

Kishida Ryūsei: Painter of “Oriental Grotesque” and the Mingei Movement

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The rich repertoire of the Taishō-period painter Kishida Ryūsei 岸田劉生 (1891–1929) has spawned numerous studies in Japan. English-language scholarship is scant, but recent contributions by Bert Winther-Tamaki and Alicia Volk are beginning to draw some much-deserved attention to Kishida and his circle—practitioners of *yōga* 洋画 who specialized in Western media (such as oil on canvas).¹ At first, Kishida studied the popular styles of Impressionism and Post-Impressionism, but later developed a heterodox language through his own audacious explorations. The most memorable images are of his daughter Reiko 麗子, who appeared from 1918 to 1924 in many of his drawings, paintings, and watercolors. Viewers are often shocked by how grotesque some of these portrayals seem. In the earliest example, *Reiko at Age Five* (1918), the girl is depicted with one eye bigger than the other, disheveled hair, a sallow and darkish complexion, and unflattering facial shadows (Fig. 1)—clearly a distorted view of the actual child (Fig. 2).² One wonders if the artist harbored some resentment towards his daughter or suffered from mental illness. Reiko’s biography of her father spoke of his alcoholism and a family history of poor health.³ However, it would be simplistic to attribute Kishida’s visions to private torments.

While portraiture could reflect the painter’s feelings and a psychosomatic correspondence between face and character, Kishida’s works exemplified what the Formalists would describe as a scaffold upon which to build “significant form,”⁴ a concept his contemporary Roger Fry (1866–1934) defined as “something other than agreeable arrangements of form, harmonious patterns and the like.” A painting which possesses significant form is, according to Fry, “the outcome of an endeavor to express an idea rather than to create a pleasing

1 Bert Winther-Tamaki, *Maximum Embodiment: Yōga, the “Western Painting” of Japan, 1912–1955* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2012); Alicia Volk, *In Pursuit of Universalism: Yorozu Tetsugorō and Japanese Modern Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010).

2 *Reiko at Age Five* was finished on 8 October 1918, the first in a series of images that documented the early development of the girl until 1924. Being poor, Kishida could not afford to hire professional models, so he often painted his friends and family.

3 Reiko mentions several times her father’s drunken rage, and how it terrified her. See Kishida Reiko, *Chichi Kishida Ryūsei* 父岸田劉生 (My father Kishida Ryūsei), 1st ed. (Tokyo: Chūōkōron-Shinsha, 1987).

4 Roger Fry, the British artist and critic, was among the first to emphasize the importance of form over ideas in the analysis of art. His views on the Post-Impressionists were particularly influential and were probably known to Kishida through translation and his artist friends.



Fig. 1 Kishida Ryūsei, *Reiko at Age Five*, 1918, oil on canvas, 45.1×37.8 cm. National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo.



Fig. 2 Photograph of Reiko around Age 5. Published in Toyota Municipal Museum of Art, *Kishida Ryūsei Hayami Gyoshū*, exh. cat (Toyota-shi: Toyoto-shi Bijutsukan, 1996), p. 12.



Fig. 3 Kishida Ryūsei, *Portrait of Y. Koya*, 1916, oil on canvas, 45.5×33.5cm. National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo.

object...[;] it implies the effort on the part of the artist to bend to our emotional understanding by means of his passionate conviction some intractable material which is alien to our spirit.”⁵ For Kishida, that intractable material was the sense of “profound beauty” (深い美 *fukai bi*) embodied in “ugliness” (醜怪 *shūkai*).⁶ His pictures jolt the viewer out of complacency, turning the instinctive evaluation of art based on pleasure on its head. He overtly challenged the government-sponsored public exhibitions such as the Bunten 文展 (Art Exhibitions of the Ministry of Education), where many budding artists gained ground by offering glaring colorfulness and decorative ornateness.⁷ By adopting non-idealization and a dark-toned palette, Kishida deviated from the standard fare of the official exhibitions which he called “trashy.”⁸

For the 1916 *Portrait of Y. Koya* (Fig. 3), Kishida incorporated the somber background of the German Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528) and the Flemish Jan van Eyck (c. 1380–1441), two of the first Europeans to use the flexibility and luminosity of oil paint to achieve penetrating realism (Figs. 4, 5). From van Eyck,

5 Roger Fry, “Retrospect,” last chapter of *Vision and Design* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1920).

