NOTES ON JAPANESE FOLK ART.
On Münsterberg's book THE FOLK ARTS OF JAPAN and relevant matters and problems

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In writing his book on the folk arts of Japan[1], H. Münsterberg kept close contact with the aims and activities of the Japanese Folk Art Museum in Tôkyô and followed the work of its founder and director Dr. Soetsu Yanagi, enjoying thus the best of guidance for his task. The promoters of the Japanese folk rt movement look at the folk arts from the purely aesthetic point of view, finding in them the revelation of a direct, simple and honest beauty which deserves appreciation by modern artists as an artistic ideal. Münsterberg identifies himself with Yanagi when he writes: "Folk art is not, as some authors have suggested, merely an unsophisticated reflection of the culture of the cities, but an indigenous creation of the ordinary people of small towns and villages, especially, those who are cut off from the main stream of urban civilization. This does not mean that they are wholly isolated—for the dominant culture no doubt influences and modifies their work —but folk art has a tradition which has remained unchanged over generations, sometimes even centuries, so that it is impossible to date it with accuracy."

Referring to the tradition of folk art, Münsterberg touches on the very essence of folk art, the definition of which has presented a vexing problem to Western folklore scientists for quite a long time, as a brief look into perti-

1) Hugo Münsterberg: The Folk Arts of Japan. With Preface by Soetsu Yanagi. 164 pages text and 4 pages index. 110 plates with illustrations, of them 18 color plates and 92 gravure plates. Charles E. Tuttle Company, Rutland, Vermont, U.S.A., and Tokyo, Japan, 1958. Prize: in the Far East ¥2,000, $5.50. In the U.S.A. $6.75.

nent topics discussed in Germany can show us. The central question concerning folk art, be it the German, the Japanese or any other, is whether folk art is an art entirely and essentially different from so-called high art or art that is no more than popularized high art. The question of what folk art is goes together with the question of folk culture. This question may pose itself in a different way among different nations. In answering such questions as to the nature of folk art and folk culture, the peculiar situation of a given nation must be given due consideration. Adolf Spamer writes that the art of the German people was in its beginning differentiated only according to different tribes and regions. During many centuries this art became further differentiated according to different cultural centers, such as the many courts of medieval rulers, monasteries, metropolitan churches, centers of bishoprics, and castles. Later, with the formation of an urban culture with its organizations of craftsmen, art became again the affair of the common citizens and was no longer the privilege of the ecclesiastic and secular aristocracy. Works of art became finally the achievements of individual artists rather than of a whole class of craftsmen. The art of these craftsmen was degraded through the general industrialisation during the nineteenth century to an insignificant position. Spamer himself did painstaking research work on the folk arts of Hessen and summarizes his findings as follows: the current of art activities of cities reached rural communities, was assimilated by them into the world of their own tastes and ideas, and this assimilation and amalgamation of old and new elements produced something of a new kind of art. The basic local element remained always unchanged. Its various combinations with lements borrowed from the changing trends of urban artistic centers resulted in many new units. An eternal basic element of local art can always be found whether objects of art were produced by creative talents or by simple immitators. Thus present-day folk art underwent a long process of evolution.[2] Konrad Hahm[3] takes as folk art the products of the culture of craftsmen among common people in so far as these products possess decorations and embellishments which originate in and appeal to common people.[4] Hahm is further of the opinion that folk art is at home among the farming population of the countryside and that it is bound to the needs of rural communities. He finds that the long line of its history begins with Germanic rural art, the forms and ornaments of which stayed alive until the nineteenth century. The ornaments of folk art, Hahm writes, are not to be disconnected from folk beliefs and customs. Art, be-

2) Adolf Spamer, Hessische Volkskunst. Jena 1939; p. 109 ff., „Rückblick und Ausblick."

3) Konrad Hahm, Grundzüge der deutschen Volkskunst. In: *Die deutsche Volkskunde*, by various authors under the direction of Adolf Spamer. Vol. 1, Berlin 1934, p. 402.

4) In this way we may perhaps render the meaning of the German " die gestaltende Arbeit der volkstümlichen und volksläufigen Handwerkskultur."

lief, and customs have to be studied as one entity from prehistoric and protohistoric times on down to present-day rural art. Forms of art objects cannot be analyzed in themselves as separate from the purpose and meaning of objects of arts. A mere psychological and phenomenological treatment of them is impossible. Both objects and their artistic form are founded upon customs and ceremonies of the annual life cycle and in usages and practices that mark important events of the span of life of individual members of the community. In this way products of artistic craftsmenship come under laws of a definite and constant cultural and spiritual world. These objects, sometimes with a deep prehistoric background, are therefore interesting items for research in myths and religious symbols.

