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Who Makes Craft Valuable, and Where?

Institutions, Categories and the Making of Japanese Craft, 1870–Present

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This paper examines how the value and meaning of Japanese crafts have been constructed and repeatedly redefined from the late nineteenth century to the present day. It traces the institutions and individuals that have classified, evaluated, promoted and presented particular products as distinctive.

From the 1870s onwards, international and domestic exhibitions, commercial museums, export associations and official statistical classifications positioned Japanese crafts as industrial products, export commodities and objects of artistic value simultaneously. During the early twentieth century, critics, collectors and movements such as Mingei introduced other criteria of value, including authenticity, handwork, locality and historical continuity. Post-war institutions further transformed this landscape and craft ecosystems through initiatives such as the designation of 'Living National Treasures' and the protection of traditional craft industries and cultural heritage.

These evolving mechanisms of evaluation also shaped narratives of tradition, the mobilisation of the past, survival and disappearance, all of which continue to influence contemporary craft markets.

The paper concludes by examining the recent shift towards geographical indications, regional branding (including utilisation of terroir), and craft-related heritage policies in Japan and Europe. By contextualising these mechanisms, the paper raises broader questions about who—and where—has determined the value of craft.

