

Leca on Guth, 'Craft Culture in Early Modern Japan: Materials, Makers, and Mastery'

Leca, Radu

Published: 01/02/2024

Document Version:
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication](#)

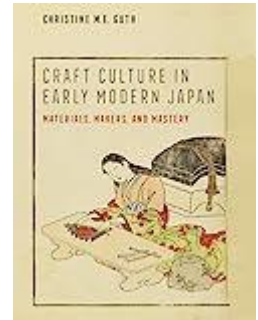
Citation for published version (APA):
Leca, R. (2024, Feb). Leca on Guth, 'Craft Culture in Early Modern Japan: Materials, Makers, and Mastery'. H-Net Reviews. <https://networks.h-net.org/group/reviews/20024739/leca-guth-craft-culture-early-modern-japan-materials-makers-and-mastery>

General rights

Copyright and intellectual property rights for the publications made accessible in HKBU Scholars are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners. In addition to the restrictions prescribed by the Copyright Ordinance of Hong Kong, all users and readers must also observe the following terms of use:

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from HKBU Scholars for the purpose of private study or research
- Users cannot further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- To share publications in HKBU Scholars with others, users are welcome to freely distribute the permanent publication URLs

Christine Guth. *Craft Culture in Early Modern Japan: Materials, Makers, and Mastery.* Franklin D. Murphy Lectures. Oakland: University of California Press, 2021. xi + 252 pp. \$45.41, cloth, ISBN 978-0-520-37981-7.



Reviewed by Radu Leca (Hong Kong Baptist University)

Published on H-Japan (February, 2024)

Commissioned by Martha Chaiklin

The word “craft” carries a lot of weight in relationship to Japanese culture. Most of that weight, however, is a product of invented traditions from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Even today, for instance, the website of the Japan Kōgei Association carries claims to “master the essence of traditional crafts.” *Kōgei* is a Meiji-period term for craft that is now promoted as a uniquely Japanese idiom. This encapsulates what Guth’s study seeks to overcome: Japanese exceptionalism and the modern framework for “tradition” that revolves around an unchanging “essence.” Instead, Guth eloquently delineates a historical and relational approach to craft culture, defined as “shared assumptions fundamental to ways and values of making that transcend the specifics of each practice” (p. 9).

The first chapter addresses the “materials” in the title from two perspectives. The first is that of resource management in early modern Japan: in direct contradiction to the general image of a Japanese “love for nature,” what emerges is a pragmatic exploitation of natural resources. I remem-

ber my noh theater instructor telling me that new stage fans feel different because their sticks can no longer be made from whale bone. This chapter shows that such concerns are not new. It brings a welcome emphasis on the environmental dimension of craft production, otherwise missing from discussion on this topic. The other perspective discussed in this chapter is that of attitudes toward nature as expressed by the neo-Confucian terms of “practical learning” and “investigation of nature.” With concise erudition, Guth demonstrates that it was not only natural resources but also their conceptualizations that were malleable and shifting in early modern Japan.

The second chapter focuses on the “makers” in the title, and their visual and verbal depictions. Guth reveals the complexity of early modern terms for artisan (jp. *shokunin*) and for craft (jp. *saiku*), which also included painting, for instance. Additionally, the chapter explains the intricacies of rural craft production, with an emphasis on division of labor and the crucial role of women. This is framed within an insightful overview of illus-

trated printed texts concerned with “the dissemination of practical and useful knowledge” for a discerning public across Japan (p. 106).

The relational approach to craft culture is particularly evident in the third chapter, which concerns training and the institutional frame of craft production. The emphasis is on collective production, either within the household or lineage (jp. *ie*), workshop, or guild. This infrastructure is fleshed out by case studies of two eighteenth-century lacquer “designer-makers.” A close reading of a genealogical manuscript of the Kōami school of lacquer makers is as close as one can hope to get to understanding the way of thinking of a workshop leader. This is followed by an object-based discussion of the type of lacquer objects produced by the Kōami school. The other lacquer specialist, Ogawa Haritsu, exemplifies horizontal social ascension in the craft world. This was nevertheless relational: skill was just as important as patronage and social connections. In this way, this and the following chapter address the issue of authorship: on the one hand, by reifying the “the unknown craftsman” as an agent that reacted and adapted to changing properties of materials, infrastructure, and market forces; on the other hand, demonstrating that “star” artisans such as Hiraga Gennai or Ogata Kenzan were not exceptional—rather, they are more amenable to the construction of a Western-style biographical profile of a lone agent. Instead, this chapter shows that craft practitioners were engaged in a complex array of negotiations and a continuous readjustment of a “house style.”

