

## *Original Paper*

# Sori Yanagi's Industrial Design Aesthetics

Siqi Zhang<sup>1\*</sup> & Chunshu Chen<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Nanjing University of Information Science and Technology, Nanjing, China

\* Siqi Zhang, E-mail: yolazhang@foxmail.com

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### **Abstract**

*With the development of social economy, industrial design has become more and more influential. The development of the industrial design industry is one of the signs showing a modern civilization, innovation ability and comprehensive national strength. In the future economic development, design will become the mainstream force driving innovation. It can be seen that showing the added value in industrial design is a popular trend in the power balance between countries in the future. This article will discuss the aesthetic thought of Sori Yanagi, the father of Japanese industrial design, and discuss the influence of his aesthetic thought on Japanese industrial design.*

### **Keywords**

*Sori Yanagi, Japanese culture, Industrial design*

### **1. Introduction**

When it comes to the development of industrial design in Japan, Sori Yanagi, the first person in industrial design in Japan, cannot be avoided. Sori Yanagi has experienced the four stages of Japanese industrial design, including the initial stage, the growth stage, the mature stage, and the green transition stage. Sori Yanagi had a great influence on Japanese industrial design. However, the world is currently not rich in research on Sori Yanagi, and lacks systematic research. The current world's research on Sori Yanagi is limited to Japan and South Korea, from the perspective of research topics, it is mainly divided into four directions. The first is the impact of Sori Yanagi's industrial design on Japanese industrial design. The second is the aesthetic connotation of Sori Yanagi's works. The third is Sori Yanagi's inheritance and development of folk art thought. The fourth is the analysis of Sori Yanagi's design works.

Before World War II, Japanese industrial design was in a zero state like other Asian countries. It took less than 50 years for the development of Japanese industrial design from zero foundation to world-renowned. Therefore, for the design of most areas where industrial design is still in development, understanding the development path of Japanese industrial design is a very important reference for the development of industrial design in the world. The development of Japanese industrial design has gone through four stages, namely, the initial stage, the growth stage, the mature stage, and the green transition stage.

From 1948 to 1952, Japanese industrial design entered the initial stage. After the end of World War II, Japan was defeated, and society was awaiting prosperity. In 1948, “industrial design” just sprouted under the support of the United States. In 1951, the famous industrial designer Raymond Rowe was invited by the Japanese government to give a lecture on industrial design in Japan. In 1952, the Japan Industrial Designers Association (JIDA) was formally established. Since then, Japan has officially entered the door of industrial design.

From 1953 to 1960, Japanese industrial design entered a period of growth. With the recovery of Japan’s domestic economy and industry, Japanese industrial design has ushered in more new challenges. In the future, well-known industrial design masters, such as Sori Yanagi, have made their debut in the world exhibitions.

In the following three decades (1960-1990), Japanese industrial design entered a mature period. After the Japanese designers have experienced the baptism of complete industrial design education, they have faded the influence of American industrial design on Japan. After combining Japanese living habits and traditional culture, Japanese designers gradually established the concept of industrial design with “Japanese style”.

Entering the 1990s, Japanese industrial design entered a green transition period. With the bursting of the Japanese economic bubble, the concept of Japanese industrial design has also changed. After the design concept has been precipitated over time, designers pay more attention to the experience and feelings of users. Also due to the occurrence of the energy crisis, designers set their sights on the earth where people live.

## **2. The Aesthetic of Sori Yanagi’s Industrial Design**

### *2.1 Sori Yanagi’s Classification of Industrial Design*

Throughout Sori Yanagi’s industrial design career, his works can be divided into four major categories, namely, daily necessities design, furniture design, public facility design, and magazine cover design. According to Sori Yanagi’s designs introduced in Sori Yanagi’s Design Chronicle in “Yanagi’s Essays”, Sori Yanagi has more than 140 designs in total. Among them, daily necessities design accounted for 47.8%, furniture design accounted for 18.6%, public facility design accounted for 9%, and cover design accounted for 15.7%. Not only that, but Sori Yanagi has also designed cars and

interior spaces. Sori Yanagi believes that the significance of industrial design lies in creativity itself. But for different types of design works, Sori Yanagi expressed different design priorities.