6 Kishida Ryūsei, “Dekadensu no kōsatsu” デカデンスの考察 (Inspection of decadence), *Junsei bijutsu* 純正美術 (Pure art) 2, no. 6 (June, 1922); cited in *Kishida Ryūsei uchinaru bi: aru to iu koto no shimpi* 岸田劉生内なる美：在るといふことの神秘 (Kishida Ryūsei inner beauty: the mystery of being), edited by Kitazawa Noriaki (Tokyo: Nigensha, 1997), 76.

7 Such tactics to catch the eye of the spectators were disparaged by some critics. See for example, National Committee of Japan on Intellectual Cooperation, “Exhibition of Famous Works of Art of the Meiji and Taisho Eras,” *The Yearbook of Japanese Art*, English edition (Tokyo: National Committee of Japan on Intellectual Cooperation, 1927), 50.

8 At the time of the sixth Bunten and the first exhibition of the Fūzain-kai ヒュウザイン会 (Fusain Society) of which Kishida was an active member) in 1912, Kishida published an article “Art of the Self” in the Yomiuri Newspaper: “I have always known that our exhibition would position itself as anti-Bunten. I also know that most paintings at Bunten are trashy. I do not expect the gentlemen in the Bunten hanging committee to judge my painting...” Cited in Omuka Toshiharu, “The Non-Continuity of the ‘Avant-Garde’: Kishida Ryūsei, Murayama Tomoyoshi, and Ono Tadashige,” in Jackie Menzies, *Modern Boy Modern Girl: Modernity in Japanese Art, 1910–1935*, exh. cat. (Sydney: the Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1998), 138.

Kishida learned to temper realism with bizarre bodily proportions. Kishida never studied in Europe, and his knowledge of Western traditions came largely from reproductions. It is worth noting that the selection of Dürer and van Eyck as prototypes was unusual at the time, both in Japan and in Europe. That was an era when the avant-garde was more concerned with exploring pictures as composites of planes, light, patterns, and colors than striving for physiognomic specificity. By selecting these Northern Renaissance masters as his models, Kishida decidedly stepped out from under the shadow of Kuroda Seiki 黒田清輝 (1866–1924), the leading Western-style artist of the Meiji period responsible for spreading Impressionism and Post-impressionism as an academic mainstream.⁹

Kitazawa Noriaki 北澤憲昭 characterizes Kishida’s mature paintings as “anti-modernist.” He points to the artist’s predilection for “classicism” and “Oriental delightfulness” or *Tōyō shumi* 東洋趣味, seeing comparable tendencies in Ōmura Seigai’s essay “Bunjinga no fukkō” (Revival of Literati Painting; 1921), Watsuji Tetsurō’s 和辻哲郎 *Koji junrei* 古寺巡禮 (Pilgrimage to Old Buddhist Temples; 1919), and the reproduction of East Asian objects in the journal *Shirakaba* 白樺 (White Birch) starting in 1923 at the instigation of Yanagi Sōetsu (Muneyoshi) 柳宗悦 (1889–1961).¹⁰ The reference to Yanagi, who was the founder of the *Mingei undō* 民芸運動 or Folk-Craft Movement, is particularly interesting. Art historians seldom treat painting and folk crafts together, but Kishida Ryūsei’s paintings echoed an aesthetic principle in the Mingei discourse, that is, the elevation of the grotesque to a state of grace. This aspect explains a critical paradox in Kishida’s oeuvre as well as many of his iconography choices.

The term “mingei,” coined by Yanagi Sōetsu and friends in 1925, literally means the “art of the [common] people.” The Mingei Movement started out largely as a ceramic movement.¹¹ It celebrated the beauty of or-



Fig. 4 Albrecht Dürer (German), *Self-Portrait*, 1500, oil on panel, 67×49 cm. Alte Pinakothek, Munich



Fig. 5 Jan van Eyck (Flemish), *Man in a Blue Turban*, 1430–1433, oil on wood, 22.5×16.6 cm. Art Museum, Bucharest, Romania (Sibiu, National Brukenthal Museum).

9 In 1908 Kishida entered the Aoibashi Western Painting Study Center where Kuroda Seiki taught *plein-air* painting in French Impressionist style. Kuroda, also a professor at the prestigious Tokyo School of Fine Arts, institutionalized impressionist colors and brushwork standard pursuits among his disciples, who came to dominate the official Bunten exhibitions. From the end of 1911 to early 1912, Kishida also independently found inspiration in the work of modern French painters, through *Shirakaba* and also illustrated books.

