

Aleksandra Ciešliczka

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Doctoral School of Humanities  
University of Lodz

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## THE BOUNDARY BETWEEN THE ART AND PRODUCT

On the meaning and form of *kōgei*  
in the past and present

### ON THE INTRICACIES OF AESTHETICS

What can an average person who is not keenly interested in art history associate the term “Japanese art” with? Will it be Hokusai’s fabulous woodcuts, intricately crafted lacquerware, elegant calligraphy on silk or decorative ceramics? Over the centuries, Japanese arts and crafts have gone through many stages, exhibiting a rich diversity of techniques and media – from initial domestic production, through the *sakoku* period, the time of Western influences, wars and crises, economic prosperity, up to modern times—in which the entirety of inspiration and various aspects that create the image of today’s Japanese culture culminate. However, there is a certain conviction about the timelessness of Japanese aesthetic thought, manifesting itself regardless of the time of creation of a given object, as well as the universality of “Japanese culture” for contemporary audiences in the world. In the world, Japan is perceived as a country that has always tried to include the element of beauty in its products, doing so in an unforced and unpretentious way. Of course, it takes both hard work and talent. For a very long time, Japanese creations completely escaped the academic categories of fine arts established in the Western world. Usually, when art is mentioned, it means works of art and hence so-called fine arts. In Japan, however, the

element of the same aesthetic quality could be found in quite mundane areas of life, such as the art of the garden, the art of tea and the art of flower arrangement. Nevertheless, searching for the unique artistic concept and immaterial essence of Japanese culture in every object seems to be quite an overinterpretation.

Nonetheless, for Europeans it was unprecedented – unusual, but interesting – to associate ordinary, everyday activities or objects with what once seemed to be the high status of art. Although the ancient Greeks had long used the idea of *techné* as a broad concept that encompassed various arts in its meaning, in Western culture this idea was not adopted and replaced by a rather limited field of “fine arts”. After all, aesthetics itself, understood scientifically as a philosophy of art is a modern, eighteenth-century European creation. Defining fine arts as a separate category, of course, had its consequences. The element of aesthetic and visual pleasure was put in opposition to practical aspects. A separate field of “applied arts” emerged, in which the aesthetic part could come only with the emergence of a utilitarian function. However, such approach to the matter meant that applied arts began to be perceived as less significant than “true” fine arts. It also caused the fine arts to drift away from ordinary life. Naturally, the model of perception of the issue of aesthetics created by Europeans, along with all the terms, did not refer to art created by other cultures outside the European circle at the time.<sup>1)</sup>

When writing about Japanese aesthetics, one must remember that almost all statements about it can be easily refuted. Aesthetics are created by man and are a reflection of his attitude to reality and the idea of beauty, and it evolves. What shapes aesthetics is not only subject to changes in the sociological and historical context, but also depends on the subjective impressions and personal thoughts of the individual. It is not easy to designate any fixed aesthetic categories for a given culture. In his publications, Donald Keene, a specialist in the field of Japanese culture, wondered how much influence the aesthetic preferences of the Japanese have on their everyday life. As it turns out, they leave their mark on nearly all aspects of existence. Moreover, even in many classic literary works, issues related to the aesthetic qualities of life are discussed first, and only then are the relationships with fine arts considered. Examples of particular interest are the essays *In Praise of the Shadow* by Jun’ichirō Tanizaki and *The Structure of Iki* by Shūzō Kuki. Furthermore, many of the terms related to art, such as *shibui*, *wa*, *mono no aware* or, very

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<sup>1)</sup> Wilkoszewska (2012: 15–16).

popular nowadays, *wabi-sabi*, also apply to everyday activities. It is also worth noting that many of these terms are essentially untranslatable into foreign languages, and we are not able to fully reflect their original meaning. On longer study, we find that we cannot directly transfer our Western thought patterns or concepts and compare them directly with other cultures.<sup>2)</sup>

