

# Diagram of Modern Definitions of Craft: The Figurative Behaviour of Craft in the Japanese Folk Craft Movement

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*UNESCO's report has extended the definition of craft from 'visual arts' to the 'design and creative services domain' since the 2000s. The scope of the definition is extending further with industrial or economic development of producing area. However, we can also focus on the figurative behaviour of craft that induce civil participation and small and grassroots activities in local communities in Japan. Such behaviour can be attributed to Nomin-bijutsu (hereinafter called 'the Peasant Crafts movement') that began in 1919. This article discusses the potential of craft from the following two perspectives. One is the situational presence of craft, in which 'public' can be equated with 'recreation, education, and labour', 'visual' with 'aesthetics, simplicity, and expression', and 'domestic' with 'lifestyle, interior, and housework'. The other is the historical presence of craft, described as 'the Peasant Crafts movement', 'Yanagi's classification', and the 'enculturation of administration'. The former illustrates the potential of craft in the community. The latter includes the former in its definition of craft. Therefore, we can define the figurative behaviour of craft in Japanese theory and the system of craft. For example, although Yanagi's classification, which was published by art critic Muneyoshi (Soetsu) Yanagi (1889-1961) in 1928, theoretically separates 'folk craft' into 'guild-oriented (creative crafts)' and 'business-oriented (industrial craft)', this article clarifies that the Peasant Crafts product is a synonym of the concept of 'folk craft' in the context of unification of 'guild-oriented (creative crafts)' and 'business-oriented (industrial craft)' folk craft. It also indicates that the Peasant Crafts movement is opposed to the enculturation of administration in the context of change from village scale to city scale.*

**Keywords:** peasant art; community; arts and crafts; enculturation

## 1 Introduction: crafts as craft as small, grass-roots, and civil-participation activities

This article aims to clarify the contemporary definition of local craft in Japan. We can generally classify Japanese craft into two categories. One is craft as traditional visual art. It is designated as the technique of a superior craftsperson by the government. The other is craft as contemporary and simple products developed by local industry. For example, the farmer would be defined by art history in Japan. The latter category of craft would be defined by product development in a producing area. The Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI) supports the latter with the promotion enterprise such as The Wonder 500 project that selects crafts across Japan. It also has come from the fact that rapid economic growth left Japanese people materially satisfied but spiritually unsatisfied.

There is craft that cannot be classified by the above perspective. These are local crafts that should be defined by small, grass-roots, and civil-participation activities. Craft is recently expanding as culture in Japan. It is different from the *Maker Movement* defined by C. Anderson (1961-) or the indies movement defined by online marketplaces such as *Etsy*.

This article puts a spotlight on the Japanese peasant crafts movement of Nagano prefecture, *Nomin-bijutsu* (hereinafter called “the Peasant Crafts movement”), as a good example for defining local craft. It began as a side activity of peasants during winter in 1919 and is still active now. Although the movement has produced handmade crafts such as a small wooden figurines, boxes, and dishes [Figure 1], its manufacturing scale has been recently shrinking. However, we can review the movement as an achievement of design thinking that originated in local areas. This article talks about elite stances toward rural making and makers, and not rural making itself, in order to clarify the figurative behaviour of crafts.



Figure 1. (left) Wooden figure called *koppa-ningyo* (timber off-cuts doll); (right) Wooden dish with the carving of a duck. There were various styles of design during the Peasant Craft movement.

## 2 Literature review: development of the definition of craft

Previous articles have discussed the design value of the Peasant Crafts movement since the 1970s (Japan put an Act on the Promotion of Traditional Craft Industries into effect in 1974).

Tuzuki (1974) regarded it as ‘one of the design theories that tried to integrate fine art and applied art’. Works of the Peasant Crafts movement were positioned as early industrial designs. However, the article focused on aesthetical classification as fine art or applied art. We cannot constructively define the works of the Peasant Crafts movement as modern crafts from this perspective.

Yamaguchi (1995) contributed to the above issue in the context of the promotion of a village. She regarded the Peasant Crafts movement as internal activities that encouraged village life. Governmental policies for side activities of the village industry or the foundation of the Industrial Arts Institute led to the development of the export industry of Japanese crafts. This was an administrative project to commercialize Japanese folk art. However, should we regard the activities of peasants as part of the official movement? Doing so might ignore the fact the peasants’ subjectively or voluntarily planned crafts.

