

Muneyoshi Yanagi's Utopia of Beautiful Things

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In the spring of 1910 a monthly coterie magazine, the *Shirakaba* was started, which during the following 13 years of its continuance was to lead progressive thought in the study of Western philosophy, art and literature. As one of the editors of the *Shirakaba*, young Muneyoshi Yanagi in the course of his devoted activities became deeply attached to the Romantic world view that he often found behind the materials he was handling; scientific materialism, the backbone of modern society he could not accept. The range of his interest and the activities to accompany it was almost limitless. He took for his field everything from philosophy of religion to arts and letters; he even attempted to rejoin sciences with humanities in some of his early academic essays. Varied as his activities were on the surface, he never lost sight of his one ultimate goal, which was to get a firm grip of the "hidden meaning of Nature and man." Young Muneyoshi Yanagi, later the founder of Japan's Folkcraft Movement started out on his career this way.

At the innermost depth of Yanagi was one basic and constant urge to become one with beautiful things. It was not ethereal beauty that he was after. He always longed for intimacy with a concrete form of beauty which he could see clearly with the eye, could feel with the

hand, or could even share his daily life with. Looking for a key to the “hidden meaning of Nature and man”, therefore, he groped for it in the world of “objects”, rather than in the world of “facts” or “notions”.

In due course of his search, he discovered the world of folk handicraft in which every single object was at once beautiful and full of hints to many a question that he had concerning “Nature and man”. Though endangered by the advance of Westernization, it was still there rooted in the native soil of Japan. Having discovered such objects as possible means to bring into light the “hidden meaning of Nature and man”, Yanagi could no longer be entirely contented with being just a writer or an editor. He became a self-appointed builder, builder of a Utopia of those beautiful handiworks of Japan.

He once wrote about the word “Utopia” in an essay:

People often talk of “Utopia” with a degree of derision. Yet it is far from a dreamy fantasy, but is an ideal necessarily called for, an ideal which has its root in one’s deep needs . . . A fantasy generates no actions; much less does it possess a potential to have one’s life devoted to it. An ideal on the other hand calls for one’s entire life.

What he says here well explains the inordinate devotion, both material and moral, that he showed in promoting his Folkcraft Movement.

The central theme in Yanagi’s Utopian vision is “seeing”. Every one sees things, of course, but not in the same manner. Some see and penetrate into the depth of things, others see only the surface. Therefore, “the thing being seen”, Yanagi says, “cannot always be the

same" depending on by whom and how it is seen. Those with the "seeing eye" are the only kind of people who can truly "see". They can see the thing itself, the whole, which is altogether different from the sum of all the parts. To "know" the facts about a thing no matter how systematically done is only to go around the periphery; in order to penetrate into the core, or the reality of the thing, we must "see" directly.

In our daily life we live in a world which we perceive with the eye of knowledge, and most of us believe that to live and continue to live in such a world is the unchangeable fact of life. Yet Yanagi tries to convince us that it is merely the surface of the world. His point is that if only we "see" with the "seeing eye" which easily penetrates the surface, we can get glimpses of the other world, in fact, the real world, or the world as it is. It is the world without differentiation, because differentiation is what the eye of knowledge sees. Nothing is good nor evil, beautiful nor ugly. There, all judgements fail and all we can do is to accept the reality opened up in front of us. Yanagi was himself often ushered into the other world by those beautiful little handi-works and saw its reality. It was the world of life, truth, and absolute beauty, and what he felt then was absolute peacefulness that he could never experience in the ordinary rational world. It was the world in which Nature was in full play.

He had already known what Nature was all about. He had been introduced to the world of William Blake, and the experience of living close to nature in Abiko for some years (1914-1921) had offered him an opportunity to ascertain for himself that in Nature was life, was

truth and was beauty all entwined into one inseparable whole. He had rejoiced and had often experienced mystical moments in the rich nature of Abiko. Inspired by the experience, he had also vigorously written a series of essays on mysticism. He had even declared that he had found his lifework in the study of mysticism. At this point, however, his peculiar love that he felt towards beautiful things and his innate longing for having them close at hand were given no legitimate place in his world.

Towards the end of these *Shirakaba* years, he was becoming more and more attached to the beauty of handmade daily utensils— they consisted mainly of Korean Yi Dynasty pottery at the time—, and had begun sharing his daily life with them. But Yanagi himself did not quite know what this love for them meant, nor did he know how, if at all, it could possibly fit into his integral world.

In time he began to see in these handiworks Nature itself in play. All the grandeur of Nature that he had come to know through the world of Blake and through the nature of Abiko, Yanagi in turn saw in the petty and meager handiworks in front of his eyes. Being basically “object” oriented rather than “fact” oriented, Yanagi felt much more at home with Nature in handiworks. Compared with the intimacy and friendliness that Nature in handicraft could offer, Nature in Blake’s artistic world, or Nature in natural features was for Yanagi much too foreign, much too abstract, and much too intangible.

In 1924, Yanagi set out on a trip to Yamanashi Prefecture, partly to enjoy nature of the area, and also partly to visit a person who possessed some pieces of Korean pottery that he had been invited to see. There

he happened to meet with two Buddhist statues of Mokujiki-shonin, or Saint Mokujiki, a priest-sculptor of the late Yedo Period (1718–1810). He was taken with them on sight. This totally accidental encounter marked an important turning point in his career. In the Buddhist statues Yanagi clearly saw the “hidden meaning of Nature and man”, an immediate expression of which he had long been looking for. There was nothing esoteric about it; it was clear to anybody’s eye.

