A Documentary Film Compendium on the Mingei (Japanese Folk Craft) Movement

Bernard Leach & Shoji Hamada 1934
Shoji Hamada at wheel, 1934
Masu Minagawa painting tea-pot

Climbing Kiln, Mashiko, 1934
Bernard Leach in Onda, 1954
Sakuma Workshop, 1937

Bernard Leach, 1971
Hamada at wheel, 1971
Soetsu Yanagi & Bernard Leach

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Proposal for a Documentary Film Compendium on the Mingei (Japanese Folk Craft) Movement

Over the past 35 years, as a professional filmmaker, I have collected films and unedited film footage documenting the life of British artist-craftsman Bernard Leach and the origins of the Mingei (Folk Craft) Movement in Japan, which remains of enduring influence to this day.

These films present the Mingei Movement from its beginnings and follow the careers of Leach and such seminal Japanese figures as philosopher Soetsu Yanagi and potter Shoji Hamada. The collection includes some early independent films and very significant unseen footage. I am working to restore and enhance these films and to create a comprehensive DVD Boxed Set covering more than half a century in the development of this exceptional artistic and cultural movement.

The films show what Leach, Yanagi and Hamada were actually seeing and writing about, from early in the last century, as they developed ideas that changed the direction of hand craftsmanship.

The complete work will be the definitive audio-visual media resource on the history of Japanese traditional pottery-making. It will chart the development of the core ideas of the Mingei Movement, and trace its roots in Japanese Buddhist philosophy.

The fragile and singular films in this collection will be archivally preserved and made available on DVD and on an interactive digital platform. I plan to transfer the films – most of which have never been shown in public – to high-definition video and to produce a comprehensive audio-video collection for craftspeople, collectors, students, historians and the general public.

This project requires funds for completion. I am seeking to raise a total of $250,000. to preserve, assemble, and release these crucial film and audio archives.

The boxed set will include four DVDs containing five hours of films accompanied by a booklet of essays on the films and transcripts of new and archival interviews.

Patrons and participating organizations will receive acknowledgment on the final work, as well as complimentary copies of the completed DVD box set.

The following films and new audio-visual materials will be included:

- **Trip to Japan**, filmed by Bernard Leach, 1934-35
- **Mashiko Village Pottery, Japan 1937**, produced by Kokusai Bunka Shinkokai
- **Bernard Leach visit to Mills College, California 1950**
- **Shoji Hamada at Scripps College, California, 1952**
- **The Leach Pottery, 1952**
- **Onda Pottery, 1954 & Onda Village Potters, 1956**
- **Bernard Leach Visit to New Zealand, 1966**
- **Potters at Work, 1976** by Marty Gross
- **The Art of the Potter (1971)**, by David Outerbridge and Sidney Reichman
- **Exclusive Video Interview by Marty Gross with Mihoko Okamura, D.T. Suzuki’s former secretary + new interviews on the relevance of the Mingei idea today**
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Ryuzaburo Shikiba, first Leach biographer with Masu Minagawa and Hamada, 1934

Shoji Hamada, Mashiko 1971
On the Mingei Movement

The artistic and philosophical concepts of the Mingei Movement, founded in 1926, have had a profound impact on arts and crafts worldwide through the works and writings of its three central figures: Soetsu Yanagi, Bernard Leach and Shoji Hamada.

Much has been written about this intellectual and artistic movement, though controversial in some circles, its influence remains irrefutable. The purpose of this project is not to take sides in a debate, but to assemble and present this legacy of ideas on craftsmanship in moving picture form; to bring alive through films and interviews the period of discovery and development of the Mingei philosophy.

At the International Conference of Craftsmen in Pottery and Textiles at Dartington Hall, in the United Kingdom, (1952) Mingei’s founding member Soetsu Yanagi said:

“All movements of art tend to the pursuit of novelty, but the essence of beauty ought to exist in that which has been liberated from the distinction of the new and the old.

Rather than attribute it to the personal ability of the potters, we are to conclude that their environments protected and assisted them. The long tradition behind them, the abundant natural resources, the repetition of work needed for producing in large numbers, the objective of making articles for daily use – all these factors collaborated to protect and develop their work….to the craftsman, tradition is the saviour and benefactor.”

Will it not be possible to say that all beautiful work is the work done by work itself? “

At a UNESCO Conference in the 1960s called Potters Voices, East and West, Bernard Leach stated:

“…pottery was a vocation in which we sought truth of contemporary expression as artists and as craftsmen, inheriting traditions not only from our respective native backgrounds but also from the other side of the world….We saw new possibilities of shape, pattern and glaze in good traditions of hand craft still extant in Japan, mainly in the country potteries….. the background of Zen and Tea provided a highly developed perceptivity of truth and beauty, and there was no hard line between the arts and the crafts.”

