

Kingdom of Beauty: Mingei and the Politics of Folk Art in Imperial Japan.* Kim Brandt. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007. 320 pp.

Reviewed by Liora Sarfati

Kim Brandt's *Kingdom of Beauty: Mingei and the Politics of Folk Art in Imperial Japan* brings to the fore the intricate process through which historic and sociological factors establish aesthetic conventions, art evaluation criteria, and art-related activism. By examining the manner in which folk arts progressed from neglected and underappreciated forms of artistic expression, often addressed in Japanese as low grade things (*gatemono*) (p. 49) to the heart of national pride, Brandt's book enables a better understanding of why and how the folk arts of Japan have become a marker of sophisticated taste in Asia and internationally. This book addresses the increasing interest in the ways that knowledge is produced and manipulated and, in the Japanese context, it adds to existing criticisms of the roles that colonial scholars played in efforts to prove Japan superior to the peoples whom it conquered. The assimilation policy that Japan hoped to implement in many of its new territories needed a scientific basis in order to receive international legitimacy. Showing through research that Japanese culture had advanced while its neighboring cultures, mainly those of Korea, had halted and stagnated served as proof that everyone in the new empire would benefit from adopting Japanese values and manners. However, Brandt's book complicates such claims of intentional and even cynical use of colonial research. Her detailed account and analysis of the work of Japanese intellectuals in the 1920s and 1930s unveils the complex intentions and operational methods of Japanese folk arts promotion groups and supplies a contextualized description of social activism that really meant to beautify Asia and the world, even while it worked for the military mechanism that ravaged Asia in the early 20th century.

This book follows the story of young imperial officials and scholars led by Yanagi Muneyoshi who managed to change the established norms for evaluating the quality of oriental art to include Asian folk crafts as officially recognized forms of art. The first chapter, "The Beauty of Sorrow," explores the fascination of such scholars with Korean Yi dynasty ceramics, which were until then excluded from serious art consideration: "By challenging the authority of the tea ceremony establishment in particular, Yanagi and other middle-class literati were able to revise the art ceramics canon in Japan to introduce the objects they had discovered in Korea" (p. 11). These efforts were derived from both artistic considerations and political inclinations. Yanagi and his counterparts preached against the Japanese assimilation policy that endangered the continuity of the indigenous ceramics they loved so much. Their efforts included fund raising, publications, and exhibitions, and culminated in the establishment of the Korean Folk Art Museum in Seoul in 1924 (p. 26). Their nationalistic goal was to place Japanese art critics alongside their Western counterparts as imperial authorities. Through its activities the group acquired the scholarly legitimacy needed to decide what items constituted "real art" and what were merely crude utensils, and so established Japanese cultural superiority. As Yanagi put it, "The Koreans made rice bowls; the Japanese masters made them into great tea bowls" (p. 15).

* This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 3.0 Unported License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, 171 Second Street, Suite 300, San Francisco, California, 94105, USA.

The second chapter, “The Discovery of Mingei,” tells how Yanagi and his friends became interested in the folk art of their own country, by traveling in the Japanese countryside and collecting various items that they saw as artistic, beautiful, and important to their nation’s culture. What was eventually categorized as *mingei* (‘art of the people’) included various genres of folk art such as ceramics, straw weaving, woodcarving, and papermaking. In the 1920s, the Mingei Movement, as the collective efforts of the various local independent scholars and collectors came to be known, was mainly busy with discovering important art genres that existed in the Japanese countryside and in educating city intellectuals about the value of such items. One of their notable successes was the production of a Japanese style model home (*mingeikan*) that they exhibited in the 1928 Tokyo Industrial Exposition, drawing crowds of hundreds of thousands of visitors (p. 66). The movement emphasized the importance of local variations in mingei art, traditional techniques, and the personal ingenuity of several celebrated artists such as the legendary Mokujiki Gokyo Shonin (p. 42). One of their professed goals was “to resist the controlling hierarchies and categories of Western Knowledge” (p. 10).

The Third chapter, “New Mingei in the 1930s,” relates a turning point in the Mingei Movement, when scholars and collectors proceeded to actively intervene in determining the content and form of the items and genres that they supported and promoted. The leading scholars and collectors traveled to workshops all over Japan, evaluating the various items that they found and advocating for the duplication of certain favorites for commercial sales in exhibitions, shows, boutique stores, and eventually regular department stores (p. 106). Their efforts to introduce mingei art to the general public stemmed from an ideology of social change based on a return to indigenous values and aesthetics that would eventually culminate in creating a healthier society.

The fourth and fifth chapters, “Mingei and the Wartime State 1937-1945” and “Renovating Greater East Asia,” deal with the most criticized period of the Japanese empire, WWII. For the Mingei Movement this was a golden era, when their ideas became officially acknowledged as beneficial to national efforts. The traditional Japanese aesthetic was considered a uniting framework in the process of creating a unique national identity that would lead citizens to contribute more to war efforts. Furthermore, the work of mingei activists in remote regions such as Tohoko helped to raise local pride in material traditions, and in this way brought into the consciousness of urban Japanese the importance of the provinces and their share in national heritage (p. 146). Mingei also served in the international arena when government officials recognized the sincere fascination of Western consumers with rustic Japanese folk arts. Mingei aesthetics were then employed as a means to supplement national funds through mass production and marketing of mingei style goods. An interesting project that mingei activists initiated, but which never actually materialized, was to reform factory girls’ dormitories from Western style architecture, which was efficient but alien to Japanese culture, to mingei housing. It was hoped that through living a mingei lifestyle their years in an urban setting would not draw village girls to unwanted Western ideals and behavior (p. 160). During the war, mingei activism was also extended to occupied territories such as North China and Manchuria, where local crafts were sought and celebrated, and, in cases where such crafts have been extinct or already modernized, mingei activists worked to recreate local traditions and implement them within the population. However, the indigenous people did not always approve of the preservationist attitude that mingei activists fostered. In Okinawa, for example, mingei efforts to preserve the unique local dialect failed when local elites refused to be kept outside of Japan’s main culture (p. 214).

Progressing along a linear historical timeline, Brandt shows how the agency of several determined individual aficionados of folk arts made a difference. The official reaction to their efforts affirms that local productivity, simplicity, and minimalist consumption, which were prominent values in mingei thought, served well the needs of the struggling new empire. The Mingei Movement's vision of creating a self-sufficient pan-Asian culture that would preserve local variations as a cultural block of resistance to Western aesthetics never reached significant application. However, the legacy of the Mingei Movement in the preservation of traditional crafts as important arts still lives in Japan and abroad today.

The beauty and strength of *Kingdom of Beauty* derives from Brandt's detailed analysis of documents from the era discussed. Journals, pamphlets, personal letters, etc. serve her dissection of an important era in Japan's cultural history. However, most of the analysis relies on verbal texts and manifested ideas of mingei activists, while less attention is dedicated to the material aspects of the items that they focus on. This shortcoming is probably due to the disciplinary categorization of the book as an historical account, rather than a material culture or art history work. More photographs and more detailed description and analysis of items mentioned in the book could broaden the target audience to related fields. Still, *Kingdom of Beauty* is an important work that contributes a grounded account of knowledge production processes, dynamics of art evaluation, and achievements of art centered social activism in a colonial setting that will be useful to scholars in many fields.

Liora Sarfati has recently received her Ph.D. from the Departments of Folklore and of East Asian Languages and Cultures at Indiana University. She is a lecturer in the Department of East Asian Studies at Tel Aviv University. Her research interests are material culture, Internet culture, tradition as process, the anthropology of East Asia, and Korean shamanism.