

Womanizing Mingei
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My summer research project brings to light the role of women, named and unnamed, in the Mingei (folk craft) movement of 20th century Japan. Involved in the movement's inception and mobilization, women made significant yet little-known contributions to the Japanese art world and society at large. My research will continue into this academic year and will serve as the basis for my honors project with the Asian Studies department.

A large amount of Mingei scholarship comprises the work of its founding figure, art critic and historian Muneyoshi Yanagi. The dearth of female scholars and writers within Mingei, in addition to the principle of the "unknown craftsman" that characterized the practice itself, offers a partial explanation for the absence of women- they simply worked behind the scenes, their creations celebrated but their achievements forgotten. My research aims to push back against this explanation by portraying Mingei in two iterations; its fledgling phase as an ideology, and its transition into a social mechanism during wartime. Both of these iterations capitalize from female labor, with a shared ultimate end of hyperproductivity.

According to the writings of Yanagi himself, much of this aesthetic inspiration came from the Korean peninsula, then a colonial territory of Japan. What stood out most to Japanese collectors was the abundance of cheap pottery belonging to the Yi Dynasty, the period that preceded Japan's occupation. In their writing about this pottery, Japanese scholars and collectors regularly assume the position of a consumer, or rather a master looking upon a subject; claiming the Japanese gaze is qualified to evaluate and fully understand the aesthetic principles of craft.

When reading the work of Japanese collectors, one will immediately notice the feminizing language used to discuss Korean objects. A Korean water jug is described as being the same shape as a girl's breast, a sensual "form to be loved". A Korean woman is portrayed as a "walking porcelain jar", turning the woman into an object that captivated and enraptured the gaze of a collector, more often than not a Japanese man. The eroticization of Korean ceramics in their subtle, humble, and unique beauty spread further to describe the entirety of Korea as feminine; with landscape, people, and things merging into one homogenous identity under the Japanese gaze.

The second iteration of my research begins in 1940, when Mingei transitioned from a category of craft to a model of social mobilization. As Japan entered the war and men left home to join the front lines, both single women and mothers were brought into the workforce, many of them in textiles or parts manufacturing. As this became synonymous with the Mingei custom of mass production, the newly formed Mingei Association considered it a fine model to operate a workplace and ultimately a society.

This utilization of the Mingei ideology in factories across Japan ultimately trained women to become more useful and productive farmwives, as many of them came from rural families. In addition to their industrial labor for the state, part of their work entailed honing their homemaking skills towards the destinations of wife and mother. The "factory girl project", as it became known, is a microcosm of the exploitative gaze embedded in the history of Mingei and colonial art collection as a whole. To be a mingei woman is to be the fetish of the gaze of Japanese collectors, and the laborer of a warring nation at its peak; ultimately a nameless and faceless vehicle for the desires of male figures now celebrated as figureheads of the movement.

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