The statues were also the most powerful examples of form into which both spirituality and materiality were fused. Yanagi, though convinced that there was Nature—alive, truthful, and beautiful—in those handiworks, and that they could offer a basis for his religious or philosophical speculations, it seems that he was still feeling a degree of hesitation about going ahead and building his philosophical system on that basis. They were after all merely “things”. From the view point of scientific materialism, these statues, just like those beautiful handicrafts, are considered merely lifeless objects. But the same spirituality that he conceived in those handiworks were now expressed much more explicitly in the image of Buddha. Seeing it, who can dismiss the statue as a mere object? He saw evidence of an existing link between spirituality and materiality, and became entirely at his ease about professing his faith in the “religion of beautiful things”.

In 1931 a major monthly organ of the Folkcraft Movement, the *Kogei* was started. And an essay written for the *Kogei* in 1939 “The *Shirakaba* and the *Kogei*” offers us some interesting points concerning the growth of Yanagi’s world that took place over some 20 years. In the essay, Yanagi evaluates his past work with the *Shirakaba* and tries

to clarify the significance of his current work with the *Kogei*. Although he brings up many points of differences, the most essential among them is the shift of his interest from Western arts to Oriental crafts. His youthful enthusiasm in assimilating Western culture, he says, was a step essential for him in order to come to a full awareness of himself and the world. In this process, however, it was inevitable to limit his field of activity to the world of “facts” or of “notions”. But being innately “object” oriented, Yanagi gradually came to realize that at the depth of his heart he was suffering. In Western arts he could no longer find positive remedy and his discontent definitely needed a vent. Furthermore he was also intellectually becoming more and more convinced that the “object” approach reveals the essence of a thing or a matter, while “fact” approach shows only the superficialities. Under these circumstances, and through years of experiences with the world of handicraft, Yanagi began to see clearly the fictitiousness of a set of values that modern West offered. Even Western arts on which he had in his youth doted he came to consider as expressions of modern Ego. In fact, any artistic expression alienated from daily life and its needs began to appear to him a fiction peculiar to our modern age. Sublime ideals that he learned from modern West inspired his mind to explore the heights of spirituality and taught him respectable facts about man and about the world, but they seemed to offer no concrete basis for everyday life of Japan. They were valid only within the world of “facts”; they were valid, for example, in the world of the *Shirakaba*, or in classrooms of the Peer’s School or the Imperial University where Yanagi was educated. But that was pretty much as far as it went. Those ideals were simply not feasible in most phases of

life, and at times even causing confusion. In time he could not but come to a realization that standard of modern West was not the only and absolute standard as he had mistakenly believed in the past. Especially as Japanese he realized he could no longer continue to live up to such set of values. Then to cultivate intimacy with the Orient and its “crafts”, not its “arts”, was for him to keep twice aloof from the coercing force of modern West.

In reading Yanagi’s passages, we often come across one curious, to some rather irritating expression, namely the “right beauty”. To say “right” or “wrong” about beauty ideed appears highly dogmatic unless it is read in a proper context. Yanagi accepts that any sort of beauty is beauty. But when talking of his Utopian vision, he accepts only one particular kind of beauty, calling it the “right beauty”. In his vision, beautiful utensils are to be firmly intertwined with man. They are to become to each other companions, influencing, growing or enlightening each other through their daily contact. Therefore the kind of beauty that these utensils should have must be the kind that should ameliorate, not deteriorate man. Then, regardless of its rigid sound, the “right beauty” is the kind that brings warmth and ease to man’s life. It is gentle, soothing and friendly and has resonance with the deepest human needs.

“The two basic foundations of folkcrafts”, Yanagi says, are “nature” and “tradition”. While traveling all over Japan collecting local handiworks, he came face to face with real aspects of life among common folk. In their world, life was still rooted in its native soil. They had

full faith in nature, and also in their tradition. Living by a particular set of values which years and years of life in the area had engendered and was itself complete, people did not appear to think of or worry about any possible change which might come over them from outside their community. Their life as it appeared to Yanagi was filled with absolute calm. And these things were still being made through their hand.

We commonly talk of “things made”, and also of “by whom”. On the other hand, Yanagi talks of “things born, not made”. In the world of folkcraft whatever comes out is the result of joint-work of man and nature. Or to be more exact, nature is the mother of the products, and man the midwife. Objects born in such a way naturally inherit the mother’s characters, that is, aspects of Nature itself, and an extra beauty is added by a trace of man’s humble help that was given when coming into this world.

Yanagi repeatedly talks of “our life” as “being supported by nature and tradition”. In reality, however, this postulation has little or no bearing on our modern life in the city; absolute calm in the life of countryfolk was something we cannot even dream of. The real meaning of Yanagi’s words then is that we must once again begin to live a new sort of life “supported by nature and tradition”. With a strong hope to realize such mode of life in this world Yanagi suggests in his Utopian vision one possibly feasible way. It is for us to start living our life with those beautiful handiworks charged with nature and tradition, then to start treating them as companions, learning from them, and being thoughtful and gentle to them.

At the very beginning, Yanagi simply felt sympathy with those

beautiful little things meant to serve man's daily needs. He did not quite know what it meant. But in the course of his activities and speculations for the Folkcraft Movement, he began to see handiworks as powerful means to restore Nature and man's solidarity to our modern life.

Modern age arrived when Western man succeeded in cutting himself away from overwhelming influences of Nature. Then he prided himself on his independence from Nature and also from other people. Yanagi instinctively sensed something wrong in this premise, but its alleged absoluteness was not all that easy for him to dismiss. He could not easily say to himself nor to the world that it might be "a" premise of life, but by no means the only one. It may be said that his constant search for a key to "the hidden meaning of Nature and man" was in a way a search for a means to call in question the absoluteness of the premise of modern West. Such means Yanagi eventually secured in those beloved handiworks.