

ONE. *The Beauty of Sorrow*

In the fall of 1914 Asakawa Noritaka, a Japanese schoolteacher in colonial Korea, paid a call on Yanagi Muneyoshi at his home in Chiba prefecture, outside Tokyo. Asakawa brought from Korea a Chosŏn-period ceramic jar, which he presented to his host.¹ The story has it that the twenty-five-year-old Yanagi fell in love with this object and that it helped to inspire in him a passionate interest in Korean arts and crafts generally. While Yanagi's fascination with Korean art persisted throughout his life, it was during the decade immediately following Asakawa's visit that he most avidly collected, appreciated, and promoted things Korean. Between 1914 and 1924, Yanagi made as many as ten trips to Korea, often staying for weeks at a time. In addition to building up his own celebrated collection of Korean ceramics and other objects, he devoted much of this period to writing a book and numerous articles on Korean art and related subjects, as well as giving well-attended public lectures in both Korea and Japan. He also joined with friends to organize several art exhibitions in both countries and led a widely publicized and successful campaign to establish a museum of Korean art in Seoul. The opening ceremonies for the Korean Art Museum (Chōsen minzoku bijutsukan), as it was rather daringly named, were held in April 1924.²

After 1924, Yanagi's focus shifted to the arts and crafts of his native Japan. Only two years later, he was at the center of a small group who declared themselves the champions of a category of objects they would name "mingei" (folk-craft).³ Their April 1926 manifesto, a pamphlet titled "Prospectus for the Establishment of a Mingei Art Museum," is often taken to mark the



1. The Chosŏn-period jar presented to Yanagi by Asakawa Noritaka in 1914. It is often suggested that Yanagi's interest in Yi dynasty wares dates from his encounter with this object. Courtesy of Nihon Mingeikan.

establishment of the so-called *mingei* movement (*mingei undō*), a loose assemblage of artists, craftspeople, collectors, and others generally thought to have concerned themselves with the discovery and promotion of a rustic, artisanal, and, above all, Japanese aesthetic.

Yet even today, the Korean objects admired so extravagantly by the youthful Yanagi remain embedded within *mingei* ideology and practice. It has become a truism among chroniclers of the movement that Yanagi was led to discover *mingei* as a result of his enthusiasm for Korean arts and crafts. In a sense, the origins of *mingei* are acknowledged to be Korean. Moreover, the specific Chosŏn-period Korean objects Yanagi praised and collected continue to help define the *mingei* aesthetic. One room of the Japan Folk-Crafts Museum (Nihon Mingeikan) in Tokyo, established in 1936 under Yanagi's

direction, remains permanently dedicated to their display. For sale in the museum shop, as in all museum shops, are picture postcards of exemplary objects from the collection; almost always available are several reproductions of especially well-known Korean items. The curators of the museum actively maintain their status as experts on what is known in Japan as “Ri chō,” or Yi dynasty.⁴ For example, two glossy paperback guides to the collection and appreciation of Yi dynasty crafts were published in 1998; one was produced under the guidance of members of the museum’s curatorial staff, who also contributed essays to both volumes.⁵

Korea also remains central to Yanagi’s postwar status as a public intellectual. The reverence in which Yanagi’s life and work are held by many both within and beyond mingei circles owes no small part to the reputation he gained posthumously, during the 1960s and 1970s, as a heroic defender of Korean art and culture against the once imperialist Japanese state. This reading of Yanagi’s activism on behalf of Korean art was given influential expression by the well-known cultural critic Tsurumi Shunsuke, for whom Yanagi represented a rare instance of “gentle stubbornness” (*odayaka na gankosa*) in his resistance to wartime ideological mobilization. According to Tsurumi, Yanagi’s attachment to Korean art, and his gently stubborn acknowledgment of a separate and honorable Korean cultural identity, were key demonstrations of his unwavering opposition to the imperialist militarism of the wartime Japanese state.⁶ Even the Japanese Ministry of Education may be said to have promoted Yanagi’s postwar identity as an advocate for Korean culture against Japanese colonial rule; a 1974 high school Japanese (*kokugo*) textbook approved by the Ministry included the text of an emotional essay written by Yanagi in 1922 protesting the projected destruction of a historic Seoul landmark by the colonial government.⁷

The postwar characterization of Yanagi as anticolonialist hero of Korean art has not gone unchallenged. During the mid-1970s, in particular, the publication of a Korean translation of Yanagi’s 1922 book *Korea and Her Art* (*Chōsen to sono geijutsu*) was the occasion for a spate of critical writings in Korea on what the poet Ch’oe Harim, who wrote an essay for the translation, called Yanagi’s “aesthetics of colonialism.”⁸ In the 1980s and especially in the 1990s, a number of Japanese scholars followed the Korean lead by developing further the arguments that Yanagi’s approach to Korea and Korean art was flawed or somehow implicated in Japanese imperialism.⁹ Yet for the most part these discussions stopped short of any consideration of how the colonialist or anticolonialist nature of Yanagi’s Korean activities might be

related to the formation of *mingei* ideal and practice. Despite the close association—sometimes bordering on conflation—of Yanagi’s life with the history of *mingei* activism, and despite the continuing importance within the folk-craft aesthetic of his Korean discoveries, the question of *mingei*’s connection to Japanese colonialism in Korea or elsewhere has been little explored.¹⁰

By considering Yanagi’s role in the emergence of Korean art, and especially in the emergence of the genre of Yi dynasty wares, it is possible to see that the categories of both Korean art and *mingei* were partly produced by Japanese colonial power in Korea. Yet the larger, if more diffuse workings of Western imperialism in Asia were also formative. During the Taishō era (1912–1926), Yanagi was only one among a number of cosmopolitan Japanese who partly turned away from Western high culture to celebrate the artistic and spiritual traditions ascribed to the “Orient” (*Tōyō*), a geocultural entity usually identified as comprising China, Japan, Korea, and India. The “return to the Orient” (*Tōyō e no kaiki*), as later scholars have referred to this fascination with the idea of an ancient Oriental civilization, represented a complex adaptation of Western ideas about the non-West. Yanagi and others accepted and employed Western systems of knowledge, including those mechanisms that, like the very idea of an Orient, implied Western superiority. At the same time, however, they sought to refute Western dominance by asserting indigenous Oriental value, and Japanese autonomy in particular.

The significance of the early-twentieth-century Japanese enthusiasm for Korean, Japanese, and other Asian objects must also be understood, therefore, within the context of a world increasingly dominated and defined by Western power. The discovery of Korean art, like the discovery of *mingei*, represented an effort to resist the controlling hierarchies and categories of Western knowledge. Yet the meanings and value that Yanagi and his cohort of collectors successfully attached to Korean objects were also instrumental in the reproduction of Japanese colonial power. The Korean art museum founded by Yanagi and his friends, for example, served ultimately to promote the legitimation and therefore the stability of the Japanese regime in Korea. More generally, the writings of Yanagi and his fellow enthusiasts of Korean art contributed to a larger body of colonial knowledge about Korea and Koreans. They praised Yi dynasty wares and the culture and people that produced them in terms that made Korea’s status as a colonial possession of Japan seem both natural and inevitable.

