

# Andon 62



Society for Japanese Arts

# Andon 62

*Shedding light on Japanese art*

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## From the editor

*The essays submitted to the jury of the Heinz Kaempfer Essay Contest form a welcome addition to manuscripts offered to the editorial staff of Andon. This issue starts with a prize-winning essay by Peter Siegenthaler about the place of Japan's 'living national treasures' in post-war Japanese society. Mr Siegenthaler discusses the evolution of the ningen kokuhō until the present time and wonders if the institution should not be thoroughly revalued.*

*For those who collect modern Japanese prints Helen Merritt is a well-known scholar. Personally I have consulted her book Modern Japanese woodblock prints: the early years, published in 1990, many times, and we are glad she has contributed an essay dealing with an underestimated artist, Watanabe Seitei, who lived in very interesting times.*

*Andon also tries to be a forum for scholars and collectors and we welcome the letter from Peter Ujlaki commenting on John Fiorillo's lead article in Andon 59. He offers some fundamental objections, and his letter is followed by John Fiorillo's response.*

*Next is a very personal contribution by one of our older members, Gerrit-Jan Korteling, who not only shows why he likes the tsuba shown on the front cover, but who has also found the relevant data connected with this artefact.*

*We conclude with a number of interesting and varied book reviews. We aim at quality and variety in Andon and we hope that this issue will stimulate some of you to send us articles, so that you can share your passion with our readers.*

evdi, June 1999



# The *ningen kokuhō*: a new symbol for the Japanese nation

Peter Siegenthaler

## Introduction

Exemplars of one of the most resonant and influential cultural institutions to come into being in postwar Japan, the *ningen kokuhō*, Japan's living national treasures, have been at the center of the nation's cultural life for more than four decades. Craftspeople selected by the government and charged with preserving and passing on to later generations the country's most fundamental craft traditions, they are practitioners of the ceramic arts and fabric-making, *Nō*, kabuki, and regional forms of singing, among many other arts. Since the first recognition of the *ningen kokuhō* in 1955, the living national treasures have held a unique place in the Japanese sense of national identity, as well as playing a significant role in the formation of the images foreigners hold of the 'true' Japan. They have served as well as an antidote to many of the other images foreigners - and some Japanese - have of the country: of the aggressive business combine, the dutiful *sararīman*, the technology pioneer, and the strident ultranationalist.

At first glance, creation of the institution of the *ningen kokuhō* may seem little more than a simple expression of the depth of value the Japanese assign to their traditional crafts. Closer examination of the context in which the award was created and received, however, shows the honor to carry significant symbolic weight. The title not only gives recognition to the recipients both within the country and abroad, but as a national award it contributes to the nation's self-definition. By the choice of professions for commendation, the style of veneration offered to their members, and the language used to describe their achievements, the award tells us much about the people who created the honor, the society in which they lived, and the culture they wanted to see around them.

In Bourdieu's phrase, symbols are "the instruments par excellence" of social integration (Bourdieu 1991, 166). Drawing on Anderson's (1991) definition of the nation as an "imagined

community," Kertzer (1988) has gone as far as to assert that "the nation itself has no palpable existence outside the symbolism through which it is envisioned." In developed countries, Kertzer adds, that symbolism must take tangible form to be appreciated by the nation's people: "Living in a society that extends well beyond our direct observation, we can relate to the larger political entity only through abstract symbolic means" (Kertzer 1988, 6, 8). Wrong attributes the need for symbols to the characteristics of the process of the "formation of social identities": "such larger and more remote social aggregates as churches, social classes, social movements, ethnic groups and nations... may be represented primarily by symbols to which strong sentiments become attached" (Wrong 1994, 229). One intention of the present research is to explore the varieties of 'strong sentiments' that affected the establishment of the national institution of the *ningen kokuhō* in the first years after Japan's 1945 defeat.

A number of scholars have explored what Ehrentraut refers to as "the problem of agency in the production of culture" (Ehrentraut 1995, 218), and Wallerstein recognizes in particular the way in which the state, "as the major mechanism of allocating social income," sees that "a particular past, a heritage is institutionalized" (Wallerstein 1991, 98). Ehrentraut's work (1995) focuses on re-imaginings of the country's past as seen in Japanese reconstructions of its architectural heritage. Following his lead, however, we may explore similar issues concerning the construction of tradition and the establishment of the institution of the *ningen kokuhō*, recognized for their achievements as practitioners of what the government terms "traditional" crafts (Monbushō 1995, chap. 9, sec. 5.5.1; Bunkazai Hogo Inkai 1962, 41-2). The present research asks why the institution of the *ningen kokuhō* arose at its particular time in Japanese history, whether it came into being to address certain cultural problems - and, perhaps, to distract attention from other



problems. It asks what precedents existed for the institution and how those precedents are reflected in the new manifestation. And it asks how this formulation of Japanese cultural values has changed over the years, as the country recovered from the damage of the war and rebuilt itself from the ashes, becoming one of the premier economic powers of its time.