## BETWEEN “ARTS” AND “CRAFTS”

Pre-modern Japan’s boundary between artist and craftsman, art and product, fine arts and craftsmanship, has always been an interesting, if ambiguous, issue for researchers. As it turns out, before the late nineteenth century, Japanese society used various terms to describe the creators of art and beautiful objects. However, there was no clear division into categories that would differentiate them in some way: both in terms of linguistics and general awareness. All professionals who engaged in handicrafts – regardless of whether they created everyday objects such as paper, baskets, ceramics, or products that are now associated with the “typical” understanding of fine arts (such as *ukiyo-e* graphics) – were called *shokunin*. The word meant “a man who possesses some skill”. Only painters and calligraphers who worked for the court or samurai were not referred to by this expression as they had a higher social status than other artists.<sup>3)</sup>

Similarly with the definition of arts or crafts themselves. In fact, the Japanese did not have a single term that would encompass the concept of “art” until late 19th century. Noriyaki Kitazawa, in his book *Me no shinden* (1989), analysed the whole process that resulted in the term *bijutsu* (art as in *beaux arts*). And, according to the author, it was some sort of translation of the term *Schöne Kunst* (or perhaps *Kunstgewerbe*), which was created in 1871 for the purpose of participating in the Vienna Exposition (1873), simultaneously being a symbolic beginning of a new hierarchy in art administration in Japan. The *bijutsu* neologism, which was created for the needs of the foreign exhibition and audience, combined the aspect of beauty (*bi*) with the previously known Chinese word *geijutsu* (“cultivated skill”), which was originally used to describe the skills that scholar-intellectuals must master. Soon, more genres emerged from *bijutsu*, based on the nomenclature transferred from

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<sup>2)</sup> Keene (2001: 49).

<sup>3)</sup> Graham (2014: 80).

the Western world. Categories such as *chokoku*, *kaiga* and the titular *kōgei* were created.<sup>4)</sup>

Interestingly, the first appearance of the word *kōgei* dates back to ancient times, in the Chinese *Tang Shu* book. However, there is no indication that it was widely used in ancient Japan. It was only due to the mission statement issued by the Ministry of Industry in 1871 that the word became commonly used. In the beginning, the word *kōgei* (as “craft”) was used in the 1870s to refer to all kinds of arts, including industrial production. However, the organizers of the international exhibition required the strict division of Japanese products into “arts” and “crafts”, signalling at the same time that crafts are placed below art in the hierarchy. Because Japan had not yet developed the idea of “creative art” at that time, Japanese artists tried in all possible ways to give their products an “artistic” expression (which was manifested, for example, in decorating ceramics with “paintings” instead of ornaments, so that they could become qualified for the adequate, “higher” category). On the other hand, the need to separate purely aesthetic objects and practical, often machine-made, products became more and more apparent. Such a policy was pursued by two officials – art administrators – Ryuichi Kuki and Tenshin Okakura. They strived to ensure that Japanese “art craft” was also recognized as a full-fledged “art” in the world. Eventually, Japan had to adapt to generally accepted principles, which considered “art” only the creative work of individual artists, even though most Japanese “art craft” were products of workshops, guilds, or companies. It also often happened that some of the works produced by this type of workshop were submitted to exhibitions under the name of the director, who had nothing to do with the actual creative process. The debate over the definition of arts and crafts continued until 1900 when the Paris Exposition Universelle took place. It was then that Tadamasa Hayashi took the position of chief secretary for the Temporary Exposition Office. He was an independent art dealer in Paris with many contacts in the foreign artistic environment. And it was he who drew attention to the difference in perception of the issue of art between the West and Japan. Thanks to his commitment and the fact that he raised this issue, there was a correction in the rules for submitting exhibition applications. Originally, according to French organizers, art objects should present an individual, unique creative idea, and at the same time capture the Japanese spirit. The new rules made it possible to consider as a work of art an object within

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<sup>4)</sup> Satō (2011: 66–67).