#### 2.1.1 Design of Daily Necessities

The deepening of the influence of the Industrial Revolution has affected the way of life of human beings all over the world. This also makes the design of daily necessities appear and develop. As Sori Yanagi said, the true value of design lies in improving the inner lifestyle of the people. Sori Yanagi's design focus on daily necessities is functional. This feature is reflected in Sori Yanagi's daily necessities design works.

As Sori Yanagi designed in 1963, a tape table that can easily cut tape no matter which direction it is taken. This design changed the original tape table manufacturing company's pursuit of blade and tape table decoration. In Sori Yanagi's eyes, the convenience and practicality of daily necessities are more important than decoration. The over-heavy decoration of the objects exposes the designer's lack of understanding of the connotation of the objects, and it also has some subtle meanings that are overwhelming. For example, the excessive patterns and weird shapes in modern tableware directly affect the protagonist on the table, the food. Why design and how design can change lives are questions that designers should think clearly. In Sori Yanagi's design aesthetics, the supremacy of functionality is the nature of daily necessities.

#### 2.1.2 Design of Furniture

In Sori Yanagi's furniture design, the most common design is the design of tables and chairs. According to the author's statistics, from 1946 to 2010, Sori Yanagi designed 18 chairs, 6 of which were re-enacted and improved models of earlier designs. Take the elephant chair that Sori Yanagi has improved the most times as an example. In 1954, Sori Yanagi designed an elephant chair for the first time. In 1960, Sori Yanagi changed the size of the elephant chair and designed a larger elephant chair. In 2000, in Sori Yanagi's "Design in Life" exhibition, the elephant chair was reproduced again, and the design was improved with a more modern sense. In 2004, Sori Yanagi transformed this elephant chair that penetrated into the lives of the people for the last time. The original FRP (Fiber Reinforced Plastics) material used in making elephant chairs is improved to PP (Polypropylene) which is commonly used in modern daily necessities, which is cheaper, lighter and easier to store. From the above introduction, it can be understood that Sori Yanagi's furniture design is more inclined to use new materials as the basis for the original design works to improve in line with the needs of the times. Making use of the latest science and technology as much as possible to create sophisticated, more convenient and easy-to-use mechanical products is the most original mission of industrial design in the heart of Sori Yanagi. Let good furniture design flow into the lives of more ordinary people and make people's lives easier. This is the pursuit of Sori Yanagi as a designer.

### 2.1.3 Design of Public Facilities

In his design career, Sori Yanagi has participated in 13 large-scale public facilities designs, including designs for flyovers, subway stations, highways, parks, and the Tokyo Olympic Games. Among them, Sori Yanagi designed the expressway the most times, reaching 5 times. In the design of public facilities, Sori Yanagi highlighted the importance of designer creativity. While pursuing functionality, Sori Yanagi believes that the design of public facilities requires creativity and beauty. According to the actual situation, he designs works suitable for different terrains and customs. It cannot be taken for granted that the structural integrity of the work is a complete work.

And Sori Yanagi believes that there can be no commercialism factor in the design of public facilities, and all facilities serve users. The design should reflect the humanistic care of modern society. Let users get a better sense of experience and use, which is the direction of public facilities design.

### 2.2 Sori Yanagi's Industrial Design Aesthetics

The reason why Sori Yanagi has a high reputation in the Japanese industrial design circle is inseparable from his clear and powerful industrial design ideas. Sori Yanagi's industrial design aesthetics runs through his works designed throughout his life. His work has a distinct personal style, but also highlights Japanese culture. This design philosophy has had a profound impact on Japanese industrial design. It makes Japanese industrial design products have strong regional characteristics and a clear local style in the international market. Sori Yanagi believes that good industrial design must have five requirements: first, it must have good functions; second, use good modern technology; third, use good materials appropriately; fourth, be suitable for mass production design; fifth, consider economy.

#### 2.2.1 The Beauty of Use

The biggest difference between industrial design and pure art is the functionality of industrial design. From the Bauhaus spirit to Le Corbusier to Soetsu Yanagi and Sori Yanagi, the functional supremacy of objects is in the same vein. "Whether the article is useful" has become the standard for Sori Yanagi and others to treat whether the design is qualified. Designed fancy packaging, in addition to accelerating people's dislike of the product, can not provide any help to the improvement and development of the product. Items widely used in the lives of ordinary people, do not require any decorations and slogans, and are very reliable and play a continuous role in people's lives. This simple and healthy item follows the needs of people's lives and exudes care and warmth to the people. "Usage is beauty" in Sori Yanagi's design thought, and this is how it came into being.