### **The *ningen kokuhō*: an outline of the program**

Official recognition of the *ningen kokuhō*, the living national treasures, is provided for under an amendment to the Law for the Protection of Cultural Properties (*Bunkazai Hogohō*; law no. 214), which was passed by the Japanese Diet on 30 May 1950. The law itself states that its purpose is “to preserve and utilize cultural properties, so that the culture of the Japanese people may be furthered and a contribution be made to world cultural understanding” (Bunkazai Hogo Iinkai 1962, 58). The 1950 law established the National Commission for Protection of Cultural Properties (Bunkazai Hogo Iinkai), assigned its duties and powers, defined a number of types of cultural assets or properties for protection, and set out procedures for the designation, custody, and protection of cultural properties (Bunkazai Hogo Iinkai 1962, 4–9). Many of the best-known artifacts of Japanese painting, sculpture, and historical and religious architecture are among the objects designated cultural properties of one classification or another as provided for in the 1950 law (Monbushō 1995, chap. 9, sec. 5.2.1).

In 1968 responsibility for the designation of cultural properties was passed to the newly created Agency for Cultural Affairs (Bunkachō), which acts under the auspices of the Monbushō, the Ministry of Education, Science, Sports and Culture (Shikaumi 1970, 10). All designations of cultural properties are made “on the basis of submissions to and recommendations by” the Council for the Protection of Cultural Properties (Bunkazai Hogo Shingikai) (Monbushō 1995, chap. 9, sec. 5.1). The council is a committee of private citizens appointed by the Agency for Cultural Affairs (Adachi 1983, 61) and “made up of experts in the field, including scholars, craftsmen, critics, museum directors, and the like” (Ogawa 1968, xx).

For the first time in Japanese history (Bunkazai Hogo Iinkai 1962, 3), the terms of the 1950 Law for the Protection of Cultural Properties also “made [it] possible for intangible cultural properties [*mukei bunkazai*] to be protected by the State”

(Bunkazai Hogo Iinkai 1962, 42). Under the law, intangible cultural properties are conceived of as “intangible cultural products materialized through such human behaviours as drama, music, dance and applied arts” (Bunkazai Hogo Iinkai 1962, 41). The “art and skill employed” in dramatic and musical forms, dances, and techniques of applied arts, among other creative genres, are recognized as intangible cultural properties based on a determination by the commission that they have “a high historical or artistic value” (Bunkazai Hogo Iinkai 1962, 4). In the first three years after the law was put into effect, a nationwide survey was carried out to identify “performance and applied art traditions that were felt to be both worthy of preservation and in danger of being lost” (Faulkner 1995, 13). In 1954 the original law was extended “to cover traditional practices that were not necessarily in danger of extinction” but were nevertheless highly valued for historical or artistic reasons (Faulkner 1995, 13).

Thus, among the theatrical arts a group of “traditional items... which have been developed and handed down from olden times” (Bunkazai Hogo Iinkai 1962, 41) were among the first performance genres selected for protection. Nō drama, kabuki dance-drama, the *bunraku* puppet plays, and the court music and dance called *gagaku* are among those genres so designated. Techniques of applied arts were similarly recognized, based on a determination that valued the “peculiarly Japanese and traditional” (Bunkazai Hogo Iinkai 1962, 41–2) more highly for protection. Various genres of ceramic, textile, and lacquerware production, metalworking, and dollmaking, among other activities, have also been recognized as intangible cultural properties.

In 1954 the original Law for the Protection of Cultural Properties was amended to create a system for designating persons or groups of persons skilled in the practice of intangible cultural properties. It is these officially designated individuals who are popularly known as *ningen kokuhō*, Japan’s living national treasures (Harada 1983, 15). The designated persons or groups, however, are referred to officially as “holders” or “holding bodies” of intangible cultural properties (*mukei bunkazai hojisha*) (Bunkazai Hogo Iinkai 1962, 42; Adachi 1983, 60), the recognition meant to “enable them to polish their skills still further and train successors to carry on the tradition” in which they excel (Monbushō 1995, chap. 9, sec. 5.5.1). As with the designations of intangible cultural properties, designations of holders or holding





**Imaizumi Imaemon XIII (appointed 1989).**  
**Octagonal porcelain dish with Nabeshima-style**  
**decoration in underglaze blue and overglaze**  
**enamels. c.1980.** Courtesy of the trustees of the  
V&A. Photographer: Ian Thomas.



bodies are made on the basis of recommendations of the Council for the Protection of Cultural Properties. Proposals are investigated by a “committee of examining experts” knowledgeable about the particular artistic genre, with each of the fifteen members of the committee appointed by the education ministry to a two-year term. The final choice of candidates is presented by the Minister of Education to the full cabinet for approval, usually annually, the announcement being made in early spring. Because it is given by the national government, the award is a national honor (Adachi 1983, 60–1). The law governing the protection of intangible cultural properties was most recently revised in 1996, but its central tenets remain in force (Monbushō 1997).