which each artist expresses his own design and technique, while following the general principles of aesthetics. Instead of the term *bijutsu kōgei* (art craft), *yūtō kōgei* (superior craft) has been used, further emphasizing the separation of crafts from “art”. This arrangement caught on quite well, which was most likely because most of the craftsmen came from the former middle and lower class, while renowned painters (and also the current governors) – from the former samurai rank. In addition, due to the economic and political situation, partly resulting from the first Sino-Japanese war (1894–1895), the mechanical industry (*kōgyō*) began to develop rapidly and soon became an independent area. Initially, the expressions *kōgei* and *kōgyō* were used interchangeably, but over time, they acquired separate meanings. The term *kōgei* began to be used more and more often to indicate items manufactured by hand, individually (such as pottery, lacquerware or any other type of artistic, utilitarian objects that did not fit in the Western category of art, which was mainly restricted to paintings and sculptures), while *kōgyō* implied products manufactured by machine and on a mass scale. Thus, a new division of categories was formed in the consciousness of people, where crafts were situated between art and mechanical industry: being a kind of link between these two areas. Even so, the difference between *kōgei* and *bijutsu kōgei* was small but significant. In one of the documents on the proposal to establish an imperial museum, there was an explanation that *kōgei* means industry, while *bijutsu kōgei* is art industry (which can be understood as “crafts as arts”). And although institutionally the division between the two was clear, in practice this concept was still not fully understood.<sup>5)</sup>

The problem revealed by the exhibition in Paris was the fact that, among the ubiquitous Art Nouveau style, Japanese art still remained in its old, traditional aesthetics, which seemed to be archaic and detached from the others. A Japanese official critical report that was written at that time highlighted all the features and elements of the exhibits that fell below expectations. It was noticed then that some of the objects were too monotonous when it came to patterns, with undifferentiated shapes, indicating a lack of commitment or alleged that they were simply too luxurious and impractical. The situation was summed up four years later by Fukuchi Fukuichi – a design instructor at the Tokyo School of Fine Arts – in *Bijutsu Shinpo*. He wrote then that Japanese “art craft” has not kept up with the global design market for a long time. While in Europe and United States, people are already designing accord-

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<sup>5)</sup> Ajioka (2012: 410–12).

ing to new tastes, with the use of new technologies. The pressure to match the Western world was intense.<sup>6)</sup>

## POLITICS OF ARTS AND CRAFTS IN THE ERA OF MODERNIZATION

Since the ending of isolation period and beginning of the Meiji restoration in 1868, the craft industry had been undergoing a fundamental transformation, both in terms of the production system and the status of the arts. The political system change – the unification of the feudal domains, the collapse of shogunate – caused a decline in demand, leaving the artisans to their own devices on the free market. Competition in the world design market and mass production, which were obvious and inevitable in the West, were a novelty in Japan. The initial delight and European fashion for Japan served as a stimulus and motivation for even better projects. Japanese manufactures, which so far only competed on the local market, did not have to change their patterns and forms immediately, because their products were popular. However, over time, as the fashion for Japan was drawing to a close, sales suffered as well. It was necessary to adapt quickly to the needs of the overseas market, and as the Japanese government wanted to acquire foreign currency, it supported all kinds of improvements. An attempt to transform Japan into a modern nation had begun. The direct exchange with Europe and America that followed then brought with it two contrasting phenomena: Westernization and Japanese cultural nationalism. That nationalism also resulted in an increased interest in traditional culture, including craftsmanship. Therefore, Japan tried to impress the rest of the world, establish a reputation, develop and benefit from technological innovations similar to the West. And at the same time, they still wanted to emphasize the continuity of the past and tradition. The famous phrase *tōyō dōtoku, sei'yō gakugei* coined by a politician Shōzan Sakuma seems to perfectly illustrate the vision of Japanese modernization, as it can be translated as “Eastern spirit, Western technology”.<sup>7)</sup>

Japan tried to implement its strategy by participating in the world exhibitions, sending delegations to study Western techniques, investing in the education system and locally organized museums and exhibitions, as well as

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<sup>6)</sup> Sigur (2008: 53–54).

<sup>7)</sup> Saito (1999: 3).

implementing a series of measures. “Art craft” was shaped during the Meiji period by the government, Imperial Household, producers, and dealers. It was they who, through the directions they set and the financial support they provided, decided what artistic creativity should look like. Many institutions and associations dealing with craftsmanship and design had also developed, organized, and supervised by the state. The *Seihin Gazu-gakari* (The Government Craft Design Office) was established as a branch within the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Its existence resulted in the formation of *Ryuchikai* (the Japan Art Association) in 1879, whose main intention was to promote the local craft and industry by encouraging the creation of products that suited Western tastes.<sup>8)</sup>