Canon Revision and the Uses of Colonialism

Yanagi was certainly among the most prominent and active of those who took up Yi dynasty, or previously overlooked categories of Chosŏn-period Korean objects, during the early twentieth century. He was by no means alone, however. In addition to Japanese residents of Korea such as Asakawa Noritaka and his younger brother, Takumi, who helped to tutor Yanagi in the appreciation of Chosŏn ceramics, woodwork, and other wares, there were others based in Japan who, like Yanagi, were struck by the new aesthetic possibilities to be found in relatively humble objects of Korean provenance. An alternative narrative of Yanagi's discovery of Korean art, for example, suggests that he was introduced to it by his friends Bernard Leach and Tomimoto Kenkichi, artists who had both become ardent admirers of Chosŏn ceramics after viewing some examples at a colonial exposition in Tokyo in 1912.¹¹

The young men who began to congregate in Seoul and Tokyo around their shared enthusiasm for later Chosŏn-period porcelain and stoneware were also linked by similar social and cultural station. As middle-class intellectuals—artists, writers, university students, teachers—they shared a somewhat precarious position as members of a cultural elite largely cut off from the monopoly capital that was rapidly producing a new haute bourgeoisie of industrialists and financiers.¹² Yet the opportunities opened up in Korea by Japanese colonial power gave Yanagi and his peers the means to contest the increasing sway of bourgeois economic elites in the cultural field, especially in the highly prestigious domain of art ceramics. By challenging the authority of the tea ceremony establishment in particular, Yanagi and other middle-class literati were able to revise the art ceramics canon in Japan to include the objects they had discovered in Korea. Through their success in promoting novel categories of Korean ceramics, they gained the cultural capital—or the status and authority—that enabled their campaign to promote *mingei*.

Korean ceramics have been highly valued in Japan for centuries. Certain types of Korean bowls produced during the Koryŏ (918–1392) and early Chosŏn periods, in particular, achieved iconic status during the late sixteenth century in the context of the elite practice of the tea ceremony. Over time there were vagaries in the popularity and status of Korean bowls relative to other, usually Chinese or Japanese teabowls. Nevertheless, the old tea maxim “First Ido [the most important category of Korean teabowl]; second

Raku; third Karatsu,” which ranks Korean bowls above the two most famous types of Japanese teabowl, suggests the extent to which Korean ceramics achieved a preeminent position in one of the most influential aesthetic institutions of early modern and modern Japan.¹³

The importance of Korean bowls, many of them produced during the Chosŏn period, only increased during the early decades of the twentieth century, with the revitalization of the tea ceremony as a pastime for the very rich.¹⁴ It may not seem surprising, therefore, that Japanese aesthetes and collectors of the early twentieth century were disposed to take an interest in the Korean ceramics rendered increasingly accessible by Japanese colonization. Indeed Yanagi himself often cited the aesthetic tradition of tea in explaining the importance he attached to Korean craft objects. He frequently expressed reverence for the creativity and sophistication demonstrated by the early tea masters who, in the early sixteenth century, first recognized the beauty of ordinary Korean rice bowls. Yanagi believed that the tea masters had thereby helped to form a special Japanese aesthetic in which his own discovery of Korean and, later, Japanese and other crafts shared.¹⁵ He proposed that the regard in which he and other Japanese held the pottery and other arts of the Chosŏn period in Korea was an organic development of the Japanese aesthetic tradition and directly linked to the genius of Sen Rikyū, the most famous of the sixteenth-century tea masters.

Yet the enthusiasm of Yanagi and others for Yi dynasty ceramics, not to mention woodwork and other handicrafts, cannot be explained by the tea aesthetic alone. For one thing, the types of pottery and porcelain they helped to bring into vogue among Japanese dealers and collectors during the 1920s and 1930s were quite distinct from the older Korean bowls admitted within the tea canon. Many of the objects that would later come to epitomize Yi dynasty, such as white porcelain (*hakuji*) vases and other objects associated with Confucian ritual practices in Korea, or the small, whimsically shaped “water droppers” (*suíteki*) customarily used by Korean literati to wet their ink stones, had no function in the tea ceremony. Moreover, there was a difference between the way objects—Korean or other—were understood in the tea ceremony and the way they were approached by young Japanese collectors in colonial Korea. By the nineteenth century, the tea ceremony had become a site at which individual objects were appreciated as utterly particular and unique; to participate in the culture of tea was, in part, to accept a highly elaborated, semiapocryphal system of knowledge about a limited number of teabowls and other items. A cherished tea implement (*cha dōgu*), housed like



2. A Chosŏn-period “water dropper” (*suiteki*).
Courtesy of Nihon Mingeikan.

a jewel in layers of custom-made silk bags and inscribed boxes, was surrounded by an aura of iconic originality. Its value was produced largely by esoteric convention, which assigned it a name, a category, and a pedigree of origin, past ownership, and use.

By contrast, the middle-class intellectuals who browsed the antique shops and markets of colonial Seoul drew on a much more cosmopolitan, self-consciously modern fund of knowledge to evaluate objects. They used universalist standards associated with Western art and science to resist the parochial conventions of the tea world and to assert their own aesthetic authority. Yet at the same time they continued to rely on certain aspects of tea tradition to obtain legitimacy for their efforts to expand the field of collectible objects. Yanagi, for example, claimed that in promoting Yi dynasty ceramics (and, later, certain categories of Chinese, Southeast Asian, rural Japanese, and even English handicraft goods), he was reviving the true spirit of the early tea masters. Later followers of the first geniuses of tea, Yanagi charged, had fallen into an increasingly stylized and imitative formalism. He felt that the tea ceremony as practiced in his own day had lost most of its

originally creative character; it venerated the individual objects hallowed by centuries of tradition but failed to recognize the value that also existed in newer or otherwise unfamiliar things.¹⁶

Yanagi's characterization of the tea ceremony as an ossified, conservative set of persons and practices was not entirely fair. In fact, during the decades around 1900 the tea ceremony saw one of the more exuberant periods of change and creativity in its long history. Beginning in the 1880s and 1890s, tea was transformed from what had become a genteel, mostly private pastime for literary men into a highly competitive arena for the expression of power, status, and wealth by a variety of rising social groups.¹⁷ Most conspicuously, during the economic boom associated with World War I, a new class of industrialists, particularly those connected with the Mitsui *zaibatsu*, or financial conglomerate, used their wealth to dominate the tea world with a lavish new style of tea that centered on the uninhibited acquisition and display of art objects new to the tea context.¹⁸ Kumakura Isao, in his history of modern tea, argues that the new "zaibatsu tea" of late Meiji and Taishō manifested the capitalistic outlook of successful entrepreneurs reveling in their liberation from an earlier, Confucian suspicion of commerce and money. As a result, the style of tea promoted by these men was characterized by a hedonistic materialism. Spiritual or religious elements the tea ceremony had once incorporated were downplayed in favor of a frankly worldly concern with fabulously expensive tea implements, other art objects for display at tea gatherings, and the opportunities these provided for the negotiation of social status and power.¹⁹

In some ways *zaibatsu* tea brought a freer approach to tea practice and ideology in the early twentieth century. Its exponents brushed aside received conventions about the type of art suitable for display in order to introduce new categories of objects—namely, those of Buddhist art unconnected to the Zen sects or to tea practice—into the tearoom for the first time.²⁰ Yet at the same time *zaibatsu* tea reiterated and reinforced selected elements of the tea tradition, particularly as it concerned the canon of famous tea objects (*meiki* or *meibutsu*). The 1920s saw the publication of the *Taishō meiki kan*, an influential nine-volume photographic catalogue of pedigreed tea caddies and tea-bowls.²¹ Its compiler, Takahashi Yoshio, a central figure in *zaibatsu* tea circles, intended the catalogue to provide a definitive modern accounting of objects belonging to the category of "celebrated tea implement." Yet with the *Taishō meiki kan* Takahashi actually managed to modify the existing canon even as he reestablished and buttressed its parameters.²² In so doing, he

reinscribed a hierarchical ranking of ceramics from the perspective of a tea establishment newly invigorated by the infusion of monopoly capital.