10 Kitazawa Noriaki, *Kishida Ryūsei to Taishō abungyarudo* 岸田劉生と大正アヴァンギャルド (Kishida Ryūsei and the Taishō avant-garde) (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1993), 199.

11 Later, mingei would include textiles, furniture, baskets, and scores of other objects. To see representative works, refer to Mie Kenritsu Bijutsukan 三重県立美術館 (Mie Prefectural Art Museum), *Yanagi Sōetsu ten: 'heijō' no bi, nichijō no shimpi* 柳宗悦展：平常の美、日常の神秘 (Exhibition on Yanagi Sōetsu: ordinary beauty, everyday mystery), exh. cat. (Tsu: Mie

dinary objects, including lowly pots and common crockery or *getemono* 下手物. These everyday objects were the antithesis of porcelain, gold lacquerware, and other high-skilled, high-priced products. In celebrating commonness, the Mingei Movement fostered humanism, equality, individualism, and countered elitism and oppression. Yet, a key condition for the flourishing of the Mingei Movement was the colonization of Korea in 1910, which enabled the massive flow of Korean pottery and other folk objects into Japanese hands.¹² Yanagi himself discussed Korean mingei in a chauvinistic tone, even as he was praising them. In his opinion, the original Korean creators had no artistic self-awareness:

It is impossible to believe that those Korean workmen possessed intellectual consciousness. It was precisely because they were not intellectuals that they were able to produce this natural beauty. The bowls were not products of conscious effort by the individual. The beauty in them springs from grace....[They] are the work of nature, not the product of human ingenuity.¹³

The Japanese attitude towards their colonial subjects was ambivalent. Yanagi's chauvinism was tempered by a pacifism that he and some former classmates—the leading Shirakaba writers Mushanokōji Saneatsu 武者小路実篤 and Shiga Naoya 志賀直哉—espoused. They famously did not get along with their headmaster General Nogi Maresuke 乃木希典 at the Peers College of Gakushū-in 学習院.¹⁴ General Nogi was a hero from the Russo-Japanese War who committed ritual disembowelment upon the death of Emperor Meiji in 1912, in accordance with what some modernizers criticized as a savage samurai practice of following one's master to death. Nogi also emblemized the kind of hardline militarism which proved inadequate and impractical for the long-term maintenance of the Empire. In the 1920s and 1930s, at the height of the Mingei Movement, the colonial government in Korea revised its repressive policy of "Military Rule" in favor of "Cultural Rule" (*bunka seiji* 文化政治, 1919–1931), which entailed greater emphasis on the celebration of local history and creativity. However, a latent sense of Japanese superiority remained.

Kim Brandt, in *Kingdom of Beauty: Mingei and the Politics of Folk Art in Imperial Japan*, explains that among a narrow segment of elite, urban male society, Korean ceramics of the Joseon-period (1392–1910) became a kind of fetish in the 1910s and 1920s. Yanagi began collecting Korean pottery on his first trip in 1916¹⁵ and returned many times thereafter, as it was easy to do during the Japanese occupation. "In those

Prefectural Art Museum, 1997).

12 Kim Brandt, *Kingdom of Beauty: Mingei and the Politics of Folk Art in Imperial Japan* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007); Yuko Kikuchi, *Japanese Modernisation and Mingei Theory: Cultural Nationalism and Oriental Orientalism* (London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004); also see Kikuchi, "The Myth of Yanagi's Originality: The Formation of 'Mingei' Theory in Its Social and Historical Context," *Journal of Design History* 7, no. 4 (1994): 247–266.

13 Yanagi Sōetsu, "On the Kizaemon Teabowl," *The Unknown Craftsman: a Japanese Insight into Beauty*, trans. by Bernard Leach (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1972), 194.

14 See Kikuchi, "The Myth of Yanagi's Originality," 250. For more on the Shirakaba group in English, see Maya Mortimer, *Meeting the Sensei: The Role of the Master in Shirakaba Writers* (Leiden: Brill, 2000).

15 Kikuchi, "The Myth of Yanagi's Originality," 248.

early days,” recalled Yanagi, “pots of the [Goryeo] dynasty (932–1392) were expensive, and I could not afford them, but work of a later Yi [or Joseon] dynasty was quite cheap....I arranged a small exhibition of objects of the Yi dynasty in Tokyo in 1921.”¹⁶ Here, Yanagi was referring to the availability of plebeian wares of the Joseon period relative to higher-ranked Goryeo pieces, such as the celadons plundered from royal tombs in Korea and sent to Japan. The interconnection between colonialism and the antiques market in Korea is a topic which is beyond the scope of this paper. Brandt has made compelling connections between the Mingei movement and imperialism, tracking the changing taste of Japanese collectors from the 1910s to the 1940s. The interest in Joseon-period antiques represented the rhetoric that revolved around a sad and melancholic Korea whose beauty was uniquely appreciated by the Japanese.

