

The Unknown Craftsman

Soetsu Yanagi

This book challenges the conventional ideas of art and beauty. What is the value of things made by an anonymous craftsman working in a set tradition and producing the same objects continuously for a lifetime? What is the value of handwork? Why should even a roughly lacquered Japanese farmer's rice bowl be beautiful? The late Soetsu Yanagi was the first to fully explore the traditional Japanese appreciation for "objects born, not made."

Mr Yanagi sees folk art as a manifestation of the essential world from which art, philosophy, and religion arise and in which the barriers between them disappear - an ego-free world of pure innocence and constant rebirth. The implications of the author's ideas are both far-reaching and practical. What is the process of making forms and patterns - of artistic creation? What attitudes help an artist's work touch an unending source of life?

The author's profound view of the creative process and his plea for a new artistic freedom within tradition are especially timely now - perhaps even overdue.

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Meister Eckhart, the medieval German mystic, said, "The words 'I am' none can truly speak but God alone." It is not I who see God but God seeing himself in me. In Buddhist terms, all true work consists of the communion between Buddha and Buddha. To quote from a Sufi poem:
When my beloved appears,
With what eye do I see Him?
With His eye, not with mine,
For none sees Him except Himself.

Buddha's eyes are usually depicted in Buddhist painting as neither quite open nor quite closed, suggesting the features in contemplation.

SHIBUSA

Intimately associated with the Zen Buddhist idea of beauty is the Japanese Way of Tea, which does not, of course, consist simply of drinking tea but seeks to plumb to the depths the meaning of beauty. The choice of utensils, the successive stages of preparation, the etiquette of drinking, the structure and decoration of the room, the arrangement of the gardens - these, as well as other visible forms, are the agents used in the pursuit, the aim of which is not merely appreciation but rather the experiencing of the beauty in the midst of daily life, not merely seeing but also acting.

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Further, Tea taught people to look at and handle utilitarian objects more carefully than they had before, and it inspired in them a deeper interest and greater respect for those objects.

Many words were invented to describe the beauty that was to be the final criterion, and of them all perhaps the most suggestive is the adjective shibui (with the noun shibusa), for which there is no exact English counterpart. Nearest to it, perhaps are such adjectives as "austere," "subdued," and "restrained," but to the Japanese the word is more complex, suggesting quietness, depth, simplicity, and purity.

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Last year's poverty was not yet true poverty
This year's poverty is at last true poverty
Last year there was nowhere to place the gimlet,
This year the gimlet itself is gone.

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When I am asked for a Buddhist explanation of the perception of beauty, my answer is a simple one: "One must discard one's self." But of course the process is not easily accomplished; grasping the reality of beauty is no easier.