

# Mingei, or Aesthetics in Everyday Life. The Jeffrey Montgomery Collection

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The Federal Office of Culture and the Museo Vincenzo Vela are delighted to offer visitors and interested scholars a significant selection of Japanese craft, known as *mingei*, from the Collection built up by Jeffrey Montgomery, resident in Ticino, in over fifty years of intense study and activity. Peerless in terms of breadth and variety,<sup>1</sup> chronological extent<sup>2</sup> and quality, the collection has been repeatedly recognized as the most important of its kind outside Japan.<sup>3</sup> It is therefore highly appropriate that it should now be featured in the rooms of the Museo Vincenzo Vela, not least because the Swiss museum has frequently launched events that examine the overlapping of generally established categories, genres and definitions. I refer here to the possibility of exploring concepts like artistic craftsmanship, free art and cultural identity together with their associated theoretical frameworks. These subjects are readily addressed in the museum, the house where Vincenzo Vela (1820–91) produced his sculptures, himself working in a 'borderline' context between official representation and aesthetic renewal, national borders, political power and ideal values.

While the collection has been featured in more than thirty exhibitions organized in Europe and the United States over the last three decades, each with a different approach, the major turning point came in 1990, when items from it were shown for the first time in Ticino at the Galleria Gottardo in Lugano.<sup>4</sup> The critical acclaim enjoyed by this initiative had a crucial impact on the development of the collection. From that moment on, Jeffrey Montgomery devoted all his energies to tracking down rare objects, furniture, fabrics and artefacts of the traditional Japanese folk art known as *mingei*. Thirty years on, the museum housed in the villa built for the sculptor Vincenzo Vela to his specifications between 1862 and 1865 – in the same years Japan was opening up to the world – presents a selection of items from the Jeffrey Montgomery Collection with an accompanying catalogue in an exhibition jointly curated with Rossella Menegazzo and Hans Bjarne Thomsen.

The events recently celebrating the anniversaries of the bilateral treaties signed by Japan with various European countries just before or after the Meiji Restoration in 1866–69, have included exhibitions devoted to Japan in a number of major Western cities. Characterized in every case by great success with the public, they generally focused on works of art and artistic craftsmanship of a particularly luxurious nature, intended for the Japanese upper classes or for sophisticated collectors in Europe and the United States. An equally great success is registered in the more popular and commercial sphere, where sushi,

manga and anime capture the attention of the young and not so young, offering them shortcuts to a simplified understanding of the Land of the Rising Sun. While both approaches highlight elements of considerable cultural value and attest to open-mindedness and curiosity, they concentrate on spectacular and partially established aspects of aesthetic appeal to a globalized public. The aim of the present exhibition is instead to open a window onto a different and largely unknown Japan, silent and sober but captivating at the same time and by no means marginal with respect to the loftier tradition.

The focal point of the exhibition is a conceptual construct as fascinating as it is complex and to some extent ambiguous, namely the theory of *mingei* or traditional folk art created in and for a specific community. Designed for personal use and devoid of any ritual or 'highbrow' associations, these articles were produced in a whole variety of materials by anonymous craftsmen, the depositaries of skills handed down from generation to generation. According to a certain Eastern school of thought, this everyday use endows the objects with an inherent beauty depending on no external canon. These aspects are addressed here in the key studies by Hans Bjarne Thomsen and Rossella Menegazzo offering insight respectively into the origin of this philosophy and its repercussions up to the present day.

