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Reviewing Product Design

Japanese Anonymous Design in International Modern Culture

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Abstract

This paper aims to examine the international influence of Japanese anonymous design as the inspiration of the modern movement through the examples of the theories of French architect and interior designer Charlotte Perriand (1903-1999), German modern architect Bruno Taut (1880-1938) and 'Mingei (Folk-Crafts)' movement leader Muneyoshi Yanagi (1889-1961), to reconsider the interactions of modern design and traditional culture.

The above three experts have positive evaluations of anonymous design, especially with regard to Japanese traditional crafts and farmhouses; nonetheless, due to their differing cultural backgrounds, the points they evaluated are different.

For Taut as a modern architect, the beauty of crafts in Japanese farmhouses was a new discovery. This is because the same 'quality (qualität)' was discovered as the product Taut was evaluating when he was in Germany. This was achieved by the sophistication of form, which is different from the handicraft of 'innocent beauty' that Yanagi discovered. However, in the case of Taut, the beauty of the farmer was like a Zen cosmology, included universality, and it was adapted to international functionalism.

On the other hand, the Japanese farmhouse was not a new concept for Perriand. In Japan, she developed her thought examining the concept of 'Folk-Crafts' by Yanagi, and matured this philosophy as the spatial regard based on the 'contact' with natural materials that included various technological possibilities of a new design for her. Unlike Taut, this 'contact' extends to the 'contact' with nature in the farmer's external environment. Her feel of the hand on 'Folk-Crafts' leads to a variety of physical gestures in general in contrast with 'practicality' as traditional life style that Yanagi valued.

This paper elucidates the differences between the questions on Japanese farmhouses by the three with different backgrounds that arise from different criteria in the interpretation of 'technology' and 'function'.

Keywords: *Charlotte Perriand; Muneyoshi Yanagi; Bruno Taut; Farmhouses; Japanese Crafts*

1. Introduction

This paper aims to examine the international influence of Japanese anonymous design as the inspiration of the modern movement through the examples of the theories of French architect and interior designer Charlotte Perriand (1903-1999), German modern architect Bruno Taut (1880-1938) and 'Mingei (Folk-Crafts)' movement founder Muneyoshi Yanagi (1889-1961), to reconsider the interactions of modern design and traditional culture.

It can be seen that all three architects have positive evaluations of anonymous design, especially with regard to Japanese traditional crafts or farmhouses, but due to their cultural backgrounds the points of their evaluations differ.

Perriand is known as a representative of modern furniture design. She worked in the atelier of the modern architect Le Corbusier (1927-1937) as well as an architect for a long period of time. From the 1940s onward, she lived in Japan intermittently (for example, 1940-1942 and 1953-1955). It can be surmised that various parts of Japanese culture influenced her designs. It is significant that in Japan, she most likely would have encountered the unknown Japanese 'Folk-Crafts' movement, 'Mingei', founded in the 1930s by theoretician Muneyoshi Yanagi and potter Kanjiro Kawai, among others, who discovered the nameless beauty of handworks in daily life and criticised machine based civilisation. Moreover, she experienced various farmhouses on site through the 'Mingei' movement.

Unlike Perriand, Bruno Taut was not very familiar with Japan. The turning point was his stay in Japan from 1933 to 1936, which was earlier than that of Perriand. As is widely acknowledged, Taut is known for his 'rediscovery of Japanese beauty' such as the Katsura Imperial Villa, and he also simultaneously studied Japanese crafts at the Japanese Industrial Arts Institute. Thus, he became familiar with traditional farmers, and wrote an article on Japanese architectural culture as a modern architect. Taut was also aware of Yanagi's ideas and they criticized each other.

Traditional Japanese farmhouses and folk art are connected to French and German modern architecture through Yanagi; nevertheless, there are few previous studies on the international relations between so-called modernism and traditional crafts in Japan. As crafts were fundamentally the aesthetics of vernacular or local handicrafts, modern architecture that called for novelties was not the main subject of anonymous design such as 'Folk-Crafts'. This is in contrast to the fact that the arts and crafts movement in the 19th century was closely related to architecture in Europe. In the 20th century, a vernacularism of 'architecture without architect' was proposed as a counterpart of modernism, and at the same time, it has been pointed out that questions about modernism itself were based on questions about the beginning of architecture.

Concerning the Japanese 'Folk-Crafts' movement, one study demonstrated that 'Folk-Crafts' is a theory of architecture that is similar to the secession movement in Japan (1). However, a relationship between Japanese anonymous design and the international modern culture has not been clearly found until now.

