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## Aesthetics and Art in Modern Pure Land Buddhism

### *Introduction*

The expressions ‘Zen art’ and ‘Zen culture’ are well known to English-language readers and it is no exaggeration to say that they embody the way Japanese culture has been generally presented to Euro-American countries. Such a reductive view has caused the marginalization of Buddhist traditions other than Zen, which have often been overlooked also at the academic level. Among the factors responsible for such marginalization, the role played by well-known exponents of the Japanese as well as European and American intelligentsia, such as Suzuki Daisetsu 鈴木大拙 (1870-1966), Hisamatsu Shin’ichi 久松真一 (1889-1980), various philosophers belonging to the Kyoto School, and Eugen Herrigel (1884-1955), just to mention a few examples, has to be taken into account. Their representations have very often been characterized by cultural nationalist traits and by a view of Japanese culture in its entirety strongly influenced by a constructed ‘uniqueness,’ which served to promote and validate the ‘spiritual’ superiority of Japan versus the ‘West.’ Besides, analyses and interpretations based on orientalist and occidentalist approaches have strongly affected the way Japanese Buddhism and Japanese culture have been presented in the ‘West.’ This has led to misinterpretations which survive still today.

Among the Buddhist traditions, Pure Land Buddhism is the largest in Japan, with Jōdo Shinshū, or Shin Buddhism in English, being the largest denomination. It is however not well known in either Europe and America and has been often overlooked as a vital part in the creation of culture also in the academic study of religions. *Tariki* 他力, other-power – which is opposite to the concept of *jiriki* 自力, self-power – constitutes a fundamental concept in this tradition and conveys the idea of reliance on Amida Buddha as the way to religious salvation.

In view of this, what I call ‘*tariki* art,’ namely a conception of the artistic work as derived from an ‘external’ religious power, other-power, will be analyzed in the following through the work of two well-known Japanese figures: the woodblock artist Munakata Shikō and the aesthetic theorist and founder of the *mingei* movement Yanagi Muneyoshi.

### *Religious aspects in Munakata Shikō’s work*

The woodblock artist Munakata Shikō 棟方志功 (1903-1975) was born in Aomori in 1903, the sixth of fifteen children. His family was rather poor, and he

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himself had to help in his father's smithy for a while after finishing elementary school. Munakata wanted to become an artist, and at the age of eighteen, after seeing a reproduction of Van Gogh's *Still Life: Vase with Five Sunflowers*, he decided to become an oil painter.<sup>1</sup> In this regard, his constantly saying "I will become Van Gogh" (*Wadaba Gobho ni naru* わだばゴッホになる) was famous, which is also the title of one of his writings. Thus, in order to pursue his artistic career, Munakata moved to Tokyo in 1924, where he began to gain recognition a few years later. The production of his woodblock printings started from the end of the 1920s and initially dates back to an exhibition of the series called *Seiza hanayome* 星座花嫁 (A Bridal Zodiac, 1928). 1932 saw the first official recognition of his woodblock prints, and from then on, his artistic career was characterized mostly by the development of this technique.

There are many religious themes to be found in Munakata's work, particularly chosen from various Japanese Buddhist traditions, though several concern Shintō and its deities, with a few depicting Christian themes, such as *Yaso jūni shito hanga saku* 耶蘇十二使徒板画冊 (The Twelve Apostles, 1953); *Kirisuto no saku* 基督の冊 (Christ 1956; printed 1958); or the series *Seitanjō no saku* 聖誕生の冊 (The Birth of Jesus, 1950), which was used as Christmas cards.<sup>2</sup>

His religious influences were varied. His family belonged to the Sōtō school of Zen Buddhism, though he was later deeply influenced by Shin Buddhism, as we will analyze further below. Munakata produced several *hanga* 板画<sup>3</sup> inspired by different Buddhist traditions, among which many are dedicated to the bodhisattva Kannon (Kannon bosatsu 観音菩薩), the *Kannon-gyō* 観音経, the *Hannya shin-gyō* 般若心経, the *Kegon-gyō* 華嚴経, and the series of woodblock printings of *Shaka jūdai deshi* 釈迦十大弟子 (The Ten Great Disciples of Buddha, 1939; see illustration), which in 1955 was awarded First Prize at the Biennale International Art Exhibition in Sao Paolo, Brazil, and exhibited at the Venice Biennale the following year.<sup>4</sup> In 1961, Munakata painted several *fusuma* (sliding doors) for Higashi Honganji in Asakusa, Tokyo, such as *On shiki zu* 御四季図, and *On bodaiju zu* 御菩提樹図.<sup>5</sup> In 1960, the Ōtani-ha,<sup>6</sup> on the occasion of the seven hundredth-anniversary of Shinran's death, commissioned

<sup>1</sup> See also Kakeya 2002: 52.

<sup>2</sup> See MSZ II, pls. 204-215; vol. 3, pls. 43, 19-21, respectively.

