

The People's Museum San Diego's Mingei celebrates the artist in each of us

In 1926, a philosopher named Dr. Soetsu Yanagi began traveling around Japan collecting pottery. Industrialism was on the rise, but Yanagi was headed in the other direction: He was looking for pieces that were made by hand, anonymous, inexpensive, created for everyday use.

In them, he saw a “freedom and purity, a friendliness and beauty” missing from the new mass-produced goods. Such is the stuff that cultural movements are born of: By the time he returned to Tokyo, Yanagi had cemented his life’s calling. He became a champion of *mingei*, the arts of the people, opening an institute in Tokyo and carrying his message around the world: that something fundamental was in danger of being lost, that true *mingei* transmits a vital human energy and enriches the lives of all who make and use it.

Martha Longenecker was an art student in California when she heard Yanagi speak in 1952. It was the time of the post-war boom, when everything from cupcakes to buttonholes were being made by machines, and the talk, she recalls, “blew my mind. It anchored me to the cosmos. It put everything together.” Longenecker went to Japan to study with Yanagi, then returned to California determined to open a museum dedicated to the world’s *mingei*. It was to be, she says, a place “dedicated to all people in recognition of the innate creativity of every person born.”

Martha is in her eighties now, and she tells me this story sitting in the remarkable museum she did create, the Mingei International Museum in San Diego’s Balboa Park. The Mingei is huge (41,000 square feet), architecturally lovely and filled with astonishing artwork from all over the planet. The prevalence of mass production has only soared since Martha first heard Yanagi speak, but inside the Mingei, you’d never know it: The museum is a love letter to the innate human desire to craft beauty. The table we are seated around as we talk, for example: It was deliberately made to preserve the soul of the tree it came from, and its burnished wood seems to glow with life still.

“Our whole ambition is for you to see the art and realize what man can do,” says Martha. “Many, many thousands of people are



Longenecker portrait, courtesy Anthony Scoggins

making objects of unsurpassed beauty.” Nearby, proving her point, workers are setting up an exhibit on the intricately wrought jewelry of the hill tribes of Laos and Thailand; across the way, an exhibit on Norway includes elaborately carved chairs, vibrant embroidered dresses, even expertly crafted rolling pins and tankards—all the stuff of daily life, all made by hand, all infused with imagination and skill.

But who actually created the stuff is a mystery: In the Mingei, it is the art that has the identity, not the artist, so there are no names next to any of the pieces. “We focus on the creativity itself, on the unknown craftsman,” confirms Martha. “Many people are not known beyond their villages.” And besides, she adds, “The objects speak. They are an international language.”

We talk about the founding of the museum: the decades spent raising the money, collecting the works. “We had a simple mission,” she explains, “to further understanding. This museum is not just for today, certainly not about nostalgia for the past. This is for the future.” She leans in closer, taps the table to underscore her point. That Martha is in her eighties is irrelevant; you feel the same intensity she must have felt listening to Yanagi over half a century ago. “People will need this. When a work of art has spirit, heart, feeling, that comes through: A whole person makes his craft with an energy that is not fragmented. In the future, people will need to feel that energy.”

Leaving the Mingei, those words come back to me as I pass a cabinet filled with nineteenth-century Hawaiian calabashes, beautiful *koa* bowls probably used to hold poi or fish. Today, of course, we use Tupperware, which, though it holds many things, holds none of the mana you can feel in the bowls. Yanagi said it best decades ago when he wrote, “On reflection, one must conclude that in bringing cheap and useful goods to the average household, industrialism has been a service to mankind—but at the cost of the heart.” HH

{ Story by Julia Steele }



PAU HANA