Yanagi's critical attitude toward the modern tea ceremony may have had as much to do with the changing nature of the tea world as with its alleged inertia. Nor was he alone in such criticism. The luxurious hedonism that zaibatsu tea represented came to seem increasingly irresponsible and extravagant as the interwar Japanese economy slumped and social issues concerning the urban and rural poor acquired new urgency.²³ Moreover, the growing cachet of the tea ceremony as a form of conspicuous consumption drove the tea goods market to unprecedented heights, richly rewarding the captains of industry who already owned most of the "celebrated tea implements," but probably disgruntling aesthetes with more limited incomes. As Yanagi wrote in 1928, "Today such things as the making of tearooms with great refinement, at the cost of a thousand yen, must be called contrary to the true spirit of tea."²⁴

For men such as Yanagi, colonial Korea offered special opportunities to counter the hegemony, reinforced by big money, of the tea tradition over the production and consumption of art ceramics in Japan. Perhaps the first to exploit these opportunities was Asakawa Noritaka, later known in Japan as the "patron saint of Korean pottery" (*Chōsen tōki no kamisama*). As noted earlier, it was Asakawa who is said to have first introduced Yanagi to Chosŏn-period ceramics. In 1913, three years after Japan's formal annexation of Korea, Asakawa moved to Seoul from his native Yamanashi prefecture, where he descended from a line of literary gentry, to take a position as an elementary school teacher. An aspiring sculptor and a tea aficionado himself, Asakawa was frustrated by his inability to afford the types of Korean ceramics favored by most Japanese collectors. Aside from the individual bowls hallowed by tea tradition, the Korean pots admired in Japan, as elsewhere, tended toward the impressive Chinese-style wares produced for ruling elites before the Chosŏn period. Writing much later of the magnificent pieces of old "celadon" he first admired in the Yi Royal Household Museum in Seoul, Asakawa described his frustration as it led to the discovery of a more accessible category of objects: "At that time I was only too sad. I wanted just one good piece, but they were too expensive for me. One night, passing in front of a *Keijō dōguya* [antique or tea implement store], I saw among the jumble of objects a white pot gleaming in the light of the street-lamp. I was drawn to this gently rounded thing, and stood looking at it for some time. This experience is even now stained deeply in my heart."²⁵



3. A Chosŏn-period liquor bottle (*tokkuri*), illustrated in the January 1932 issue of *Kōgei*. Yanagi wrote of the bottle, then in the collection of the Korean Art Museum, “The artisan was free. He was not limited by the intention of painting a beautiful design. He did not have consciousness of such things as ‘this design is beautiful.’ ” From *Kōgei* 13 (January 1932): 22.

Asakawa identifies this moment as the point from which his career as an expert on Korean pottery began. (He quit his teaching job in 1919.) The pot was an example of a type of Chosŏn porcelain, distinguished by its milky whiteness, that later became especially popular in Japan.

Yi dynasty white porcelain, along with other types of Korean ceramics from the later Chosŏn period, was relatively cheap and plentiful. Asakawa and other Japanese with more taste and information than money—salaried employees of the colonial government or of private Japanese enterprise in Korea, scholars and writers, students, artists—took it up in part because they could afford it. Akaboshi Gorō, another authority on Yi dynasty, later wrote of his early days antique hunting in colonial Seoul (or Keijō, as it was called by Japanese) that he, like Asakawa, had at first been attracted to so-called celadon porcelain from the Koryŏ period but had been unable to pay the steep prices it commanded on the market:

At that time it was Asakawa Noritaka who opened my eyes to the overlooked Yi dynasty things. I jumped at the opportunity to have him take me around to all the Keijō antique shops. What now seem astonishingly good pieces were lying around all over the place. Most of what I now own I obtained in Keijō. . . . In those days there were lots of [Japanese] antique dealers in Keijō. . . . In addition there were a great many Korean antique dealers, who mostly had junk shops and sideline businesses. I would be in front of a shop, and a *yobo* (a laborer) would come carrying a Buddha or a bronze piece or a pot wrapped in a cloth, and then he and the shop owner would begin to bargain. Finally the *yobo* would leave, and then the piece just bought would be priced at a hundred times the amount paid. Until I got used to it, I found this kind of thing truly unpleasant, but because it was clear that the objects would end up being sold somewhere, I had to buy them.²⁶

Akaboshi offers here a glimpse into the colonial market relations that made it possible for him and other Japanese of relatively limited means to amass, despite the occasional pang of conscience, what later became extremely valuable collections of Korean art. Even at prices that returned large profits to Japanese (and some Korean) dealers, Japanese collectors found Korean art objects a good bargain.²⁷

In addition to collecting ceramics, Asakawa devoted much of his twenty-odd years in Korea to the investigation of hundreds of old kiln sites in an effort to correct the errors of Japanese tea lore about Korean teabowls. His

challenge to the hegemonic ideology of ceramics purveyed largely by the tea establishment was not confined to the assertion of independent aesthetic authority that Yanagi appeared to find sufficient. Yanagi, already famous due to his close association with the influential *Shirakaba* (*White Birch*) art and literary magazine (published 1911–1923), through which he helped to introduce canonical elements of Western high culture to Japan, simply dismissed later developments in tea as formalist decadence. He suggested that his own preferences in art ceramics, like the genius of the early tea masters, drew on what he construed as a universal realm of aesthetic value to which he, as a recognized expert on Western art, had special access. Asakawa, a provincial schoolmaster, was perhaps less comfortable snubbing the aesthetic conventions of the rich and venerable. Instead, he bolstered his attack on tea knowledge with science. In 1934 Asakawa gave an address in Tokyo on the subject of his pottery investigations:

Even when the [ceramic] objects that came [to Japan from Korea] in long ago times have written explanations attached to them, these are the judgements made from four-and-a-half mat tearooms by tea people. Because they did not actually know Korea, these judgements are nothing more than flights of fancy. They knew almost none of the facts. . . . If, first, [an object's] place of origin, the period when it was produced, and the conditions of its transmission become clear, then for the first time it will become a proper historical source. For example, when we talk of the Korean teabowl categories of Ido, Totoya, Soba, Katade, Gohon, these are all conventions derived from superficial observation; what is referred to as correct knowledge about these categories consists of the records made regarding individual bowls, and these are nothing more than conventions limited to the tea world. . . . In these days, which are liberated historically and geographically, I think that it is our job to investigate such things on the basis of a correct foundation.²⁸

In this lecture Asakawa noted the special advantages of his time and place in colonial Korea. Although he expressed some irritation with the suspicion and passive resistance he encountered from Koreans during his excavating expeditions, he stated, “Ever since the annexation, everything [in Korea] has come to light, and things which were buried unused in the ground have appeared here and there; from the standpoint of research, this is the best of times.”²⁹

Asakawa's findings appear to have troubled the tea establishment. Takahashi Yoshio, when compiling the three volumes dealing with Korean tea-bowls in the nine-volume *Taishō meiki kan*, felt himself compelled to make repeated references to Asakawa's investigations in Korea and the new critical light in which they cast many of the received traditions of the tea world.³⁰ Takahashi resolved his dilemma by regretting that it was too late for him to fully assimilate Asakawa's contributions in the *Taishō meiki kan*: "Because I myself wish to go to Korea after the publication of this catalogue is completed, and do research there, for the time being I will base my commentary here on the past sayings of tea people, and hope to elucidate with regard to new facts such as those cited above at some other time."³¹ However that elucidation may have been managed, the authority of tea ideology was gradually forced to retreat, in the face of empirical contradiction, from its original monopoly on the truth of Korean-Japanese pottery.