The first thirty-one holders of intangible cultural properties were appointed on 15 February 1955 (Adachi 1983, 60). Other properties have since been designated, and a handful of holders, either to replace craftspeople who have died or as representatives of newly added properties, are honored each year (Adachi 1983, 61). As of April 1997, eighty-three individuals and twenty-four groups were designated as holders of intangible cultural properties (Monbushō 1997). The designation as a holder of an intangible cultural property is said to “carr[y] with it responsibilities as well as distinction and acclaim” (Adachi 1978, 42). The recipient is given a “modest” yearly stipend (Havens 1987, 338), currently about 2 million yen (United States Army 1991), and additional funds for the training of successors in the craft (Monbushō 1995, chap. 9, sec. 5.5.1). The recipient is “expected to find and train apprentices and successors” and to play a public role in transmitting the craft knowledge to scholars, other practitioners, and the public at large. The honor may not be inherited or passed on to a successor, but apprentices or students of honorees may receive the award in their own right (Adachi 1983, 61).

With a 1975 revision of the Law for the Protection of Cultural Properties, a separate category of intangible properties, intangible folk cultural properties (*mukei minzoku bunkazai*), was created as a means of recognizing and preserving “the traditional events and practices (and the objects and structures associated with them) that are essential to understanding how life in Japan has changed over time” (Thornbury 1994, 212). These intangible folk cultural properties are held by groups (for example, performance troupes) and not by individuals, and so are distinct from the *mukei*

*bunkazai hojisha*. However, various prefectural and local governments present awards that are similar to the award of holder of an intangible cultural property, and so some confusion between the national designees and local ones may occur (Adachi 1983, 61).

### The *ningen nokuhō*: primary issues

One of the hallmarks of the Law for the Protection of Cultural Properties is its stated emphasis on the skills used in traditional crafts, and its relative lack of regard for the persons possessing those skills. This aspect of the law has few equals either within the laws of Japan that concern culture or in the laws of other nations. Such an emphasis was unique at the time of the law’s writing (Hashimoto 1998, 36), and today only the Republic of Korea’s Cultural Asset Preservation Act (*Munhwajae Pohobop*), enacted in 1963, bears any strong resemblance to the Japanese law. The framers of the Korean law appear to have drawn directly for its terminology on the Japanese scheme of “intangible cultural properties” (in Korean, *muhyong munhwajae*) and their “holders” (*poyuja*) (Kim 1976, 17, 32–5; Howard 1995, 4).

Within Japan, a number of government programs establish provisions for recognition of artists and craftspeople as individuals. While government publications concerning the holders of intangible cultural properties are careful to acknowledge the imprecision of the title “living national treasure,” avoiding its use altogether (Bunkazai Hogo Iinkai 1962; Monbushō 1996) or prefacing the phrase with “so-called” (Monbushō 1995, chap. 9, sec. 5.5.1), receipt of the Order of Merit, the Person of Cultural Merit system, and appointment to the Japan Art Academy are described by the education ministry as three of the mechanisms by which “outstanding artists” are given recognition for their achievements in the fine arts (Monbushō 1995, chap. 9, sec. 2.2.2). The Academy of Arts Award has been described as “the highest prize of honour for arts... the Emperor, the Prime Minister, and the Minister of Education being present at the prize-giving ceremony” (Shikaumi 1970, 36). Since 1949 the government has organized the annual National Arts Festival, which “continues to confer nonpareil prestige on those who take part” (Havens 1987, 335). Within the world of crafts production, emphasis is placed on individual membership in professional associations and the individual’s submission of works to juried shows (Faulkner 1995, 13–15).





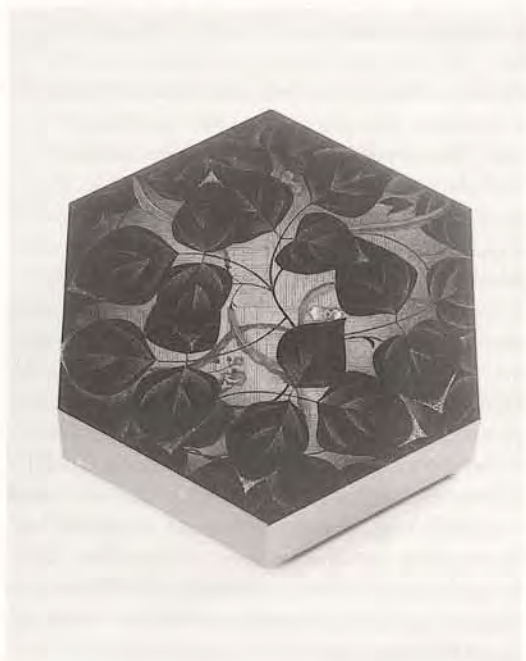
**Suzuki Osamu (appointed 1994). Stoneware fresh-water jar with resist-applied Shino-type glaze over iron slip. 1989.** Courtesy of the trustees of the V&A. Photographer: Ian Thomas.

