

## **Mingei: Japanese Folk Art from the Montgomery Collection**

### **Mingei: Japanese Folk Art**

Until the arrival of Europeans in Japan in the 1870s, the Japanese did not differentiate between fine arts and functional arts or crafts. In pre-industrial Japan, aesthetic objects, whether designed for daily or special use, fit Allan Kaprow's description of "life-like" art, in which art is connected to life and everything else. This attitude is the opposite of the traditional Western view of objects as "art-like" art, in which art is separate from life and everything else.

The influences of Zen Buddhism and the four basic Buddhist principles of harmony, respect, purity, and tranquility were reflected in all aspects of Japanese life - in architecture, gardens, household furnishings, the tea ceremony, scroll and screen paintings, and in ordinary objects of daily use, for all levels of society. Objects created by painters, sculptors, and architects were seen as equally valuable to the work of potters, weavers, lacquerers, carpenters, sword smiths, and other artisans. Despite the influences of Western culture, this aesthetic of simplicity and functionality continues today to represent typically Japanese attitudes towards life.

Because of this aesthetic view of life, the concept of Mingei, Japanese folk art, is fairly recent to Japan. The word Mingei, which means "art of the people," was coined by Soetsu Yanagi (1889 - 1961) in the 1920s from the words min (people) and gei (arts) to represent objects of everyday use made for and by ordinary people.

Yanagi was a Japanese philosopher (perhaps an aesthetician in modern terms), writer, social critic, and collector who were influenced by the ideas of William Morris, the founder of the Arts & Crafts movement in England in the 19th century. The Arts and Crafts movement was an effort to preserve and maintain the traditions of finely designed and crafted handmade functional objects in response to the rise of industrialization. Yanagi applied these aims to the preservation of the folk arts of the people of Japan, a country also affected by industrialization.

Yanagi believed that the directness and honesty of Mingei represented the truest expression of Japan's cultural heritage. He introduced the idea of Mingei into Japan and founded the Nippon Mingeikan, Japan's first folk art museum in 1936. According to Yanagi, objects that work well are inherently beautiful, so the beauty of Mingei is inseparable from its function.

Yanagi suggested specific characteristics for Mingei:

- Mingei is functional, made to be used, and actually used, for it is only with use that an object becomes beautiful. The appreciation of a beautiful thing is only complete when the object is put into actual use.
- Mingei is utilitarian-oriented, commonplace ordinary objects for everyday use.
- Mingei is made by hand from natural materials, with truth to the materials.
- Mingei is well-crafted of high quality materials.

- Mingei is made with unornamented simplicity.
- Mingei is inexpensive and made for and by the masses.
- Mingei is honest, simple, and pure.
- Mingei is designed to be appreciated through everyday usage, not through display.
- Traditional Mingei is anonymous, not attributed to a single artist.

A contemporary revision of attitudes toward Mingei is the recognition of the individual artist or artisan. This appreciation and the desire to maintain traditional Japanese skills and knowledge are shown in Japan's designation of respected artisans and craftspeople as *ningen kokuho*, or Living National Treasures. This designation includes makers of pottery, textiles, lacquerware, swords, paper, and other aesthetic, functional objects. Living National Treasures receive government stipends, are honored in annual exhibitions, and, most importantly, preserve Japanese traditions by training a new generation of artisans in their particular specialties.

The folk art objects in *Mingei: Japanese Folk Art from the Montgomery Collection* offer a particularly accessible entry into Japanese life and aesthetics of the Meiji Period (1868-1912). This exhibition, containing a number of objects that have never been previously shown, is made possible through the generosity of the collector, Jeffrey Montgomery.

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### **PALACE DOLL: LITTLE BOY WEARING THE HAT OF A SAMBASO DANCER**

**Edo Period, nineteenth century**

**Clay coated with polished gesso; applied cloth garment**

Dolls like this one were made in Kyoto to be given to the feudal lords by members of the Imperial court. During the Edo period, the daimyo, feudal lords from every province in Japan, were required to spend half of each year in Edo with their Shogun, the powerful military leader of the feudal lords who ruled Japan in the name of the Emperor. The families of the daimyo were required to stay in Edo while the lords left to tend to their own lands at home.

This system of moving back and forth between Edo and the daimyo's own territory was enforced in order to discourage revolts.

The daimyo passed through Kyoto, the Imperial capital, as they traveled to and from Edo. They often presented gifts in Kyoto to the Imperial family and members of the Court. The Court members began a tradition of giving palace dolls to the daimyo in return. Originally these dolls were toys made for children at the Imperial Court, but they are usually more elegant and carefully crafted than other types of Japanese dolls.

The faces are quite delicate and detailed, and the dolls have a lustrous white skin. To obtain this lustre, the maker of the doll would carefully polish the gesso which covers the clay or wood of which the dolls are made. The dolls usually are dressed in minimal garments of actual silk fabric. The hat on this doll is that of a sambaso dancer. The hat is tall with a pyramidal top and a red sun disc painted on either side. Samboso is an ancient dance used as a prelude to theatrical performances of the Noh theater at the beginning of the New Year.

