CHAPTER THREE

PURE LAND BUDDHISM AND CREATIVE ARTS

This chapter, which explores the role played by Pure Land Buddhism in the field of creative arts and aesthetics, is mainly focused on two influential and famous Japanese personalities, the woodblock artist Munakata Shikō and Yanagi Muneyoshi, the founder of the mingei movement and art critic. In particular, the idea of tariki, other-power, will be considered here as an inspirational creative force and, together with other elements of Pure Land Buddhism, as a basis for the development of a Buddhist aesthetics which provided further support to Yanagi’s mingei theory. What I call ‘tariki art’ (and ‘tariki aesthetics’), namely a conception of the artistic work as derived from such ‘external’ religious power, other-power, will be analysed in the following. Besides, in order to offer a sample of the presence of this religious tradition in recent Japanese artistic trends, the last section is dedicated to visual representations of the Pure Land as found in contemporary works of art both within and outside Japan, and presented in different environments both inside and outside temples, such as the installation entitled “Pure Land” by Mori Mariko, a Japanese multimedia artist who lives between Japan and the United States.

Aesthetics and Religion in Yanagi Muneyoshi

Yanagi Muneyoshi, better known as Yanagi Sōetsu 柳宗悦 (1889–1961), was the founder and leading exponent of the mingei 民藝 (folk crafts) movement, which was destined to gain great popularity both within Japan and abroad. 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 a lengthy stay in Japan. Leach

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Muneyoshi is the original given name, and the Chinese-derived pronunciation of the same characters was later used in some cases to create an aura of greater formality.

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was an influential figure and his book *A Potter’s Book* (1940) notably affected modern studio pottery, while in Japan his contribution to the development of the *mingeï* movement in the post-war period was also highly significant.\(^3\) With reference to his role within this movement, Kikuchi Yuko has pointed out that “Leach was a loyal spokesman for Yanagi, reinforcing the mystification of *Mingeï* theory”,\(^4\) and in analysing cultural nationalistic connotations of the *mingeï* movement, she has further asserted: “Just as the *Mingeï* movement thrived during the Second World War, the ‘Leach Tradition’ was in harmony with the political and practical propaganda that surrounded an idealized image of England in which its vernacular crafts and countryside were regarded as a cradle of ‘tradition’.”\(^5\) A more detailed account of the construction of a discourse based on the opposition ‘Orient’/’Occident’ and Japan/Other Asian countries as related to the *mingeï* theory will be provided below.

The *mingeï* movement developed in the 1920s through the efforts of Yanagi to propagate an “art of the people”. In explaining the origin of the word *mingeï*, which is an abbreviation of *minshūteki kōgei* 民衆的工芸, Leach claimed that Yanagi had coined this himself so as to express the “equivalent term for peasant or folk art, in Japanese”\(^6\). Yet, it appears that this was a result of a discussion between Yanagi and his friends Kawai Kanjirō 河井寛次郎 and Hamada Shōji 濱田庄司,\(^7\) during a field trip in Wakayama prefecture in 1925 in order to study traces of the wandering monk Mokujiki Shōnin 木喰上人 (1718–1810).\(^8\)

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Bernard Leach stayed in Japan from 1909 until 1920, when he came back to England accompanied by Hamada Shōji and set up a pottery in St. Ives (Cornwall). Hamada returned to Japan in 1923.

\(^3\) Ibid., pp. 13–14.
\(^4\) Ibid., p. 233.
\(^5\) Ibid., pp. 234–235.
\(^7\) Kawai Kanjirō (potter and artist, 1890–1966) and Hamada Shōji (potter, 1894–1978) both belonged to the *mingeï* movement.