<sup>3</sup> Woodblock print. These *kanji* (Chinese characters) were chosen in 1942 by Munakata himself instead of the usual one, 版画. Another reading of the kanji is *ita-ga* which means "(wooden) board," or "(wood) block picture," as Munakata himself explains: "In my writing, however, I rarely use the term *sōsaku hanga* or even *hanga* 版画. I prefer the older expression *ita-ga*, which means 'block picture', because it emphasizes the importance of the block itself." (Munakata 1991: 138)

<sup>4</sup> Munakata won international recognition in 1951 with the Prize for Excellency for *Nyonin Kanzeon* 女人観世音 in Lugano, Switzerland; then in 1956 he won an award at the Venice Biennale for his woodblock *Ryūryoku kakō shō* 柳緑花紅頌.

<sup>5</sup> See *Munakata Shikō hangyō*; and MSZ III, pls. 222-223.

<sup>6</sup> Also known as Higashi (East) Honganji, one of the two main branches of Jōdo Shinshū, the other being the Honganji-ha, or Nishi (West) Honganji.

him to create a series of *fusuma* paintings for the Onrindō 園林堂 in the Shōsei-en 涉成園 garden, which is owned by this branch of Jōdo Shinshū and located quite close to the head temple in Kyoto.<sup>7</sup>

*Tariki as Munakata's source of inspiration*

Munakata was a prolific artist, producing hundreds of works, which ranged from oil paintings to *yamato-ga* 倭画 (Japanese-style paintings) and calligraphy, but most of all they consisted of woodblock prints. The main point of interest here, however, is the consideration of that part of his production which contains religious elements, and more specifically themes and influences taken from the Pure Land Buddhist tradition.

Before analyzing these, however, some attention should be paid to what religion meant for Munakata and how it was expressed in his artistic work. His interest in religion dates back to his childhood, and is one of the constitutive elements of his art. His woodblock prints are often entitled "... *no saku*" "～の柵," where the word *saku* 柵, here, as Munakata himself explains, referring in particular to the Shikoku pilgrimage in 88 stages, represents the bundle of sticks which pilgrims carry with them. Each stick (*fuda* 札) is "a symbol of their prayers, wishes and faith,"<sup>8</sup> which they leave behind at each temple constituting the route of the pilgrimage. Munakata considered his life like a pilgrimage and illustrating why he included the word *saku* in the title of his works he wrote that at every stage in his career he liked to "leave behind a print or a picture" as if offering a prayer. (Munakata 1991: 139)

Munakata maintained that religion did not reside in the scriptures or in the statues of *kami* 神 (Shintō deities) and buddhas, but rather was something



Munakata Shikō, *Furuna* (富楼那, Skt: Pūrṇa. One of the *Ten Great Disciples of Buddha*). (Higashi Honganji, Dōbōkaikan 23 Nov. 2006. Photo: Elisabetta Porcu)

<sup>7</sup> See also MSZ III, pl. 212-214. Cf. pp. 138-142, where he mentions also that he painted 26 *fusuma* panels for the Onrindō on that occasion (p. 138).

<sup>8</sup> As for the word *saku*, see also Munakata 1997: 104. Munakata used this word from 1941 onwards. See *Ātisuto Japan* (Artists Japan) 1992: 237. In fact these sticks are widely replaced by slips of paper, also known as *fuda*.

deeply natural.<sup>9</sup> This same naturalness is a main characteristic of the woodblock print, which arises from within itself, and the conscious efforts of the artist do not have any significant role. This process, similar to the idea conveyed by the term ‘naturalness,’ or *jinen* 自然 in Shin Buddhism, actually makes those who are involved in the creative production mere recipients of this religious power, *tariki* or other-power. It is significant in this regard that such dependence on Shin Buddhist ideas was explicitly formulated by Munakata on various occasions, in writings dedicated to the explanation of his own art, and again in his autobiographical works, such as *Wadaba Gobho ni naru*, which are thought to be reliable accounts of the main stages in his artistic development, and in which he himself described his access to the dimension of other-power in unequivocally religious terms.<sup>10</sup> One of Munakata’s utterances which is often taken as representative of his idea of art, is that he was not responsible for his work (*Watakushi wa jibun no shigoto ni wa sekinin o motte imasen* 私は自分の仕事には責任を持っていません).<sup>11</sup> His inspiration derived from an external, religious power, from other-power, *tariki*.

As mentioned before, Munakata’s family belonged to the Sōtō school of Zen, and he learnt about Zen Buddhism from his grandmother and also from his friend, the potter and artist of the *mingei* movement Kawai Kanjirō 河井寛次郎 (1890-1966). However, during the war he started thinking about Shin Buddhism as well as about self-power (*jiriki*) and other-power (*tariki*). (Munakata 1997: 29) The influence of Shin Buddhism and of the concept of *tariki*, however, became stronger when Munakata evacuated with his family from Tokyo to Fukumitsu (1945-1951). Fukumitsu is located in Toyama prefecture, not far away from Kanazawa (Ishikawa prefecture), an area which has had strong historical links with Shin Buddhism and is still one of the strongholds of this denomination.<sup>12</sup> There Munakata felt the influence of this environment, as he himself recalls:

Once getting into the life of Fukumitsu, I noticed that in the towns and villages all around there were splendid Shinshū temples, the people being devout Shinshū believers. Carving woodblocks in such an environment, I also received in both body and mind the wonderful power of the original vow of *tariki* [*tariki hongan no shūritsu no naka no honmyō* 他力本願の宗律の中の本妙] transmitted to us.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>9</sup> See for example his article entitled *Watakushi to shūkyō* 私と宗教, in MSZ III, pp. 155-156, in which he also refers briefly to the concept of *jinen hōni* (spontaneous working [of the Vow]). See CWS II: 302, 191-192).

