

Yanagi, Ceramics and the Craft Values of Korean Aesthetics

Rosa Fernández Gómez

The long Japanese tradition of Korean ceramics appreciation, closely associated with the Zen tea ceremony (*chanoyu*), has played an important role in the development of Korean aesthetics in the twentieth century. The art critic and philosopher Yanagi Sōetsu was instrumental in this process during the occupation period, since, continuing in this tradition, he particularly valued Joseon ceramics for their aesthetic qualities — such as naturalness, nonchalance, and simplicity — akin to praised values in Zen Buddhism. Yanagi's pioneering writings might have been influential in the prevalence of those traits when defining Korean art and aesthetics in general. After a brief presentation of key expressions defining Korean art and aesthetics, the paper focuses on Yanagi's aesthetic assessment of Joseon ceramics and particularly on his proposal of its appreciation beyond the modern Western division between art and craft. | *Keywords: Korean Aesthetics, Craft, Yanagi Sōetsu, modern System of the Arts, Everyday*

1. Introduction

The seminal conception of Korean aesthetics took place in the twentieth century under the conceptual framework of a double colonialism: a firsthand and direct experience, derived from the political occupation of the peninsula by Japan (1910–1945) and similarly a second hand and indirect one, exerted through the Japanese filter and derived from the Western paradigm of the modern art system.¹ Since the Meiji period (1868–1912), Japan itself had been in the process of assuming and emulating some aspects of Western culture as a way to legitimize its hegemonic position within East Asia, while at the same time rejecting others from a nationalistic defensive attitude. The complexity of the tensions involved in this double intellectual influence (Japanese/Western) shows well with regard to ceramics, a craft form in which Korea's production is renowned and whose pieces have been deeply appreciated in Japan in the context of tea culture (with the expression *korai chawan*) for the last seven centuries (Brandt, 2000).

¹ I am following here Larry Shiner's expression 'modern art system' (Shiner, 2001).

There are two reasons for this: first, in the Western modern art system ceramics was excluded as it fell on the side of crafts, as opposed to fine art; and second, in Japan, ceramics was highly appreciated in aesthetic terms but from criteria entirely different to the European fine art standards, being one of the most striking contrasts the additional value that the marks of use sometimes attached to the pieces.²

In particular, this was the case with the aesthetics of Joseon ceramics styles (fifteen to nineteenth centuries) most valued by Japanese *connoisseurs*: the *buncheong* and *baekja* or white porcelain styles.³ *Buncheong* is characterised by its coarseness, free and lively decorative patterns, its unfinished and apparently carefree outlook and *baekja* by its elegant simplicity and sober restraint; whereas *buncheong* could be seen more in accordance with Zen Buddhist values, *baekja* reflected the Neoconfucian ideal of austerity that was prevalent in society by mid Joseon dynasty.⁴ In this sense, despite their many differences, there was a familiarity between both ceramic styles reflected in the ethical values of poverty and austerity they both portrayed. After a brief review of some of the main authors who have attempted to define Korean art and aesthetics in the twentieth century, I shall concentrate on the aesthetics of ceramics proper as exposed by Yanagi.

2. The Colonial Beginnings

The first author to write a monograph on Korean art in a Western language was the German André Eckardt (1884–1974), with his *Geschichte der Koreanische Kunst* (1929).⁵ In this work the influence of European authors of the time is already evident: the ‘style theory’ of Alois Riegl in particular, which will lead the author to uphold the classic beauty (*gojeonmi*), understood as symmetry in structure, balance, and so on, as a trait of Korean art. The fact that he centers his reflection on arts such as architecture and sculpture, which are ranked high from a European perspective but which according to East Asian canons have a low status in comparison to the so called ‘arts of the brush’ (calligraphy, poetry and

² Shiner in this regard has remarked how also in the ancient European tradition of the art/craft system, that lasted until 17th century, form and function were appreciated in an undivided manner whereas with the establishment of the modern art system, art and craft were separated and from then on, fine art instead of being defined by its differentiation to nature, became defined in opposition to crafts. Whereas in the ancient art/craft system wearability and use were highly valued, in the modern art system, the most important criterium to distinguish an artwork was its opposition to use and functionality (Shiner, 2001, p. 141).