Yanagi tried to couch Mingei aesthetics in Buddhist terms. He and the potters Hamada Shōji 濱田庄司 (1894–1978) and Kawai Kanjiro 河井寛次郎 (1890–1966) had an initiation rite at a monastery on Mount Kōya 高野山 in 1926, the year commonly cited as the beginning the Mingei Movement.¹⁷ Yanagi was fond of saying that art is non-dualistic, that it does not discriminate between beauty and ugliness, just as there is no fullness or void in the Buddhist worldview. His aesthetic ideal embraces both conditions. Furthermore, Yanagi liked to see himself as the originator of the Mingei Movement and the movement itself as a Japanese invention. In reality, he had been exposed to the anti-industrial ideals of the Arts and Crafts Movement of the West, especially via Bernard Leach (1887–1979), a British ceramicist born in Hong Kong, trained in England, and lived extensively in Japan. Leach remembered discussing with Yanagi the possibility of starting an equivalent Japanese movement in the late 1910s, years before the appearance of the term “mingei.”¹⁸

Unlike William Morris (1834–1896) of the Arts and Crafts Movement, Yanagi was a philosopher more than an artist. Although he encouraged fellow potters to be productive, including Leach’s teacher Hamada Shōji, he made few ceramics of his own. Today, the Western world knows Yanagi largely through Leach’s translation of his writings in *The Unknown Craftsman: A Japanese Insight into Beauty*, a 1970s compilation of essays written over several decades, some dating as far back as the 1920s.

In a 1931 essay, Yanagi sang the praises of the “Kizaemon 喜左衛門 teabowl”¹⁹ (16th century) (Fig. 6)—a warped, roughly glazed Korean vessel (originally a ricebowl?) that had passed through several hands in Japan. A succession of owners had died mysteriously from boils, until the bowl was entrusted to Kohō-an 孤篷庵, a subtemple of Daitokuji 大徳寺 in Kyoto.²⁰ For Yanagi, this legendary bowl (now a Japanese National

16 Yanagi, *The Unknown Craftsman*, 101.

17 For a focused study on the inception of the Mingei Movement, see Okuramura Kichiemon 岡村吉右衛門, *Yanagi Sōetsu to shoki mingei undō* 柳宗悦と初期民藝運動 (Yanagi Sōetsu and the early period of the Mingei Movement) (Tokyo: Tamagawa Daigaku Shuppanbu, 1991).

18 Kikuchi, “The Myth of Yanagi’s Originality,” 259.

19 The name “Kizaemon” refers to a past owner of the bowl, an Osaka merchant named Takeda Kizaemon.

20 Another discussion of this teabowl in English can be found in Jon and Alan Covell, *The World of Korean Ceramics* (Seoul: Si-sa Yong-o-sa, 1986).



Fig. 6. Anonymous, Kizaemon Teabowl, 16th century, Joseon Dynasty (1392–1897), Korea. Kohō-an, Daitokuji, Kyoto, Japan.

Treasure) epitomizes the beauty of *mingei*, even though it initially “cost next to nothing,” was “made by a poor man” and “bought without pride.”²¹ Its defining virtues are humbleness and deformity.

Finding beauty in the imperfect and the mundane was likewise Kishida’s stated goal. This was no ordinary beauty, but an “inner beauty” (*uchinaru bi* 内なる美) which must be sought by delving into the nature of things; according to Kishida, inner beauty is neither purely decorative nor purely realistic. “The heart leaps” at the sight of inner beauty, as though enraptured by an “unfathomable” (*fushigi na* 不思議な) “mystery” (*shimpi* 神秘).²² In his poem on an early still-life (now lost), Kishida wrote:

Upon seeing these two apples,
Do you not think of the shape of fate?
That the two are here,
When staring at their shapes
Do you not sense something mysterious?
It is beauty, the beauty of being.
Beauty is mystery in form [...]