<sup>10</sup> See also further below.

<sup>11</sup> Quoted by Yanagi Muneyoshi in: *Munakata Shikō hangyō* 棟方志功板業. See also Munakata’s own explanation in *Horu: Munakata Shikō no sekai* 彫る—棟方志功の世界.

<sup>12</sup> This dates back to the time when Rennyō moved to Yoshizaki in 1471 and the Honganji developed into a powerful religious organization, playing also a very significant role in the uprisings in late medieval Japan, known as the *ikkō-ikki* 一向一揆. (Rogers and Rogers 1991: 9-10)

<sup>13</sup> Munakata 1997: 94-95. When not otherwise indicated, English translations are by the present writer.

Among Munakata's works which depict themes taken from the Pure Land tradition and from Shin Buddhism, the following can be given as illustrative examples: calligraphy scrolls containing the six-character *myōgō Namu Amida Butsu* 南無阿彌陀仏;<sup>14</sup> *Namu Amida Butsu* woodblocks made for Yanagi Muneyoshi's writing *Kokoro uta* 心偈 (Hymns for the Heart); *On niga byakudō zu* 御二河白道図 (Two Rivers and the White Path, Japanese-style painting, 1951), inspired by Shandao's parable *Two Rivers and the White Path*;<sup>15</sup> the woodblock *Akao Dōshū gazō no saku* 赤尾道宗臥像の柵 (Lying figure of Dōshū of Akao, 1950); *Rennyō shōnin daigen: ike no ma* 蓮如上人大言一池の間 (Rennyō's great words: the room of the pond, 1948); *Rennyō shōnin no saku* 蓮如上人の柵 (Rennyō, 1949), or again *Shinran 700-nen enki posutā* 親鸞七百年遠忌ポスター (A poster for Shinran's 700th-year memorial anniversary, 1968).<sup>16</sup>

In the black and white woodblock depicting Dōshū of Akao (d. 1516), a *myōkōnin* 妙好人 and devoted follower of Rennyō,<sup>17</sup> Dōshū "sleeps on a pallet of 48 sticks of split firewood" (Rogers and Rogers 1991: 289 n) and at the top on the right there is the first of his twenty-one resolutions: "As long as life lasts, never forget the most important matter, the afterlife (*goshō no ichidaiji* 後生の一大事)."<sup>18</sup> Inspiration for Munakata's woodblock print was "a small wood carving of Dōshū known as the 'Gratitude Image' (*hōon no zō* 報恩の像) in the collection of Gyōtoku-ji."<sup>19</sup> In this woodblock the austerity of the sharp forms best represents Dōshū's severe way of life, in particular the episode concerning that, as it is said, he slept on 48 sticks in order not to forget Amida's 48 vows and his compassion revealed in aeons of bodhisattva activity fulfilling them.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>14</sup> For example, in Gyōtoku-ji 行徳寺, a Jōdo Shinshū temple in Akao, Toyama prefecture, which is said to have been founded by Dōshū of Akao.

<sup>15</sup> In Zenkō-ji 善興寺, Honganji-ha temple in Takaoka 高岡, Toyama prefecture. See MSZ III, pl. 205. Shandao (Jpn. Zendō 善導, 613-681) was the third of the five masters of the Pure Land tradition and the fifth of the seven patriarchs of Jōdo Shinshū (*shichi-kōshō* 七高僧). In this well-known parable the narrow white path across two rivers of water and fire represents the awakening of faith in Amida Buddha and the attainment of birth in the Pure Land after death. It is also quoted and commented upon in Shinran's *Kyōgyōshinshō*, Chapter on *Shinjin* 信心 (CWS I: 89-91).

<sup>16</sup> See MSZ III, pl. 235.

<sup>17</sup> Rogers and Rogers (1991: 210) highlight that in Rennyō's memoirs *Goichidaiki kikigaki*, Dōshū is cited several times. The term *myōkōnin* (wondrous people) designate some fervent believers in Jōdo Shinshū, the majority of whom were illiterate. Among the most well known are Akao no Dōshū and Asahara Saichi.

<sup>18</sup> Rogers and Rogers 1991: 290. *Goshō no ichidaiji* 後生の一大事 is actually Rennyō's phrase as also found in his letters. See, for example, Letters: 1.10 (pp. 1098; 770); 3.4 (pp. 1141; 800); 5.16 (pp. 1204; 842). In parentheses the pages in *Jōdoshinshū seiten*, Honganji-ha; and *Shinshū seiten*, Ōtani-ha respectively.

<sup>19</sup> Rogers and Rogers 1991: 289 n. See note 14 above.