The term *mingei* was coined in 1925 in a treacherous and highly nationalistic political context by the Japanese intellectual, philosopher and psychologist Sōetsu Yanagi (1889–1961), who observed with a critical eye and mind the sudden changes to which Japan was subjected as a result of opening up to the world outside and of a policy of imperialist expansion.<sup>5</sup> These led to accelerated industrialization and the accentuated individualization of production processes, which Yanagi opposed vigorously. Withstanding the industrialized standardization of goods for use far away from their place of production, he championed the concept of a primordial aesthetic, i.e. the natural, inherent beauty created by an anonymous craftsman working in an age-old tradition and driven not so much by rational aims as by emotion and deep feeling in a sort of 'state of grace'.<sup>6</sup> Yanagi's theories sought not only a reevaluation of the illustrious artisanal traditions of his country. Equally important were the moral and political aims pursued in a large number of highly successful publications, which are referred to repeatedly in this catalogue.<sup>7</sup> He was also convinced that the Mingei Movement could offer the possibility of deep redemption and revitalization to a society dominated by boundless mass production and modernization, as well as by a form of nationalism with no interest in cultural diver-

sity and local traditions.<sup>8</sup> It is also interesting to note that the philosopher sought public support for his theory and visibility for his new 'aesthetic canon'<sup>9</sup> through recourse to an institution of western origin, namely the public museum. Inaugurated in Tokyo in 1936, the Mingeikan or Japanese Folk Crafts Museum enabled him to present the poetics of *mingei* as embodied in the traditional artefacts to which he had devoted his life at great personal risk.

In the light of the above considerations, the artefacts from the Jeffrey Montgomery Collection on show here – from religious figurines to ornamental and functional objects like plates, vases, pot hooks, tea pots, masks, kimonos and futons – can be seen as endowed with a value that is hard to define in dialectical terms. Apart from the material patina left by time on their surface, close observation reveals a striking degree of unobtrusive beauty, a sort of 'cultural patina' resulting from use, which arouses subtle emotions. It is such feelings that have guided Jeffrey Montgomery during decades of collecting. We hope, he will continue to do so for a long time to come.

Among the many people who have contributed to the planning and creation of this exhibition, I wish to thank first of all the collector Jeffrey Montgomery for his enthusiastic collaboration and wealth of stories as well as his open-mindedness and trust. I am most grateful to the joint curators Rossella Menegazzo and Hans Bjarne Thomsen for their crucial scholarly contributions. I thank the authors of the studies in the catalogue for their precious insights and the translators for their indispensable work. Yuki Seli is warmly thanked for the photographs that embellish this catalogue, Laurent Nicod and Lara Fuchs for the layout. Thanks to Adele Passaniti for her assistance on various fronts. Thanks also to Anita Guglielmetti for the editing and to Christina Müller for the final revision of the texts as well as to the museum's technical department. I am indebted to Marco Francioli for introducing me to the fascinating world of Jeffrey Montgomery.

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## NOTES

- 1** – The collection consists of nearly 800 items, mostly ceramics followed by fabrics, sculptures, lacquerware, furniture and household utensils.
- 2** – The works cover a span of over 2,000 years from the prehistoric period to the second half of the 20th century.
- 3** – See Michael Dunn, 'Japanese Mingei', in *Asian Art*, September 2019.
- 4** – *Mingei. Folk Arts of Japan. A Private Collection*, (exh. cat., Lugano, Galleria Gottardo), Lugano, Galleria Gottardo, [1990].
- 5** – See Yuko Kikuchi, 'A Japanese William Morris: Yanagi Sōetsu and Mingei Theory', in Peter Faulkner and Peter Preston (ed. by), *William Morris. Centenary Essays. Papers from the Morris Centenary Conference organized by the William Morris Society at Exeter College Oxford, 30 June–3 July 1996*, Exeter, University of Exeter Press, 1999, pp. 39–44.
- 6** – Michael Dunn, op. cit.
- 7** – See the useful compendium of the philosopher's writings recently published in English: Soetsu [sic] Yanagi, *The Beauty of Everyday Things*, London, Penguin Books, 2018.
- 8** – M. William Steele, 'Nationalism and Cultural Pluralism in Modern Japan: Sōetsu Yanagi and the Mingei Movement', in John C. Maher and Gaynor Macdonald (ed. by), *Diversity in Japanese Culture and Language*, London e New York, Routledge, 1995, pp. 27–42.
- 9** – Noriko Aso, 'Yanagi: Crafting an Alternative Aesthetic Canon', in *Public Properties. Museums in Imperial Japan*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2014, pp. 151–164.