Consequently, this paper also reconsiders architectural modernism through an analysis of Taut, Yanagi, and Perriand's interpretation of anonymity as the international cultural crossing point. As a method of analysis, this paper first traces the experiences the three architects have with 'Folk-Crafts'. Secondly, the scope is extended to farmhouses where crafts are used, and finally, it compares the criteria of the ideologies of Taut, Yanagi and Perriand.

2. Encounter with 'Mingei (Folk-Crafts)': Question of "Technology"

2.1. Quality

For Taut, as a modern architect, the beauty of Japanese crafts was a new discovery. However, what Taut saw during his stay in Japan was not pre-modern culture. He found something comparable to the Greek Acropolis in Japanese architectural culture. This was not limited to shrines, temples, or aristocratic houses such as Ise Shrine and the Katsura Imperial Villa. Taut's gaze equally extended to farmers and the tools they used in their daily lives. Through this observation, he became familiar with Yanagi's theory.

First of all, about *getemono* [household goods], I would like to express my deepest respect for the efforts of Mr Soetsu Yanagi and the people around him, preserving and collecting the traditional excellent techniques and forms that remain among local workshops, farmers or fishermen, and maintaining the life of the folk art as much as possible. The works of the artists around Mr Yanagi, especially the works of Mr Tomimoto, are already out of *getemono*. I think that this is an advantage for his artistic "quality". (2)

Taut's interest based on 'quality (qualität)' was the same when it came to modern product that he was evaluating when in Germany (3). Moreover, Taut considered that its 'quality' was based on the archetype (Ürform). 'Japanese work tends to keep the elemental archetype, and Japan has created countless such elemental forms with perfect harmony between practical value and beauty' (4).

Therefore, at the Institute, Taut lectured on types and their variations. It can be said that this was an adaptation of Bauhaus's idea (5), which sought a rational combination of function and form in relation to Japanese crafts. For Bauhaus, technology was the medium, and it did not have to be handicraft. 'The integration of materials and technology has been cultivated over the centuries and is, in principle, exactly in line with modern production'. Whether modern or pre-modern crafts, universal beauty is achieved by the sophistication of form, which is different from the dexterity-based 'innocent beauty' that Yanagi discovers (Fig. 1).



Figure 1: Ordinary rice pot in the Japanese countryside introduced by Muneyoshi Yanagi (*Nature of Folk-Crafts?*, 1941, p.152)

2.2. Innocent Beauty

Taut and Yanagi met in Takasaki. Yanagi appreciated Taut's architectural projects, but criticized the products in Japan which Taut instructed on. It is ironic that Taut, who captured the technical maturity of Japanese crafts, was pointed out for technical imperfections. However, for Yanagi, 'technology' was not always reduced to visual perfection or 'quality' as product. 'This completion makes one forget even the technique. They forget what to make and what to draw and how to move their hands. There is no longer any hesitation in technology and no consciousness. This repetition has the power to bring all ordinary people to a level of proficiency' (6).

Hand skill is more important to Yanagi than visual appearance. However, this is not simply due to the degree of mastery of craftsmanship; the most important point is that the production is based on innocent, natural forces that lead to the 'forgetting of craftsmanship', or in some cases, 'immature taste'.

Yanagi went back to past techniques with 'Folk-Crafts'. In addition, according to Yanagi, the selection of high-quality crafts also depended on an 'intuition' beyond notions or knowledge. For Yanagi, 'intuition' was 'to look at things as the concreteness of the hearts' (7) and this was based on the Buddhist faith where 'beauty was faith'. Yanagi had this same feeling for anonymous craftwork. The cooperative work was 'innocent' and 'more traditional than individual', and placed emphasis

‘not [on] the human being, but [on] the wisdom of nature’. According to Yanagi, this nature was another world in Buddhism, and the ‘beyond of oneself’, ‘Tariki’, operated in the pure land, ‘Jyodo’ (8). On the other hand, many modern products are aesthetic rather than ‘body and mind as one’ (9). They are personal art by ‘artists’, not craft beauty, and cannot be a ‘standard of beauty’. For Yanagi, craft beauty must be something used repetitively over years (10).

Such a view is incomprehensible to Taut because there is no pursuit of ‘quality’ in the crafts that are used by farmers (11). Taut criticised them for their lack of beauty.

2.3. Material

In 1940, Perriand went to Japan at the request of the Japanese Ministry of Commerce and Industry with the title of adviser for the export of products similar to a previous foreign adviser, the modern German architect Bruno Taut. She immediately met Yanagi at the Japan Folk-Crafts Museum and visited Yanagi’s residence on the opposite side of the museum. Perriand’s sketchbook shows that she had been attracted exclusively to materials such as the floorings of the Japanese indigenous Oyaishi stones, Korean porcelain, and the daily life crafts of the rural regions of Japan (12). She understood the meaning of the ‘beauty of material’.