**Fujimoto Yoshimichi (appointed 1986). Porcelain box with underglaze and overglaze decoration. 1983.** Courtesy of the trustees of the V&A. Photographer: Ian Thomas.



**Matsui Kōsei (appointed 1993). Stoneware jar with marbled (*neriage*) patterning. 1988.** Courtesy of the trustees of the V&A. Photographer: Ian Thomas.

**Taguchi Yoshikuni (appointed 1989). 'Bean Field,' hexagonal box of lacquered wood with *maki-e* (sprinkled picture), mother-of-pearl, and metal foil decoration. 1978.** Courtesy of the trustees of the V&A. Photographer: Ian Thomas.





The term *ningen kokuhō* is said to have been applied by the Japanese public in 1955 to the first persons recognized as holders of intangible cultural properties and has been used widely if unofficially since that time (Ogawa 1968, xx). Adachi notes the conflict that use of the term provokes with the intentions of the award: the term *ningen kokuhō* has been used since 1955 “despite protestations on the part of the Ministry of Education and the designees themselves that the program is designed not to honor individuals, but to ensure that certain traditional crafts will be transmitted for future generations” (Adachi 1983, 60).

A Japanese scholar writing on the topic of the *ningen kokuhō* commends the law’s achievement in recognizing intangible skills over the craftsperson’s individuality. Fukuda suggests that the *ningen kokuhō* share the experience of having “annihilated themselves in their service to material things, controlling whatever selfish feelings they may have had and devoting themselves to bringing out the spirit in the objects they have created” (Fukuda 1968, ix). Moreover, he dismisses the concerns of many observers (see, for example, Harada 1983, 14), whose motivation for preserving handicraft techniques stems from either “nostalgia for the more leisurely and non-mechanical past [or] the desire to perpetuate an anachronism,” and instead sees the promotion of a social agenda in support of the handmade object. Recognition by both maker and user of the spirit residing in the object, Fukuda writes, “is the only way to restore the man-to-man relationship that should exist between maker and user by way of the created object” (Fukuda 1968, ix).

Ogawa, on the other hand, accepts the term *ningen kokuhō* as a true designation of the craftsperson’s role: “The Japanese public... has little patience with the stilted language of bureaucracy and, by analogy with those works of art and architecture which are officially designated as ‘national treasures’, has long since taken to calling these respected men and women ‘living national treasures’. And that, of course, is exactly what they are” (Ogawa 1968, xx). In general agreement with Ogawa regarding the propensity of the Japanese public to focus attention on individual artists, an American academic assumes a more critical tone. Havens cites a “habit of avoiding confrontation and criticism,” which he sees as “deeply embedded” in the Japanese social structure, as the spur for recognition of individuals in public life. Discussing the conservatism of Japanese audiences in relation to contemporary art, Havens argues that “the

public’s preoccupation with famous names... is at least as tyrannical as bureaucratism” in narrowing the selection of artworks available for viewing. He suggests that conservative tendencies on the part of audiences and exhibition organizers focus attention on artists’ individual personalities and creations, reinforcing one another and creating a climate in which only shows that feature well-known artists are presented (Havens 1987, 345-6). Moeran’s (1990) own experiences in the Japanese craft world echo Havens’ assertions.

### The immediate context for the 1950 law

The most common explanation for the passage of the 1950 Law for the Preservation of Cultural Properties concerns threats to the country’s cultural inheritance in the years after the end of the Second World War. The final months of the war were devastating for Japan: its cities were firebombed, its people displaced, its industry destroyed. Raids by American bombers on the Japanese main islands began soon after the fall of Saipan in July 1944, and the raids on Tokyo in one night, 9-10 March 1945, killed more than 100,000 people. Other cities were also heavily damaged by carpet firebombing, with large loss of life and property. Summing up the situation, one Japanese observer has written in retrospect: “In 1945...the country was reduced to ashes and desolation prevailed among the people” (Shikaumi 1970, 31).

Despite the end of the conflict, the immediate postwar period also held threats for the preservation of cultural artifacts. Members of the government and private citizens alike feared that buildings and works of art that had escaped the war might not survive the peace. Cultural properties “which fortunately survived [the air raids] were left to deterioration and decay on account of financial difficulties and social unrest” among the Japanese people (Bunkazai Hogo Iinkai 1962, 3). The 1949 destruction by fire of the wall paintings in the main hall of Hōryūji Temple, in Nara prefecture, is cited as the immediate impetus for “a rapid growth of popular concern” (Shikaumi 1970, 20) regarding protection of cultural treasures, concern that resulted in the passage of the 1950 law (Bunkazai Hogo Iinkai 1962, 22).