In their resistance to the authority of tea, and in their efforts to draw attention in Japan to previously overlooked categories of art ceramics, Yanagi and Asakawa joined a more general trend in ceramics appreciation. Scholarly groups like the *Tōjiki kenkyūkai* and the *Saikōkai*, whose leading members were attached to Tokyo Imperial University, and the *Chōsōkai* at Waseda University dedicated themselves to the scientific study and appreciation of old Japanese, Chinese, and other Asian ceramics. Their efforts were partly inspired by the example—and threat—of European and American scholars and collectors, whose access to certain types of Japanese and other Asian art treasures had only been facilitated by the narrow scope of tea taste.³² At the same time they, like Yanagi and Asakawa, were often collectors of relatively limited means who sought to broaden the field of art ceramics eligible for legitimate appreciation.

But Asakawa, Akaboshi, Yanagi, and the other early collectors of Yi dynasty pottery and porcelain also used the advantages of their position in colonial Korea, in combination with the tools of Western-style knowledge, to force open the categories of collectible art in Japan. They became cultural heroes of a sort for establishing a distinct subfield in the appreciation of ceramics that was both independent of tea taste and yet partly informed and legitimated by it. As a measure of their success, Japanese demand for Yi dynasty grew rapidly during the early twentieth century, spreading from colonial residents and visiting cognoscenti in Korea to the metropolitan market in Japan. So popular did several types of the Chosŏn-period pottery and porcelain first collected by Yanagi and his peers become that there also

emerged a lively trade in Yi dynasty fakes, known sometimes as “Taishō Ri chō” (Taishō Yi dynasty).³³

In successfully revising the canon of Japanese art ceramics, intellectuals and artists like Yanagi and Asakawa were able to wrest some of the leadership in the prestigious field of art ceramics from bourgeois economic elites, who were bidding for dominance from their new power position within the tea establishment. Colonial opportunities allowed middle-class literati to parlay modest investments into enormous returns in cultural capital. Although the highest prices continued to go to the older, rarer, and safely pedigreed objects of tea, the market value and cultural prestige of the late Chosŏn-period objects first bought cheaply in colonial Seoul climbed steadily, bringing both symbolic and actual wealth to many of its early collectors.³⁴

Solving the Korea Problem

The success of Yanagi, Asakawa, and others in revising the Japanese art canon to include novel categories of Korean objects owed much to the immediate and material opportunities opened up in colonial Korea to Japanese of even modest wealth. Especially after formal annexation in 1910, it was a relatively simple matter for Japanese like the Asakawa brothers and Yanagi to live, work, and travel in Korea, usually with the sorts of privileges monopolized by colonial elites everywhere. For Japanese in Korea, these included the freedom to seek out and appropriate Korean goods of all description at very low cost, and also to remove those goods—even rare or antique art objects—permanently to Japan.

But colonial power also produced other, less predictable opportunities for Japanese interested in shaping new meanings or identities. Yanagi and his immediate circle were especially active between 1919 and 1924, when Korean nationalist resistance opened up new spaces for negotiation and change within the colonial context. They used the relative fluidity and even instability of this period, when Japanese colonial policy and administration were under public review, to promote their own programs for cultural reform. By boldly engaging in the debate on colonial policy, Yanagi gained unprecedented publicity for his own definitions of art generally, and of Korean art in particular. He also succeeded in gaining significant public support in both countries for his various projects to improve Japan-Korea relations through the cultural “preservation” and “revival” of Korea. There was a critical edge to culturalist reform efforts like Yanagi’s, which implicitly

or explicitly suggested the inadequacy and immorality of assimilationist colonial policy. Yet it is important to recognize that in Korea during the early 1920s, nationalist cultural reform was a means employed by governing authorities to produce legitimacy and stability for the Japanese regime. Korean art proved very useful to the colonial system that helped to define it.

Early 1920s Korea was the site for a widely acknowledged crisis in colonial relations. By 1919, a decade of oppressive, even brutal assimilationist rule had produced an uncontrollable level of outrage and opposition throughout much of Korean society. The organized mass demonstrations that ensued on 1 March 1919, thereafter sacred to Korean nationalist memory as the March first movement (*samil undong*), terrified and infuriated colonial authorities, who called out the troops. Several weeks of mayhem and some thousands of Korean casualties later, it was clear to many in Japan as well as Korea that something had gone very wrong. Although mainstream Japanese opinion tended to blame Koreans, and also Western missionaries, for what were commonly described as “riots” and “insubordination” by “malcontent Koreans” (*futei na Senjin*), it was difficult to escape the reflection that Japanese colonial policy might also bear some responsibility. As a consequence, the “Korea problem” (*Chōsen mondai*) and discussion of its resolution figured large in both colonial and metropolitan publications for several years thereafter.

In this context, Yanagi was one of the few Japanese who dared to publish, repeatedly, opinion sharply critical of Japanese colonial policy. In essays and articles that appeared in newspapers and well-known journals from 1919 through 1924, he presented himself as a conscientious objector to the inhumanity and philistinism characterizing Japanese attitudes and policy toward Korea. As he put it in “Thinking about Koreans” (“*Chōsenjin o omou*”), an impassioned four-part article published first in a major Tokyo daily in May 1919, “If we wish for eternal peace between ourselves and our neighbors, then we must purify and warm our hearts with love and sympathy. But, unfortunately, Japan has dealt with the sword, and offered abuse. Can this possibly give rise to mutual understanding, or create cooperation, or produce union? Nay, all Koreans feel throughout their beings a limitless enmity, resistance, hatred, and separation [*bunri*]. It is an inevitable consequence that independence should be their ideal.” Yanagi especially stressed the efficacy of art as a means of producing the mutual understanding and love necessary for improved Japanese-Korean relations: “I believe it is art, not science, that promotes congress between countries, and draws peoples to-

gether. . . . Only religious or artistic understanding can give experience of the inner heart, and from that experience create a limitless love.”³⁵

The extraordinary power Yanagi attributed to art—its capacity for social and political healing—derived from the Romantic philosophy he embraced, as did many of his colleagues in the so-called Shirakaba school. In this view, art was the key to a transcendent, mystic realm of natural and universal truth, beauty, and humanity. It was opposed, moreover, to the particularistic and divisive, unnatural modes of being associated with modern science and industry, politics, and nationalism. Raymond Williams has pointed out, in the case of the British Romantic poets, that the opposition they perceived between natural beauty and personal feeling on the one hand, and industrial civilization on the other, has often been misunderstood as a dissociation. But in fact the British Romantics, like the Japanese Romantics of the early twentieth century, were far from being indifferent to politics and social affairs. Rather, their commitment to art and love represented a direct criticism of modern state and society, which they hoped thereby to reform.³⁶ In this sense Yanagi, the author in 1914 of a massive study of William Blake, was simply extending principles long dear to him and many of his fellow “literary youth” (*bungaku seinen*) in proposing that the Korean problem might be understood and resolved best by means of art.