In 1890, the Imperial Household Agency and the Ministry of Education have undertaken supporting solutions for *bijutsu kōgei*: exceptional craft objects intended for export which were considered of national importance and granted the highest status among modern crafts. The first appointment system was called *Teishitsu Gigeiin* (Imperial Court Artists). Artisans named under the title of “Imperial Arts and Crafts Experts” received support in exchange for creating works for the international exhibitions. In the following years, the idea was followed by several similar systems. For example, in 1919, the title was changed to the appointment to *Teikoku Bijutsuin/Geijutsuin Kaiin* (Members of the Imperial Academy of Arts). After the Second World War, it has been replaced by the title *Nihon Geijutsuin Kaiin* (Members of the Japan Academy of Arts). And finally, in 1955, the title *Jyuyo Mukei Bunkazai* (Important Intangible Cultural Property, which was colloquially known as *Ningen Kokuho*: Living National Treasure) was invented by the Ministry of Education.<sup>9)</sup>

At that time, two narratives developing in parallel could be observed in Japan. Imperial commissions both required inspiration from the rich tradition of Japanese art, but were to be interpreted to appeal to modern, Western audiences. Thus, a kind of academism prevailed until the turn of the twentieth century. Only with the beginning of the next century, did actual attempts to come up with a new concept of craftsmanship become more and more visible. The newly established schools of arts, crafts (*Kōgei Gakkō*) and industrial design (*Kōgyo Gakkō*) also played a particularly important role here, where classes were conducted by recognized professionals and whose young gradu-

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<sup>8)</sup> Morais (2019: 140).

<sup>9)</sup> Kikuchi (2006: 85).

ates were to constitute the new generation of craft makers. One of the first such centres was the Imperial College of Engineering, founded in 1871. More than 10 years later, Kaijiro Notomi established Kanazawa Kōgyō Gakkō, which is considered the first school of design in Japan.<sup>10)</sup> Another institution that went down in history was The Tokyo School of Fine Arts, whose pupils created new, interesting patterns for producers of ceramics, textiles and lacquerware. Two other schools were established in 1902 and 1921: The Kyoto Kōtō Kōgei Gakkō (Kyoto Higher Technical School) and Tokyo Kōtō Kōgei Gakkō<sup>11)</sup> (Tokyo Higher School of Arts and Technology). In 1928, the Kōgei Shidōsho (National Craftworks Institute, from 1952 renamed as the Sangyo Kōgei Shikensho – Industrial Arts Research Institute) was formed by the Ministry of Commerce and Industry to review the traditional techniques of indigenous local handicrafts. The idea behind it was to promote export but also to utilize the labour of the depressed farm villages by industrializing traditional and local handicraft.<sup>12)</sup> Kunii Kitaro, the first director of the Kōgei Shidōsho defined this production as *sangyo kōgei*, which meant native industrial products including both hand and machine-made objects for daily use, which combine the elements of art and technology, unifying utility and beauty.<sup>13)</sup>

All these institutions, factors and activities contributed to the diversification of the approach to craftsmanship and design. Some artists returning from overseas began to create according to Western patterns, others appreciated family aesthetics again, and for others such journeys constituted a complete breakthrough, and they began to question both models and look for their own, individual artistic path.<sup>14)</sup>

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<sup>10)</sup> Margolin (2015: 439).

<sup>11)</sup> In 1937, the director of Tokyo Koto Kōgei Gakko, Rokuzo Yasuda presented an English paper entitled “Applied Art Industry in Japan” at an international conference to outline the idea of the Japanese *kōgei* for the foreigners. There was also a discussion about the translation of the word *kōgei* into English. Yasuda then stated that it can be translated as “artistic industry” which equates to the term “applied arts” known in the Western world. At the same time, he noted that the ideal definition of *kōgei* may be impossible to achieve, although he himself presented his version of “artistic industry” as production concerned with everyday objects that should have a pleasant visual layer, but also be utilitarian.

<sup>12)</sup> Kōgei Shidōsho also published magazines such as Kōgei Shidō (Instructions on Crafts) and Kōgei Nyūsu (Industrial Art News).

<sup>13)</sup> Amagai (2016: 107).

<sup>14)</sup> Huppertz (2018: 39–40).