According to Richard Weiss[5] a steady mutual exchange goes on between individualized and community bound folk cultures This author is of the opinion that folk culture does not belong only to a certain class, but its subject is the whole nation, whose members share the folk culture in a different degree. Thus a nation consists not of two layers, upper class and folk, but upper class and folk are intensely indented, not existing side by side as two entities with clear-cut differences in their respective cultures, educational levels, and customs. This new concept of folk culture may be called the most progressive one; it applies also to folk art.

But leaving the whole problem of what folk art really is aside for further discussion and clarification, we may safely give a preliminary definition of folk art by exclusion, that is by saying what it is not. Folk art is not an individual art and is not a product of modern industry. Stated positively we may say that folk art is a complex thing which has grown in a nation in the course of that nation's cultural history. In this way we have at least marked out the field from which to start. To analyze and define the elements of a nation's folk art is the task for the Science of Folklore, in particular, of the Science of Folk Art.

Münsterberg, together with the former and present entire community of native researchers having the Japanese Folk Art Museum as the center of their activity, are not much concerned with the history of the Japanese folk arts and the history of Japanese culture. Their approach is aesthetic. In a way we can say they are siding with a certain school of high art or individualistic art which finds its ideal of beauty materialized in the objects of folk art. Stith Thompson speaks of the romantic interest in primitivism to which he attributes the great advances that have been made in the study of folklore.[6] Münsterberg himself mentions outstanding artists who were

5) Richard Weiß, Volkskunde der Schweiz. Erlenbach-Zürich 1946; p. 46.

6) Stith Thompson: Advances in Folklore Studies. In: *Anthropology Today*. An Encyclopedic Inventory Prepared under the Chairmanship of A. L. Kroeber. The University of Chicago Press, Third Impression 1955; p. 588.

so impressed by the freshness and simplicity of the art of primitives that they settled down among them, Paul Gauguin in Tahiti and Robert Louis Stevenson in Samoa, to learn from them. In Japan many artists have been inspired by folk art and now produces works of a similar directness and vitality. Münsterberg writes of four high class artists that they have turned folk artists. Shoji Hamada became potter in a village in Tochigi Prefecture where a flourishing pottery existed for several centuries. Kanjiro Kawai, too, became a folk potter. Keisuke Serizawa is a modern folk dyer who has revived and now continues old traditions from Okinawa. Shiko Munakata is very active as a modern printmaker following folk traditions. These four artists are doing consciously what folk artists always have done unconsciously. In Japan high art and folk art have found a common ground, at least in a few areas. This was made possible because folk art in Japan is still alive, though on a side-track where modern industry has pushed it.

Though we look in vain through the entire Yanagi school for historical studies, we must credit the great merit of the extensive surveys made of folk arts still practiced. Münsterberg presents Japanese folk art production under the heading of Pottery—Baskets and Related Objects—Lacquer Ware, Wooden Ware, Metalwork—Toys—Textiles—Painting and Sculpture—Peasant Houses. He describes the present state of the vitality of each of these groups of folk art production. There are still 50 active folk kilns. Basketry is still practiced in Kyûshû and Northeastern Japan. Straw-hats for folk dances and decorations on straw rain-coats (*mino*) are still manufactured for their local markets. Hand-made paper has not yet disappeared in the prefectures of Kôchi and Gifu, and in districts of Kyûshû and Sanin. Since lacquer ware could not stand competition with porcelain, only a few centers of production have survived. Of about 100 centers of toy production in the Tokugawa period many are still working. It should be mentioned that more than in any other field of folk art, numerous elements from the history of Japanese religion and culture have been assembled in the field of toys. Among such elements are old Japanese and Buddhist tales and legends, magic, and belief in spirits, demons and ghosts. In textiles Okinawa still plays a vital role, combining Chinese and Japanese motifs. In Northeastern Japan we can still see designs that originate in the old Heian culture and in that of the Momoyama time. Everywhere in the country old symbolic motifs, mostly of Chinese origin, from Kyôto and other art centers, are still enjoyed. Northeastern Japan and Shikoku are still rich in local textile industries. Painting and sculpture are serving practical needs, mostly religious, and are rural, primitive, and crude adaptations of urban models. Folk painting has existed since the seventeenth century. The best known pictures are the Otsu-e, pictures from Otsu near Lake Biwa in Central Japan. They were at first religious, later secular. They are the co nterpart of the professional high art productions of the