Yet by choosing to write regularly on so current and sensitive a topic, Yanagi also ensured that his definition of art generally, and of Korean art in particular, reached a much larger audience than he had ever addressed before. First in Japanese, then in English and Korean translations, his articles on the importance of a proper recognition of the value and meaning of certain Korean objects as Art circulated widely in both Japan and Korea. In a 1921 piece first published in *Shirakaba* and then translated into English for the *Japan Advertiser*, Yanagi wrote, “Who could look at this exquisite figure of Maitreya Buddha with its expression of profound meditation, or at this vase of ancient Korai [Koryō] work, and still remain cold toward the nation that could make such things. Art transcends frontiers and the differences of men’s minds.” Here Yanagi proposed relatively conventional candidates for inclusion in what he called the “universal realm of art.”³⁷ Both ancient Buddhist statuary and Koryō-period ceramics were already acknowledged in Japan as valuable Korean art products. Elsewhere, however, he insisted that Chosŏn-period ceramics also qualified as “great art” (*idai na geijutsu*).³⁸ In his 1922 essay, “Korean Art” (“Chōsen no bijutsu”), he again reminded readers of the glories of ancient Korean Buddhist statuary before asserting, “But

people must not think that it is only in the distant past that Korea had art and culture. Is not the Koryŏ dynasty immortal for its ceramics? . . . Even from the Yi dynasty, which is thought to be decadent and therefore rarely considered, I have witnessed many immortal works. Some of its woodwork and porcelain are truly eternal.”³⁹

Yanagi did more than write. Early in 1920 he and his wife, Kaneko, a contralto who specialized in German *Lieder*, announced their intention to raise money through a series of benefit concerts in Japan. Their goal was to travel to Korea to give more concerts. These were part of a larger effort to prove that art and religion, rather than militarism or diplomacy, could effectively create harmony between the two countries.⁴⁰ At this point Yanagi seems also to have been planning the establishment of a literary magazine based on the cooperative efforts of Koreans and Japanese. In May of the same year Yanagi, Kaneko, and the British artist and potter Bernard Leach traveled to Seoul for three weeks of welcome parties, concerts, and lectures sponsored by various Korean and Japanese organizations. All concerned pronounced the entire venture to be a great success.⁴¹ This was the first of many trips Yanagi and Kaneko, accompanied by various others, were to make to Korea during the next few years.

By the end of 1920 Yanagi had abandoned his plan for a literary journal in favor of a project to found a museum of Korean folk art, to be located in Seoul. Much of his activity (and that of his wife and friends) between 1920 and early 1924, when the museum finally opened, was devoted to this end. In addition to fundraising and promotional concerts and lectures in Korea and Japan, the museum project involved exhibitions of Korean pottery in both countries, a fundraising drive organized through *Shirakaba*, a stream of publications by Yanagi and his friends on Korean art, group art-collecting and kiln research trips in Korea, and complicated negotiations in Korea concerning the site of the museum.

After his death in 1961, Yanagi was eulogized by many Japanese as well as Koreans for championing Korean art and culture during the colonial period. His activist period in the early 1920s came in for special notice by those who held him up as an example of resistance to the imperialist Japanese state. Yet, as the historian Takasaki Sōji has noted, Yanagi’s criticisms were directed largely against the heavy-handed militarism and assimilationism that characterized Japanese colonial policy before 1919 and that came in for general disapproval during the relatively liberal era of the early 1920s. It is significant that Yanagi’s relations with the new colonial administration, brought in after



4. Yanagi (front center) and Asakawa Noritaka (far left) at a 1922 exhibition of Korean ceramics in Seoul. The three Chosŏn-period vases in the foreground all became celebrated pieces held in Japanese collections. Courtesy of Nihon Mingeikan.

the March first movement, were cordial.⁴² Indeed, Korea in the early 1920s, under the new Saitō government, was highly receptive to Yanagi's special brand of cultural activism.

Many of the Korean organizers of the March first movement sought to make use of Woodrow Wilson's statements on the doctrine of national self-determination in order to attract international attention to the issue of Korean independence. There were even hopes that the Japanese government might be embarrassed into relinquishing its nine-year-old colony.⁴³ Korean efforts were partly successful: the independence movement, along with the violent countermeasures immediately taken by General Hasegawa Yoshimichi, governor-general of Korea from 1916 to 1919, received publicity in both Japan and the West. In consequence, the Tokyo government felt increasing domestic as well as international pressure to review the evidently unsuccessful policy of military rule (*budan seiji*) that Hasegawa and his predecessor, General Terauchi Masatake, had implemented in Korea.⁴⁴ Some of that domestic pressure was applied by the few Japanese intellectuals who, like Yanagi, dared publicly to condemn the brutality of Japanese rule.

In August 1919 Prime Minister Hara Kei replaced Hasegawa with Admiral Saitō Makoto, who immediately undertook a more conciliatory “cultural” policy, thereby inaugurating the period of so-called cultural rule (*bunka seiji*; 1919 to approximately 1931) in Korea. But as Michael Robinson has argued in his study of Korean cultural nationalism during this period, Saitō’s colonial policy was “a brilliant co-optative maneuver.”⁴⁵ By expanding the arena of legally permissible political and cultural activity in colonial Korea, Saitō’s regime was largely successful both in making Japanese rule acceptable to world opinion and in gaining increased legitimacy in the colony. At the same time, the Saitō administration strengthened the police control apparatus. The result was a split in the Korean nationalist movement between moderate or cultural nationalism, which flourished during the early 1920s, and a newer radical, leftist nationalism that came under increasing attack by the Japanese colonial state.⁴⁶

During the early 1920s the museum was Yanagi’s central preoccupation in Korea, but at the same time he continued to produce public commentary in both countries on the more general theme of Japanese-Korean relations. For the most part Yanagi settled down to write pieces urging cultural understanding and adjuring Koreans to focus on the development of cultural rather than political identity and independence. Although he could occasionally prove something of a gadfly to Japanese in Korea, on the whole his views and activities during the 1920s were as acceptable to the Saitō administration as they were to Korean cultural nationalists. Much like Yanagi, these Koreans considered political independence a remote goal predicated upon gradual, long-term cultural development. They focused on strengthening Korean identity through historical studies, education, a vernacular language movement, and cultural societies, and their programs were based on a policy of nonconfrontation with Japanese authorities.⁴⁷ One leading exponent of Korean cultural nationalism even wrote about his movement in 1922 that it was “untainted by politics.”⁴⁸ This influential segment of elite Korean opinion welcomed and supported Yanagi’s endeavors. The *Tonga ilbo*, a Korean-language newspaper founded and edited by prominent moderate nationalists such as Kim Sōngsu and Chang Tōksu, actively promoted Yanagi and his projects through articles and reviews as well as the sponsorship of lectures and concerts.

As for the government, Saitō’s cultural policy corresponded in many ways to the proposals for Korean development outlined by Yanagi as well as many

Korean cultural nationalists. The actual reforms Saitō planned in Korea after 1919 were organized around precisely their concerns: the eradication of militarism in Japanese rule, increased educational opportunity for Koreans, freedom of speech, and general respect for Korean culture. In practice, of course, many of Saitō's promises were only half-kept. The gendarmerie was abolished, but only to be replaced by what became a much larger and more comprehensive civilian police force.⁴⁹ A civilian governor-general, though held out as a possibility, was never appointed. The public educational system was greatly expanded and the curriculum revised to include Korean studies, but it has been argued that the real beneficiaries continued to be the resident Japanese community.⁵⁰ Publication controls were relaxed, but only for relatively apolitical materials; socialist or otherwise radically critical opinion was suppressed.⁵¹

In this context, Yanagi's Korean projects met with approval and even active support from Japanese authorities. In early 1921 Yanagi met with Saitō, who offered to house the proposed Korean Art Museum in a building belonging to the government.⁵² In 1922 the governor-general was among the twelve hundred who attended an exhibit of Chosōn pottery organized by Yanagi and his friends in Seoul to promote the museum. On that occasion Saitō and his vice governor-general, Ariyoshi Chūichi, also donated a large sum of money to the museum fund.⁵³ It may have mattered that Yanagi's father had been an admiral in the Japanese navy, therefore once Saitō's superior, and that Yanagi's sister was married to a well-regarded bureaucrat in the Korean government. Yet these personal connections alone are not enough to explain the support Yanagi received not only from Saitō but also from the official government newspaper, the *Keijō nippō*, as well as other government organizations through the 1920s and beyond.⁵⁴

For Yanagi the opening of the Korean Folk Art Museum in April 1924 marked the closing of a five-year period of public engagement in the politics of colonial Korean culture. After 1924 his activities in Korea took on a quieter, more conventionally philanthropic and educational cast. Supported by the colonial government, Yanagi and his wife made several more benefit lecture and concert circuits in aid of, in 1924, Korean victims of the massacre that followed the 1923 earthquake in Japan and, in 1925, victims of a Korean flood. But Yanagi's real interest had moved to Japan, where he was increasingly preoccupied with what would become a lifelong campaign to preserve and revive another culture—his own—against the assimilationist threat posed by Western-style modernization.