Perriand wrote about Yanagi as follows:

Most of the collections by Mister Yanagi are composed of past “Folk-Crafts”; there are no present art crafts. Why is this? (We have an opinion on the “Mingei” movement, which follows Mister Yanagi’s thoughts on crafts; however, we mention the problem of crafts compared to the so-called present art crafts.) Mister Yanagi values consciously or unconsciously these “Folk-Crafts” in the organic, economic meaning, or in the meaning of the standard, furthermore in the meaning of the beauty with total harmony. (13)

The above quote mentioning Yanagi in parenthesis includes Perriand’s potential doubt toward Yanagi: Yanagi limited the possibility of the beauty of ‘Folk-Crafts’. However, in principle, Perriand appreciated the essence of Yanagi’s definition of ‘Folk-Crafts’ as ‘oneness of use and beauty’ or ‘unification of popularity, cheapness, and beauty’. However, Yanagi himself did not refer to the physical ‘standard’ directly as Perriand pointed out, even if he valued the proficiency of the technique to enable repetition and mass production. The ‘standard’ in Yanagi was a unique interpretation of Perriand who focused on machine production. Perriand was optimistic about machine production, which was the opposite of handcrafts, while Taut regards machine technology as the extension of handwork.

3. Development of Spatial Theory: Question of “Function”

3.1. Universality

Like Perriand, Taut was interested in the dwellings of the world. He has already surveyed the interior of Japanese temples with the plates 19 and 20 in his work *New Dwelling*, published in 1924. This is a general description of Japanese life culture that was known at that time, such as the absence of structural walls, monochrome interior decoration, and the relationship with clothing. It is clear that Taut’s main focus was on his own housing concept, with applications in undecorated interior spaces.

The evaluation of the Japanese crafts by Taut on site was an affirmation from the viewpoint of ‘quality’ as an accord with function and form. With such a viewpoint, it was impossible to find direct similarity between modern architecture and the farmhouses of Japan. However, he finally looked at Japanese form or space as the metaphysics of ‘the universal’.

In particular, Taut pays attention only to the Tokonoma (alcove). (Fig. 2)

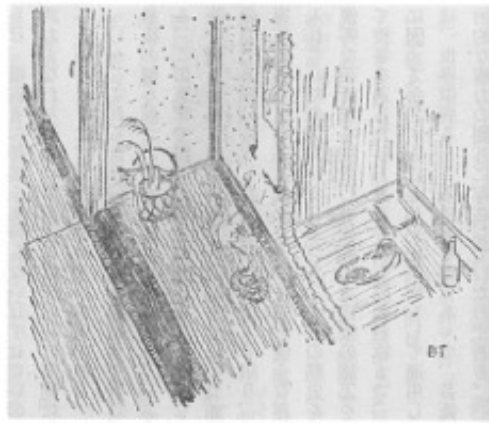


Figure 2: Tokonoma (alcove) discovered by Bruno Taut (2)

That is, the Tokonoma (alcove) most clearly defines the limits and the consciousness of the arts. For example, architecture has the purest abstract proportion and relationship ... sculpture or painting ... its work is beautiful when it expresses a close relationship as possible to the resident's spiritual or emotional life. That is, the significance of architecture lies in the abstract unbiased neutrality, and the significance of decoration as well as painting and sculpture is to express spiritual things as simply as possible. (4)

The 'integration of art' was exactly the Bauhaus educational philosophy itself. Theatre was the most representative building type, but according to Taut, it could be seen between the Tokonoma (alcove), not only in a theatre in Bauhaus. He saw 'the universal language of farmers' in the symbolic universe of Japanese farmers:

Japanese farmers do not speak to the world in words, they speak through their houses. They have universal power because they are true Japanese and their "language" is universally common. In addition, it has created a unique and sophisticated culture in Japan. (14)

3.2. Use

Yanagi himself respected the daily 'use' of 'Mingei (Folk-Crafts)' and praised that the 'use' was traditionally cultivated and constant. There is no novelty or internationality in it that modern architects demand. Moreover, he respected that the daily life of farmers was regional. However, Yanagi did not mention much about the farmhouse itself, which should be used in daily life, or the relationship between 'Mingei (Folk-Crafts)' and architecture in general.

Crafts must be integrated, because crafts do not live alone. A chest of drawers in one room, and many stationery items placed on a desk that occupies a corner ... Many products are prepared waiting for use. By extension, the food, or the architecture that encloses everything. There must be harmony and unity in between. (9)

For example, according to Yanagi, a consistent logic is adhered to from the tea ceremony tools to the inner space in the tea ceremony room.