Government policies had existed to encourage the protection of cultural treasures since shortly after the Meiji Restoration in 1868. In the eighty or so years prior to the passage of the 1950 law, legislation governing cultural properties was at least as concerned with discouraging (or



preventing) the export of culturally valuable objects as it was with the preservation of objects that remained in the country (Bunkazai Hogo Iinkai 1962, 3). As early as 1871, the government had “proclaimed that important old works of art should be protected and that the names and possessors of such works should be reported to the nation” (Harada 1983, 14). The first legislation successful in governing the protection of cultural objects was the Law for the Preservation of Ancient Shrines and Temples, enacted in 1897 and using for the first time the term *kokuhō* to designate important works as cultural treasures (Guth 1993, 163). That law was replaced in 1929 by the Preservation of National Treasures Law (*Kokuhō Hozonhō*) (Adachi 1983, 60), which “extended protection formerly limited to possessions of shrines and temples to buildings and works of fine and applied arts in general” (Harada 1983, 14). A law passed in 1933 “prescrib[ed] the indispensability of permission of the Minister of Education for the exportation” of such objects (Bunkazai Hogo Iinkai 1962, 3). All existing laws governing cultural protection were “unified” under the stipulations of the 1950 law (Harada 1983, 14). Programs to promote the production of crafts for export were instituted in Japan in the late nineteenth century (Fischer 1994, 9–10), but the decision to protect traditional crafts by means of a system of honors to recognize skilled craftspeople appears to have a much longer history. While Graves (1972, 370), without providing a citation to support the assertion, attributes its inclusion in the 1950 law to the influence of general Douglas MacArthur, Adachi, a longtime student of Japan’s crafts traditions and of government efforts to support them, traces the practice as far back as policies of the feudal Tokugawa regime (Adachi 1978, 41). Adachi’s view is echoed by Harada, who cites the “patronage of the ruling classes, namely the Imperial court, the nobility, and the samurai class, as well as religious establishments” as responsible for the support of craftspeople before the arrival of the modern age (Harada 1983, 14). Following the lead of Seidel (1981), who locates the institution of the *ningen kokuhō* in the earliest eras of Japan’s Confucian past, Pimpaneau finds that their recognition is “part and parcel of a very long tradition of conservation... [directed] towards a cultural identity... embodied in objects or people” (Pimpaneau 1997, 7). The emphasis of the Law for the Protection of Cultural Properties on the preservation of handicraft skills is one of its most widely known

and highly respected aspects, but the origin of the distinction between a recognition of (intangible) skills and a celebration of the individual craftsperson is not clear. Japanese respect for the craftsperson as a vital part of the sustenance of the culture has a long history (Cort 1978, 38), but the philosophical underpinnings of a distinction between the body of the craftsperson and the intangible skills he or she holds within it appears to be a more recent development.

Influential in the drafting of the 1950 law appears to be the fully formed philosophy of *mingei* (literally, ‘popular craft’) which was developed and popularized by Yanagi Muneyoshi (also known as Yanagi Sōetsu) and his colleagues in the Japanese Folk Craft movement. Yanagi began his studies of folk crafts in the 1920s, and he went on to play a role in the formation of a number of influential folk crafts institutions, including the Korean Folk Art Gallery (Chōsen Minzoku Bijutsukan) in Seoul, the Japan Folk Craft Association (Nihon Mingei Kyōkai), and Tokyo’s Japan Folk Craft Museum (Nihon Mingeikan) (Moeran 1984, 9-27). One of the foundation stones of *mingei* theory is the belief that the aesthetic qualities of folk craft are achieved precisely because the objects are produced in an atmosphere of anonymity. Moeran provides an apt summary of Yanagi’s philosophy in this regard:

Yanagi argued that *mingei* was characterized by tradition and not by individuality. Art should not be associated with the individual creator; it should be unassuming, the work of “non-individuality.” ...[I]t was precisely because [the craftsmen] had worked together over the centuries, patiently, with humility, using methods of trial and error in an “abandonment of egoism and pride,” that their work had great aesthetic value (Moeran 1984, 14).

The connection between this aspect of Yanagi’s theory of *mingei* and the institution of the holders of intangible cultural properties is rarely made explicit. Yet a number of the craftspeople first recognized as holders of intangible cultural properties, including Hamada Shōji and Kawai Kanjirō, were colleagues of Yanagi and active in the Folk Craft movement (Moeran 1984, 14). Although successful and greatly influential over many years, the Japanese Folk Craft movement was subject to extensive internal division (Moeran 1984, 16-7). In this light, reticence regarding the connections between *mingei* theory and postwar legislation concerning crafts protection may be seen as an attempt to maintain neutrality in those disputes.