³ For a general introduction to Korean Ceramics see Kang (2008).

⁴ Regarding *buncheong* ceramics, art historian Lee Soyoung (2020, p. 327) remarks that [in comparison to its immediate predecessor, Goryeo celadon] it is “more robust and organic, the designs sometimes infused with a sense of playfulness or wit” and that “the central appeal of *punch’ong* lies in its materiality: the texture of the relatively coarse clay and of the thickly applied white slip; and the quality of the surface designs, which are organic and earthy on the one hand and delightfully modern on the other” (Lee, 2020, p. 329). This author also highlights the Japanese fascination with this variety of ceramics: “that unrefined, earthy quality, however, was precisely what the Japanese consumers, primarily tea aficionados ranging from the *daimyō* to the merchant, valued from the sixteenth century onwards” (*Ibid.*).

⁵ In this section I will follow the detailed historical account provided by Kwon Young-pil *The Aesthetic in Traditional Korean Art and its Influence in Modern Life* (Kwon, 2007).

painting), creates already a first distortion with the colonial imposition of the Western artistic canon. Interestingly enough, German art historian Eckardt is the first of a long list of authors to mention ‘artless naïveté’ and the lack of excessive decoration as important features. In his recent assessment of Korean aesthetics, Kwon Yong-pil suggests that Gombrich’s notion of simplicity in Western art, praising moderation and rejecting ornamentation, was at work as an aesthetic ideal that Eckardt tried to find in Korean art (Kwon, 2007, p. 14).

Also in this early period, Japanese philosopher and art critic Yanagi Sōetsu (1889–1961), from 1914 onwards developed a sustained interest in Korean folk crafts, particularly ceramics, and from 1920 on wrote numerous essays dealing with Korean art. His famous ‘aesthetics of sorrow’ (jap. *hiai no bi*) – in reference to the tragic history of successive invasions in the country – can be claimed as the first attempt to describe a native Korean aesthetic sensibility.⁶ Besides its obvious paternalistic bias, ‘sadness’ as an aesthetic category might have been attractive for Yanagi as it was closely linked to the Japanese *awareness* (‘sadness for the perishability of life’) and also close to the Western notion of *pathos* or ‘the tragic’. As already mentioned, Yanagi, as a native East-Asian author, focused on the vindication of specific Korean arts which, although considered ‘minor’ in the West, were prominent in Japan: ceramics in particular and also various forms of folk art. Still, in his beginnings he departed also from the strong influence of the Western Arts and Crafts movement. In the next section, I will deal *in extenso* with his contribution.

The third relevant author and the first Korean one was the art historian and aesthetician Go Yuseop (1905–1944). In his approach, we can already identify another trait: the close connection between art history and aesthetics derived from his Japanese educational background. In his short life he laid the foundation of Korean art history, trying not only to develop a formalistic approach but also to understand the deeper cultural meaning of works of art within their historical contexts. He also wrote about aesthetics, especially in two articles published in 1940 and 1941. There he identified “technique without technique,” “artless art,” “planless planning,” “disinterestedness,” “an overall sense of pleasure” and “a lingering sense of delight” as essential features of Korean art (Kim, 2010, pp. 83–84). Go provided many examples of Korean artworks to illustrate his positions and one such example is the crooked beams of the Gakhwangjeong Hall of Hwaeomsa Temple.

In a typically colonial vein, Korean aesthetics was qualified with adjectives such as ‘naïve’ or ‘childish’. The recurrent use of paradoxically negative expressions to refer to Korean art may also show how far apart the East Asian aesthetic framework was from the modern European parameters.

⁶ One of the documents that attest to his still ambiguous colonial defense of Korean art is his *A Letter to my Korean Friends*, published in 1920. An English translation can be found in Yanagi, Sōetsu (2017) *Selected Essays on Japanese Folk Crafts*, Japan Publishing Industry Foundation for Culture, pp. 195–211.