<sup>20</sup> See also Rogers and Rogers 1991: 289.

Munakata's concept of the creative process in woodblock printing, in which "a print springs out by itself" and the creation itself becomes an act bestowed upon the artist by a power which lies outside himself, might be included in the concept of 'tariki art,' in which the artist is not responsible for his/her own work, this being the product of the influence of that external power.<sup>21</sup>

Once Munakata wrote: "That which is real must come from that which is *tariki* ('other power')." <sup>22</sup> Such a conception of art even had an impact on the techniques he used. We may recall here the emphasis placed by Munakata on the back-colouring technique (*wrazaishiki* 裏彩色) which was used by him to add colours to the woodblock print. It consists in applying intense colours to the back of a print, allowing them to permeate through the paper to the other side. This "indirect" process was for Munakata closely linked with *tariki*, other-power. In his words:

It is not through painting, but through saturation that we can see the final product achieved through *tariki* ("other power"), just like my prints. This is how "prints colored from the back" (*wrazaishiki hanga*) came to be.<sup>23</sup>

"Indirectness" is the keyword for explaining the character of *hanga*, the woodblock. The power lies in the board itself, and this is its own intrinsic quality from which the woodblock printing develops. (Kawai 2002: 17) The indirectness of *wrazaishiki* and that of the woodblock print are, therefore, closely connected, both of them resulting in "the final product achieved through *tariki*."

Through the various examples provided here it has been observed how Munakata's idea of art, as expressed in his work, is significantly filled with religious connotations. It has also been seen that although constitutive motifs of his work derive very often from different religious traditions, it appears that his art and the creative process which lies behind it are essentially linked with the concept of *tariki*, other-power. In this sense it seems to be appropriate to call his art "*tariki* art," which, though not excluding other influences from Japanese Buddhism, does suggest an attitude towards life and the artistic creation deeply rooted in the Pure Land tradition, and more specifically in Jōdo Shinshū.

### *Yanagi Muneyoshi's aesthetic conception within the Pure Land Buddhist context*

A friend and mentor of Munakata was Yanagi Muneyoshi, better known as Yanagi Sōetsu 柳宗悦 (1889-1961), the founder and leading exponent of the *mingei* 民芸 (folk crafts) movement,<sup>24</sup> which developed in the 1920s through Yanagi's efforts to propagate an "art of the people." This was going to gain great popularity

<sup>21</sup> Munakata himself explained this creative process, for instance, in *Horu: Munakata Shikō no sekai* 彫る一棟方志功の世界.

<sup>22</sup> Quoted in Kawai 2002: 18.

<sup>23</sup> Quoted in Kakeya 2002: 76; cf. p. 77.

<sup>24</sup> Muneyoshi is the original given name, Sōetsu is the Chinese-derived pronunciation of the same characters.

both within Japan and abroad.<sup>25</sup> Yanagi was born into a wealthy Tokyo family, was educated at the elitist Gakushūin 学習院 (Peers' school), and graduated from Tokyo Imperial University in 1913. The word *mingei* is an abbreviation of *minshū-teki kōgei* 民衆の工芸 used by Yanagi and the followers of his movement to express the “equivalent term for peasant or folk art, in Japanese.” (Yanagi 1989: 94) The *mingei* theory at the basis of this movement was destined to have a deep impact on the modern theory of craft in Japan and several folk craft museums have since been established throughout the country.

What deserves attention in this paper is, however, Yanagi's later aesthetic conception. This is formulated on the basis of the Fourth Vow of Amida Buddha, as found in one of the essential texts of the Pure Land tradition, the *Larger Sukhāvatīvyūha-sūtra* (*Daimuryōju-kyō* 大無量壽經).<sup>26</sup> This vow states that in the Pure Land there is no discrimination between beauty and ugliness.<sup>27</sup> Yanagi starting from this idea argued that folk craft objects were, in fact, expressions of “true beauty.” It is the acceptance of other-power, and its “blessing,” that allows for the creation of these “ordinary,” but “wondrous” works. (Yanagi 1976: 37, 40) It is on this foundation that Yanagi himself was able to define his conception as a Buddhist aesthetics, which in turn provided further support to the later development of the *mingei* movement.

Yanagi defined folk crafts as follows: “unself-consciously handmade and unsigned for the people by the people, cheaply and in quantity, as for example, the Gothic crafts, the best work being done under the Medieval guild system.”<sup>28</sup> A *mingei* object had to meet certain criteria as defined by Yanagi which are also summarized in both the pamphlet and on the official website of the Nihon Mingeikan 日本民藝館 (the Japan Folk Crafts Museum, established by Yanagi in 1936): “it had to be the work of anonymous craftsmen [*sic*], produced by hand in quantities, inexpensive, to be used by the masses, functional in daily life, and

<sup>25</sup> In Great Britain, for example, the movement headed by Yanagi's friend, the potter Bernard Leach (1887-1979) and the so-called “Leach Tradition” of Anglo-Oriental pottery style developed from the 1920s, after Leach's return from Japan. See Kikuchi 2004: 233ff. Leach stayed in Japan from 1909 until 1920, when he came back to England accompanied by the potter Hamada Shōji 濱田庄司 (1894-1978) and set up a pottery in St. Ives (Cornwall). Hamada returned to Japan in 1923.