**Shimura Fukumi (appointed 1990). 'Ise', plain-weave *tsumugi* (hand-spun floss) silk kimono. 1988.** Courtesy of the trustees of the V&A.  
Photographer: Ian Thomas.



### The *ningen kokuhō* as a national symbol

At its most elemental, the establishment of the institution of Japan's *ningen kokuhō* was an effort to protect and maintain the country's unique craft traditions against the onslaught of the mechanized production of household items (Harada 1983, 14). Justification for a concern for handicrafts has been extended to the "peril" into which Japanese aesthetic life had been placed by industrialization (Ogawa 1968, xix–xx) and the importance of handicrafts in fostering larger patterns of civil interaction within the society (Fukuda 1968, ix–x). Government institutions, however, may have influence far beyond the particular field of activity in which they most often act. In the context of postwar Japan, the role of the symbolic was of more profound importance than at any other time in the country's recent past (Gluck 1990). The symbolic nature of the institution of the *ningen kokuhō* was an active presence in the cultural life of the early years of the postwar period.

A central way in which the government's emphasis on folk crafts and folk culture played a role in national life was in the formation of a new symbol for the nation to replace the emperor and the imperial house, rendered unacceptable by their perceived responsibility for the conduct of the war. Reference has already been made here to the material and spiritual conditions of postwar Japan. On one level, acceptance of the craftspeople as a symbol for the nation has been seen as a part of the psychological dynamics of the postwar period, resolution of "a psychological need for the stability that a strong sense of cultural identity could provide" (Faulkner 1995, 13). Focusing directly on the nation's symbolic life, Gluck points to a break in the maintenance of symbolic forms by identifying a "postwar principle of discontinuity" (Gluck 1990, 10) that mandated the rejection of institutions, persons, and ideas that had national prevalence before or during the war. Such a discontinuity led to what Befu terms a "symbolic vacuum" (Befu, quoted in Ehrentraut 1995, 220), which itself prompted a "public and private search for untainted national symbols" in the early postwar years (Ehrentraut 1995, 220).

The importance of drawing on a store of existing symbols when looking to establish a new symbolic order has been recognized in many contexts (Connerton 1989; Kertzer 1988). As mentioned above, support for craftspeople and patrons' interest in their productions was well-established in Japan long before the arrival of the modern age in

the mid-nineteenth century. Such a respect was developed and popularized by the efforts of Yanagi and the Japanese Folk Craft movement in the early decades of the twentieth century. Moreover, Yanagi himself, and the folk craft movement more generally, despite the possibility that the movement's philosophy might contain a form of cultural nationalism that would be in keeping with the dominant ideology of the war years, were not a part of "Japan's stigmatized national identity" (Ehrentraut 1995, 220) in the years following the country's defeat. On the contrary, Yanagi was long at odds with the Japanese government over his support of indigenous Korean crafts. Beginning in 1919, Yanagi published a number of papers in praise of Korean culture and "despite being harassed by the [colonial] police... persisted in his praise of Korean things" (Moeran 1984, 13). While observers of the *ningen kokuhō* acknowledge that most of the designees carry out their creative work in the environs of Tokyo or other large cities (see, for example, Adachi 1978, Graves 1972), an association is commonly made between the craftspeople and rural life. A number of scholars have seen a relationship between the ideas of the Folk Craft movement and the agrarianism (*nōhonshugi*) that held sway before the outbreak of war in 1937 (see Moeran 1984, 12). Regarding the *ningen kokuhō* themselves, numerous photo essays, such as the collections by Sugimura (1968) and Adachi (1973), present the craftspeople either within their rustic workshops or in rural settings. That a craftspeople recognized as a *ningen kokuhō* would look entirely out of place on a crowded Tokyo street corner remains as true today as it was when the program was first established more than forty years ago.

Use of the image of the craftspeople, with its associations of tradition and rurality, as a symbol for the nation is at odds with what a number of observers (e.g., Kelly 1990; Robertson 1991, 22) have seen as the mood of the Japanese people in the immediate postwar period. An ideal of rural life played a major part in the formation of ultranationalist ideology during the 1920s and 1930s (see the schema by Maruyama, describing the characteristics of Japanese fascism, cited in Wilson 1969, 139). Consequently, the first decade after the war's end saw a general denigration of the countryside as the "bastion of residual 'semifeudal' elements and superstitious customs that were antithetical to that which was 'modern' and 'democratic' and desirable" (Kelly 1990, 222). Within the decade following the selection of the



first *ningen kokuhō* by the education ministry, however, the search for an acceptable national symbol began to be “expressed in the ubiquitous promotion of *urusato*,” the “intensely emotional term” referring to a vision of the ancestral village and landscape (Ehrentraut 1995, 220). This “flush of rural nostalgia” reached its height in the 1970s and 1980s, but it persists even in the current decade (Kelly 1990, 222).