The ‘artlessness’ is indeed related to the philosophical notion of spontaneity (ch. *tzu ran*), which became an artistic and aesthetic ideal in East Asia’s higher arts, the so-called ‘arts of the brush’ (calligraphy, poetry and painting).⁷ It also resonates with the Zen Buddhist ideal of ‘no-mind’ (jap. *mushin*).

In the sixties, Choe Sun-u, a prominent disciple of Go, went a step further centering his research only on Korean pottery and woodcraft and defining their aesthetic characteristics as “simplicity and naïvete” (Kwon, 2007, p. 19). Also, the English ceramic collector Godfrey Gompertz, in his monographs about Korean ceramics published in 1963 and 1966, presented the work of the Korean potter as “careless or inexpert with technique,” more concerned with producing artistic effects and less interested in details (Gompertz 1964, p. 2). Two more articles from the late seventies are relevant: one by art historian Dietrich Seckel and another by Korean archaeologist Kim Won-yong. Both will again characterize Korean art with traits such as ‘simplicity’, ‘spontaneity’, ‘liveliness’ and ‘informality’, which entirely apply to the description of Joseon *buncheong* and, to a lesser extent, to *baekja* or white porcelain (Seckel, 1977; Kim, 1979).

From the above-mentioned descriptions, the important role that Joseon ceramics played as an inspirational source for defining Korean aesthetics as a whole may seem clear. This centrality of Joseon ceramics was closely linked to two factors: to Japan’s own aesthetic tastes, associated with Zen Buddhist values and to its ambiguous position as colonial political power with regard to Korea and towards Western culture. The combination of a paternalistic attitude, associated to all sorts of imperialisms, with the ethical and aesthetic values promoted by Zen Buddhism (somehow antithetical to it), influenced the reception and idealization of Korean crafts during the occupation period. Yanagi’s own evolution in his aesthetic assessment of Korean folk crafts, being more and more influenced by what he called a ‘Buddhist idea of beauty’, with ceramics at its centre, might prove instructive. It may help not only to cast light on the complex issues derived from a double colonial process but also on finding new avenues to solve or at least avoid typical contradictions and dichotomies of the Western modern art system.

3. Korean Ceramics in Yanagi’s Eyes: the Power of the Collective, Use and the Everyday

Yanagi Sōetsu has eloquently been called ‘A Japanese William Morris’ (Kikuchi, 1997), having contributed like no other author to develop an Eastern ‘craft aesthetics’. Yuko Kikuchi (2004) and Kim Brandt (2007, 2000) have underlined the significance of his encounter with Korean art in the second decade of the twentieth century for his subsequent development of *mingei* theory.⁸ Kikuchi

⁷ Again, there is a very important body of research done on unintentionality and spontaneity in art from the perspective of the Chinese tradition, connected with Daoism, mainly but also referred in the case of the Japanese aesthetics in connection to Buddhist notions. With regard to China, see for example Bruya (2002).

⁸ In Kikuchi’s words: “Yanagi’s involvement with Korea is extremely significant because his interest in Korean crafts preceded his interest in Japanese folkcrafts and predated his creation of the ‘criterion of beauty’” (Kikuchi, 2004, p. 126).

specifically mentions the originality of Yanagi's own hybridisations, first with regard to the Western Arts and Crafts movement, and then in relation to Zen Buddhism (Kikuchi, 2004, pp. 136–137; Yanagi, 2013, pp. 127–157). The latter is relevant in so far as it will mark the difference between his positions and the British movement founded by Morris (Kikuchi, 2004, pp. 201–202; Kikuchi, 1997, p. 43).⁹ With this distancing from a Buddhist background, he may indeed have laid the foundation for a more original aesthetic appreciation of Korean traditional craft objects beyond the Western modern dichotomy between arts and crafts.¹⁰

Thus, whereas in the first two decades of his intellectual production he was clearly under the influence of the Western art system, even if only to reject it – following the Arts and Crafts movement of resistance (Shiner, 2001, pp. 239–245) – in the last part of his life Yanagi imbued his contentions with a Buddhist religious halo (Kikuchi, 2004, pp. 136–137; Yanagi, 2013, pp. 127–157). According to Buddhist precepts, Yanagi contended that the main human problem was the perception of duality, primarily between life and death and between oneself and others (Yanagi, 2013, p. 128), or, in aesthetic terms, between beauty and ugliness.