Tsujimoto (2005) responded to the above question. She pointed out the philosophical relation between the English Arts and Crafts movement and the Japanese Peasant Crafts movement. The design of the crafts can be regarded as a reflection of the value of their handicrafts. However, this conclusion takes back the Peasant Crafts movement to a retrospective preference for the medieval ages and further away from defining modern crafts.

Banks pointed out, 'Indeed, critics now suggested that even in more advanced, globalised economies, characterised by various kinds of "post-industrial" work, processes appear to resuscitate the condition of craft production' (Banks, 2007). When reviewing the Peasant Crafts movement today, we must innovatively define it in terms of modern crafts. Then, we can classify the changes in the definition of crafts into three developments as follows:

### **2.1 Development (1): conceptual extension as transversal domain**

*The International Symposium on 'Crafts and the International Market: Trade and Customs Codification'* defined crafts as 'those produced by artisans, either completely by hand or with the help of hand-tools or even mechanical means' (UNESCO, 1997). This definition focuses on 'the special nature of artisanal products'. This definition is stereotypical but popular among us. We believe the essence of crafts 'derives from their distinctive features, which can be utilitarian, aesthetic, artistic, creative, culturally attached, decorative, functional, traditional, religiously and socially symbolic, and significant' in this case. However, *the 2009 UNESCO Framework for Cultural Statistics* revised the definition later as follows: 'Many crafts objects are produced industrially...Contemporary crafts are not in *Visual Arts and Crafts*, but are included in Domain F, *the Design and Creative Services* domain' (Pol, 2009). The Domain F is a category of that 'covers activities, goods, and services resulting from the creative, artistic, and aesthetic design of objects, buildings, and landscape' (this domain includes Intangible Cultural Heritage, Archiving and Preserving, Education and Training, and Equipment and Supporting Materials). Crafts should be presented as a transversal domain now. For example, the skills to manufacture crafts are intangible cultural heritage. We can see cultural value in the elaborate motion of hands and arms manufacturing crafts as performing art now.

Value lies only in skilful artisans; it does not focus on whether people belong to small, grassroots, or civil-participation activities.

### **2.2 Development (2): sociological extension with craft-community and craft-association**

*Creative Economy Report* (UNESCO, 2013) introduces two notable facts: one is that craft had already developed as a cultural industry in Africa, Arab states, and Asia-Pacific, etc., the other is that craft manufacturing forms each communities' cultural industry in the local economy. Craft manufacturing put the labour force together to create profit and employment in economically developing areas. This report also pointed out an issue to realise craft-community in the creative industry. For example, a nongovernmental body, the Vietcraft Association of Handicraft Exporters said integrating design thinking into the craft value chain remains an uphill battle because of a lack of resources and knowledge. Policymakers need greater capacity to understand how individual creative workers and small cultural enterprises operate, and closer links need to be built between them and creative workers. In this context, as there are no independent sub-regional cultural agencies, professional associations have an important role to play as they are familiar with the assets, needs, and possibilities of each industry branch.

However, past reports might exaggeratedly regard craftspeople as high-level specialists or expect them in strategic, general, and cross-sectional roles. An artisan of the Peasant Crafts movement, Toshiharu Ozawa, vice-president of the above NPO enjoys talking with people at a citizen's workshop on craft-making. Open and liberal relationships between him and other citizens there makes us aware of the fact that he is a part of the community. Although his behaviour might be small, grass-roots, and not innovative, his activity is important to promote craft within the community. Therefore, we would also need modern definition on craft that can explain this perspective.

### **2.3 Development (3): discourse extension with socio-technical industry**

Karin Hansson introduced the complex roles of design with designers who work with vulnerable craft communities in India through NGO founder Annapurna Mamidipudi's interview with a designer. The designer mediated the tension between traditional craft economies and capitalist markets. Mamidipudi pointed out that 'three positions of designer on a scale of epistemologies, ranging from "intervention", where the designer enables economic development in a crafts community; to support of "inter-action", where craftspeople actively participate in socio-technical networks of production; to "mediations" in which craftspeople are treated by the designer as experts in their own right' (Hansson, *et al.*, 2018). Discourse of craftspeople is equivalent to designers and policymakers who approach the local craft as mediators.

However, the stakeholders are not only the designers or craftsmen, but also the villagers and peasants; their integration forms a local community. We should summarise the above developments as the interface between traditional idioms and contemporary society. Therefore, we can regard crafts as innovative representations of the local community.