<sup>26</sup> *The Larger Sukhāvatīvyūha-sūtra* constitutes one of the three basic sutras of the Pure Land tradition, the others being the *Amida-kyō* 阿彌陀經, *The Smaller Sukhāvatīvyūha-sūtra*, and the *Kanmuryōju-kyō* 觀無量壽經 (Chinese: *Guan wu liang shou-jing*), the *Sutra of the Meditation on the Buddha of Immeasurable Life*.

<sup>27</sup> The Fourth Vow from the sutra is also quoted in Yanagi (1979: 5): “When I come to attain Buddhahood, unless all the beings throughout my land are of one form and color, unless there is no beauty and ugliness among them, I will not attain the highest enlightenment.”

<sup>28</sup> Bernard Leach's adaptation. In Yanagi 1989: 198. As regards Yanagi's appreciation of medieval art, see, for example, Ama 1992: 125. For a critique on this point of Yanagi's theory, see, for example, Kikuchi 2004: 143-146.

representative of the region in which it was produced.”<sup>29</sup> *Mingei* objects, are those which are of “unstressed and ordinary everyday life (*getemono* [下手物]),” representing “the purest form of craft,” and their beauty is identified with use. As to their source, Yanagi further asserts that “The beauty of folkcraft is the kind that comes from dependence on the Other Power” and is produced by “unlettered, uneducated” craftsmen. (Yanagi 1989: 210, 198, 200)

What deserves attention at this point is the further development of his aesthetic theory, taking into account elements derived in particular from the Pure Land Buddhist tradition.

### *Religion and tariki in Yanagi's aesthetic theory*

Yanagi's use of a language imbued with religious connotations can often be found in his writings. In explaining why he decided to donate his “property and possessions concerned with crafts, including a library of books” to the Japan Folk Crafts Museum, for example, he wrote that he considered this act as a “religious gift.”<sup>30</sup>

In the formulation of his aesthetic theory which is at the foundation of the *mingei* movement Yanagi included elements taken from the Buddhist tradition. In its further development after the Second World War his view seems to have found its source of inspiration more and more in the Pure Land tradition. This is clear if one considers his aesthetic theory as expounded in some of his post-war writings, such as *Bi no hōmon* 美の法門 (*The Dharma Gate of Beauty*), written in 1948 and published in the following year; *Bi no Jōdo* 美の浄土 (*The Pure Land of Beauty*, 1962); or again, *Bukkyō bigaku ni tsuite* 仏教美学について (*The Buddhist Idea of Beauty*, 1952). Other writings which are relevant to Buddhist aesthetics and to Buddhist teachings are: *Hō to bi* 法と美 (*The Dharma and Beauty*, 1961) and *Muu kōshū no gan* 無有好醜の願 (*The Vow of non-Discrimination between Beauty and Ugliness*, 1957); *Namu Amida Butsu* 南無阿彌陀仏 (1955) and *Myōkōnin Inaba no Genza* 妙好人因幡の源左 (*The Myōkōnin Inaba no Genza*). In this respect, Ama Toshimaro (1991: 62) has remarked that no other aesthetic theory based on the Pure Land tradition except for Yanagi's has been elaborated as yet.

It is therefore worth considering Yanagi's theory of aesthetics in this context in more detail, starting from *The Dharma Gate of Beauty*. As Yanagi himself (1979: 2) explains in the Prologue, it “marks a culmination” of his ideas on aesthetics, while being “a fresh starting point from which to develop them further.” It constitutes thus a very significant stage in the development of his theory. Yanagi (1979: 2), in his attempt to create a kind of religious theory applied to folk crafts, saw the necessity of using some “ultimate scriptural sources.”<sup>31</sup> However, why did he

<sup>29</sup> Pamphlet available at the museum. Also on: <http://www.mingeikan.or.jp/english/html/history-mingeikan.html> (accessed in March 2005). Cf. Ogyū 2006a: 4, 5.

<sup>30</sup> Yanagi 1989: 102. As to Yanagi's religious view of art, see also Ama 1992; 1991.

<sup>31</sup> In the original Japanese version, this passage reads as follows: *Mingei no biron ga issbū o katachizukuran to suru ni wa, hitoshiku mujōna tenkyo ga atte shikarubeki dewanai ka.* 民藝



choose the Pure Land tradition as the basis for the elaboration of his theory? It seems appropriate in this regard to quote again a passage from *The Dharma Gate of Beauty*, in view of its importance in the development of his thought towards the creation of what might be called ‘*tariki* aesthetics’:

This past summer, while I was reading the *Sutra of Eternal Life* [*Daimuryōju-kyō*], I was struck by something in the Fourth Vow ... All at once I knew that this was the vow upon which the Dharma Gate of Beauty could be built. It was a sudden self-realization. My thoughts even it seemed in spite of myself were being developed by the words of this Vow which denies the duality of beauty and ugliness. (Yanagi 1979: 2-3)

And he claims further that his intention was to discover the foundation of folk craft in the “Absolute Compassion of the Buddha.” (Yanagi 1979: 3)

It is perhaps interesting that this essay was written at Jōhana Betsuin 城端別院, in Toyama prefecture, one of the strongholds of Shin Buddhism. This location may have had some influence on the writing of this essay, just as on a different occasion did the environment of this area influence Munakata Shikō as shown before.