In the modern era where commercialism is developing rapidly, a trend of confrontation with commercialism has also emerged. "Anonymous Design" makes use of extreme functions and few decorations to appear in every home. The nameless design can be said to be the perfect interpretation of Sori Yanagi's "use is beauty". It pursues the ultimate in function, ignoring all unnecessary parts in appearance, and the nameless design is therefore more precious. This kind of design that only cares about the use of objects and internal structure is the initial form of design since ancient times, and it

plays a vital role in improving the objects themselves.

With the development of the era today, there is no qualitative difference in daily necessities. The use attributes of the “things” of the items themselves have never changed, but they are more in line with the current era following the advancement of science and technology. To a certain extent, the anonymous design that used us as beauty in the industrial age is more like the folk art of the industrial age. They were born out of the needs of the people and are the art of living people.

### 2.2.2 The Beauty of Materials

The most obvious thing about the development and changes of a chair from ancient times to the present is the difference in materials. From wooden chairs in the handicraft era to iron chairs and plastic chairs in the industrial era, it not only implies changes in life, but also reflects the development of materials. As a pioneer of industrial design in Japan after the war, Sori Yanagi showed great enthusiasm for new materials. According to Sori Yanagi, the designer will take the active use of fine new materials as his obligation. The improvement of product quality by changing the materials used is much more important than the appearance design. The true value of design lies in improving the product’s internals, and only continuous improvement can take the responsibility of promoting the evolution of civilization. Applying suitable materials to suitable products, the beauty of this material is also fully demonstrated in Sori Yanagi’s works. When the material of polyethylene was first used to make objects, Sori Yanagi immediately noticed that using plastic to make teapot products was cheap and lacking texture. When the plastic is made into a chair, it shows a different state. The plastic chairs made by Sori Yanagi are bright in color and cheap, and they are very light. The use of different materials requires designers to have a deep understanding of the nature of objects and life experience.

Of course, there are different materials with very local characteristics in different regions of the world. The proper use of local materials is also very necessary in Sori Yanagi’s view. The use of local materials to make products not only allows users to feel the unique local cultural atmosphere, but also resonates with the world about the common culture of mankind.

### 2.2.3 The Beauty of Craft

Process is the process of using production tools to process raw materials into finished products. In the handicraft era, crafts belonged to the people, and the beauty of craftsmanship at this time is a good commemoration of the work of the people and the cooperation of the people. Entering the age of machinery, craft no longer needs the support of the people, and machinery can replace humans in the whole process of production. Because of this, the purely mechanically manufactured industrial products have lost the beauty contained in the articles themselves. Sori Yanagi’s father Soetsu Yanagi once wrote that craftsmanship cannot be ignored. Craftsmanship can show the richest beauty only through handwork. Compared with hand-made items, hand-made items are endlessly varied, and mechanical items are monotonous. No matter how complicated a machine is, it can’t match the beauty of good fortune revealed by human beings.

Sori Yanagi dialectically absorbed his father's point of view, he affirmed the importance of hands, and still retains some of the content created by hand in the mechanical age. He puts forward the slogan "think with hands, make with heart", and believes that when you design with your hands, you will have the answer. In Sori Yanagi's industrial design process, Sori Yanagi often did not draw design drawings. He feels the plaster model with his hands, and thinks and corrects it. Objects are not made by design, but are designed in the making. The products designed by Sori Yanagi's show a lot of humanistic care. His design is healthy, simple, and possesses the beauty of practical craftsmanship, which makes Sori Yanagi's works have a long life.

Sori Yanagi often visits the factory front line. He believes that the most important thing in mechanical production is the perfect cooperation between various departments. It is impossible for a designer to complete a work by himself. Only by cooperating on the production line can the work be completed. Designers need to understand the links in the production line, be clear about the division of labor, and communicate more with sales and manufacturers. This will enable designers to better understand the needs of society. This can be regarded as a good commemoration of the work of the people and the cooperation of the people in the industrial age.

#### 2.2.4 The Beauty of Nature

Beauty is not created, but is born. Sori Yanagi has verified this sentence in a large number of works in his design.