DOMESTIC EXHIBITIONS AND A DISCUSSION  
ON CATEGORIZATION

Another way to promote and stimulate the progress of modernization, as well as the interaction of native artists, was to organize domestic exhibitions. Unfortunately, however, it was not possible to avoid competition, separation and unfair valuation of arts and crafts, which took place in the case of world exhibitions. In fact, initially the *Bunten* (*Mombushō Bijutsu Tenrankai* – The Ministry of Education Art Exhibition) created in 1907 and renamed *Teiten* (*Teikoku Bijutsu Tenrankai* – Imperial Academy Art Exhibition) in 1919, which was an important, government-sponsored, annual Japanese art exhibition, only showed works of “fine arts”, completely excluding craft from the narrative. The Ministry of Education, as well as painters and sculptors representing Japanese *beaux arts*, were not eager to cooperate. For some time, after the Russo-Japanese war, Japanese craftsmen were compelled to present their works during *Noten* exhibitions (Design and Applied Arts Exhibition), organized by the Ministry of Commerce and Agriculture. The first *Noten* exhibition, which took place in 1913 was the first event of this type that allowed craftsmen to really present their creative work.<sup>15)</sup> Only in 1928 was the inclusion of the Craft Arts section in *Teiten* achieved. In 1937, the *Teiten* exhibition changed its name to *Shin-bunten* (New *Bunten*) and in 1946, to *Nitten* (*Nihon Bijutsu Tenrankai* – The Japan Fine Arts Exhibition), still being sponsored by the Ministry of Education. The fifth *Nitten* Exhibition in 1950 was already organized jointly by the Japanese Academy of Arts and the *Nitten* Administrative Association. In 1958, the two organizations began to operate individually, and the exhibition was financed by public subscription<sup>16), 17)</sup>

Around the same time, when the Living National Treasure system was set up, the *Nihon Kōgeikai* (Japan Art Crafts Association) was formed in conjunction with the organization of *Nihon Dentō Kōgeiten* (The Japan Traditional Crafts Exhibition) with the help of the Agency for Cultural Affairs. The exhibition was one of the components implementing the government’s plan: it served to promote and develop native artisan and craftsmen traditions, at the same time presenting the works of artists designated as Living

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<sup>15)</sup> Masahiro (2015: 24).

<sup>16)</sup> From 2014, after some controversy, exhibition is referred to as the *Shinnitten* (New *Nitten*).

<sup>17)</sup> *Nitten*, <https://nitten.or.jp/english>

National Treasures. The term *dentō kōgei* itself meant “traditional art crafts” and was like the earlier *bijutsu kōgei* idea but, at the same time, it was also an attempt to form a genre, explore new forms of expression unique to Japan and recognize the value in native handcraft.<sup>18)</sup>

## MODERN CRAFT MOVEMENTS – ON THE THEORIES OF MINGEI AND MUKEI

Along with the development of exhibition initiatives, the 1920s also marked the beginning of the golden period of the modern crafts movement. Artists and craftsmen not only engaged in actual artistic creation, but also more and more boldly wrote down and proclaimed their theories regarding the ideas of art or craftsmanship. More magazines on crafts began to be published, such as *Kōgei Tsushin* (Craft Communication) in 1922, *Kōgei Jidai* (The Age of Craft) in 1926, *Mukei* (Formless) in 1927 and *Kōgei* (Crafts) in 1931. The latter two were associated with the figures of two men important for Japanese art, who, however, had completely different views on the essence of the new image of the craft.<sup>19)</sup>

The first was Sōetsu Yanagi (1889–1961), philosopher, art critic, but also the creator of the term and artistic movement *mingei* (folk arts). The term *mingei* was formed from a fusion of the words *minshū* (common people) and *kōgei* (craft).<sup>20)</sup> Yanagi translated it into English as “folk crafts”, emphasizing that in the context of this type of products, the term “art” should not be used, as then these items lose their proper character. *Mingei* encompassed “traditional folk crafts”: items that are beautiful, with an aesthetically pleasing visual element, but still serving simple, everyday activities and having a practical character. Yanagi assumed that for an object to be defined by this term, certain conditions should be met. First, the author had to be an anonymous creator: what counted more than the artist’s individual expression was the effort put into producing many pieces of a given object, which would serve the next generations. They were also supposed to be simple items, which through their form emphasize the natural beauty of the material from which they were made. An imperfect, unpretentious shape was valued more highly than an excessively

<sup>18)</sup> Rousmaniere (2007: 13).