As aforementioned Yanagi constructed a theory starting from the Fourth Vow of Amida Buddha in the *Daimuryōju-kyō* in which the contrast between beauty and ugliness vanishes. Precisely because all things possess Buddha-nature, Yanagi (1979: 5) explains, they “are of a purity that transcends relative oppositions such as beauty and ugliness.” His theory then takes on a soteriological function when he claims that the “‘Dharma-gate’ of beauty,” “the religion of beauty,” teaches that everyone can attain salvation, namely dwelling in the “intrinsic Buddha-nature which is beyond beauty and ugliness,” and which constitutes the only “real or true beauty.”<sup>32</sup> In the development of his thesis, Yanagi directs his attention more specifically towards the Jōdo Shinshū teaching as when, taking into account Shinran’s concept of *jinen hōni* 自然法爾, he argues that:

The realm of *jinen hōni* or “natural suchness” is alone immovable and unchangeable. From it, we can learn what true beauty is, for truly beautiful things do not exist apart from it. One may equally say that true beauty is the form of this “suchness.” Suchness is oneness, non-duality or “not-two-ness.” It belongs neither to beauty nor to ugliness. (Yanagi 1979: 9)

Further on, when praising the Ido tea bowls (*Ido chawan* 井戸茶碗),<sup>33</sup> which he considered to be the work of “nameless and illiterate craftsmen,” Yanagi (1979: 16)

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の美論が一宗を形作らんとするには、等しく無上な典據があつて然るべきではないか。(Yanagi 1973: 38)

<sup>32</sup> Yanagi 1979: 6. As for Yanagi’s use of concepts taken from the Zen Buddhist tradition and his attempt to synthesize it with the Pure Land tradition see, for example, Yanagi 1979: 9, 13, 16, 19-20.

<sup>33</sup> Tea bowls originally from Korea and highly praised in the world of the tea ceremony. The term Ido is probably the name of the place where these bowls originated, though this is uncertain. According to Yanagi, these are the most superb examples of tea bowls.

quoted Shinran paraphrasing the famous sentence in the *Tannishō*: “Even a good person attains birth in the Pure Land, so it goes without saying that an evil person will.” (CWS I: 663) In his words: “‘The genius can produce exceptional work, all the more so can the common man’ – with the help of the Buddha.”<sup>34</sup> Beauty is thus the creation of the Buddha, “Buddha himself does the work. ... to make things beautiful is the Buddha’s nature.” (Yanagi 1979: 18) This “True beauty” is “the beauty of the Pure Land,” which is “the birthplace and native land of beauty.” (Yanagi 1979: 13, 19)

In *The Pure Land of Beauty*, written more than a decade after *The Dharma Gate of Beauty*, Yanagi (1976: 19, 21) continued to propose his theory based on the Pure Land as a “Land of Non-duality” [不二國],<sup>35</sup> which is “present here at this very moment,” and contains no discrimination.<sup>36</sup> Simple and ordinary objects, such as those represented by folk craft art, are depositaries of such beauty. Moreover, in his efforts to create a Buddhist aesthetics by substituting the term “Beauty-nature” (*bishō* 美性) for “Buddha-nature” (*bussō* 佛性) he claimed that all things from the very beginning were “endowed with beauty,” and that “Affirmation of this truth is taking place endlessly in the Pure Land of Beauty.”<sup>37</sup> In structuring his aesthetic theory, Yanagi, while basing this mainly on the teachings of the Pure Land tradition, makes great use of comparisons and parallelisms with those concepts taken from the Zen tradition which seem to support its validation.<sup>38</sup>

Folk craft objects, which are “proof” of the “Pure Land of Beauty,” (Yanagi 1976: 40) just because they were made by ordinary people and are common objects cannot be an expression of individuality or intellectuality and thus are “naturally embraced or accepted by beauty.” Such is, according to Yanagi, “the ‘beauty of acceptance,’ or the beauty which comes from being saved by the ‘Other Power.’” (Yanagi 1976: 37)

Another theme derived from Shin Buddhism is an analogy which Yanagi drew between the words *myōkōnin* 妙好人 (wondrous people) and *myōkō-hin* 妙好品.<sup>39</sup> He writes, that:

The beauty found in folk crafts may be closely compared to the “rankless rank” of the *Myōkōnin*. It may thus be permissible to call the work of their hands *myōkō-hin* (wondrous work). (Yanagi 1976: 40)

<sup>34</sup> The original reads: *Tensai ni wa hiideta saku ga dekiru no de aru. Daga bonjin ni wa nao mo sore ga dekiru no de aru. Butsu no kago no moto de* 天才には秀でた作が出来るのである。だが凡人には尚もそれが出来るのである。佛の加護の許で。 (Yanagi 1973: 28)

<sup>35</sup> The original Japanese in Yanagi 1973: 187-188.