Take the Yanagi's chair designed by Sori Yanagi in 1990 as an example. The Yanagi's chair is made of oak bent wood. The work is simple and generous. It is a sleek wooden chair with no edges and corners around it. In 2007, Sori Yanagi changed the production materials of this design. The whole work is completed with only one piece of bent wood. Compared with the 1990 version, this version has a more natural momentum. The wood itself has constituted a complete environment. Users will find that even without decoration and excessive design, this chair can put people in nature.

The natural beauty that Sori Yanagi pursues is quietly flowing through the practical and simple things in people's lives. Even for the large-volume industrial works of the mechanical age, today when all-mechanical production has obliterated the natural destiny, Sori Yanagi retains a little natural taste by designing by hand. Sori Yanagi believes that design will become ugly when it violates nature, and designers should follow the consciousness of nature as much as possible. The unique charm of natural beauty in Sori Yanagi's design stems from his consciousness of following nature in his design. This kind of consciousness has been exerted to the extreme in many years of training, and it has become the unconscious active choice of Sori Yanagi.

Not only that, in the 1950s, facing the crisis of American commercialism's over-design, Sori Yanagi stepped forward to carry the banner of anti-commercialism and consumerism. Sori Yanagi once wrote that the objects created by humans have to be returned to the earth after all. This is the basic principle of maintaining the natural harmony cycle. The human eye will be moved by pure things, and the

eye-stimulating designs under the trend of commercialism are nothing but waste and evil consequences of the proliferation of capitalism. Mechanical production is uncontrolled and has reached a state of overproduction. In order to stimulate consumption at this time, designers focus on packaging and decoration, rather than the product itself. This goes against the will of natural development. Then mechanical products can't have beauty at all. Sori Yanagi's design does not follow social trends, does not cater to the public's aesthetics, and only makes useful things needed for life. In today's over-designed world, it has a unique style and has become a representative of natural beauty.

#### 2.2.5 The Beauty of Terroir

Crafts have no hometown, because of their different types, changes and tastes, they have different hometowns. Different terroir features give the same item a different beauty in different regions. For example, China, Japan and South Korea all use woks. The pans in Japan are flat and shallow, while the pans in China and South Korea are curved and deep. This represents the culinary culture and customs of different regions. The chopsticks used in China, Japan and South Korea also have different appearances due to different eating habits. When Sori Yanagi accompanied Charlotte Bellian on a tour of Japanese folk design, he re-understood the traditional Japanese folk culture. He realized that these lively and practical objects that matched the habits of Japanese people were the unique charm of Japan. The beauty of the terroir is fully manifested at this time.

The large amount of rain in the Japanese climate makes rice the most important staple food for the Japanese. In Sori Yanagi's view, straw is the most readily available and abundant daily necessities material for Japanese people. The Japanese were born on straw, grew up in straw baby cages, played on straw mats, ushered in death on tatami mats, and were burned to ashes along with the straw and disappeared into the earth. Shimenawa, a unique Japanese item that hangs in shrines, sacred trees, and people's homes. Made of straw, it represents the religious concepts and customs of the Japanese. Shimenawa's One end of the connection in Japanese culture is real life, and the other end of the connection is the sanctuary where the gods are. Such hanging ornaments, which are closely related to Japanese climate and life, represent the beauty of the terroir in the eyes of Sori Yanagi.

Designing objects that conform to local living habits, this act puts a clear terroir mark on the objects themselves. When goods go international, they represent a party's culture and civilization. Sori Yanagi opened a new chapter in Japanese industrial design. Sori Yanagi called on Japanese design not to copy Europe and the United States. Japanese people have their own way of life. Designs that have always imitated Europe and the United States not only affect the image, but are also useless in Japanese life. On the land of Japan, using Japanese materials and craftsmanship, and designing for the Japanese and the Japanese public, the works will naturally have the beauty of Japanese terroir.

### 3. Conclusion

Obviously, good design products will bring convenience and happiness to people's lives, while bad design can only represent the proliferation of commercialism. The designer's contribution is inseparable behind the product. How the design can reflect the national and national characteristics requires every designer to think about it. As the father of Japanese industrial design and the pioneer of Japanese industrial design, Sori Yanagi is unique. His design philosophy is full of Japanese culture, people-oriented, and love for nature. In today's era, these design concepts are still not outdated today. This kind of design full of humanistic care shines in human life all over the world.

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