Shoji Hamada wrote in Kogei Magazine (1931):

….the piece achieves its beauty irrespective of the conscious aims of the maker. Usually the craftsman sets out to produce a particular effect and is pleased or displeased with the final result, depending on how near the work comes to his original intention. In fact, the essence of the true quality of the work lies somewhere else, and his conscious efforts to achieve this quality make little difference.
Images from Trip to Japan, filmed by Bernard Leach, 1934-35

Coiling Large Water Jar, Futagawa, 1934

Hamada Pottery Workshop and Home

Masu Minagawa decorating Mashiko teapots

Making clay in Kitagoya, Mashiko

Hamada and Leach pots, Mashiko 1934

Shoji Hamada directing Mashiko thrower
Bernard Leach, Shoji Hamada and Soetsu Yanagi – The Founders

Bernard Leach (1887-1979), Shoji Hamada (1894-1978) and Soetsu Yanagi (1889-1961) were key figures in the introduction of Japanese aesthetic culture to the world of modern craftsmanship and of the modern arts of the West to Japan. They were among the most significant voices in the world of craftsmanship in the 20th century.

In 1909 Bernard Leach set out for Japan intending to teach Western printmaking techniques. Instead he took up the study of pottery making. Returning to England in 1920, with his close friend Shoji Hamada, he founded the legendary Leach Pottery in St. Ives, Cornwall. Leach later became world-renowned through the publication of *A Potter’s Book*, (1940). Based on his encounters with artists, craftsmen and thinkers in Japan, this landmark work introduced ideas quite new to the West.

His influence on ceramic artists around the world was incontestable throughout his life and remains vibrant today. Whether one accepts or rejects his strong sensibility and standards, Leach is ever-present in discussions on meaning and purpose in crafts.

Shoji Hamada went on to become one of the most important artist-craftsmen of his era. Deeply influenced by the local crafts of Japan and Korea, with a firm scientific understanding of his materials and processes, Hamada embodied a renewed vitality in tradition-based craftsmanship. Working continuously over a long lifetime, Hamada was a paradigm for contemporary craftsmen and revered around the world.

The ceramic works of Leach and Hamada are as different as were the men themselves. In Leach we see thought and philosophy in action; in Hamada we find action and warmth in the very human and necessary activity of pot making.

Soetsu Yanagi was a philosopher, Buddhist aesthetician and critic and the central thinker of the Mingei Movement. The most prominent of his works in English is his collection of essays on Buddhist concepts of beauty, known as *The Unknown Craftsman* (1972).

Yanagi traveled widely in Japan and Korea, seeking objects that were, in his words “...born, not made.” He established the Japan Folk Craft Museum, creating a legacy for craftsmen seeking to invigorate the use of inherited knowledge as a source of direction for the future.

The towering figure in the introduction of Japanese art, culture and thought to the West in the 20th century was undoubtedly Daisetsu (D.T.) Suzuki. Yanagi, Hamada and Leach were directly affected by Suzuki, the man and the thinker. Consideration of the role of Suzuki’s teaching is of central importance to an understanding of the Mingei philosophy.
Daisetsu (D.T.) Suzuki and the Mingei Movement

The ideas behind the Mingei Movement were part of a wider intellectual exchange in the early part of the 20th century. Just as Eastern philosophy and aesthetics were being introduced to the West, European ideas of arts and design, as articulated by the Arts and Crafts Movement of John Ruskin, William Morris and Eric Gill, among others, were entering Japan.

The central Japanese figure in this exchange was Buddhist scholar Daisetsu Teitaro (D.T.) Suzuki, author of many books in English on Buddhism and Japanese culture; including Essays in Zen Buddhism (1927), Zen and Japanese Culture (1959) and Shin Buddhism (1970). Suzuki lived in America during the early part of the 20th century and travelled extensively throughout his long life, lecturing and engaging in dialogue with many of the most important artists and thinkers of his time.

His influence is widely acknowledged; no discussion of the position of Japan in the intellectual history of the 20th century can be complete without consideration of D.T. Suzuki. Undoubtedly one of the most significant figures of the last century, his important contributions include writings on Buddhist philosophy and the arts of Japan – writings that influenced artists worldwide.