## **3 Research aims**

This article focuses on the figurative behaviour of crafts that induce civil participation and small and grassroots activities in local communities in Japan to define modern crafts, another development in producing areas. We can not only observe the figurative behaviours of craft but can also place the behaviours in the context of Japanese theory and the system of craft to understand the extended definition of craft in local communities of Japan.

## **4 Research methods**

This article arranges the potential of craft into the following two perspectives. One is the situational presence of craft, in which 'public' can be equated with 'recreation, education, and labour', 'visual' with aesthetics, simplicity, and expression', and 'domestic' with 'lifestyle, interior, and housework'. The other is the historical presence of craft, described as 'the Peasant Crafts movement', 'Yanagi's classification', and the 'enculturation of administration'. The former illustrates the potential of craft in the community. The latter includes the former in its definition of craft. Therefore, we can define the figurative behaviour of craft in Japanese theory and the system of craft.

We might question why this article will not deal with the history of Japanese craft before the modern age. The major premise to study the history of Japanese craft is the fact that the definition and word of 'craft' did not exist in Japanese philosophy. The present Japanese term, *kogei* (craft), was either translated from Western terms or artificially created at the beginning of the Meiji period (1868-1912) in response to modernisation and Westernisation.

The term previously used, *gigei* (technical art), implied both the concepts of 'fine art' and 'craft' (Kikuchi, 1994). When crafts have been exaggeratedly Japanese for foreign preference, namely, *Japonism*, the definition of craft greatly developed alongside business-oriented industry and utilitarianism for export. As a result, the definition of *kogei* formed to encompass a broad concept ranging from technology, science, and engineering, to manufacturing and crafts since the 1880s.

This article focuses on the definition that does not come from encompasses technology, science, and engineering. Therefore, it also regard present the Peasant Crafts product as part of the post-industrial transition of craft.

## **5 Situational presence of the Peasant Crafts movement**

A painter, Kanae Yamamoto (1882-1946), who studied abroad in Paris after graduating art school, established the Peasant Crafts movement. Yamamoto collected wooden toys from Russia during his return journey to Japan. It was an inspiration for the movement. Russia had a rich wooden object culture because the wood manufacturing industry could survive in long and severe winters.

Yamamoto described, 'there is an area called Talashkino in Smolensk Oblast, Russia. The interesting art movement was occurring there about twenty years ago. Statues, paintings, embroideries, weavings, dyeing, and ceramics made peasant's houses, furnishers, and clothes beautiful... This movement seems to be in response to art movement famous for English William Morris'. (Yamamoto, 1924) Yamamoto applied this experience and knowledge to the Peasant Crafts movement. Peasants imitated it at the beginning of the movement. This manufacturing state was regulated by the workshop facilities of the village. Peasants used woodworking machines such as a hollow chisel mortise, plainer, and turner in the 1920s (Kangawamura kyodo kenkyukai, 1973).

### **5.1 Situational presence: 'public' can be equated with 'labour, recreation, and education'**

When the movement established a Tokyo branch office in 1927, Yamamoto wrote about his trouble as follows: 'a thinker looks at the properties of creative labour and the spread of subline-value to encourage themselves. [However] artists are not interested in running it as a business with an industrial mission even though they focus on the name of the Peasant Crafts movement with admiration for its primitive design and skill. On the contrary, they showed his feeling that was not gladdened by the appearance of such arts' (Yamamoto, 1921). A novelist, Roan Uchida (1868-1929) summarised this trouble in the movement, 'simplicity and plainness in the life of the Peasant Crafts movement would disappear if they were educated'.

However, Yamamoto and Uchida would overlook the fact that the peasants awoke the concept of recreation. The peasants would be excited by Western methods of arts, crafts, and its culture. A peasant said, 'to learn carving made my life brighter... I came to realise the individual beauties in the looks of peasants who worked in the field' (Yamaguchi, 1995). The Peasant Crafts movement did not only give job to peasants. He also built a wooden laboratory to train peasants to produce crafts and to develop them with semi-Western style architecture. Yamamoto also invited professional artists from Tokyo to train the peasants. They were young and ambitious sculptors such as Hakurei Yoshida (1872-1942), Goro Kimura (1899-1935), and Tsuruzo Ishii (1887-1973). Ishii would become an authority on

sculpture in Japan and worked as a professor at Tokyo University of Art and Music. The peasant learned how to produce a small wooden figures from them. Therefore, the peasants were basically educated with modernist sensibilities. The simple and plain design of wooden figures comes from this modern and academic education. They also held a culture festival in the village to enjoy classical music by J. S. Bach, drama by J. A. Strindberg, and lectures by Yamamoto and an oil painter, Kazumasa Nakagawa (1893-1991), etc. Craft made their life active. The Peasant Crafts movement was placed in the cultural motivation of the village-scale. We can regard this feeling as awakening to peasant art. The Peasant Crafts movement would provide fresh air to the conventional society of *Kangawa* village. It would bring cooperation, liberal arts, and identity to the peasants.