<sup>36</sup> This theory may also be found in “The Buddhist Idea of Beauty” (1952), in Yanagi 1989: 127-157.

<sup>37</sup> Yanagi 1976: 31. See also the original Japanese in Yanagi 1973: 216.

<sup>38</sup> See Yanagi 1976: 33. Here he quotes both Shinran and the Zen master Daie 大慧.

<sup>39</sup> As for Yanagi’s interest in the *myōkōnin*, see, for example, Ama 1992: 125. The term *myōkohin* was coined by Yanagi himself.

He was thus able to conclude that “the folk crafts, regarded as *myōkō-bin*, hold a worthy place in the ‘Pure Land of Beauty.’” (Yanagi 1976: 41) In the final part of this essay, concerning his “special mission” (*tokubetsuna shimei* 特別な使命) Yanagi (1976: 41) claims:

I feel it is my special mission regarding the “Pure Land of Beauty” to cause folk-crafts, already accepted into Heaven and thereby “*myōkō-bin*,” to be more deeply, more properly considered. It is because I feel this so strongly that I have taken up my pen and put together these thoughts though lying on a sickbed.

Within the context of his aesthetic perspective, in which great emphasis is placed on art while relying on *tariki*, other-power, it is significant to mention briefly the pamphlet in English available at the Japan Folk Crafts Museum in Tokyo in which the importance of *tariki* in the production of *mingei* objects is highlighted:

Submissive reliance on *tariki* (other power) or the “Greater Power” resulted in the production of warm items through the medium of man. Yanagi accounted tradition – the accumulation of wisdom and experience – as the “Given Power” that enabled the individual “to produce work of astonishing merit with the utmost ease.”

From this can be seen therefore that *tariki*, as a principle of Yanagi’s theory which is at the basis of the *mingei* movement, is not confined to the writings taken into account above, but has a wider and significant position. The text just mentioned, being part of a concise presentation of what the museum is, constitutes the first impact its organizers wished to transmit to the general public. Also for this reason, it is therefore an element not to be overlooked in the interpretation of any folk art conveyed by the *mingei* movement through its many institutions.

An analysis of Yanagi’s aesthetic theory would be however incomplete without taking into account elements of cultural nationalism embedded here, which are linked to the discourse on the ‘uniqueness’ of Japanese culture as mentioned in the Introduction.

### *Cultural Nationalism in Yanagi’s Aesthetic Theory*

It has been observed that the *mingei* movement and the production of folk crafts, in Yanagi’s view, represented the purest form of art which was saturated with religious connotations. This theory is apparently characterized by a democratic, egalitarian spirit, with a high consideration of the arts made by ordinary people and minorities.<sup>40</sup> However, Yanagi constructed a hierarchical theory at the top of which were Japanese folk crafts. This is characterized by

<sup>40</sup> See, in this respect, Yanagi’s evaluation of Okinawan, Ainu, Taiwanese, and Korean crafts. This aspect has been analyzed by Kikuchi 2004. As for this point, cf. also Yanagi’s portrait of Munakata Shikō in Yanagi Sōri (1991: 129), where the discriminatory equation ‘Ainu equals uncivilized’ is quite evident.

traits of cultural nationalism which led him to claim the ‘uniqueness’ of Japanese culture and of its spirituality permeated with Buddhism. In this respect, it seems appropriate to mention Yanagi’s *Bukkyō bigaku no higan* 仏教美学の悲願 (In Search of a Buddhist Aesthetics),<sup>41</sup> which contrasts “Occidental aesthetics” (*Seiyō bigaku* 西洋美学) with “Buddhist aesthetics” (*Bukkyō bigaku* 仏教美学).<sup>42</sup>

### Themes of Occidental Aesthetics

(*Seiyō bigaku no shudai* 西洋美学の主題)

individual (*kojin* 個人)  
 genius (*tensai* 天才)  
 self-power (*jiriki* 自力)  
 difficult practice (*nangyō* 難行)  
 signed (*zaimei* 在銘)  
 fine art (*bijutsu* 美術)  
 appreciation (*kanshō* 鑑賞)

creation (*sōzō* 創造)  
 distinction between beauty and ugliness  
 (*bishū funbetsu* 美醜分別)<sup>43</sup>  
 leisure (*yoka* 余暇)  
 small quantity (*shōsū* 少数)  
 unusual (*ijō* 異常)

### The object of Buddhist Aesthetics

(*Bukkyō bigaku no taishō* 仏教美学の対象)

all living beings (*shūjō* 衆生)  
 common people (*bonjin* 凡人)  
 other-power (*tariki* 他力)  
 easy practice (*igyō* 易行)  
 unsigned (*mumei* 無銘)  
 craft (*kōgei* 工藝)  
 functional use (in daily life)  
 (*jitsuyō* 実用 *seikatsu* 生活)  
 tradition (*dentō* 伝統)  
 non-distinction between beauty and ugliness  
 (*bishū mibun* 美醜未分)  
 labour (*rōdō* 労働)  
 large quantity (*taryō* 多量)  
 usual (*heijō* 平常)