Ukiyo-e in Edo. Today they are no longer made. However, still made everywhere in great numbers are the so-called Ema, *ex voto* pictures, to be hung in Shintô shrines and Buddhist temples, and we have seen some also on horse-stables. The stone carvings, to be found in the whole country at roadsides and village boundaries, were mostly made some time in the Edo period and represent such gods as Jizô, Seimen Kongo, Dôsojin, and Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. The horse-headed Kannon, the tombstone for horses, also has a wide distribution. In Nagano Prefecture we have seen many relief sculptures in stone of Daikoku, a god of luck, in a clearly defined local style and some of them of recent make (Fig. 1). Quite interesting are the local types of Dôsojin, a road god having many other functions. On Izu Peninsula where each village has several of them, Dôsojin looks like a feudal official of the Tokugawa era, whereas in Nagano Prefecture we saw Dôsojin stone reliefs showing a couple in intimate conjugal union (Fig. 2). The god is also the patron of conjugal harmony and of peace in the family. In the old province of Kai, Dôsojin is represented simply by a round-shaped stone or a pile of four stones. In Nagano Prefecture, Kamiina District, we saw many Dôsojin which were either huge stone monuments with the characters for Dôsojin chiselled on them, or smaller monuments of a roundish shape on which the name Dôsojin was chiselled in a peculiar calligraphic pattern. The popular Buddhist iconography consists of more or less skillful immitations of standardized representations of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas at the great temples of Nara. In Kanagi Village, Nishitsugaru District, Aomori Prefecture, a remote village on the northernmost tip of Honshû, we saw a great number of stone carved Jizô assembled in a Jizô Hall. They are extremely crudely done and a few colors are painted on them. Their primitive artistic features resemble in some way the old Haniwa figures of the Tumuli (*kofun*) period. In their naïvetëe and in their religious function as voitif figures in the care for the dead, they give a pitiful yet charming and cosy impression.

We agree of course with Münsterberg that the peasant house deserves to be treated as an object of folk art. In its setting as a part of the surrounding landscape and in many details of its construction the farmhouse offers a pleasing sight. The roof, the partition of the interior, the garden in front of the rooms, the contrast between the dark timber and the sliding doors of white paper or between the wooden framework of the construction and the white plaster on the walls produce a picturesque effect. Further artistic elements are the fine forms into which the reed-grass or the rice-straw of the roof thatching has been smoothly cut with huge scissors, all these forms differing from region to region, according to the traditions of the local craftsmen who are mostly professional or semiprofessional roof thatchers. There is nothing pretentious about a farmhouse; everything is there for an

useful purpose, and where decorative elements are added, they are in complete harmony with the function of the objects concerned. In accordance with the general idea of his book, Münsterberg is exclusively concerned with the beauty of the farmhouse. For illustrative purposes he selected some pictures of farmhouses and details from several provinces. It goes without saying that much more could be said about the farmhouse. In fact, extensive studies about it have been made by Japanese specialists and voluminous publications have appeared; such as, monographs, contributions for encyclopedic collections and for folklore journals. We can learn much about the history of farmhouse architecture, about the various types existing in the provinces of the Japanese islands and their distribution, and about the religious and social functions of the rooms in the interior. The Japanese farmhouse is the product of a steady process of combinations of elements of the refined culture of nobility in the cities and castles with objects of practical use into a new, harmonious unit. Such a process has gone on also in other fields of folk life, in Japan and in other countries as well.

In Western countries the interest in folk art arose with the time conditioned predilection for the art of the so-called primitives. In the year 1928 the first folk art congress took place in Prague which decided upon the formation of 25 national commissions for folk art. The German Folk Art Commission started on a program of studies of the art of rural craftsmen and in 1932 held its first exhibition of Folk Art, Home Industry, and Crafts. In Japan Dr. Soetsu Yanagi, in collaboration with the artists Kanjirô Kawai and Shôji Hamada, founded the Japanese Folk Art Society (*Nihon Mingei Kyokai*) in 1931, and in 1936 the Japanese Folk Art Museum (*Nihon Mingei Kan*) was established. Similar museums followed in Kurashiki and Osaka. These museums became the centers of a folk art movement. A Japanese journal *Mingei* (Folk Art) was started by Yanagi. In Western language Münsterberg's book is, to our knowledge, the first publication on this subject.