この二つの林檎を見て
君は運命の姿を思わないか
此処に二つのものがあるという事
その姿を見つめていると
君は神秘を感じないか
それは美だ、在るという事の美だ
美は神秘の形だ [...] ²³

In Kishida’s still-lives, the sparseness and the contrast of bright objects against a bare and dark-toned background (Fig. 7) remind one of *Quince, Cabbage Melon, Cucumber* of 1602 by the Spaniard Juan Sánchez

21 Yanagi, “The Kizaemon Tea-bowl,” 190–96.

22 Kishida Ryūsei, “Uchinaru bi,” in *Bi no hontai* 美の本体 (The true face of beauty) (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1985), 38–39. This essay, reprinted in several books, was originally published in *Shirakaba* 9, no. 3 (March 1918).

23 Kishida Ryūsei, “Futatsu no unmei” 二つの運命 (Two fates), cited in Kishida, *Bi no hontai*, 246–247.



Fig. 7 Kishida Ryūsei, *Still-life: Three Apples*, 1917, oil on canvas, 31.9×40.9 cm, private collection. From Kishida Ryūsei, *Kishida Ryūsei uchinaru bi : Aru to iu koto no shimpi*, edited by Kitazawa Noriaki (Tokyo: Nigensha, 1997), p. 47.



Fig. 8 Juan Sánchez Cotán (Spanish), *Still-life with Quince, Cabbage, Melon, and Cucumber*, about 1600, oil on canvas, 69.6×85 cm. San Diego Museum of Art.

Cotán, a pioneer of European still-life painting (Fig. 8). Before the 17th century, Europeans had avoided ordinary comestibles like fruits and vegetables for formal compositions, regarding them as too base. But Cotán, a lay brother of a Carthusian Order, imparted deeper meaning to quotidian themes, using the meager supplies on a poor man's table to evoke the monastic principles of humility, silence, asceticism, and mysticism. Still-lives from the devoutly Catholic Spain proved particularly attractive to Kishida. Other comparable examples are works by Francisco de Zurbarán and Luis Meléndez (Fig. 9).



Fig. 9 Luis Meléndez (Spanish), *Still-life with Pomegranates, Apples, a Pot of Jam, and a Stone Pot*, 1771–72, oil on canvas, 48×34 cm. Museo del Prado, Madrid.

Kishida himself was a Christian convert, and he talked frequently about endowing art with spiritual values. Like Meléndez, Kishida could be described as striving for “an inverse ideal of truthful imitation of mundane reality—the apparently unadulterated and particularized visual record of the world of real objects, which are, by their very nature, imperfect.”²⁴

In *Still-life: Apples, Tin Can, Ceramic Cups, and Spoon* (1920), Kishida treated one of his favorite motifs—apples—with an unforgiving realism; their skins are pockmarked and rotting (Fig. 10). His grotesque aesthetic is more pronounced when juxtaposed with a still-life by the nihonga painter Hayami Gyoshū 速水御舟, *Teacup and Plums* of 1921 (Fig. 11). The basic components of the two pictures are the same, but their color schemes and emotional effects are diametrically opposed. Gyoshū's props are jewel-like and luscious,

24 Peter Cherry, “Luis Meléndez: Real Life and Still Life,” in Gretchen A. Hirschauer and Catherine A. Metzger, eds., *Luis Meléndez: Master of the Spanish Still Life* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 2009), 24.



Fig. 10 Kishida Ryūsei, *Still-life: Apples, Tin Can, Ceramic Cups, and Spoon*, 1920, oil on canvas, 36.5×44 cm. Ōhara Museum of Art, Kurashiki.



Fig. 11 Hayami Gyoshū, *Still-life: Teacup and Plums*, 1921, color on silk, 27×24 cm. National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo.



Fig. 12 Kishida Ryūsei, *An Apple atop a Jug*, 1916, oil on panel, 40×29.5 cm. National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo.



Fig. 13 Anonymous, Blue-and-White Ware, Joseon Dynasty (1392–1892), Korea, former collection of Yanagi Sōetsu, Nihon Mingeikan, Japan Folk Crafts Museum, Tokyo. In Mie Prefectural Art Museum, *Yanagi Sōetsu ten: 'heijō' no bi, nichijō no shimpī*, (Exhibition on Yanagi Sōetsu: ordinary beauty, everyday mystery), exh. cat. (Tsu: Mie Prefectural Art Museum, 1997) p. 60.



