

PRESS RELEASE

Art Without Heroes: Mingei
23 March – 22 September 2024



William Morris Gallery is pleased to announce *Art Without Heroes: Mingei*, the largest ever exhibition in the UK dedicated to Mingei, the influential folk-craft movement that developed in Japan in the 1920s and 1930s. With more than 80 works, including ceramics, woodwork, paper, toys, textiles, photography and film, the exhibition will incorporate unseen pieces from significant private collections in the UK and Japan, along with museum loans.

Mingei, a term coined by the Japanese philosopher and critic Yanagi Sōetsu (1889-1961) to mean 'the art of the people', ascribed cultural value and aesthetic purity to traditional craft objects, unnamed makers and a simpler way of life. The exhibition will consider Mingei both as a historical moment and as a set of principles that remain relevant to contemporary craft, manufacturing and material consumerism worldwide. Mingei was born in response to Japan's rapid industrialisation, and developed in dialogue with the British Arts and Crafts movement within a specifically Japanese context that included the strong influence of Pure Land Buddhism. The exhibition will also introduce the significance of Korean, Okinawan and Ainu objects to the Mingei movement, showing how these independent cultures contributed to what tends to be seen as a quintessentially Japanese aesthetic.

Divided into three parts, the exhibition will start with the 19th-century craft objects the Mingei movement looked to for inspiration. Ceramics, simple wooden kokeshi dolls, kimono and the

functional stitching known as sashiko will be displayed alongside pieces from Korea, which was under Japanese rule from 1910 to 1945, and Okinawa, a region annexed by Japan in the 19th century, as well as Ainu objects from the northern island of Hokkaido, which have been selected and interpreted in partnership with Ainu artist Mayunkiki (b.1982). The exhibition will also problematise aspects of the Mingei movement, including the tendency to idealise rural poverty and disregard the identity of so-called 'anonymous' artists, some of whom suffered from misrepresentation and the historical erasure of colonialism. For example, *bingata* textiles from Okinawa, originally produced for the exclusive use of the royal court, became synonymous, thanks to Yanagi's misunderstanding of indigenous culture, with humble folk craft.

The second part of the exhibition will focus on the origin and evolution of the Mingei movement during the 20th century. Spearheaded by Yanagi, Japanese studio potter Hamada Shōji (1894-1978) and British studio potter Bernard Leach (1887-1979), it proposed an alternative to the rise of industrialism that accompanied the modernisation of Japanese society. Together Yanagi, Hamada and Leach, who described themselves as the 'three musketeers', championed the Mingei ideals of 'art without heroes', true beauty and traditional craft skills, leading a revival of interest in folk crafts. Writings by Yanagi and Leach will be displayed alongside work that Hamada created in Mashiko, north of Tokyo, where he established a traditional climbing kiln, and worked with local clay and glazes. Additional objects in this section will include an early plate by Kawai Kanjirō (1890-1966), another key potter of the Mingei movement, and two colourful printed screens by textile artist Serizawa Keisuke (1895-1984). The section will also look at the international commercialisation of the Mingei movement through footage, shot by Leach, from the Mingei Film Archive depicting an exhibition at Tokyo's Takashimaya department store, as well as objects created as part of the Mingei tourist boom in the 1970s.

The final section of the exhibition will consider 21st-century iterations of the Mingei movement and modern re-interpretations of its core values, while asking whether Mingei still exists today and in what forms. Contemporary Japanese products will evidence the enduring Mingei ideas of simple forms, beauty in use and utilitarian design. Items by brands such as Muji and Bote & Sutto will be shown besides objects designed by Yanagi Sōri (1915-2011), the son of Yanagi Sōetsu, and modern kokeshi dolls that draw from pop culture and global trends. The Mingei emphasis on sustainability, respect for natural materials and a return to small-scale production will be illustrated through eco-conscious brand Itoshiro Yōhin-ten, established in the rural mountains of Gifu prefecture, and a piece of sashiko created by contemporary artisan makers. The exhibition will also show how the term 'Mingei' has been reinterpreted and reclaimed by contemporary artists, including work by Theaster Gates which explores the spiritual and artistic dialogue between Black and Japanese craft traditions, a key concern of his practice.

The exhibition is designed by Hayatsu Architects and graphic design studio Stinsensqueeze, and will be accompanied by a major new publication by Yale University Press edited by curator Roisin Inglesby. The book will feature nine essays by experts including Yuko Kikuchi, Head of Academic Programmes at the V&A; Dasom Sung, Assistant Curator of Korean Arts at the V&A; Anna Jackson, Keeper of the Asian Department at the V&A; Aaron Angell, ceramic artist, curator and Director of Troy Town Art Pottery; Okazaki Manami, author and journalist; Sam Thorne, Director General of Japan House, London; Adam Sutherland, MBE, Director of Grizedale Arts; and Naomi Pollock, author and architect. It will also include a series of profiles of contemporary makers by cultural translator Yoshizawa Tomo, including Fukasawa Naoto, product designer and Director of the Japan Folk Crafts Museum; Hamada Tomoo, ceramicist and grandson of Shōji; and Higeta Tadashi, ninth-generation indigo dyer and weaver.

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Art Without Heroes: Mingei is supported by The Great Britain Sasakawa Foundation.

The exhibition will be on view from 21 March – 22 September 2024. Gallery opening hours are Tuesday to Sunday, 10am – 5pm; Admission free (suggested £5 donation).

Please note Japanese and Korean names are written in their original order (i.e. family name first) unless the subjects have specifically requested otherwise.

Images

Left: Storage jar (tsubo), stoneware with a brown ame glaze and white namako overglaze, Tsutsumi kiln, 19th century © National Museums Scotland

Right: “Shigoto-gi” Work Clothes. Late Edo to early Showa period, 1800s-1950s. Collection of Chuzaburo Tanaka.

About the William Morris Gallery

Owned and run by Waltham Forest Council, the William Morris Gallery is the only public Gallery devoted to William Morris: designer, craftsman and radical socialist. Housed in the Grade II* listed building that was Morris's family home from 1848 to 1856, it displays the world's largest collection of his work. In recent years the Gallery has developed an ambitious programme of contemporary and historical exhibitions by artists including Kehinde Wiley, Jeremy Deller, Yinka Shonibare CBE, Althea McNish and May Morris. Other special exhibitions have explored 20th-century political posters and African textiles.

William Morris Gallery
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