the merchant classes, Shin became the practice of the poor.

Within the tradition of Shin stand the figures of the 'myokonin', the poor, ill-educated, naive followers whose great faith in the Buddha brings them eventually to a deeper spiritual understanding than the trained priests who are their teachers. Such a one from the last century was Saichi, a wooden clog-maker, a maker of mingei, unusual only in that he wrote down his thoughts as he worked on the long wood-shavings produced in his workshop, keeping up a spiritual journal in this way for over thirty years.

Saichi could represent all those makers of mingei. Shin followers recognise their own limitations, their own endless fallibility, and place their reliance on a power beyond themselves, personified as the Buddha Amida. Yanagi argues that this is exactly analogous to the makers of mingei's faith in their craft, their own tradition, to overcome their personal limitations. 'True entrusting' is one translation of this attitude. True entrusting for the maker involves a confidence in the tradition within which one works, combined with a humility about one's own abilities, which is the opposite of a pride in one's 'self'.

So Yanagi is offering a choice of two complementary strategies: fine artists can choose to question their own identity, their own sense of self, as do diligent Zen students striving to cut through their personal perspective to see reality as it is. Makers of mingei, like the myokonin, rely on humble trust to overcome their personal limitations. An example, that perhaps has something of both: when asked why he was constructing his vast multi-chambered hillside kiln, the potter Shoji Hamada answered that he wanted *less* control over the firing process, trusting that this would produce more interesting results.

I think it is inescapable, unless we deliberately shut our eyes to it, that Yanagi is arguing that craft is capable of being much more than the making of useful things or things that are nice to look at. It is capable of being, and for much of its history has been, a deep spiritual practice, if by spiritual we don't mean otherworldly, but the process of being and acting in this very world, the here and now. I believe strongly that this needs saying, and needs repeating in today's world. To be clear, this is absolutely not to make the absurd suggestion that there is some spiritual essence of craft; 'craft' is not a thing at all, just a label we can use, it is always what we make it. But making in ways we can call craft clearly has the potential for a real and specific spiritual depth, or you could simply call it human depth. As makers, as viewers and users, as human beings, craft can help us get 'out of the box' of our preconceptions and fixations, and see and feel in new ways.

Equally though, there is no prescription for this. As a maker, like the myokonin, I have to accept that I'm deluded through and through. I like to think that there is an 'I' that is in control of my work, who is the author or lordly artist of it. The reality is somewhat different. I misunderstand what I'm doing, vanish down blind alleys, value the worthless elements in my work. I rely on a world I didn't create to provide me with all I need: tools developed over thousands of years, hands evolved over millions of years, and a raw material, wood, evolved over hundreds of millions, on a small rock in a backwater of a minor galaxy. Without all of this I'm nothing. The myokonins' answer to this is gratitude for what is given, and openness in accepting what is offered.

V

As a contemporary maker whose work provides some kind of living, I find that my livelihood depends exactly on using my training and imagination to develop an artistic personality, a 'self' which is the apparent sovereign of a body of work, an oeuvre, distinguishable from that of other makers. The work I make has to be always 'new', but still identifiably 'mine', in order to be understood and appreciated by my audience. But I don't even get to construct this 'self', because in part it's always constructed for me by galleries, curators, journalists and collectors, other makers ... I am only too aware of some of the limitations this places on me, and certainly entirely ignorant of others.

But this artistic self, no more than any other aspect of my 'personality', is never really fixed or consistent, and circumstances, the conditions under which work is made, can cause radical shifts that challenge who we think we are and how we work.

This summer I and my full-time collaborator, Gaynor Dowling, were lucky enough to be Resident Fellows at the Center for Art in Wood, in Philadelphia. For a full-time maker, the chance to make work away from commercial pressure for two whole months is wonderful, and the only brief was to 'do something different'. We did. It was a real chance to question every aspect of how we work, and to let go of our

own and other people's expectations of us and our work. We had originally applied and been selected for this residency several years ago, but were unable to take up the offer for family reasons. In retrospect, this actually had a very positive effect on us, both in nurturing our gratitude for getting there, and helping us simply to be open to what presented itself. To let go of our 'selves'.

One of the best things about our residency was the chance to work in a well-equipped but very conventional modern workshop alongside a thoughtful and skilled proponent of the use of hand tools, the woodworker and writer on things wooden, John Kelsey. We learnt that a new tool brings new possibilities, and this further helped us to abandon self-imposed limitations. Allowing myself, for example, to have the option of working with templates and making simple jigs has been a revelation. It sounds stupidly simple, but this is the kind of decision from which dramatic change can be made.

We chose, inadvertently perhaps, to set ourselves a specific problem, which would transform what we make. That our heavy and (literally) solid vessels should now contain, if nothing else, space and light. They would acquire interiors. Gaynor's training was in textiles and being able to use this within our collaborative work has been a long-time aspiration. So the obvious choice for us was to use stitch as a way of joining wood elements that might or might not be carved. It quickly became clear that we would not be able to find the large sections of seasoned hardwood we had always used at home. So we began to use plywood boards and veneer, not because we had chosen them, but because they were there, and in this sense chose us. We had no idea that this would lead us to using these (for us) new and unlikely materials for their structural properties, the different ways of using their tension itself as a way of shaping. Suddenly (and it did seem very sudden) our heavy and very earthy work became light as a feather, found wings, and took flight.

So we have changed our relationship to 'woodwork', and benefited. The surprising conclusion of the residency is to see how easy it is, when you change the working conditions and context, for radically different work to appear. We have a certain range of skills and experience, but those can manifest themselves in infinitely varied forms, depending solely on the conditions. We have returned, I think, with different 'selves' and a different way of working within our tradition.

And of course collaboration itself is always a challenge to self ... are we one or are we two? This came up several times during the residency, and of course the answer is always, in good Zen terms, not one, not two ...

This residency was for us a chance to challenge our own and others' assumptions about our 'selves' both as people and as makers, of course you can't really separate the two. It will take time to see what effect this has, what we think of our new work as it develops, and what others think of the changes in it and in us. This is, in the sense I have been talking about, practical spiritual work, the problem of how to make, and who it is who is making, anyway? Nothing special.

VI

There is no real conclusion to this paper ... just more questions. Would Yanagi have agreed with my argument, or have recognised my image of his writing? I really can't say, and that's not really the point. His clear positions on the potential value of craft making as spiritual work, and the complexity of making valid work in modern society still stand and, a few worthy platitudes apart, are still largely unrecognised. Beyond that, my reading of him is a response from the workbench, a maker's grateful thanks for the questions that still confront him in each day's work.

Note

1. *The Unknown Craftsman* is a series of Yanagi's essays and lectures assembled, translated and edited by Bernard Leach. The clearest statement of the argument is in the lecture 'The Buddhist idea of beauty', though Yanagi's style is evocative and descriptive rather than analytic. The Suzuki book is a transcript of a series of lectures on Shin Buddhism given late in life by a Zen Buddhist who had grown up in a Shin community, and show the point at which Zen and Shin converge, and implicitly perhaps also where the mingei maker and the fine artist might meet.

References

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The Center for Art in Wood website: www.centerforartinwood.org/

The blog for the Philadelphia Residency: http://internationalturningexchange.wordpress.com