Orientalism for the Orientals: Korean Art and the Reproduction of Colonial Knowledge

At the same time that Yanagi endeavored to relocate certain Korean objects within a universal category of world art, where they might take their place alongside such timeless monuments to human genius as classical Greek architecture, Russian literature, and French post-impressionist painting, he and others promoted the idea that Korean achievements also belonged in the category of Oriental art (*Tōyō no geijutsu*). By the 1920s, a wave of renewed interest in Asian, especially Japanese, artistic monuments and traditions had developed in Japanese literary and artistic circles.⁵⁵ Yanagi and other members of the *Shirakaba* set were quick to assimilate the various Japanese, Korean, and Chinese objects they admired within Oriental art, which they usually envisioned as a subset of the wider canon of universal or world art. They helped to promote the idea that Oriental art signified the greatest artistic achievements of the Orient, or *Tōyō*; this was a vaguely defined region comprising China, India, Japan, and Korea, which was often figured in terms that posited the centrality of Buddhism to a once great and unified ancient civilization.

In adopting the notion of Oriental art as a means of defining and celebrating not only Korean but also Chinese and Japanese ceramics, painting, and sculpture, Japanese collectors, artists, and writers were engaged in a complex interaction with Western, as well as Japanese, colonial power. By employing Western systems of thought, including Orientalist ideas that functioned to reduce and subordinate the non-West, they seemed to accept the often oppressive categories and hierarchies of a Eurocentric ideology. Yet some of the writers and artists who embraced the idea of the Orient did so partly to revise and even to resist the common sense about Asian cultures and especially artistic achievement that derived from the prestige of Western views. The result was an ambivalent form of colonial knowledge, mobilized in part to resist Western power but serving finally to reinscribe it.

Like many of his peers, Yanagi found his way back to non-Western, or indigenous, aesthetic value through an initial and abiding preoccupation with Western literature and art. His earliest efforts to promote Korean art were conducted, therefore, within the parameters of a highly Europeanized frame of reference. This was true in an institutional as well as an epistemological sense; Yanagi first wrote on Korean art in *Shirakaba*, a magazine that gained its celebrity and influence during the second decade of the twentieth

century in large part through its dedication to the goal of introducing European (and some American) high culture to Japan. It should not be surprising, therefore, that Korean art was introduced in *Shirakaba* in a manner shaped by several typically Western assumptions about the non-West. For example, the first Korean art featured in the magazine, for the February 1920 issue, was Buddhist sculpture dating from the eighth century and earlier—objects evoking the lost grandeur and mystic spirituality of a remote Oriental past.⁵⁶ This, as Yanagi put it in his editorial commentary, was a “second experiment”; the first had been conducted in July of the previous year, when Yanagi selected several details from ancient Japanese Buddhist paintings for reproduction in the magazine.⁵⁷

In both issues, Yanagi considered himself to be introducing the readers of *Shirakaba* to Oriental art. In the first, he wrote at some length in defense of this innovation, which he expected would surprise and even offend the many readers who had “long adored Western art”: “Just as we looked at the Occident with entirely new demands, so now we have begun to look at the Orient with eyes unlike those of anyone before. . . . We have begun to comprehend the Orient anew, but not from the fixed and academic viewpoint people have taken to date. Rather we comprehend the Orient in a universal sense; or, to put it differently, even though it is the Orient, we comprehend it in terms of universal value, and of truth that transcends the distinction between East and West.”⁵⁸ Yet Yanagi’s efforts to demonstrate the “universal” value and truth of Oriental art as it transcended the division between East and West relied on stubbornly Western categories. These included not only the central, unitary category of the Orient, and its irresistible associations with the past splendor of an ancient civilization, but also the category of art itself, as defined preeminently in terms of painting and sculpture.

Yanagi may well have chosen Buddhist sculpture in particular to represent Oriental art because it was already recognized both in Japan and the West as an important genre of native fine art, distinct from the lower orders of handicraft or industry.⁵⁹ Yet the art historian Kinoshita Naoyuki has shown that Buddhist artifacts were transformed into “artworks” only in the late nineteenth century, largely at the behest of government officials determined to effect Japanese “civilization and enlightenment” (*bunmei kaika*), or conformity to Western standards of cultural and social progress. In their search for an indigenous tradition of sculpture, one of the central genres of fine art in the European West, modernizing elites were quick to discover and promote carved Buddhist images. These seemed the closest counterpart to the monu-

mental statues and busts ubiquitous in the public spaces of nineteenth-century Europe and North America. At the same time, Buddhist objects satisfied Western consumers' touristic interest in the Japanese exotic, which Meiji officials could not afford to ignore. By 1900, therefore, the process by which many Buddhist artifacts were removed from temples, where they had functioned as sacred objects, and placed in museums (as well as private collections), where they became art objects in glass cases, was more or less complete.⁶⁰ Fifteen years later, Yanagi and other Taishō cosmopolitans found Buddhist sculpture readymade, by their Westernizing Meiji elders, as Oriental art.⁶¹

No less than Meiji-era modernizers, however, the young intellectuals who "returned to the Orient" in Taishō hoped to use Western means to resist aspects of Western hegemony. Yanagi suggested that by introducing Japanese to the magnificence of Oriental art, he might remind them that the West was not the exclusive province of value: "But for Japan today, which is in a strange condition, this sort of elucidation is both meaningful and necessary. For it is a fact that young Japanese are more familiar with things Occidental than with things Oriental."⁶² Nor was Yanagi content to accept, uncontested, all of the implications of the Western categories and definitions he employed. For example, although the first Oriental numbers of *Shirakaba* featured painting and sculpture, it was not long before Yanagi had persuaded his fellow editors to let him devote an issue to Chosŏn-period ceramics, which, as he insisted at every opportunity, belonged to the category of "great art." Like the early modernists in Europe, of whom he was almost certainly aware, Yanagi resisted the conventional European distinction between "fine" and "decorative" or "applied" arts. Not only did such a separation imply and reinforce hierarchies of class, according to which the sculptor or painter occupied a position elevated far above that of the engraver or printer, but it projected those hierarchies onto the international stage. In this sense, the strong association of East Asian cultures with ceramic, print, and textile arts could only reinscribe Oriental inferiority.