The key members of the Mingei Movement felt Daisetsu Suzuki’s influence and friendship directly and unmistakably. In this film project we have had the unique opportunity to explore this legacy through an interview in Kyoto with Mihoko Okamura, Suzuki’s longtime assistant.

D.T. Suzuki and Soetsu Yanagi
This project will include several new video interviews with artists, craftsmen and thinkers. Of particular significance is our interview with Mihoko Okamura, who is central to the history of the Mingei Movement, having known directly most of its key figures.

Ms. Okamura was born in the United States in 1934. She was the personal assistant to D.T. Suzuki, from 1953 until his death in 1966.

During her long association with Dr. Suzuki, Mihoko Okamura came to know Bernard Leach, Shoji Hamada and Soetsu Yanagi, a younger colleague of Suzuki, who concentrated his thinking on Buddhist ideas of beauty.

This legacy, leading from Suzuki through Yanagi to the craftsmen themselves, has never been sufficiently examined.

After Suzuki’s death Bernard Leach, who did not read Japanese, requested Mihoko’s help in translating essays by Yanagi. He invited her to St. Ives on two occasions where they worked together on *The Unknown Craftsman* (1976) and the yet to be published *The Gate of Beauty*, Yanagi’s central work.

In 1973 she translated conversations between Leach and Hamada, for what was to become the text for the book *Hamada, Potter* by Leach, published in 1975.

My exclusive video interview with Mihoko Okamura took place on July 29th, 2013 at the Kanjiro Kawai Memorial Museum. For close to six hours we discussed the intellectual connection between Suzuki and the Mingei Movement. Though frequently interviewed by the Japanese media, this was the first extensive interview with Mihoko Okamura in English. As a direct link to the central figures, she provided unique and direct insight on the background of the Mingei Movement and the transmission of its central ideas.

I was introduced to Mihoko Okamura in 1975 by Bernard and Janet Leach and have remained in close contact with her ever since. She is now the only person able to speak in English about direct contact and collaboration with Leach, Hamada and Yanagi. It was my privilege to conduct this video interview at the Kawai Kanjiro House, the museum dedicated to the memory of Kanjiro Kawai, another of the founding members of the Mingei Movement.

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**Interview with Mihoko Okamura**

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Mihoko Okamura interview with Marty Gross
Kanjiro Kawai Memorial Museum, July 2013
Discovering a Film Legacy

In 1974, while doing research for my film *Potters at Work* (1976), I discovered a cache of films that must have provided Europeans with some of the first moving images of rural Japan and its crafts.

I had been re-reading the journals of Bernard Leach in *A Potter in Japan* (1960) and was astonished to find the following from 1934:

“*When I showed my film to the local potters one evening they roared with derisive laughter when they saw her (Masu Minagawa) on the screen and she, sitting amongst them, laughed too.*”

Bernard Leach made films in Japan in 1934? Where were they? Would he still have them?

With some trepidation, I phoned The Leach Pottery from Canada and had a brief conversation with his wife Janet Darnell Leach, who confirmed that they still had the films, but was not at all optimistic about what condition they might be in. I became more determined than ever to find out for myself.

As luck would have it, my first short film (*As We Are*, 1974, 30 minutes) was invited to the London Film Festival, providing an opportunity to call Janet Leach once again and propose a visit. She said simply that if I had time to waste on what might well be a lost cause, she’d welcome me.

Janet picked me up at the station and handed me a key to the small private office at the back of the world famous pottery showroom. Rusty old film cans were waiting in a neat pile. She and Bernard later told me they were quite relieved that I had shown up – they’d been wondering what to do with his films which had been sitting neglected for close to half a century.

I had brought along some film-viewing equipment from Canada and set to work. What I saw that day was clearly of historical importance. The shooting was not professional to be sure, but absolutely riveting. Leach had filmed throughout Japan in 1934-35. The people introduced in his writings were there – in motion. Here was Shoji Hamada at home and in his workshop, Kanjiro Kawai at work, Masu Minagawa painting teapots in Mashiko and much more. What is most important is that these films follow Leach’s very first visits to the pottery villages of rural Japan.

Additional reels contained brief glimpses of other crafts; on the final reel were scenes of visits to Hong Kong, Singapore and Korea in 1935.

The films were in very bad condition, severely shrunk, mouldy in sections. Many of the original handmade splices were falling apart; some sections were so fragile that I was forced to use a magnifying glass to look at frames one at a time. I was not at all confident that anything could be done.