The establishment of the *ningen kokuhō* as a national symbol occurred at a time of political debates of great importance both within Japan and internationally. Japan in the immediate postwar years was characterized by disagreement over the practical and symbolic decisions of government at all levels. Koschmann (1982, 1996) presents the portrait of a time in which a profound ambivalence toward the project of modernity was played out widely in intellectual, popular, and government circles. Moreover, through the combined censorship of the American Occupation and the insistence of influential voices on the Japanese side, “explicit rejection of the recent Japanese past was virtually a condition for participation in intellectual discourse” (Koschmann 1982, 612). Prime minister Yoshida, the dominant figure of Japanese politics in the immediate postwar period, commented famously that while the country was not physically divided after the end of the war, as was Korea, “a ‘thirty-eighth parallel’ divided the populace” politically and ideologically. In this domestic context, the institution of the *ningen kokuhō* served indirectly in the promotion of the *bunka kokka* (cultural state), a term popularized in the early 1950s by Yoshida in his attempts to establish a single, universally acceptable national identity (Robertson 1991, 37).

In the international sphere, Japan’s role since the 1950s has been one of an explicit non-militarism. Article 9 of the postwar constitution states that “the Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right” and forbids the country from rearming. In the context of Gluck’s “postwar principle of discontinuity,” the country’s pacifism serves to reinforce a perception of a significant break in its conduct of international affairs. The so-called Yoshida Doctrine had as one of its prime tenets a position in international affairs that set Japan under the protection of the United States. In exchange for loyalty to the United States’ views internationally and the stationing of U.S. troops on its soil, Japan received guarantees of its security. The money that Japan would have spent on rebuilding its shattered military Yoshida was free

to allocate to the rebuilding of the nation’s economy. The prominence of the *ningen kokuhō*, with their simplicity, attention to detail, and sensitivity to the natural world, at just the time in which Yoshida was most under pressure to soften his doctrine and to take an active role in Cold war politics, supported a view of Japan internationally as peaceable, aesthetic, and nonmilitaristic.

#### **Contestation in the use of the *ningen kokuhō* as a symbol**

The extent to which symbols are used in the construction of national identity is matched only by the degree to which those national formulations are subject to contestation or manipulation by other actors in the social world to suit their own ends (Kertzer 1988, 178–9). Building on the work of Burridge and Gramsci, Bell (1992) develops the concept of “redemptive hegemony” to describe a person’s ability to “reproduce or reconfigure a vision of the order of power in the world” (Bell 1992, 81). Gottdiener concludes that “ideological control in modern society can never attain closure and there is a struggle over meanings for cultural objects and events that both the dominant and subordinate groups must face” (Gottdiener, quoted in Ehrentraut 1992, 219).

An examination of contemporary discourse on the *ningen kokuhō* shows that examples of the manipulation of the institution to suit parochial ends are common. In Bourdieu’s terms, bestowing a national award such as honoring a craftsman as a holder of an intangible cultural property is an exercise of “social magic,” which “always manages to produce discontinuity out of continuity” (Bourdieu 1991, 120). Thus, the award establishes an arbitrary difference between the holders of the award and all the craftspeople who produce similar work but are not recognized with the honor. With reference to the performance troupes that are recipients of the title of holder of folk cultural properties, Thornbury (1994) discusses the implications of this difference at length. The troupes, she writes, display the certificate of honor in a glass case in their performance hall, testifying both “to the pride the communities feel in having been recognized, as well as to the fact that such recognition can contribute to community revenues by attracting visitors at festival time as well as throughout the year” (Thornbury 1994, 216). A similar phenomenon is the occurrence of lobbying for the honor (Thornbury 1994, 218; Philip 1989, 163), activity that undercuts the image



of the craftsperson as concerned only with the selfless and proper use of the materials of his or her craft. One Japanese observer notes that the emphasis of the award on the skills displayed by the craftsperson, and not the tangible products of those skills, allows the value, both monetary and symbolic, that resides in the artistic act to remain with the artist and not be appropriated by any other cultural entity (Ogino 1995). Moeran (1987), for his part, emphasizes the process through which the craftsperson establishes suitability for the position of *ningen kokuhō*. Studying the world of ceramics, Moeran describes a carefully managed program of the exhibition of works and the cultivation of relationships within the craft establishment and concludes that achievement of a “national treasureship” is “as much related to the nature of a potter’s social relations as to his or her technical accomplishments” (Moeran 1987, 32).