Most important, Yanagi and his fellow celebrants of Oriental art lost no time in qualifying the essential uniformity implied by the idea of the Orient. In particular, they claimed for themselves, as Japanese, the capacity for active modern consciousness and aesthetic discernment normally monopolized, according to Orientalist thought, by the West. In this sense Japan, and especially modern Japan, was "different"; it was located both within and beyond the Oriental sphere. Of course, the idea that the hybrid nature of

Japanese modernity might give it a distinctive role relative to an Orient defined largely in terms of ancient art and spirituality was not new with the Shirakaba generation. In his 1903 book on Japanese art, *The Ideals of the East*, the art educator Okakura Kakuzō had already informed European and American readers that “Japan is a museum of Asiatic civilization; and yet more than a museum, because the singular genius of the race leads it to dwell on all phases of the ideals of the past, in that spirit of living Advaitism which welcomes the new without losing the old.” Okakura concluded by suggesting some of the larger implications of Japan’s singular genius: “The Chinese War [the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–1895] . . . arouses us now to the grand problems and responsibilities which await us as the new Asiatic Power. Not only to return to our own past ideals, but to feel and revivify the dormant life of the old Asiatic unity, becomes our mission.”⁶³

Both Okakura and Yanagi appear to have imagined an identity and role for modern Japan distinct from those of either Orient or Occident. In a sense, writers and artists of Yanagi’s generation were able to go some way toward realizing Okakura’s vision; the Korean museum that opened in 1924, for example, seems an almost uncanny expression of Okakura’s notion of Japan’s special curatorial role in the preservation of Asiatic civilization. However, Yanagi and his fellows, like Okakura, found it difficult to transcend the models and forms for international relations established by the West—even as they struggled to free themselves from the disadvantages of their own position in a Western-dominated world order. The very idea of a museum was borrowed from Western Europe, where its emergence and development were deeply involved in the history of modern imperialism.⁶⁴ In their voluminous writings on Korean material culture, moreover, Japanese collectors and critics of the 1920s and 1930s relied on rhetorical strategies of knowing and appreciation that had long been employed in the Western Orientalist literature on the non-West. As with the Korean museum, the result contributed to the reproduction of Japanese colonial power.

In 1922, Yanagi published his classic statement on Korean art, an influential essay which appeared in the magazine *Shinchō*.⁶⁵ In the essay he claimed that the art of any country reflects the psychology of its people, as formed by the natural environment and by history. Korea’s geographic condition as a peninsula combined with Korean history, which Yanagi characterized in terms of instability, invasion, and subservience to foreign powers, to make the Korean essence lonely, sorrowful, and spiritual. In the same way Yanagi claimed that China’s size and power had created a people and art defined by

strength and that the security and comfort of Japan's situation explained an essentially optimistic, playful character. Further, he proposed that each country's character is associated with one of the three key elements of art: form, color, and line. He argued that since the ideal form is stable, the ideal color bright, and the ideal line long, Chinese art is characterized by stable forms, which signify power; Japanese art by bright colors, signifying pleasure; and Korean art by thin, curved lines, signifying sorrow and loneliness.

In the essay Yanagi went on to explore the incompatibility of long, curved lines and stable forms. This was especially the case in pottery, which he saw as the apotheosis of the art of the curved line, that is to say, of Korean art. He pointed out, "All [Korean pots] are unstable because they are long and narrow, but in them the demand for the element of line is completely satisfied. How inappropriate and fragile the long, narrow part is in use. The people do not have worldly desires."⁶⁶ Yanagi proceeded to discuss what he perceived as the absence of bright color in Korean art and culture, and arrived at what has become his somewhat notorious theory of Korean "whiteness." He observed of Korea:

As for the color of clothing worn, is it not, if anything, white? Or if not, then a pale blue. Why is it that old and young, men and women all wear the same sort of white clothing? There are many countries and people in the world, but one cannot observe this strange phenomenon anywhere else. . . . White clothing has always been for mourning. It has been the symbol of a lonely, reverent, and profound heart. The people, by wearing white clothing, are mourning for eternity. I think that the difficult historical experience of the people, who have suffered much, led naturally and inevitably to the clothing they wear. Is not the paucity of color true proof of the absence of pleasure in life?⁶⁷

During this period the idea of an essential Korean sorrow brought about by a national history of unremitting disaster was of a piece with both scholarly and popular views in Japan of Korea. In his study of the Japanese historiography of Korea, Hatada Takashi has shown that during the early twentieth century Japanese scholarly discourse on Korea and its history centered on the theory of Korean "stagnation" (*teitai*). This notion persisted, Hatada notes, well into the postwar period and brings together several other themes central to the colonial-era Japanese study of Korea: the theory of the common origins of Japanese and Koreans (*Nissen dōsoron*), that of the original unity of Manchuria and Korea (*Mansen ittairon*), and the theory of Korean

subordination to other countries (*taritsuseiron*). In short, the basic argument promoted by the Japanese scholars who wrote on Korean history during this period was of the tragic impossibility of independent Korean development.⁶⁸ Publications on Korean art and culture by critics and collectors such as Yanagi contributed to a larger discourse that naturalized Japanese colonialism as a normal and even inevitable product of history, geography, and essential Korean identity.

In Yanagi's circle of fellow Japanese collectors of Korean objects, there were differences of opinion on various aspects of Korean art and culture. Nevertheless, the idea of sorrow or melancholy as an aesthetic principle of Korean culture was accepted by many. For example, Kurahashi Tōjirō, a publisher and collector who was part of Yanagi's circle in the 1920s, gave a lecture on Korean pottery in 1928 in which he claimed, "Another special characteristic [of Korea] is that for a thousand years it has truckled to stronger powers [*jidaitēki*] . . . standing for the most part between Chinese and Japanese might, and the fact of having been intimidated throughout, generally by China, has been included within the things created by Koreans. Their feelings did not turn outwards but rather went deeper and deeper inside, and as a result . . . Korean crafts call strangely to people, they are lonely, and this is why they were taken up by the [Japanese] tea people."⁶⁹ The potter Tomimoto Kenkichi was also an early enthusiast of Korean pottery, making trips on his own and with Yanagi to Korea during the 1920s. In writings on Korea from this period he too referred to the melancholy quiet of Korean pottery, and to its contrast with the "strength" of Chinese ceramics and the "prettiness" of Japanese pieces.⁷⁰ Kon Wajirō, the architect and folklorist, went to Korea in the early 1920s to survey *minka*, or folk houses, for a report commissioned by the colonial government. In the 1924 report Kon, ordinarily a careful and independent-minded observer, stressed what he saw as the decorative, free, natural quality of the Korean aesthetic. Still, even Kon prefaced his discussion with the statement, "It can be said that there is in the lifestyle of the [Korean] upper class a sad, delicate beauty such as has been recognized in the art of the Korean peninsula."⁷¹ In 1933 Uchiyama Shōzō, another collector and Korean pottery expert, wrote, "When we contemplate Yi period wares, we realize that lonely people are indeed possessed of warm hearts."⁷²

As suggested by Uchiyama's remark, many of those writing on Korean art during this period also imagined an identity between Korean objects and Korean people. For some the comparison between Koreans wearing white

and the white porcelain of the later Chosŏn period was irresistible. Kurahashi concluded his preface to a 1932 book on Korean white porcelain with a typical flourish: “Those who travel in Korea are likely to see the scene of people in white clothing working slowly on the reddish-brown terrain. Those white-clad Koreans [Senjin] are, in sum, the white porcelain of the Yi dynasty.”⁷³ The identity Kurahashi suggests between Koreans and Korean objects may be a poetic conceit, but it is one that recurs in a variety of Japanese texts written during this period on Korean material culture. It suggests the way Japanese writers regularly assumed the position of the colonialist master, or subject, whose consuming gaze rendered everything Korean—landscape, people, and things—into a unified aesthetic object. Often this maneuver was accomplished by means of the same rhetorical strategies that had long been employed in Western texts to subordinate non-Western (including Japanese) others. For example Asakawa Noritaka, the expert on Korean ceramics who with his brother Takumi introduced Yanagi and many other Japanese collectors to Yi dynasty pottery, published a poem called “Tsubo” (Jar) in 1922 that gave vent to a fantasy assimilating Korean women and ceramic objects. After comparing the shape of a Korean water jug to a girl’s breast, “a form born to be loved,” he went on to write in vaguely erotic terms of the Korean woman as a “walking Yi dynasty jar.”⁷⁴

Korea and Korean art and culture were often feminized, although the metaphorical gender relations that were elaborated from the initial premise of Korea or Korean culture as woman could go in a variety of directions. The writer and collector Aoyama Jirō, another member of the group around Yanagi, gave a lecture on Korean crafts that was published in the magazine *Teikoku kōgei* in 1930. Aoyama’s main argument was that Korean culture had no real independent identity and that it was actually only a part of Chinese culture. As he put it, “Korea is that which is admiring, weak, timid, fundamentally lazy and likes someone extreme; in short, a girl.”⁷⁵ In Aoyama’s account the “thoughtless,” “irresponsible” man whom this “girl” emulates and is overwhelmed by is China. Yanagi, on the other hand, had a penchant for identifying Korean historical periods in terms of gender. For example, in 1922 he stated that the art of the Confucian Yi dynasty was masculine, whereas that of the preceding Buddhist Koryŏ dynasty was feminine.⁷⁶ Later, however, he reversed himself; for reasons about which one can only speculate he decided that Koryŏ works were male, while those of the Yi were female.