His ideal *Unknown Craftsman* was inevitably inspired by the idealized image of a Korean potter, particularly one of those who, according to his view, produced his beloved pieces of *buncheong* ceramics in a state of non-duality:

Korean work is but an uneventful, natural outcome of the people's state of mind, free from dualistic, man-made rules. They make their asymmetrical lathe work not because they regard asymmetrical form as beautiful or symmetrical as ugly, but because they make everything without such polarized conceptions. They are quite free from the conflict between the beautiful and the ugly. Here, deeply buried, is the mystery of the endless beauty of Korean wares. They just make what they make without pretension. (Yanagi, 2013, 123)

In this passage his colonial and paternalistic bias is still evident in the sense that it will still be “the Japanese eyes” the ones who perceive consciously, whereas the Korean artisan acts naturally and almost unconsciously (Yanagi, 2013, p. 176). Yanagi's assertions were mostly inspired by a romanticized and poetic view which lacked any sort of historical documentation. Nonetheless, we can still read between the lines of his contentions, mostly focused on Korean craft examples, interesting ideas and suggestions for the eventual arousal of a third art system: a moment of fusion where crafts, collectivity and the everyday may be more harmoniously intertwined.

⁹ According to Kikuchi Yanagi can be considered one of the first ‘oriental orientalists’. She states: “his initial narrative of the ‘beauty of sadness’ (*hi ai no bi*), was a Japanese variant of the Orientalism creating an exotic Other from the Japanocentric view in the colonial power relation. This was articulated in the same manner as the Europeans who created exotic Others in Asia, the Near and the Middle East and in Africa” (Kikuchi, 2004, p. 140). Kim Brandt specifically refers to the complex tension in Yanagi between the acceptance and the rejection of the modern art system when, for example, vindicating Korean art as an epitome of craft or folk aesthetic values. Brandt states: “[Yanagi’s] earliest efforts to promote Korean art were conducted [...] within the parameters of a highly Europeanized frame of reference” (Brandt, 2007, p. 27).

¹⁰ I am deeply grateful to an anonymous referee for the suggestion of this idea. I would also like to thank Vanessa Trost for her disinterested help with the English language editing.

Yanagi's Buddhist ideas might find a perfect illustration in the classic processual arts (ending with the suffix '-do' in Japanese) associated with Zen Buddhist values from the outset, being the *Way of Tea* (*cha-do*) the paradigmatic example of them. However, in the case of ceramics and the potter's work (having ideally in mind the Korean potter) the situation varies for a number of reasons that are inherently linked to the material conditions imposed by pottery's own nature. On the one hand, pottery, although it can be practised individually, has traditionally been developed as a collective activity in which, as the process of kiln firing illustrates, one has to rely on external means and acknowledge that complete control is impossible. On the other hand, the very clear utilitarian dimension, often in the context of the everyday life of the people, links so much of this activity to our human needs that it is hard to focus on the making process individually and as an end in itself. As a result, the state of 'no-mind' is achieved 'as a matter of fact', in an unintentional manner and due to the instinctive response to human needs that have to be met on a daily basis. Yanagi would have seen here a way to 'solve the riddle' of the non-intentionality in the figure of the illiterate Korean potter who acts unconsciously. He would time and again contrast him to the Japanese one, too affected and limited by his own intellectual knowledge.¹¹

Yanagi truly saw these external conditioning factors of pottery as potential advantages. From a Buddhist perspective, practical everyday activities are perceived as an antidote against egocentrism as they remind us of our fragility and ontological dependence on others. In this context, Yanagi referred to the "way of grace" and "the way of Other Power" to emphasize the collective dimension of folk crafts and invoked "tradition" as another collective preserver of a non-egocentric order (Yanagi, 2013, pp. 132–136).