A more troubling implication of the application of arbitrary distinctions within the craft community is its potential for creating profound divisions within craft communities. Discussing the effect of crafts association awards given for achievement in ceramics, Moeran (1984) cites the example of a young potter given a major award for a particular piece made in the style common in his community. “The immediate reaction of the older potters was that his... jar could have been made by any one of the other potters” in the village (Moeran 1984, 162). While Moeran concludes that the more significant conflict in the village derived from competition between a “gerontocracy” and a younger generation, his story illustrates the way in which the giving of awards further undermines the collective purpose thought by Yanagi, among many others, to serve as the foundation of the production of highly developed folk crafts.

Perhaps more threatening still to the craft traditions that the 1950 Law for the Protection of Cultural Properties was designed to protect is what Thornbury (1994, 220) refers to as the creation of “fixed cultural properties.” In aesthetic terms, the definition of tradition threatens to privilege a particular version of tradition over all other possible versions (Ehrentraut 1995), as well as ruling out the more obvious forms of innovation altogether. In practical terms, the insistence by the Monbushō that holders of intangible cultural properties must have been trained in a master-pupil arrangement (Philip 1989, 163) promotes what is perceived by some as a “clubby” form of instruction (Havens 1987, 347) that stifles creativity (Faulkner 1995, 48). Such a situation,

compounded by the government’s selection of only government officials and “professionals in the arts” as members of the Council for the Protection of Cultural Properties (Adachi 1983, 61) and the frequent selection of the students of elderly *ningen kokuhō* to succeed their teachers in the role, serves to rob the crafts themselves of vitality and to discourage the involvement of newcomers not content merely to copy the achievements of their elders (Thornbury 1994, 220-1).

## Conclusions

Examination of various aspects of the awarding of the title of holder of an intangible cultural property reveals that the institution has had mixed success in meeting what would appear to be its original goals. The intention of the award, to identify and preserve skills of fundamental importance to the nation and the world, has largely been met. Whereas craftspeople in the immediate postwar period were not able to support themselves by their work, the few now recognized popularly as *ningen kokuhō* are only the most prominent of a large number of working artisans well-supported by the public. The “*mingei* boom” (Moeran 1984, 15-16) of the 1960s and 1970s has long since passed, but designees are still well-represented on the faculties of the country’s various arts colleges and appear to be able to attract new students to carry on their skills (Faulkner 1995, 48).

The spirit of the award, to recognize the skill of the anonymous craftsperson, has been less well served. The desirability of placing emphasis on the intangible skill has never been widely shared by the Japanese public (Adachi 1983). The arts world in general, and the crafts world in particular, are increasingly dominated by the influence of a few well-known names (Moeran 1990), prompting one observer to write of a “period of gradual stultification” in Japanese crafts since the 1960s (Faulkner 1998, 8). Aesthetically and philosophically, the folk craft world in Japan is said to be threatened by its own stifling atmosphere (Thornbury 1994; Faulkner 1995), putting the vitality of the crafts in doubt.

In the larger cultural sphere, however, the unstated intentions of the program might be said to have been well served. Entering as it did into the particular cultural situation of the immediate postwar period, the institution of the *ningen kokuhō* filled a space in the symbolic vacuum created by the defeat. With resonance on two levels of the postwar discourse, in the ongoing discussions



of folk craft and the search for the mythical *furusato*, enthusiasm for the award appears to have been shared among large segments of the Japanese population. Internationally, it served what were perceived to be the country's interests by reinforcing the image of the nation as the government would have it be communicated. The varied usefulness of the institution of the *ningen kokuhō* in its early years is clear, but as the award enters its fifth decade its importance as a cultural symbol for the Japanese people shows signs of waning. Exhibitions of the craft productions of the designees continue, but profiles of the "living treasures" have grown less frequent. Indications are that the program and its participants have settled into a comfortable pattern of favorable evaluation and nearly assured inheritance of the title. While attempts are being made to re-envision the institution of the *ningen kokuhō* to allow for a necessary evolution (Thornbury 1994; Hashimoto 1998), the fundamental approach to crafts preservation represented by the award remains nearly unchanged. Concerned over the commercialization and commodification of Japan's architectural heritage, Ehrentraut looks in vain for evidence of Gottdiener's "struggle over meanings of cultural objects" (Gottdiener, quoted in Ehrentraut 1995, 235), which would reinvigorate the national cultural dialogue. The cultural development of Japan continues at sometimes breathtaking pace. Whether the construction of tradition represented by the *ningen kokuhō* has a central place in the cultural debates of the country's future remains to be seen.

*This paper is dedicated to the late Adolf Ehrentraut, whose research into the politics of heritage first showed me a direction for my work.*



**Yamamoto Tōshū (appointed 1987). Bizen-type stoneware vase with scorched surface colouring. c. 1950.** Courtesy of the trustees of the V&A. Photographer: Ian Thomas.

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**Shōno Shōunsai (appointed 1967). Bamboo vase with loop handle. 1960s.** Courtesy of the trustees of the V&A. Photographer: Ian Thomas.

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