Fig. 14 Kishida Ryūsei, *Still-life: Two Apples, Bottle, and Teacups*, 1917, oil on canvas, 32×44.5 cm. Private collection. In Toyota Municipal Museum of Art, *Kishida Ryūsei Hayami Gyoshū*, exh. cat (Toyota-shi: Toyoto-shi Bijutsukan, 1996), plate 20.

while Kishida's are raw and serious, evoking the austere Christian precedents. In his own words, “tables, apples, and containers” could replace “biblical events and tales” as conveyors of religious sentiments.²⁵

Grotesque, in Yanagi's mind, was a major feature in modern art, in fact, in “all true art.” A passage in *The Unknown Craftsman* states, “A conspicuous trend in modern art movements is the pursuit of deformation, discarding conventional form, as an expression of man's quest for freedom.....The term ‘grotesque’, which has an important—rather, a solemn—significance in aesthetic history, has unfortunately been misused and debased in modern times. All true art has, somewhere, an element of the grotesque....The irregular

25 See Kishida, *Kishida Ryūsei uchinaru bi*, 16.

is in a sense something to which all who pursue true beauty resort. But primitive art from Africa, the Americas, and the South Seas was an astonishing revelation and had a magnetic effect on artists like Picasso and Matisse.”²⁶

Besides echoes of Yanagi’s philosophy, the kinds of objects touted by Yanagi’s mingei circle appeared often in Kishida’s still-lives. In *An Apple atop a Jug* (1916): the blue-and-white vessel has yellowed with age (Fig. 12). Its simple design resembles the Korean Joseon-period pottery that was becoming very popular in Japan. We know that Kishida liked to frequent night markets and antiques shops where ceramics of all sorts could be bought. Rustic Joseon ceramics, the opposite of “the decadent, consumerist, Western tastes and habits,”²⁷ were originally not very expensive, but their prices soared as more and more Japanese wanted to collect them. The small-necked jar in the 1916 painting looks to be of the same type as a piece that once belonged to the Yanagi (Fig. 13)—the yellowed surface of the painted jar resembles the soiled crazing on antique pottery. Seen through materialist and colonial lenses, the ceramic ware was more than the artist’s stock prop. Recalling imports from the subjugated Korea, it renders visible Japan’s imperialist geography.

Kishida died in 1929, three years after the founding of the Mingei movement. He did not seem to have been much involved in the movement’s publishing, exhibiting, or pottery-making activities, and it is unclear if colonial politics limited his creative process. Nevertheless, parallels between Kishida’s aesthetic proclivities and the Mingei Movement are difficult to overlook. A key intermediary was Bernard Leach.²⁸ As Tanaka Atsushi 田中淳 has pointed out, Kishida and Leach met “in November 1911 at an art exhibition sponsored by the Shirakaba group. Thereafter, their friendship developed. The Japanese painter visited Leach’s studio to help paint ceramic ware, while Leach taught Kishida etching techniques.”²⁹ Kishida seemed to hold his foreign friend in high regard. The most telling was the incorporation of Leach’s original ceramic creations in several of his paintings. In *Still-life: Two Apples, Bottle, and Teacups* (1917) (Fig. 14), the shorter cup compares closely in shape, color, and pattern to a porcelain known to be of Leach’s making (Fig. 15). The taller one bears an inscription with the English words “The E[arth]” (the last four letters, here blocked from view, are clear in other works), referring to the elemental aesthetic and the principle of simplicity associated with mingei. Notable here again are the vessel’s blemishes: its rim is chipped and inner wall stained.



Fig. 15 Bernard Leach, Porcelain Cup, 1917, formerly in the collection of Yanagi Sōetsu. Japan Folk Crafts Museum, Tokyo. In Mie Prefectural Art Museum, *Yanagi Sōetsu ten: ‘heijō’ no bi, nichijō no shimpī* (Exhibition on Yanagi Sōetsu: ordinary beauty, everyday mystery), exh. cat. (Tsu: Mie Prefectural Art Museum, 1997), p. 144.

26 Yanagi, *The Unknown Craftsman*, 119.

27 Brandt, *Kingdom of Beauty*, 162.

28 One of Kishida’s surviving portraits of Leach, titled “B.L.” (1913), is representative of the painter’s early phase, when he was still keeping with the loose brushwork of the (Post)Impressionists. Today, the painting is held in the National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo.

29 Tanaka Atsushi, in Takashina, J. Thomas Rimer, and Gerald D. Bolas, eds., *Paris in Japan: the Japanese Encounter with European Painting* (Saint Louis: Washington University Press, 1987), 152.



