

VOI. 7

Here's to Japanese MINGEI!

My home is an ultra-modern apartment in central Tokyo. The walls are smooth, white, and entirely devoid of surplus adornment. It's a living environment in which everything feels factory-made and standard-issue. To take the edge off this rather sterile look, I decided to use mingei (folk art) bowls, plates and such for daily meals. For the benefit of non-Japanese readers, by "folk art" I mean popular (as in, for the masses) art craft items.

But in Japan, such popular art can reach heights of rare beauty. Folk art pottery is practical stuff, designed for everyday use rather than centuries of display as art objects, and is made from simple clay-like materials. The shapes and colors of these items of tableware reflect their obvious purpose. In many cases, part of the surface has been left unglazed, allowing a glimpse of the rough texture beneath. This serves to highlight, in exquisite contrast, the gloss of the glaze.

Most Japanese these days have lost any attachment they once felt to this sort of pottery, dismissing it as "vulgar" and preferring plastic products to those made from materials like clay, wood and bamboo; a shift attributable in part to a more American lifestyle. It is left to artists and intellectuals to appreciate the dynamic beauty of folk art.

The mingei undo arts and crafts movement driven by such individuals may be traced back to the pre-war years. Muneyoshi Yanagi, the founder of the movement, was a philosopher who had the idea to encourage renewed understanding of the value of Japan's popular arts, which by this time was fully exposed to competition from Western-influenced standardized goods. The mingei undo, which allowed Japan to have its own unique identity without modeling itself on other countries, also helped to restore dignity to a nation that had lost confidence in the wake of its defeat in 1945.

I vividly remember in the 1960s heading frequently to Shinjuku, haunt of the capital's thinkers and artists. Here people sipped coffee served in "folk art" cups while listening to classical music and contemplating the highly idiosyncratic prints of Shiko Munakata on the wall.

The craze for Japanese folk art subsequently crossed the ocean, and today it is highly prized by cultured individuals of many nationalities.

What is it about folk art ceramics that touches us so?

Firstly, the fact is that these items constitute part of the traditional Japanese lifestyle, more precious now than ever due to its decline due to the march of modernization. Trends like the current enthusiasm for getting back to nature, and the popularity of organic produce, may also be linked to this renewed appreciation of Japanese tradition.

Another reason for the appeal of folk art ceramics is that they have none of the pretentiousness or affectation so often seen in contemporary art objects and paintings, and instead speak straight to the viewer's heart. No special knowledge is required to enjoy folk art; nor must one absorb complex art theory. The pleasure of folk art is something conveyed directly and simply.

The third reason is that folk art, with its unadorned, unpretentious air, radiates a kind of energy that passes through our skin and goes straight to our nerves. In the case of folk art tableware, the aesthetic appeal of the form and materials is immediately obvious, and one feels that using this sort of plate would make everyday living more enjoyable, more laid-back.

Folk art ceramics made from such a simple material as clay offer peace of mind, a kind of serenity. In the vein of that famous line in Genesis: "Dust (soil or clay) thou art, and unto dust thou shalt return".

Back to childhood?

Folk art ceramics invariably have a certain "roundness" to them. Even square plates have curves. Fashioned on a manual potter's wheel, even the corners have what one might call a "human" feel. There are no sharply-defined angles, no clear edges between surfaces, and nothing is geometric. No doubt the plates have been made robustly chunky with durability in mind, but this very sturdiness is part of their attraction. It is this thickness that conveys the feel of the raw material, clay, an "honest" material if you like, one that makes no attempt to pretend it is anything more. The very simplicity of folk art is reassuring. Those who touch it feel protected. Folk art serving plates, platters, vases and bowls enfold you in a warm, maternal embrace. It's like returning to

childhood and your mother's protection. Folk ceramics with their lustrous glaze appeal not to our powers of reason, but our souls, without a hint of artifice. Even food feels comfortable on ceramics like these, because they don't let heat escape the way thinner dishes do.

What constitutes true luxury today?

In modern-day society, where materialism rules and the market is dominated by products (I repeat, too often made of plastic) not made to last, folk art ceramics crafted individually with love, and fired carefully at just the right temperature night and day for as long as it takes to achieve the perfect result, are all slightly different. Such ceramics, originally made for everyday use by ordinary people, are paradoxically now luxury goods.

In a different field, what is it that makes Hermes bags so popular? The fact that they are individually, lovingly hand-stitched by masters of their craft.

Here in the 21st century, handmade goods of this sort are precisely what constitute genuine luxury. They are indubitably humanity's true cultural heritage. They are also vivid proof that human beings cannot live surrounded by only concrete, steel and plastic.

Surely the craftsmen and women who make these things ought to be respected and valued, being as they are the final link between true luxury and ourselves. True luxury lies in that which is natural, in simple beauty, elegance and wisdom. All values sorely lacking in the 21st century, where there's a tendency to charge head-on into folly. Wouldn't you agree?



Francoise Morechand (Fashion essayist)

Born 1936 in Montparnasse, Paris. Came to Japan in 1958 after studying Japanese at the Sorbonne. Worked as a teacher on NHK's Tanoshii Furansugo French language education series, and lecturer in French at Ochanomizu Women's University, before returning to France in 1964. Came to Japan again in 1974 to manage Chanel's beauty department there. With a career spanning French teacher, TV "tarento", writer, and fashion coordinator, in 2004 Morechand's longstanding contribution to Franco-Japanese cultural ties was recognised by the French government with the awarding of the Légion d'honneur. Visiting professor at Kyoritsu Women's University. Overseas trade advisor to the French government. North Asia representative for the Conseil Supérieur des Français de l'Étranger (CSFE). International advisor to the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa. Ishikawa Prefecture tourism ambassador.

Yasuko Sensyu (Illustrator)

Leading creator of adorable "healing art". All her work, starting with calligraphy employing her Level 7 calligraphic skills, and including her illustrations and essays, is suffused with a warmth that soothes whoever picks it up. Her diverse portfolio includes paintings for the interior of Le Comptoir de Benoit, chef Alain Ducasse's first restaurant venture in Osaka; murals at the En-Japan head office, plus illustrating, brand logos, wall paintings and essays. She was also responsible for the "Japan Trump" playing cards showcasing famous sightseeing spots nationwide (supported by the Japan National Tourism Organization), extending this concept further across Asia with a sub-brand for the Singaporean tourism office, and Indonesian Trump cards.

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