A paradigmatic example for Yanagi was the Korean *buncheong* ceramic wares decorated with a technique that the Japanese called *hakeme*. All the apparent constraints to which this decorative technique responded were turned into virtues for the Japanese eye, expert in appreciating the beauty of poverty and scarcity. About this decorative style Yanagi writes:

The Korean *hakeme* pottery was made by sweeping the leather-hard green pot with a large, coarse brush full of white clay. The technique is a simple one, and Korean potters employed it in an extremely casual manner; they also worked very quickly, because the white clay adheres to the pot better when so treated [...] Here, where the craftsmen do their work as a matter of course, is 'the everyday mind' of the Zen Buddhists. (At one time this was the cheapest pottery in the world.) [...] In Zen terms, Korean *hakeme* is produced prior to the formation of the concepts of beauty and ugliness, while the Japanese imitation is produced after the separation of the two. (Yanagi, 2013, p. 139)

In another passage Yanagi continues to explore the connection between the non-conceptual 'everyday mind' of Zen Buddhism and utility, stating that it is precisely the particular circumstance of the daily use that these objects are

¹¹ This is even more obvious in his essay about the Kizaemon tea bowl, where he compares the famous ceramic piece to the Japanese Raku style bowls which are defective precisely because they try to imitate the Korean one (Yanagi, 2013, pp. 190–196).

intended for, what favours their realization from that state of no-mind. In his words:

Utility does not permit unsoundness or frailty, for between use and beauty there is a close relation. Utility demands faithfulness in objects; it does not condone human self-indulgence. In creating an object intended for practical use, the maker does not push himself to the foreground or even, for that matter, to the surface. With such objects, self-assertion and error – if present at all – are reduced to a minimum. This may be one reason why useful goods are beautiful. (Yanagi, 2013, p. 143)

Yanagi often spoke in moralistic and affective terms about this traditional 'craft aesthetics', with expressions such as the above mentioned 'faithfulness', 'honesty' and 'health'. He particularly invoked 'trust in nature' and 'grace' as the way in which the anonymous Korean potter received his inspiration.

4. Conclusion

Two decades ago, Shiner (2001, p. 307) remarked how the dualistic divisions of the modern art system were responsible for the progressive disconnection of the realm of art from the life of the people and pointed to an eventual overcoming of this fracture. In his words: "A third system of the arts transcending the divisions of the modern fine art system has yet to establish itself [...] The answer to a divided art is obviously not to reject such ideals as freedom, imagination and creativity but to unite them with facility, service, and function." (Shiner, 2001, pp. 306–307). As a response from Yanagi's side, we might enrich the meaning of 'freedom, imagination and creativity' if we change the individualistic egocentric perspective we usually ascribe to those terms (as it is based on a dualistic framework), thus making room for the integration of the complementary ones of 'facility, service and function'.

Again, in Shiner's terms, "the great value of the traditional craft object, which links it to the old idea of art before it was split into fine art and craft, is the craft work's relation to touch, use and the body" (Shiner, 1999, p. 453). This somatic dimension of traditional crafts, rooted in function and everyday use, could well fit in the Zen Buddhist idea to avoid intellectualization and non-conceptualization (the no-mind or *mushin*). The reunification of creativity and imagination with service, use and function is also welcome and fostered in the previously mentioned atmosphere of a craft aesthetics where a more body-oriented consciousness in a collective environment easily prevails over the individualistic one.

Craft values, like the ones here exposed, could still be inspiring for this enterprise of reuniting art and life, as they don't imply so much the art vs. craft exclusivist division that arose in the European enlightenment. Specifically, the way in which Yanagi understood the beauty in connection to use, as exemplified through ceramic wares used on a daily basis, shows a path to overcome the dualistic model of detached contemplation so typical of the Enlightenment aesthetics.