<sup>19)</sup> Kikuchi (2006: 88).

<sup>20)</sup> Brandt (2007: 51).

refined and elaborate form. *Mingei* objects also should be handcrafted in large numbers and sold at affordable prices. Yanagi also believed that the idea of *mingei* exists beyond beauty and ugliness. Individuality did not matter: the most important attribute of folk products was the so-called “honesty of the material” and their usefulness. The craftsman did not create so that his work would be admired by someone, but because his products are indispensable in everyday life. The *Mingei* movement, which was initiated by Yanagi in 1926, was therefore a specific response to the situation on the domestic design market, where industrialization and mechanization took place, Western influences were more and more noticeable which, according to Yanagi, destroyed the beauty of the aesthetics of hand-made objects. He also felt that the term *kōgei* was used mainly by the upper spheres of Japanese society, thus taking art crafts from ordinary people in a way.<sup>21)</sup>

Yanagi devoted his entire life to researching, disseminating, and collecting folk crafts. He propagated his thoughts on the aesthetics of folk craft in the form of articles, books and lectures he believed that the public needed to be educated on the beauty of Japanese material tradition. His first complete work *Kōgei no Michi*<sup>22)</sup> (The Way of Crafts) was published in 1928. In 1931, he started publishing *Kōgei* (Crafts) magazine, in which he and a close circle of friends and supporters were able to elaborate their views. Moreover, in 1934, *Nihon Mingei Kyokai* (The Japan Folk Crafts Association) was set up. The *Mingei* movement and other various activities undertaken by Yanagi were also appreciated outside Japan, but above all they inspired the development of many institutions and museums, which contributed to the spread and survival of traditional Japanese crafts.<sup>23)</sup>

The second group that stood out on the Japanese crafts market was *Mukei*. And while the *Mingei* movement was a negative reaction to the rapid urbanization and rationalization of everyday life, the *Mukei* (Formless/No Style) group, was quite different. *Mukei*, founded in 1925 by Toyochika Takamura and Kado Sugita, showed a positive attitude to the changing reality

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<sup>21)</sup> Kodansha (1998: 612).

<sup>22)</sup> In the book, Yanagi classified the definition of craft into “folk craft” and “artistic craft”. The latter meant craft as “fine arts”: “aristocracy-oriented” craft (which included products for export that exaggerated “Japaneseness” for foreign audience) and “individual-oriented” (characteristic) crafts. The definition of “folk crafts” divided into – “guild-oriented” (creative) crafts and “business-oriented” (industrial) crafts.

<sup>23)</sup> Rutkowska (2009: 117–118).

and lifestyle. Members of the group were eager to learn about European technological novelties, and the aim was to explore a new form of craft which was created to suit the modern lifestyle. In their works, artists such as Haruji Naito, Akira Isoya, and Matsugoro Hirokawa were inspired by Western Art Deco and functionalism. The *Mukei* was against the tradition and putting technique above creativity. This group's ideal was to create objects from the imagination. In its development, the founder of this group, Takamura Toyochika, maintained that people should create beauty in ordinary daily objects to raise the standard of beauty in the society. Following the example of modern European artistic groups, they even issued their own manifesto *Mukei no tanjo* (The Birth of Mukei) presenting their attitude. Their denial of the classical Japanese style could then even be considered as a kind of value iconoclasm. It is interesting that they used geometric forms in their objects, but their idea of *junsui kōgei* (pure craft) appealed to a kind of art that is admired as painting or sculpture. On the one hand, it is utilitarian, but on the other, there is an aesthetic value, attention to line and colour. Takamura himself called their products "works of art". He also postulated that "pure craft" and "industrial craft" should develop in tandem. The Mukei group disbanded in 1933 and the former members established new Existing Art Crafts Society in 1935.<sup>24)</sup>

These and many more various movements of modern crafts clearly shows the growing recognition of craft and explored craft relationship with everyday life. The history of modern Japanese design was significantly influenced by numerous associations and groups. Their members, often artists or craftsmen, but also ordinary enthusiasts, tried to popularize local design, raise the awareness of both countrymen and foreigners, but also keep the market alive. They organized various types of exhibitions during which various kinds of products were displayed. Of course, not all of them cooperated, sometimes even antagonizing. Not all of them shared the same views and values, but they were united by the will to support domestic production.