Material culture studies form the backbone of the fourth chapter, which is, at least according to this reviewer, the most transformational of received thinking. Object analysis (including a sophisticated discussion of a teabowl by Ogawa Haritsu) and technical descriptions are employed here to grasp at that most elusive embodied knowledge, its transmission and cultivation. Guth reconceptualizes the idea of a set form (jp. *kata*) as a dynamic process involving “corporeal modeling” and ac-

quiring “material consciousness” through repetition.[1] Attention is paid to the ways in which this process functioned in female practices, and to the availability of specialist knowledge in popular publications, which problematizes the idea of professional secrecy in the early modern period (p. 149). By exemplifying these ideas with a discussion of the practice of a contemporary swordsmith, Guth formulates a mode of thinking about craft alternative to that consecrated by the current system of Living National Treasure.

The perspective widens in the fifth chapter, which deals with technology and innovation in early modern Japan. The relational nature of craft culture is revealed by a discussion of the creativity behind import substitution. Guth argues that rather than comparisons with Europe, it is more fruitful to focus on intra-Asian and regional dynamics, particularly on “creative adaptations” of Chinese technology and illustrated texts. The discussion of craft production in Japan is thus put into dialogue with developments in China, and with the work of historians of technology such as Francesca Bray.

Craft practitioners emerge from this study as enterprising, connected, and adaptive makers. Guth rescues craft from serving as an ideological tool, showing it to be a dynamic process. On one level, this is a research guide to that process: each chapter demonstrates ways of extracting insight from interrelated historical sources, along with quasi-archaeological methods of reconstructing making practices from artifacts and environmental conditions. This is complemented by personal observations and contemporary documents, which even include a discussion of a YouTube video of a swordsmith at work. This eclectic range of interlocking approaches to craft culture is necessary for grasping such a complex topic. Despite its complexity, the study provides a clear vocabulary that enables conversation with recent studies that question the fixity and exceptionality of Japanese culture.[2] It configures a mode of inquiry

at the intersection of socioeconomic and artifact studies of early modern Japan.[3]

The study carves out a critical position that bypasses modern boundaries between art and design history. In this sense, it is apt that the book is dedicated to Guth's former colleagues and students at the Royal College of Art and Victoria & Albert Museum, which are at the forefront of rethinking understandings of artifacts. With analytical precision and a deft use of historical sources, this study unhinges paradigms, not just of craft, but also of Japan and of nature, and by doing so makes them available for further analysis. A fruitful avenue would be to engage the study of craft culture with elements of practice theory, such as the categories of infrastructure, devices, and resources proposed by Elizabeth Shove.

The pithy and polished nature of this study stems from decades of thinking on this topic. Adding to its persuasiveness are more than fifty illustrations, some of them double-spread, sourced from an impressive array of public and private institutions. This is lavish for a such a concise book, and enables the argument to be carried forward by the visual materials. Overall, the study should become essential reading for scholars of early modern Japan and of Japanese art and culture, as well as historians of science and technology in East Asia.

Notes

[1]. The concept of corporeal modeling is developed in a previous article: Christine M. E. Guth, "Modeling, Models, and Knowledge Exchange in Early Modern Japan," *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 71-72 (2019): 253-64.

[2]. For example, Jun Uchida, *Provincializing Empire: Omi Merchants in the Japanese Transpacific Diaspora* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2023).

[3]. For the former, see Susan Hanley, *Everyday Things in Premodern Japan: The Hidden Legacy of Material Culture* (Berkeley: University of

California Press, 1997); and Kären Wigen, *The Making of a Japanese Periphery, 1750-1920* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); for an example of the latter, see Louise Cort and Andrew Watsky, *Chigusa and the Art of Tea* (Washington, DC: Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, 2014).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-japan>

Citation: Radu Leca. Review of Guth, Christine, *Craft Culture in Early Modern Japan: Materials, Makers, and Mastery*. H-Japan, H-Net Reviews. February, 2024.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=59528>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.