As far as we know, in Japan, apart from the aesthetic aspect, which comes into the realm of artists, folk art has so far not been made the object of research as have many other fields of folk life and culture. In Europe the question was caised whether or not folk art is an art that differs essentially from nation to nation as a national characteristic. With regard to Japan, this question has not yet been discussed. If it is done in the future, the discussion will be one of cultural history. Experts have advanced the view that in German folk art such motifs as the wheel, the cross, and the star date back from the remote past of prehistoric times and persist as basic elements throughout the time up to present-day folk art products, though their religious and mythological meaning has been lost and many additions to and variations of these basic elements were made. We ask if Japanese folk art

possesses elements which belonged to the Japanese people as constitutive elements of their culture before it entered history and then underwent historically known cultural influences from outside. What was the cultural heritage which the Japanese people exhibited in the dawn of history? Was there any constant substance which became the substratum for later additions of alien elements when the waves of cultural movements from the continent reached Japanese shores, or was perhaps something essential of the oldest heritage lost in these waves? Archaeology has registered and described findings pertinent to art, but it has not discussed the question whether the objects belonged to a common native layer or to the cultural outfit of only one class. We know practically nothing about the most ancient Japanese folk art. We can guess that there existed one when society was still uniform and did not know the stratifications of later periods in which artistic concepts of higher levels acted as impulses for art production of the lower classes. What Münsterberg, following suite to the Japanese folk art movement, calls folk arts, belonged two or three hundred years ago to the stock of urban civilization. So he writes on the farmhouse that its present form is the product of the Tokugawa period. This is correct with regard to the room partition of the interior and to many things of its furnishing. Compared with house figures from the Haniwa art of the Tumuli (*kofun*) period, the roof construction of the present farmhouse seems to be the same as that of the ancient time, but the interior must then have been quite different, a different room partition and no elevated floor. The farmhouse of today is the outcome of a union of practical needs with urban refinements which were brought to the countryside largely by peasant-soldiers, that is the samurai who lived by farming in peace-time. We can find large farmhouses which were formerly real *samurai-yashiki*, that is mansions of farming warriors, with impressive fronts and entrance doors and many spacious rooms inside (Fig. 3). These houses were those which were most advanced in the general trend in farmhouse building to immitate as much as the purposes of a farmhouse permitted the comfort and beauty of residences of higher levels of the nation. About 200 hundred years ago a regulation was still in force prohibiting the common farmer having planed pillars in his house. They could be worked only with the carpenter's ax and looked crude. Such pillars, here and there, found in farmhouses are a reliable criterion of the age of the house. An elevated wooden floor in rooms with straw mats (*tatami*), now common everywhere, was first usurped by rural upstarts. In remote places of the provinces of Kai and Shinano we can still find a few farmhouses without this upper class refinement. Another usurpation is the covering of the outside of the walls of farmhouses with white plaster which is lined with black streaks in a way that results in a lozenge pattern. Under the plaster lozenge shaped tiles were nailed to the mud-wall with specially hardened bamboo nails, four nails

for each tile. The black streaks follow the edges of the tiles while the tiles themsevles are covered with white plaster. This technique is beautiful, and at the same time it is a strong protection to the wall against the unrush of rainstorms. The longing for such walls seems to have been especially strong in districts along exposed sea-sides, for instance in Southern Izu where such decorations strike the eye pleasantly on town-houses in Shimoda and on many farmhouses inland. Opposite to Izu Peninsula, on the Southern tip of Bôsô Peninsula to the east of Tôkyô and Sagami Bay, thatched farmhouses have their ridges covered with tiles seamed together with white and black plaster in a very decorative way. People say that such a ridge covering can withstand inclement weather for generations whereas grass covering withers away in about twenty years. Tiles on farmhouses were democratic innovations against which the feudal lords somehow had to close their eyes in the later years of the Edo period. But there are also quite remarkable embellishments to be found on farmhouses which have not been wrested by envious farmers from the more privileged classes. Unique in the whole country are the farmhouse roofs of the Western part of the old province of Musashino in Kantô, which are a combination of gabled and hipped roofs, but the gable is a very large one. A trellis is fixed into its triangle and the surrounding thatch is cut in fine swinging lines (Fig. 4). Such gables remind one of roofs on Buddhist temples. Historians tell us that these places in Musashino were colonized during the Fujiwara years of late Heian time, and that Kyôto temple roofs were, in fact, the god-parents of the farmhouse roofs in Western Musashino.

Folk art in Japan is a rather relative concept and a composite one. It is relative in so far as folk art is considered to be art that has been practiced by the folk for a certain time and applied to practical purposes. The concept is composite in so far as folk art may be art that has been taken over from the individualistic high art or that may never in any way have been an element of the high art. Of the latter kind is folk art that originates in the native religion, magic and myths. Indeed, figures and pictures of all kinds and various materials were and are made for religious and magical purposes, many of them belonging to the realm of toys in a large sense.

