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"The Best of Japan"

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Synopsis

THE BEST OF JAPAN

Its folk art and folk art movement

By

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It is thirty years ago in Japan. The people of a small mountain village look curiously at three men who stroll with such obvious pleasure down the dusty road that winds through their village. They are an interesting sight. It is apparent they have come from some distant city, but on what strange errand, the villagers cannot guess. Their faces are good and kind, and the people view them only with wonder, for they wander in and out of the village shops, stopping to admire and often buy, the most ordinary household articles. The shopkeepers are amazed as these men admire pots and bowls that housewives buy simply for pickling radishes, or salting fish, or storing sugar. One villager tells them the old potter up in the hills makes dozens of them each day. The men immediately show signs of great interest and trudge into the wooded hills to seek out the old potter. Perhaps they do not even tell him who they are, but the potter must know he talks with men who understand his work well - perhaps even better than he himself, for they are Kanjiro Kawai and Shoji Hamada, two of Japan's foremost contemporary potters, and Soetsu Yanagi, art critic and director of Japan's Folk Art Museum.

Their search for folk craft in the remote villages of Japan began largely because of a talk they had one long winter night at Mt. Koya. They knew then that the folk crafts of Japan were gradually dying out. Looms were growing silent; smoke no longer darkened the skies above the kilns of the countryside. If someone didn't arouse the interest

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and concern of the Japanese people soon, perhaps it would be too late. Without a single hard-headed notion as to how to secure funds, these men decided then to work toward the establishment of a folk art museum.

With a sense of urgency and much enthusiasm, they recruited friends and scoured the countryside for handcrafts. They collected pottery, woodcarvings, bamboo baskets, raincoats, boots, brooms, pans, wine jugs and rugs - anything that contained elements of what they called "healthy beauty" (functional as well as beautiful in design.) The villages bulged with such craft, for no one had ever gone out to buy them before. And hidden in the debris of second hand shops were also wonderful specimens of folk art of the past.

It took time to educate a public that was apathetic to the unsigned work of unknown artisans and clamoring for porcelains of China and the work of artists of fame. The word "mingei" (people's art) was not even listed in the dictionaries of Japan. With books and articles, and the first formal exhibits of folk art, the public was gradually won over.

One day, a ^{person} Mr. Ohara (philanthropist and art lover) came to see Dr. Yanagi and suddenly announced, "I shall finance your folk art museum." With that, the long cherished hope took on substance, and Japan's first folk art museum was erected. Soetsu Yanagi became its director and it became the natural center for a group of craftsmen, scholars and friends of Japanese folk art.

Gradually, a folk art movement developed about this nucleus, and today it is a thriving organization with over twenty branches throughout Japan. Its major task is to develop leaders among the rural craftsmen to help sustain and improve the quality of folk crafts. "Craftsmen need leaders," says Yanagi, and there are several outstanding artists today who act in this capacity. Kahjiro Kawai and Shoji Hamada are

two of its influential potters.

"Behind the work of the hand, there is the heart," says Soetsu Yanagi, and much work of the heart and the spirit is apparent in the whole folk art movement. Its leaders are humble men who share a deep faith that some greater power (not specifically God or Buddha), directs their creative energies. "We do not work alone," says Kanjiro Kawai, "We are always helped." ... The influence of Zen Buddhism runs deep.

Soetsu Yanagi is one of the key figures of the Japanese folk art movement today. ~~(What are his thoughts on the following:)~~ "What is folk art?" ^{he asks} "What gives it its strength and beauty? What is the role of the individual artist in the realm of folk art? Can the machine and handcraft work together? What of the future of folk art?" ^{These questions have not yet been answered}

Much has happened since those early days when the three men collected folk craft for a museum that hadn't even been built. Today, there are ~~two other~~ ^{in Kurashiki} folk art museums besides the one first built in Tokyo. There are several thriving folk craft shops, and "mingei sections" exist in the larger department stores of almost every major Japanese city. The flow of handcraft from the small villages has continued far beyond the shops of Japan, and already much has come across the Pacific on exhibit, and in ^{the} shops of many cities in the United States.

With vast wisdom, the people of the folk art movement say, "If we make the best of truly traditional Japanese goods, they will be understood and appreciated anywhere in the world." And certainly, the truth and success of this statement has already been well borne out.