The familiar metaphor of colonial object as woman could also make

room—sometimes even in the same text—for another familiar trope: colonial object as child. Asakawa’s poem “Tsubo” includes the following verses:

Koreans

Do not know what intention is

Rather than self-consciousness and reflection

They have one instinctive way

They make things with the pure heart of a child drawing a picture

And that one feeling continues to the end

An art in which feeling rather than rationality has won

An art in which the same thing cannot be made twice

Children’s work made by adults

One bows the head on seeing the drawings of children

And feels astonished shame of one’s own impurity⁷⁷

The theme of the childlike Korean producing, all unconscious, masterpieces of art recurs in texts throughout this period. Yanagi used it, as did his friend the British potter Bernard Leach, who was still writing in the early 1950s, “The Koreans and their pots are childlike, spontaneous and trusting. We had something akin to this in Europe up to about the thirteenth century.”⁷⁸

Another comparison to Europe is apt here. Elisa Evett, in her study of the reception of Japanese art in late-nineteenth-century Europe, notes that critics in the West dwelled on what they saw as the childlike, unconscious, even primitive qualities of Japanese images, and by extension of the Japanese themselves.⁷⁹ In his 1898 *The Soul of the Far East*, for example, the astronomer Percival Lowell wrote that Japanese are “still in that childish state of development before self-consciousness has spoiled the sweet simplicity of nature.”⁸⁰ These perceptions of the Oriental other were linked, of course, to ideas about the imperial European self; the decadent modern West had lost, irrevocably, the innocence and purity of the nobly savage state in which Japanese were still to be found.⁸¹

In much the same way, Japanese writings on Korean pottery helped to define and interpret not only the colonial Korean object but also the colonialist Japanese subject. In a sense, Korea offered an opportunity for critical reflection on Japan’s modern development. For example, the childlike innocence and purity of Korea contrasted with the adult consciousness and impurity of Japan. Much as it had for Europeans and Americans contemplating the Far East, this metaphorical figure expressed the power relation between

two cultures while it evoked nostalgia for a lost, premodern past. Writings by Japanese critics refer to the “naturalness,” “unconsciousness,” and “traditionalism” of Korea, Koreans, and Korean objects. These were in explicit contrast to the artifice, self-consciousness, and Westernized modernity of Japan, which the authors generally deplored.

Asakawa Noritaka, for example, wrote in 1922 comparing Korean and Japanese ceramics:

Much of Japanese pottery to date ignores natural laws and has a tendency to want to show off its own cleverness. Therefore it becomes something unpleasant. There is none of this in Korean things. First of all they always come out of nature; even [Korean] architecture is built to go with its surrounding lines and planes. If you look at it, the method is that of a swallow building its nest, and no matter how small the house, it harmonizes well with the lines of nature. I will even say that this is instinctive. Pottery methods too are truly not that of making something but rather of a swallow building its nest.⁸²

Similarly, Yanagi wrote in 1931 of Japanese ceramics, “Production was poisoned by appreciation. Japanese bowls bear the scars of consciousness.”⁸³ In the same vein, the potter Tomimoto Kenkichi wrote in 1925 of his disgust with the modern, Western-style architecture that Japanese had brought to Seoul, and mourned the resulting demise of indigenous Korean buildings and monuments, which were like “objects in nature” and “feel as though they have existed from before they were built.”⁸⁴

Yet Orientalist strategies of appreciating Korean objects also assigned great creative power and authority to Japanese consciousness, however scarred or impure. Almost every Japanese writing on Korean ceramics in this period stressed the importance and value of the Japanese discovery of Korean pottery in the sixteenth century and, by extension, of Japanese aesthetic discrimination generally. Occasionally it was even suggested that the Japanese genius lay less in art production than in art appreciation.⁸⁵ Moreover, that genius was in itself a form of production, and one that was perhaps of a higher order than that of simple manufacture. As Yanagi put it, “The Koreans made rice bowls; the Japanese masters made them into great teabowls.”⁸⁶ The publisher and collector Kurahashi Tōjirō asserted that “the use of [Korean bowls] as tea utensils represented a discernment equal or superior to that of those people who made them.”⁸⁷

By claiming the power to discern Oriental objects, and even to create their

proper meanings and uses, Japanese intellectuals self-consciously ranged themselves alongside their Western counterparts as imperial authorities. In his first public reaction to the Korean independence movement of 1919, Yanagi suggested that just as the American writer Lafcadio Hearn had “understood Japan better than some of the Japanese,” so might Japanese like himself be able to render “the labor of love for Korea” and fathom Korean “inner life as shown in religion and art.” “There has been no Hearn for Korea yet,” he observed.⁸⁸ Yet in claiming the type of authority over Oriental objects monopolized previously by Western subjects, Yanagi and his cohort were bidding for something beyond a mere power-sharing arrangement. They were explicitly engaged in an effort to resist the growing predominance of Western power throughout the world, and particularly in East Asia. As Yanagi wrote in 1923 of the Korean art museum he planned to open in Seoul, “It would be the greatest of pities if the introduction of the material civilization of Europe should lead to the extinction of our cherished Oriental handicrafts, as seems quite likely, so it is my earnest hope that the establishment of a gallery like this may not only serve to preserve the relics of the past, but also to provide a stimulus for new activities in the days to come.”⁸⁹

Like Okakura, Yanagi proposed that Japan respond to the Western challenge by means of a museum of past Oriental greatness that would also be, in some indefinite way, much more. In postcolonial retrospect, it is perhaps too easy to read imperialist intent into the vague, ambitious vistas opened by Okakura’s 1903 mission to “revivify the dormant life of the old Asiatic unity,” or even by Yanagi’s hope some twenty years later of “new activities in the days to come.” Certainly Yanagi’s museum, which was made possible by Japanese colonial power in Korea and even helped to reproduce it, was both more concrete and ultimately more oppressive than the one Okakura only envisioned. Yet Yanagi belonged to a generation much more disillusioned than Okakura’s with the imperialist modernizing project of the nineteenth-century nation-state. His aspirations for the future of Japan, Asia, and indeed the world were critical and utopian; only a few years later he looked toward a “Kingdom of Beauty” (*bi no ōkoku*) that promised humanity a quasi-socialist liberation from capitalist modernity.⁹⁰

Even this brief survey of texts on Korean objects produced by the loose network of Japanese collectors and critics out of which the *mingei* movement later arose reveals some of the ways they not only reiterated but also amplified colonialist views of Korea, Japan, and the Orient generally. Al-

though areas of uncertainty and disagreement remained, particularly in connection with the problem of trying to accommodate Korean and Japanese difference within Oriental identity, a common discourse on the Korean object had been established by the end of the 1920s. Not only did that discourse affirm a more general understanding of Japanese-Korean relations prevalent during this period, but it helped to shape future encounters by Japanese with other cultures and their artifacts, whether these were located within national borders or without.