Fig. 16 Kishida Ryūsei, *Wild Girl* (Reiko), 1922, oil on canvas, 45.5×53.1 cm. Museum of Modern Art, Kamakura.

Kishida's exploration of beauty through imperfection is nowhere more pronounced than in a portrait of Reiko, titled *Wild Girl* (1922) (Fig. 16). The artist saw in children "the simplicity of barbarians" and "an innocence" that were part of their inner beauty.³⁰ For inspiration, he looked to the well-known 14th-century scrolls by the Chinese artist Yan Hui 顏輝 of Hanshan 寒山 (J: Kanzan) and Shide 拾得 (J: Jittoku) (Fig. 17).³¹ The toothy grin, narrow eyes, and hunched shoulders of the legendary Buddhist eccentrics are transposed onto Reiko to make her look demented, almost possessed.

In his short life, Kishida produced works of technical and aesthetic profundity. His paintings have been described as "precise" and "beautiful," "disturbing," and "mystical." Analyses of his complex vision reveal his cosmopolitan sophistication, even though he hardly left Japan. Most of all, he captured the pulse of the times by celebrating imperfection, thus putting into practice the mingei philosophy before it even had a name. In addition, he was likely inspired by realist and naturalist novels, which examined minute details and unwholesome characterizations as a way to get at the depths of human nature. It is well-known, for example, that Kishida admired Dostoevsky who thought deeply about questions of beauty and ugliness. Not entirely contradictory were the possible influences from the anti-naturalist and grotesque fantasies of Japanese writers as Tanizaki Jun'ichirō 谷崎潤一郎 (1886–1965) and Edgar Allan Poe (in translation). These authors "opened up a new realm for writers who rejected overly didactic and practical writing" in early twentieth-century Japan.³²

Indeed, the artistic and the literary worlds were closely related, as many artists had relations with literary figures whose portraits they painted and whose works they illustrated. Similarly, artists became major protagonists in the masterpieces of Mori Ōgai 森鷗外 (1862–1922), Natsume Sōseki 夏目漱石 (1867–1916), and Shimozaki Tōson 島崎藤村 (1872–1943). Furthermore, Kishida was affiliated with the Shirakaba group, which, along with the "aesthetic school," represented the two dominant literary movements in Japan. Noriko Lippit summarizes the differences between these two movements: "The Shirakaba group sought a new sense of life in the limitless expanse of the self and of human possibilities, while the aesthetic school was committed to the pursuit of the beautiful, even to the point of sacrificing social and moral integrity. Yet they agree that literature is an art form, and that style, structure, words, and images are at least as important as the content of the literary work."³³

30 Kishida, *Bi no hontai*, 137, 160.

31 Tomiyama, *Kishida Ryūsei*, 143–44.

32 Noriko Mizuta Lippit, "Tanizaki and Poe: The Grotesque and the Quest for Supernal Beauty," *Comparative Literature* 29, No. 3 (Summer 1977), 221–240.

33 Lippit, "Tanizaki and Poe."

Kishida Ryūsei kept a diary for two decades, from 1907 to 1929. These pages detail his fascination with Oriental art objects (*tōyō no geijutsu* 東洋の芸術), and how he began to collect Chinese paintings. In 1919, he made two trips to the ancient capitals of Kyoto and Nara (stopping at the Imperial Household Museum of Nara) where he saw works that awakened his feelings for the “traditional beauty of the Orient.”³⁴ These included flower-and-bird painting of the Song and Yuan dynasties. Until the early twentieth century, Japanese knowledge of Chinese painting was largely based on works handed down from olden times, most renowned being works from the Song and Yuan dynasties. Kishida expounded on this local canon of Chinese classicism in an article titled “Sō-Gen garon” 宋元画論 published in the journal *Kaizō* 改造 in 1924.³⁵ These “Oriental” paintings—some rendered with descriptive colors and brushwork—became an inspiration for a number of his paintings. They also showed him the possibility of maintaining the “realist path” independent of Western models.³⁶

How did his interest in Chinese art come about? Perhaps being one of Kishida Ginkō's 岸田吟香 (1833–1905) children played a part. Ginkō was Japan's first war reporter with extensive knowledge of the continent and Taiwan,³⁷ and an entrepreneur and cultural activist in Shanghai. But Ginkō was already dead before Ryūsei turned fifteen and probably did little to mold his son's taste. A likelier influence was Bernard Leach, whom Ryūsei credited with inspiring him with stories of China travels.³⁸ Ryūsei also lived in a time when an unprecedented number of art works from the continent became available for viewing



Fig. 17 Yan Hui (Chinese), *Hanshan* (Kanzan), 14th century, Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368), ink on paper, 41.8×127.6 cm. Tokyo National Museum, Tokyo.