With the above notes we want in no way to be critical of Münsterberg and the Japanese writers on folk art to whom we want to give all the credit that is due to them. They want to promote folk art and their studies are to be evaluated accordingly. Our suggestions and views on folk art from the standpoint of Folklore Science do not in any way run counter to them.

Fig. 1. Nagano Prefecture, Kitaazumi District, Yotsuya Village

Fig. 2. Nagano Prefecture, Shimoina District, near Iida City

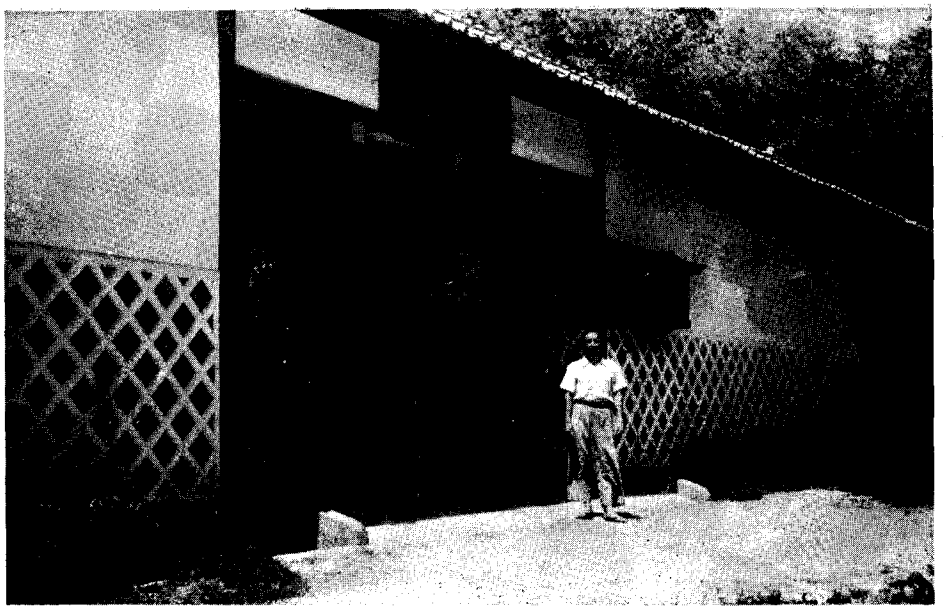

Fig. 3. Nagano Prefecture, Shimoina District, near Iida City

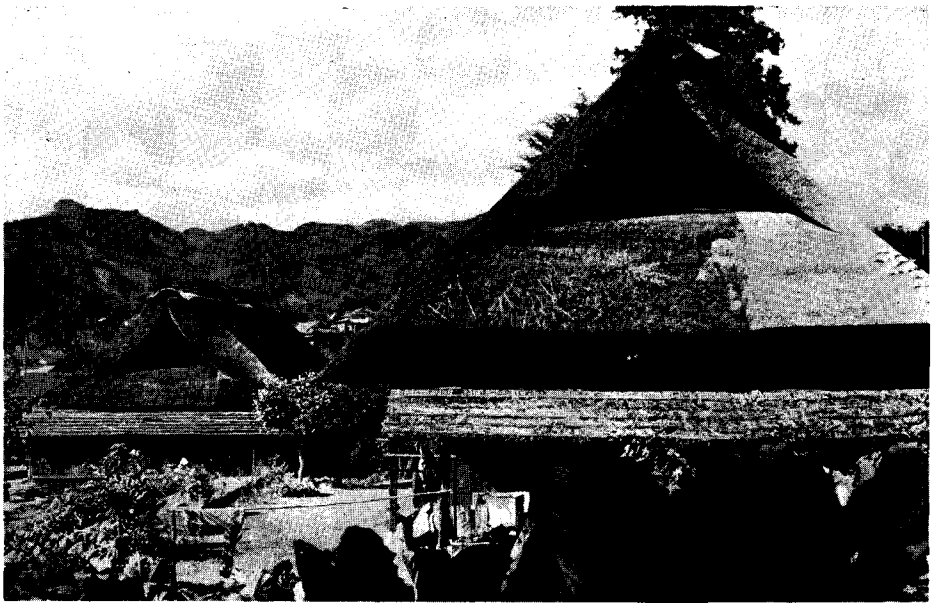

Fig. 4. Tôkyô County, Nishitama District, Ikusabatake Village