During my several days examining the films, Janet made sure I had plenty of time to visit with Bernard Leach himself. He was almost blind by then and eager to reminisce. I had been to Japan only twice at that point but somehow managed to keep up the conversation. The DVD box set will include excerpts from the recordings taken when we met.
More surprises awaited me. Before I left St Ives after that first visit, Bernard and Janet decided to show me a box of other films collected over the years. In that box were The Leach Pottery, 1952 and a fine series of craft documentaries produced by Japan’s foreign cultural agency, Kokusai Bunka Shinkokai. One was the film Mashiko Village Pottery, Japan 1937. A remarkable historical document, this professionally made film follows the entire process of pottery manufacture at the workshop of Totaro Sakuma, the very workshop where Shoji Hamada had stayed when he first arrived in Mashiko.

Both films contain the only filmed record of the legendary teapot decorator Masu Minagawa of Mashiko, about whom Leach wrote:

“...{(she)...drew the patterns of an era elsewhere lost ... lightly and with amazing swiftness and impersonal beauty of traditional touch.”

The Japan Foundation, successor organization to the Kokusai Bunka Shinkokai, has kindly agreed to permit inclusion of this important film in this project.

Bernard Leach and Janet Darnell Leach passed along the extraordinary filmed legacy now in my possession. Back in Canada, I was fortunate to find several retired film technicians who had trained at the National Film Board of Canada and were experts in the then nascent art of film restoration. With the support of the Human Studies Film Archive of The Smithsonian Institution and Canada’s National Film Archive, I restored the films and sent one new 16mm print back to The Leach Pottery and to the supporting institutions in the United States and Canada where they are still held.

I am calling these films Trip to Japan, filmed by Bernard Leach, 1934-35.
The central work in this project will be the restoration and digital enhancement of the 1971 film *The Art of the Potter*.

American filmmakers David Outerbridge and Sidney Reichman made this very fine educational documentary in which they interview Bernard Leach in St. Ives and film Shoji Hamada at work in Mashiko.

In 2005 I contacted Mr. Outerbridge and Mr. Reichman to present my idea of restoring and re-releasing *The Art of the Potter*. A few years later, Mrs. Lilias Outerbridge, widow of David Outerbridge, along with Mr. Reichman made available almost ten hours of never-before-shown outtakes from *The Art of the Potter*, consisting of invaluable scenes of Hamada at work and Leach in a final interview. This unedited film material also shows important British potters such as William Marshall, John Bedding, Judy Gardner, Alan Brough and Trevor Corsor along with Japanese potter Shigeyoshi Ichino as well as others active at The Leach Pottery in 1970.

From the additional film footage, we will create a series of short films of interviews with Bernard Leach and Shoji Hamada at work. There is sufficient footage of Hamada’s workshop to cover all aspects of his working process and to show the many village craftsmen who worked at his side.
Images from The Art of the Potter, 1971

Bernard Leach with Seto Plate

Tamba potter, Shigeyoshi Ichino in St Ives

Shoji Hamada, decorating large charger

Bernard Leach discussing pots

William Marshall at The Leach Pottery

Shoji Hamada examining jar
Why Now?

After some years lying dormant and mostly abandoned, The Leach Pottery was revitalized as the Bernard Leach (St Ives) Trust Ltd in 2007 with the assistance of the Arts Council England and the Heritage Lottery Fund. The original property has been restored and expanded with new workshops and an exhibition space. A research centre, now being planned in an adjacent building, will house a library and study rooms for students and researchers. This research centre will also provide online access to films, recordings and documents from other organizations including the St. Ives Archive Study Centre, Dartington Hall Trust and the Crafts Study Centre in Farnham in the East of England.

In Japan, the Nippon Mingei Kan – the Japan Folk Craft Museum – is the most important repository for works of the Mingei Movement. It remains a vibrant institution, exhibiting and preserving key collections and works of its founders.

Neither The Leach Pottery nor the Japan Folk Craft Museum has any filmed materials related to their origins and the lives of their founders. The successful completion of this project will provide both organizations, as well as researchers, craftspeople, students and the general public, with a rich legacy.

There are still people in Great Britain, America and Japan with direct knowledge of the history of this important period of intellectual and artistic exchange. It is vital that we consult them and record their histories.

Hamada throwing, filmed by Bernard Leach, 1934
The Leach Pottery, 1952 (DVD 2008)

In 2008 I completed the first DVD Edition of The Leach Pottery, 1952 and have recently completed versions in English and in Japanese.

A selection of reviews:

In this restoration, MacKenzie’s excellent voiceover commentary helps explain the workings – artistic, personal, economic – of the pottery, and helps make the film a happy discovery. It turns basic footage shot without sound into an engaging guide to one of the most important sites in modern ceramics.

