

Aleksandra Cieřliczka

ABSTRACT – Between beauty and utility. The influence of artistic and non-artistic factors on the formation of Japanese craftsmanship and design from the Meiji period to the present day

Japanese design is one of the most intriguing areas of research in material culture and applied art. Its evolution—from traditional crafts to modern design—reflects not only artistic changes but also the profound social, political, and technological transformations that have shaped Japan since the late 19th century. This dissertation attempts to analyze these processes, focusing on the influence of both artistic and non-artistic factors on the development of Japanese design thought in the context of ceramics. It is an interdisciplinary attempt to trace the evolution of Japanese design, based on a critical and comparative interpretation of available scholarly studies, thematic publications, and curatorial approaches to exhibitions devoted to Japanese crafts and design. This work aims to identify the interrelationships between various areas of social life and artistic practices, with particular emphasis on their mutual influences from a historical and cultural perspective. Considering a broad spectrum of factors—both artistic and non-artistic—allows for a multifaceted approach to the subject, enabling a deeper understanding.

The structure of the work is designed to provide a gradual introduction to Japanese design. Subsequent chapters cover: the theoretical foundations of concepts related to beauty and craftsmanship, the origins of handicraft production in Japan, a cross-sectional presentation of the main ceramic centers, the historical transition from the Edo to the Meiji period, an outline of the nature and influence of Nippon's contacts with Europe, the revival of traditional crafts in the 20th century, and a broad overview of contemporary design, including exhibition concepts.

Ceramics was chosen as a reference point for Japanese crafts due to its exceptional cultural, historical, and artistic significance. It is one of the oldest and most developed fields of Japanese manufacture, having served both utilitarian and aesthetic purposes for centuries. The richness of techniques, forms, glazes, and regional styles makes ceramics a perfect illustration of the complexity of the creative process, which depends on numerous factors – from the availability of raw materials, through local traditions, to external influences and individual artistic concepts. As a medium that connects everyday life with spirituality, ceramics demonstrates a distinctive Japanese approach to beauty, harmony, and craftsmanship, making it an ideal starting point for a broader reflection on Japanese aesthetics.

The first chapter provides a theoretical introduction to the broad concept of Japanese aesthetics, the various categories of beauty in Japan, and the division of art and craft. The Japanese concept of beauty is multidimensional, relative, and highly context-dependent. It is based on a rich, extensive aesthetic terminology that describes both material, immaterial, and metaphysical aspects. Many concepts were developed retrospectively, and their meanings have evolved over time. Due to the descriptive nature of the Japanese language, these terms often represent complex sets of characteristics that are difficult to define and translate unambiguously.

Chapter two presents the origins of Japanese ceramic crafts, tracing their development from the earliest forms of production to the formation of regional traditions. The importance of ceramics in Japanese culture, their functional functions, and the external influences that influenced local techniques and aesthetics are discussed. Particular attention is paid to the main ceramic centers and their characteristic features, emphasizing regional variations and the role of local traditions in shaping styles and production technologies. The geographical, social, and historical factors that influenced the development of handicrafts in Japan are also highlighted.

Chapter three focuses on the situation in Japan before the Meiji Restoration. The author concisely outlines the Edo period – the period of the Tokugawa Shogunate – with particular emphasis on the political system and socio-economic conditions crucial to the development of crafts. It also describes Japan's first contacts with the Western world and the consequences of the isolationist policy.

Chapter four is devoted to Japan's great modernization, the Meiji period. It presents a picture of the changes that occurred in Japanese crafts during the country's intensive modernization. It analyzes the impact of Japan's opening to the West and the phenomenon of Japonisme on the development of applied arts. It also discusses the development of educational institutions, the redefinition of design, and its international promotion.

Chapter five focuses on the revival of traditional crafts in Japan in the 20th century, with particular emphasis on the Mingei concept, formulated by Sōetsu Yanagi. It analyzes the role of artistic associations supporting the development of handicrafts and introduces the concept of the Living National Treasures. It also presents profiles of selected artists whose work played a significant role in preserving Japan's cultural heritage.

The final chapter focuses on contemporary Japanese design, its evolution, and its international presentation. Particular attention is paid to the work of Kenya Hara and Naoto Fukasawa, who represent a modern approach to design. A subchapter discusses selected domestic and international exhibitions that play a key role in shaping Japan's image as a country with a rich craftsmanship tradition and an innovative approach to design.

This dissertation attempts to answer the following questions: What artistic, social, economic, and political factors have influenced the evolution of Japanese crafts and design from the Meiji period to the present? How have Japanese handicraft traditions—especially ceramics—shaped the contemporary understanding of Japanese design and its cultural identity? How has the perception of the relationship between art and craftsmanship in Japanese aesthetics evolved? What cultural and aesthetic narratives dominate the presentation of Japanese crafts and design in national and international exhibitions? Have Western interpretations of Japanese aesthetics influenced the global image of Japan as a country with a "unique" cultural heritage and artistic achievements?

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