Few dolls such as this one have survived. They are prized as family treasures and, consequently, very few have left Japan.

**Questions to consider:**

Look carefully at the Palace Doll. How is it similar to dolls given to children in our culture? In what ways is it different?

Would you like to play with this doll? What clothes and accessories would you want to have with it?

If you owned this doll, where would you keep it in your house? Describe the place and tell why you would put it there.

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### **KETTLE-HOOK HANGER (JIZAI-GAKE)** **Late Edo to early Meiji Period, nineteenth century** **Zelkova wood (keyaki)**

The two main types of kettle-hooks used in homes and businesses in Japan were named for the two principal household gods, Ebisu and Daikoku. These two gods were thought to be very important for the family's happiness and prosperity. Ebisu is the God of Daily Food and Daikoku is the God of Wealth.

Some kettle-hooks, the Ebisu type, were made from the natural fork of a tree branch, but this more elaborate hook is an example of the Daikoku type. It was cut from a single large piece of wood (the transverse peg at upper center is a separate piece) and has an inverted "V" shaped piece that reminds the Japanese of Daikoku's floppy hat.

The stirrup-shaped wooden device from which the hook is suspended takes the place of the thick rope that usually suspended hooks over the fire. Because a fire was kept in an open hearth in the center of the floor, the kettle-hook was always in view of guests to the home or business. Well-to-do farmers and merchants competed with each other to have the most impressive hanger made from the finest wood available with the best craftsmanship. A hook might be larger than was necessary in order to impress visitors with the owner's good taste and affluence.

This kettle-hook is made from zelkova wood, the most expensive wood used for this purpose. The finest hooks have a clear lacquer finish like this one which shows the beautiful, flame-like grain of the wood and a rich, orange color typical of zelkova wood.

An object as fine as this one might be thought of as a piece of sculpture that also served a function for its owner, who was perhaps an important merchant whose house was also his place of business.

### **Questions to consider:**

Think about the pot that might have hung from this hook. How big do you think it would be?

How large do you think the fireplace would have to be to accommodate a hook as big as this one?

If you were to visit the home or business of the owner of this kettle-hook, would you be impressed? What do you find impressive?

What kinds of useful objects might be impressive in our homes? How do we use them to express our taste and impress our visitors?

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### **SAKE KEG WITH "HORNS" (TSUNO-DARU)**

**Meiji Period, nineteenth century**

**Lacquer on wood and bamboo**

Because the two vertical slats extend upward beyond the horizontal handle, this type of keg is called a tsuno-daru or "keg with horns." The extending horns serve no necessary function and were formed in this way solely for decorative purposes. The keg is coated with maroon-colored lacquer on the lower half and red lacquer on the upper half.

The name of the shop and the name of the owner appear on one of the horns; the address of the wine shop is shown on the other. The shop's crest, composed of the characters for "mountain" and "good luck," appears on the top of the keg.

The keg is made to hold sake, a type of wine made from rice. It often is used for engagement and wedding celebrations. Traditional Japanese customs required that young people follow a certain procedure when they were ready to marry. When a young man or woman wished to marry, their parents would ask their friends to look for a suitable partner. If a suitable person was found, the parents asked someone to arrange a meeting of the young people and their parents and relatives. The meeting would be planned to appear as if it happened by chance. If all parties were satisfied with the first meeting and after any further questions were answered about the families and the two young people, a day could be set for the formal proposal of marriage.

On the proposal day, the young man's family would send a trusted friend to the girl's house to make the proposal. This person would take gifts that might include silk dresses, fish, and sake in a keg such as this one. After the father accepted the gifts and gave a receipt to the person who brought them, the engagement could be announced and preparations for the wedding could begin.

### **Questions to consider:**

Compare and contrast the differences in traditional marriage customs in Japan and in our culture. How do young people in the United States find a partner to marry? Imagine what it would be like for your friends and family to choose your future marriage partner.

Are gifts exchanged between the future bride and groom in our country? What does the man sometimes give to the woman to indicate that they are engaged?

Do you know of ways in which cultures other than your own arrange and celebrate engagements or weddings? Describe what you know about these arrangements and celebrations?



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### **FESTIVAL MASK (KONOHA-TENGU)**

**Edo Period, nineteenth century**

**Lacquer**

Rural villagers imagine that tengu, playful demons, live in Japan's remote mountains and forests. They believe that when a tengu travels about among humans, he carries a sword and wears a monk's robe with a pillbox-type cap. Two types of tengu are believed to exist. The type depicted in this mask has a fierce expression with a long nose. The second type has a huge beak in place of a nose.

Masks like this were worn by performers who danced in annual festivals held at local shrines throughout Japan. Festivals were very important to the agricultural society of this time. The most important ones were held at New Year's, during the spring plowing, during the midsummer growth time, at the fall harvest time, and in the middle of the winter snow. The festival held during the winter was primarily to request renewal of the yearly fertile cycle.