Robert Silberman, American Craft Magazine

The film, along with MacKenzie’s narration, gives viewers both a sense of life at The Leach Pottery, and a much more personal view on what St. Ives and the Leach philosophy meant to the budding studio pottery movement in the U.S. This is one of the film’s strengths; it takes the abstract idea of Leach’s legacy and makes it specific and personal.

Jessica Knapp, Ceramics Monthly, USA

This DVD and booklet is a delightful package of rare and historic material. I can’t recommend it enough…. I don’t tire of watching the seemingly casual order of a well-run studio: the easy skills, intelligent repetition. This is a small wonder we are observing.

Gwyn Hannsen Pigott
The Journal of Australian Ceramics

It is fascinating to hear Leach’s voice, but it is way he describes the process that is truly gripping….He is also lyrical, when the ‘clay sings silently in the centre of the wheel’, and surprising endearing when talking about the pleasure that pots should give both maker and buyer…. a compelling DVD, showing several aspects of a complex story in a single package.

Ian Howie
Ceramic Review, U.K.
English Language DVD released in 2008

Japanese subtitled DVD released in 2009
List Of Films Being Restored & Digitally Re-mastered

- *Trip to Japan, filmed by Bernard Leach, 1934-35* (70 minutes)
- *Mashiko Village Pottery, Japan 1937* (32 minutes) – with narration by Ryuji Sakuma, potter and grandson of Totaro Sakuma, recorded in 2014
- *Bernard Leach visit to San Francisco, 1950* (10 minutes)
- *Hamada at Scripps College, California 1950* (15 minutes)
- *Onda Pottery, 1954* with Bernard Leach and Soetsu Yanagi (16 minutes)
- *Onda Village Potters, 1956* by West Japan Film Co. Oita, Japan (15 minutes)
- *The Leach Pottery, 1952* (35 minutes), with separate commentary by Bernard Leach recorded in the 1960's and Warren MacKenzie, recorded in 2007
- *Bernard Leach Visit to New Zealand, 1966* (20 minutes)
- *Potters at Work, 1976* (26 minutes)
- *The Art of the Potter* (1971, 52 minutes)
  - with commentary by British potter John Bedditti and American potter Jeff Oestreich, recorded in St. Ives, 2014
  - also with Commentary by Masao Toyoda, craftsman at Hamada pottery for over 60 years; recorded in Mashiko, 2014
- *Out-takes from The Art of the Potter* – 9 hours of footage from which short educational documentaries are to be made.
- **New Interviews**
  Video interview with Mihoko Okamura, secretary to D. T. Suzuki, completed July 2013
  New interviews on the history and relevance of the Mingei idea today, to be decided.

With the new possibilities permitted by digital technology we are now able to edit all these diverse film elements into comprehensive works and disseminate them easily in multiple formats and languages.

I am fortunate to have been given the opportunity to preserve this important legacy and plan to use these film materials to present a definitive visual record of the era and its influences.

Marty Gross, January 2015
Sample Images from Restored Films

These images are taken from 16mm film frames of *Trip to Japan, by Bernard Leach 1934-35.*

The left shows the films after scanning and digital restoration to 2K video, on the right is the see the frames in their original condition.

The films are being transferred to 2K video at Frame Discreet in Toronto, Canada.
Images from Mashiko Village Pottery, Japan, 1937

Making Clay at Kitagoya, Mashiko

Wedging clay, Sakuma Workshop

Decorating Hibachi

Loading Kiln at Dai-sei Gama

Drying pots in front of Sakuma workshop

Making large water jar
Collaborating Organizations:

The Bernard Leach (St Ives) Trust Ltd.
Crafts Study Centre, University for the Creative Arts, Farnham
The Museum of Ceramic Art/New York
The Japan Traditional Cultures Foundation, Tokyo, Japan
Japan Folk Crafts Museum
The Mashiko Museum of Ceramic Art
Shoji Hamada Mashiko Sankokan Museum
The Japan Foundation
Gardiner Museum, Toronto, Canada

Sponsors:

Great Britain Sasakawa Foundation
Ceramica Stiftung, Basel, Switzerland
The Museum of Ceramic Art/New York
Warren MacKenzie, Potter and Nancy MacKenzie, Fibre Artist
Dr. Paul Griffith, Scholar
Dr. John Driscoll, Collector
Joan B. Mirviss
John Gillespie
Fumiko Toshi
Andreas Vagelatos

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