From this schematized representation, it clearly emerges that “Occidental aesthetics” is characterized by elements such as the “distinction between beauty and ugliness,” the overcoming of which is a necessary step towards the highest value of beauty, as already analyzed through Yanagi’s writings, which is thus the prerogative of a “Buddhist aesthetics” and consequently of the *mingei* aesthetic theory. Another distinctive feature is the contrast between “self-power” and “other-power” which, in the light of what was said previously, bestows upon Buddhist-Japanese aesthetics a higher status than that of its ‘Western’ counterpart. Therefore, at that time Yanagi was constructing a theory based on the overcoming of all dualisms and discriminations, developing it through a dualistic and discriminatory method based on the opposition between the Buddhist “Orient” and the non-Buddhist “Occident,” which had already been carried out by other promoters of Japanese ‘uniqueness’ before him, such as Okakura Kakuzō 岡倉覚三 (1863-1913) and Suzuki Daisetsu. As well as this, Buddhism is used to validate the *mingei* movement and to claim the ‘uniqueness’ of Japanese crafts, which

<sup>41</sup> *Higan* 悲願, in Buddhist terms, is the compassionate vow made by a buddha or a bodhisattva.

<sup>42</sup> Yanagi 2004a: 29. In brackets, the original Japanese word used by Yanagi. Cf. Kikuchi 2004: 201.

<sup>43</sup> The Buddhist reading *funbetsu* is preferred to the more usual *bunbetsu* here because of the context.

leads to a shift of focus from the universal teachings of this religious system to a particular, restricted sphere. One more self-contradictory aspect in Yanagi's theory is worth mentioning. On the one hand he tacitly adopted ideas taken from European aesthetics in order to build the *mingei* theory. Simultaneously, however, he claimed *mingei*'s originality and independence from Europe and was using European ('occidental') aesthetics as a negative counterpart in order to promote the 'uniqueness' of Japanese crafts and of the *mingei* movement, thus advocating the superiority of the 'Orient' over the 'Occident.'<sup>44</sup>

Such a creation of an image of Japan and its culture, in which Japan acquired a privileged and central position, seems to be not only a question of the past, since similar agendas based on the stereotypical dichotomy Japan=spirituality; Orient-Japan-Buddhism *versus* West=materialism; Occident-Europe-Christianity have been carried out by quite a few cultural ideologists right up to the present.

### Conclusion

From the examination of these two relevant Japanese figures in the field of art and aesthetics, there has emerged a conception of art which relies deeply on the principle of *tariki*, the Pure Land Buddhist tradition and Shin Buddhism in particular. However, during the process of the presentation of Japanese culture and art to Europe and America, the model which was proposed as representative of Japanese aesthetics was, instead, the more Zen-oriented one, in which Zen Buddhism was decontextualized and constructed *ad hoc* for a more appeal for the 'West.'<sup>45</sup>

In a broader perspective, the view according to which a work of art springs from *tariki* could be compared to ideas on aesthetics which were mainly elaborated in nineteenth-century European thought, where the artistic creation itself is conceived as something originating from an unmediated contact of the artist – the genius – with the absolute. This apparently underlies common interpretations of this process regarded as being due to an inspiration detached from the artist's own intentionality. In the above-mentioned examples, it may be argued that *tariki* comes to play an analogous role, since reliance on other-power, which excludes self-effort, would enable the artist to produce a work of art.

Yet, among the reasons underlying the Zen-oriented choice it might be argued that there was a search by part of the 'western' public for religious elements which differed from those found in the European context or in Christian tradition, and that the *tariki* model would have been less 'exotic,' and thus less appealing than the kind of Zen which was proposed to the 'West.'

The examples presented above give us further evidence to counter the assumption of Zen Buddhism being the main or even the only influence of

<sup>44</sup> See also Kikuchi 2004: 42; in particular chapter one, "Orientalism: the foundation of *Mingei* Theory".

<sup>45</sup> In another context, cf. also, for example, Amstutz 1997; Faure 1993; Sharf 1995.

Japanese art and culture, as promoters of such a reductive and exclusivist viewpoint have instead advocated.<sup>46</sup>

Representations of cultures and religions which privilege inclusiveness rather than exclusiveness and take into account their diverse facets and influences instead of reducing everything to an alleged ‘unique essence,’ may provide a better approach of analysis and a consideration of the ‘other’ which would go beyond a simple oppositional matter at the benefit of one civilization over others. Moreover, in the specific case of religions such an approach would be helpful to provide reliable information on the various religious systems in order to avoid stereotyped images and misinterpretations, which in turn reinforce hegemonic strategies of those who possess power and are able to maintain it also in virtue of a ‘spontaneous’ consent built through similar strategies.

### Abbreviations

CWS = *The Collected Works of Shinran*.

MSZ = *Munakata Shikō zenshū* 棟方志功全集.

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<sup>46</sup> In this regard, I examined various other aspects of Japanese culture as influenced by the Pure Land Buddhist tradition in Porcu (forthcoming).

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