34 Kishida Ryūsei's diary has been published. See Kishida Ryūsei and Oka Isaburō 岡畏三郎, *Ryūsei nikki* 劉生日記 (Ryūsei's diary) (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1984, 1979).

35 Kishida Ryūsei, “Sō-Gen garon” (On Song and Yuan painting), *Kaizō* 改造 (January 1924). His views on Song-Yuan realism were published posthumously as Kishida Ryūsei, *Sō Gen no shaseiga* 宋元の写生画 (Realist paintings of the Song and Yuan periods) (Kyoto: Zenkoku Shobō, 1947).

36 Tomiyama, section on “Sō-Gen shaseiga,” Kishida Ryūsei, 160–164. Examples of Kishida's Chinese-inspired still-lifes, such as *Winter Melon and Eggplants* (1926) and *Fruits on a Chinese Dish* (1925), are reproduced in Kishida, *Kishida Ryūsei uchinaru bi*.

37 On *Kishida Ginkō*, see Sugiura Tadashi 杉浦正, *Kishida Ginkō: shiryō kara mita sono isshō* 岸田吟香：資料から見たその一生 (Kishida Ginkō: his life as seen in documents) (Tokyo: Kyūko Shoin, 1996); Suigiyama Sakae, *Kishida Ginkō* 岸田吟香, vol. 1 of *Sandai genronjin shū* 三代言論人集 (Three generations of journalists) (Tokyo: Jiji Tsūshinsha, 1962). For an English-language study of Kishida Ginkō's career as a journalist, see Matthew Fraleigh, “Japan's First War Reporter: Kishida Ginkō and the Taiwan Expedition,” *Japanese Studies* 30, no. 1 (2010): 43–66.

38 See Tomiyama, *Kishida Ryūsei*, 124.

and collecting in Japan. In the journal *Shina bijutsu* 支那美術 (Chinese art), he published a review of an exhibition of works that belonged to the eminent Beijing collector Yan Shiqing 顏世清, including some 130 paintings and calligraphy attributed to Juran 巨然, Huang Tingjian 黃庭堅, Zhao Mengfu 趙孟頫, Qian Xuan 錢選, Shen Zhou 沈周, Tang Yin 唐寅, Shitao 石濤, among others. This exhibition was held at the Chinese Embassy in Tokyo in February 1923.³⁹ The year before, Kishida had proudly acquired from a Tokyo dealer a painting of a pigeon purportedly by the Ming court master Bian Wenjin 邊文進 (c.1356–1435), for which he paid 1000 yen, a considerable sum at the time.⁴⁰ However, Kishida had almost no direct contact with China. In 1929 an invitation to paint a portrait for an executive of the South Manchuria Railway Company finally took him to the continent. During this trip, Kishida's alcoholism intensified, and he soon died of a combination of uremia (caused by kidney failure) and stomach ulcers.⁴¹ He was 38 years old.

Before fate took a hand, Kishida had also begun to study early hand painted ukiyo-e, termed *nikuhitsuga* 肉筆画. He saw in these images a combination of “grime and softness” (デロリ),⁴² an unusual beauty that he regarded as traditionally “Oriental.” The idea of a uniquely Oriental approach to aesthetics preoccupied Ryūsei in the last decade of his life. His imagination of the Orient was materialist. He grounded his understanding of inner experience in objects. At the same time, his paintings reflected trends in literature, and to a degree, colonialism. Unlike some modernizers who took technical finesse as a “Western” remedy to Japanese backwardness, he posited realism as a stylistic variant within a broadly defined Oriental tradition.

39 Kishida Ryūsei, “Kanmokudō no zōga o miru” 寒木堂の藏画を見る (Seeing the collection from the Hall of the Cold Wood), *Shina bijutsu* 1, no. 7 (March 1923): 5–6. A list of the exhibits was also published in the *Shōga kottō zasshi* 書画骨董雑誌 176 (February 1923): 29.

40 See Kishida and Oka, *Kishida Ryūsei nikki*, October 15, 1922.

41 See Tomiyama Hideo 富山秀男, *Kishida Ryūsei* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1986), 195.

42 Tomiyama, *Kishida Ryūsei*, 166.