Today, for growing fields of research on the margins of *artcentrism*, such as everyday aesthetics, we may gain inspiration from Yanagi's proposals which intended to go beyond Western categorizations. Through his guidance, I have attempted to present an alternative reading of the main traits ascribed to Korean aesthetics, trying also to hint at suggestions on how to overcome some of the dualisms of the modern art system and attend to a new third hybrid system where utility and form, the extraordinary and the ordinary, may reconcile in a continuum of activities that promote values similar to those that utilitarian crafts inspire. The need to recognize our vulnerability, co-dependence and embeddedness in a human collectivity but also in a wider natural environment may be some of the outcomes of the 'craft values' that are associated with Korean traditional aesthetics but which Yanagi, in his later years, associated with Buddhist values in a more general and universal scale.

References

- Brandt, K. (2007) *Kingdom of Beauty. Mingei and the Politics of Folk Art in Imperial Japan*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Brandt, K. (2000) 'Objects of Desire: Japanese Collectors and Colonial Korea', *Positions* 8(3), Duke University Press, 713–746.
- Bruya, B. (2002) 'Chaos as the Inchoate: The Early Chinese Aesthetic of Spontaneity', in Marchiano, Grazia (ed.) *Aesthetics & Chaos: Investigating a Creative Complicity*. Turin: Trauben, pp. 115–135.
- Gompertz, G. St, G. M. (1964) *Korean Celadon and Other Wares of the Koryo Period*. London: Faber & Faber
- Gompertz, G. St. G. M. (1968) *Korean Pottery and Porcelain of the Yi Period*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Jungmann, B. (2010) *Life in Ceramics – Five Contemporary Korean Artists*. Los Angeles, Calif.: Fowler Museum at UCLA.
- Kang, K.S. (2008) *Korean Ceramics*. Seoul: The Korea Foundation.
- Kikuchi, Y. (2004) *Japanese Modernisation and Mingei Theory. Cultural Nationalism and Oriental Orientalism*. London: Routledge.
- Kikuchi, Y. (1997) 'A Japanese William Morris: Yanagi Sōetsu and Mingei theory', *The Journal of the William Morris Society*, 12 (2): 39–45.
- Kim, Y. (2010) 'The Achievements and Limitations of Ko Yu-seop, a Luminary in Korean Art History', in *Archives of Asian Art*, vol.60, pp. 79–87.
- Kim, W.Y. (1979) 'Philosophies and Styles in Korean art – a Prelude to the Study of Korean Art', *Korea Journal*, 19(4) (April), pp. 24–33.
- Kwon, Y.P. (2007) "'The Aesthetic' in traditional Korean Art and its Influence on Modern Life", *Korea Journal* 47(3) (Autumn), pp. 9–34.
- Lee, S. (2020) 'Ceramics and Culture in Chosōn Korea', in Park, J.P., Jungmann, B. and Rhi, J. (eds.), *A Companion to Korean Art*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell, pp.321–342.
- Min, J. (2002), 'Aesthetic Ideal of Ceramics in East Asian Culture', in *The Eastern Art* (동양 예술), Vol.5, The Korean Society of Eastern Art Studies, 2002, pp.253–272.
- Shiner, L. (2001) *The Invention of Art. A Cultural History*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Shiner, L. (1999) 'Craft', in Kelly, M. (ed.) *The Encyclopaedia of Aesthetics*. Oxford University Press, vol. I, pp. 450–453.
- Seckel, D. (1977) 'Some Characteristics of Korean Art', *Oriental Art*, 23, pp. 52–61.
- Yanagi, S. (2013) [1972] *The Unknown Craftsman. A Japanese Insight into Beauty*, [Ed. and transl. Bernard Leach]. New York: Kodansha International.

Yanagi, S. (2017) *Selected Essays on Japanese Folk Crafts*. Tokyo: Japan Publishing Industry Foundation for Culture.

Rosa Fernández Gómez
University of Málaga
Department of Philosophy 29071 Málaga (Spain)
rosafernang@uma.es

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.6622522