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<sup>24)</sup> Brown (2012: 47–48).

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## CRAFTS AND DESIGN IN THE SECOND HALF OF 20TH CENTURY

The 1950s were a time when many groups of artists and craftsmen emerged focusing mainly on producing stylish items that would fit the new way of life. They were mainly influenced by Scandinavian design and the American *Good Design*. In 1953, the first *Seikatsu Kōgeiten* exhibition, dedicated to luxury craftsmanship, was opened. In 1959, Craft Center Japan was founded to promote the distribution of Japanese crafts, which also quickly brought about the desired results. The movement of artists/craftsmen tried to preserve the handicraft element in its work, while introducing some techniques of mass production, so that these products could be distributed and popularized on a larger scale, so that everyone could use good-quality everyday objects.<sup>25)</sup>

From 1955 to 1965, the era of original designs began with the recovery of the Japanese economy. Another important step was the establishment of the Good Design Awards in 1957. It was believed that if original, creative ideas were supported and appreciated, Japanese design would gain a better reputation on the global market. The most significant event of that time, however, was the World Design Conference that took place in Tokyo in 1960. The beginning of the 1960s was also a time when Japan experienced an economic boom, industry was running smoothly, and people finally had the financial resources to buy various products. Two important events closed the period of rebuilding the country: the Tokyo Olympics in 1964 and the Osaka Expo in 1970. Japanese creative thought was successful in many fields at the time.<sup>26)</sup>

By the 1980s, Japanese design, especially products intended for export, began to function in the wider consciousness thanks to the gained media popularity and gradually increasing prosperity in Japan. There was rapid globalization; many projects from the West entered the Japanese market. Luxury goods had become widely available; people have departed almost completely from tradition and the past. This period is known in the history of Japan as the “Bubble Period”. With the beginning of the 1990s, the “economic bubble” burst. The government had to re-evaluate its priorities, which also led to a re-appreciation of domestic goods and projects. This led

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<sup>25)</sup> Masahiro (2015: 43).

<sup>26)</sup> Tanaka (1983: 89).

to the increased promotion of original Japanese design in the world at the end of the 1990s.<sup>27)</sup>

### KŌGEI TODAY

The concept of *kōgei*, as well as the entirety of Japan's artistic creativity, has come a long way and many transformations. At first, in the late 19th century, it encompassed various handmade products. Later, it was split into sub-classifications such as *bijutsu kōgei* (art crafts) and *futsū kōgei* (common crafts), *sangyo kōgei* (industrial crafts), *mingei* or *shin kōgei* (new crafts or studio crafts). Until the 1920s, the term *kōgei* in general meant applied arts: product design in contemporary terminology and was used in close association with official schemes for export. Over time, it began to take on a slightly different meaning, appearing in the context of hand-made goods, most often of a traditional nature (such as *dentō kōgei*). Even nowadays, there is an official *kōgei* website that provides guidance on what products can be considered *kōgei*: the Traditional Crafts of Japan. There are five requirements. Firstly, the object must be made for the everyday use. The manufacturing process should be based mainly on handiwork. The techniques used during the creation must be traditional and the materials raw. And finally, the *kōgei* object ought to be made in a designed area and come from a certain region of Japan.<sup>28)</sup>

Repeatedly discussed, considered in all possible ways, *kōgei* is still an interesting and perhaps incomprehensible issue for researchers, art critics and art curators. The idea behind the *kōgei* and *creators* of the past is still alive and reinterpreted.

For example, in 2015, Yūji Akimoto – the director of the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art in Kanazawa – curated the *Japanese Kōgei / Future Forward* exhibition, which showcased the creation of twelve renowned *kōgei* artists. And while it is widely accepted that even contemporary *kōgei* creators should uphold traditional culture of the past, in this exhibition, however, they were able to break out of this convention. While still respecting the achievements of the past, they implemented their own ideas about the future

<sup>27)</sup> Pollock (2012: 17).

<sup>28)</sup> *Kogei Japan*, [https://kogejapan.com/locale/en\\_US/Aboutdansen/](https://kogejapan.com/locale/en_US/Aboutdansen/).



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