These festivals were meant to entertain and to please the spirits in order to insure good crops. The festivals also provided some of the only entertainment and rest from harsh farm work that was the life of the peasants. Music and dancing were an important part of the festivals and while the masks, dancing, and music might vary from one village to another, the general pattern was the same.

Festivals often lasted most of the night with much drinking, eating, and boisterous celebration. The music was usually provided by three drummers and a flute player. The dancers usually wore masks. Because magic was associated with the number three, the dance movements were repeated in sets of three.

**Questions to consider:**

Think of the many different types of masks used in our culture. List some that are worn for celebrations and some that are worn for other purposes. Describe the masks, what they represent, and what purpose they serve. Your list may be longer than you expected!

Do you know of masks used by other cultures for special purposes? Describe them and their purposes.

In Japan, the festivals gave people a chance to have fun and take a rest from their strenuous farm work. What celebration in our culture celebrates a plentiful growing season? Can you think of another holiday that gives workers a day to rest from their hard work? How are these holidays celebrated?

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### **SETO WARE OIL PLATE (ABURA-ZARA): PAMPAS GRASS (SUSKI)** **Edo Period, first half of the nineteenth century** **Glazed stoneware**

Interior lighting was provided during the Edo period by oil lamps. Light came from the flame of the oil lamp supported inside a lantern-like, paper covered wooden frame. Below the oil lamp, on the base of the wooden frame, sat the oil plate. It was placed there to catch any oil drippings that might start a fire. Late in the nineteenth century when gaslights and electricity were introduced, these oil lamps became obsolete.

This plate was made in the town of Seto. Seto has been a major center for the production of ceramics since the Kamakura Period (1185-1334), and it continues to be important today. Three types of plates were produced by the Seto kilns in the late Edo period. The three standard types of plates produced there were the stone plates, horse-eye plates, and oil plates.

Horse-eye plates always have the same design and were used for serving food. The stone plates and oil plates, also called lamp plates, differ in that they are not all alike and can be decorated with a wide variety of designs.

The Seto Ware Oil Plate with Pampas Grass is an example of Oribe ware which was developed at the Mino kilns during the early part of the seventeenth century. A group of potters from Seto fled the large ceramic center during a civil war in the second half of the sixteenth century. Subsequently, they began to produce ceramics in the city of Mino. They became famous for tea ceremony ware called Oribe Ware, named for the famous tea master Furuta Oribe (1545-1615) who invented the style. The Oribe style usually has bold designs with one side dipped in green glaze. This style was later appropriated by the Seto kilns and is still made today.

Pampas grass is often seen in Japanese art. The tall stalks are simple and elegant, dancing

in the wind. In Japan, this motif can symbolize the autumn of the year and fallen warriors of ancient battles.

**Questions to consider:**

If you did not know the use for which this plate was made, what would you have guessed its function might be?

The pampas grass is very graceful and simple. What tool(s) do you think the maker of this plate used to make it? Describe the tool(s).

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### **TRAY (BON): PINE TREE (MATSU)**

**Edo Period, nineteenth century**

**Lacquer on wood**

The tray shows a graceful pine tree, a tree often depicted in Japanese art. Pines withstand strong winds, rain, sleet, and snow, survive in rocky areas, and may live for several centuries. In Japan, the pine tree, plum tree, and bamboo are sometimes referred to as "The Three Friends of Winter" because they stay green during the winter.

The pine tree has been used in China to symbolize longevity and resilience since ancient times. This metaphor was later adopted in Korea and Japan. Along windy seacoasts and craggy mountains, pine trees blown by strong winds can develop interesting shapes suggesting dancers swaying in the wind. Well-to-do Japanese enjoy having pine trees in their gardens, where they can be trained and pruned into graceful, rhythmical shapes. Bonsai, or miniature, potted pines are treated in much the same way to produce a very small example of these lovely shapes.

This tray is carved from wood, then decorated with numerous layers of lacquer. The design is painted with oil paints on a background of red lacquer. The oil paints are similar to those used by artists in the West and in present-day Japan. This was a common technique for decorating folk lacquer pieces during the Edo period. However, the use of oil painting on lacquer was not an influence from the West, but came from China where the technique was used during the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644).

Raw lacquer comes from the sap of the Oriental sumac tree and is a sticky, poisonous substance. It can cause a rash on the skin with only brief contact and lacquer artists must gradually build up immunity to it. Lacquer requires a very humid environment in which to dry—a special wet room with extremely high humidity. However, once the pieces are dry the lacquer is quite hard and is impervious to normal liquids, including alcohol and solvents.

### **Questions to consider:**

Have you seen pine trees in our state or in other parts of the United States? In what areas do they grow? Do they look like the ones painted on this tray? Describe any similarities

and differences.

In Japanese art some trees, flowers, and animals are symbols for ideas, concepts, or qualities. What are some trees, flowers, and animals that have special symbolism for people in the culture in which you live?