I could not understand that when today's "tea" is the "tea" in the tea ceremony room, and the "tea" disappears when you step out of the alley. In my opinion, the tea ceremony room is like a training room. The "tea" in the tea ceremony room comes to life only when the viewpoints practiced here

are combined with daily life. No, in a sense, everyday life itself is more important, and if there is no basis for tea life here, the “tea” in the tea ceremony room will be a lie. (15)

The core of his logic is the ‘standard of beauty’ derived from the daily necessity of drinking tea, which has the same roots as ‘Mingei (Folk-Crafts)’, and it must be reflected in both tools and space. However, disagreeing with Taut, Yanagi asserted that it was a phenomenon in a previous era, and that modern capitalism separated from handicrafts was a chaotic world.

3.3. Contact

As a modern individual, Perriand was a creator, and she did not probe into religious feelings like Yanagi did. After her departure from Japan, at a lecture in Hanoi in January 1942, she discussed various themes including organising production for export, the local materials of Yanagi’s ‘Folk-Crafts’, and Japanese lifestyles.

Perriand’s criticism of modern functionalism by Bauhaus was that the form was decided definitively by the function and that the form limited the function (16). Her question was the meaning of ‘the function of objects’. Of course, they must be produced because of the needs of everyday life and ‘the beauty of the use’ is also produced, as Yanagi stated. However, according to Perriand, this also contained the tactile element of ‘contact’.

This was her fundamental question, and this was led by her encounter with ‘Folk-Crafts’ and the real experience of daily life spaces in Japan. While the ‘the beauty of the use’ for Yanagi was sublimated to ‘beyond oneself’, Perriand went back to the human senses.

After returning to France, she published the article ‘Crisis of the Gesture in Japan’ in 1956, in which she discussed traditional Japanese houses as the most important component from the viewpoint of a reflection on ‘Folk-Crafts’:



Figure 3: Japanese hotel presented by Charlotte Perriand (17)

Yet, without falling into folklore, our wonder is more than justified: the Japanese house has all the qualities and the spirit that informs modern western trends. Not that Japanese architecture has influenced us: it was rather a meeting of conceptions that occurred when we abandoned the load-bearing walls that condemned us to have windows in the facades and to be cut off from nature, while in the Japanese house the man has never lost contact with his original environment. But

will Japan be able to preserve the privilege of having traditionally the most modern house of inspiration and an entire people that benefit from it? (« Crisi del gesto in Giappone », *Casabella continuità*, no. 210, 63, 65)

According to Perriand, the sense of touch must be universal in both the Occident and the Orient. Perriand's tactile experience was prolonged by 'Folk-Crafts', clothes, and the cabinets of the environmental 'ambience' (18) that surround humanity; in this way, these are theorised as modern architecture spaces (Fig. 3).

4. Conclusion (Table 1)

Anonymous design	Bruno Taut	Muneyoshi Yanagi	Charlotte Perriand
Folk-craft (question of 'function')	Quality (sophistication of form)	Hand skill	Natural materials
Farmhouse (question of 'technology')	Universality	Daily use	Contact
Criteria	Eyes (optic)	hands	body

Table 1: Crossing different perspectives over Japanese anonymous design

For Taut as a modern architect, the beauty of crafts in Japanese farmhouses was equal with 'quality (qualität)'. This is achieved by the sophistication of form, which is different from the hand skill based on the 'innocent beauty' that Yanagi discovered. However, in the case of Taut, the beauty of the farmhouse was like a Zen cosmology, included universality, and was adapted to international functionalism.

On the other hand, the Japanese farmhouse was not a new concept for Perriand. In Japan, she developed her thought by analyzing the concept of 'Folk-Crafts' for daily uses constructed by Yanagi, and matured this thinking as the spatial regard based on the 'contact' with natural materials that included various technological possibilities of a new design for her. In the case of Perriand, this 'contact' extends to the 'contact' with nature in the farmer's external environment. Her feel of the hand on 'Folk-Crafts' leads to a variety of physical gestures in general in contrast with 'practicality' of the traditional life style that Yanagi valued. Regional differences must be respected if practical uses result from regional daily life.

It can be seen that the differences between the questions on Japanese anonymous design by three architects arise from different criteria in the interpretation of 'technology' and 'function'. Taut was judged by the morphological dimension that can be seen by the eyes, and Yanagi and Perriand were judged by the human physical dimension. However, Yanagi was of the belief of 'hands' as a Buddhist value, while Perriand was in the realm of possibility of design related to 'body' gesture itself.

Perriand and Taut's first-hand experience in Japan was a coincidence and not their own choice. However, both have long been interested in ethnic customs around the world. Then, how did they try to universalize their experience in Japan? After staying in Japan, Taut taught at a university in Turkey. Perriand returned to Paris to write treatises on Japanese architecture and returned to Japan to hold an exhibition. The anonymity in modern design hidden in these activities probably leads to the problems of life design like MUJI today.

Notes

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