### **5.2 Situational presence: 'visual' can be equated with 'aesthetics, simplicity, and expression'**

Russian contemporary aesthetics were popular in Japan. For example, Tolstoy's *What is Art* (1897) was published in a Japanese version (1931). 'Artistic activity will then be accessible to all men. It will become accessible to the whole people, because, in the first place, in the art of the future, not only will that complex technique, which deforms the productions of the art of to-day and requires so great an effort and expenditure of time, not be demanded, but, on the contrary, the demand will be for clearness, simplicity, and brevity—conditions mastered, not by mechanical exercises, but by the education of taste' (Tolstoy, 1897). The Peasant Crafts movement was avant-garde in craft with such philosophy; it was a great achievement of amateurs in this context. The peasants could produce the crafts within half of a year. They began to imitate Russian crafts such as a bowl, paper knife, or shelf, etc. with wooden figures. They were practical and daily goods. The wooden figures expressed the true picture of peasants who worked in the field. They respected the popular fact that they were peasants; they were labours. Yamamoto took a little wooden shelf from Russia that had a relief of the Russian fairy tale, *Finist the Falcon Prince*. The peasants changed the relief on the shelf from prince to Japanese cherry blossoms. Its flowers are elaborate and realistic in comparison to the Russian ones. There is also vertical lined pattern of carving behind them. The language of cherry blossoms is 'purity', 'nice beauty', etc. in Japan. The change is not only its motif but also its expression. Peasants who designed this shelf changed the imaginary motif for children to a sophisticated craft for adults.

### **5.3 Situational presence: 'domestic' can be equated with 'lifestyle, interior, and housework'**

The movement marked the introduction of a new lifestyle into village life. Yamamoto wrote his plan for the Peasant Crafts movement *kengyo no shuisyo* (The prospectus for the foundation of the Peasant Crafts movement, 1919). It said, 'our goods list covers wooden toys, carved stationary, decorative trays, embroidery, dyed table cloths, cushions, cloth for bags, simple ceramics, chairs, tables, little furniture like a book shelf, and wallpaper'(Yamamoto, 1919). We can read three representations of this description. Firstly, he imagined a the Peasant Crafts interior with a Western lifestyle. The above products were rare in conventional Japanese-style interiors. The school, bank, and theatre only apply the Western style to architecture and its furnishings through early modernisation of the 1920s. The movement aimed to establish a modern lifestyle with Western-style product design to change their tradition and vernacularism. Western design means modern for them, in this case. The peasants of *Kangawa* village were more intellectual and modern. Secondly, the above description seems to look over a room where the Peasant Crafts products were here

and there. We should focus on the collective preference in it. This ‘profusion, piling high are clearly the most striking descriptive features’ of consumer society (Baudrillard, 1970). The movement truly projected luxurious dream more than the sum of Western products. The Peasant Crafts movement unveiled the fact that the peasants held pleasure-seeking consumer minds. Thirdly, we know the fact that this interest in interiors came from housework, a modern theme of philosophy. G. Bachelard described this point in his book, *The Poetics of Space* as, ‘Objects that are cherished in this way really are born of an intimate light, and they attain to a higher degree of reality than indifferent objects, or those that are defined by geometric reality. For they produce a new reality of being, and they take their place not only in an order but in a community of order. From one object in a room to another, housewifely care weaves the ties that unite a very ancient past to the new epoch. The housewife awakens furniture that was asleep’. (Bachelard, 1958). The Peasant Crafts movement would publicly put the spotlight on the housewife as keyperson in the interior.

## 6 Historical presence of the Peasant Crafts movement

Although the Peasant Crafts movement developed in 1920s, it also experienced a standstill during World War II in 1940s, high economic growth since the 1950s, economic stagnation since the 1990s, and the development of the domestic culture administration since the 2000s. This article focuses on the following two events featuring local crafts to include the situational presences above in the modern definition of craft in Japan.

### 6.1 Yanagi’s classification

A philosopher, Muneyoshi (Soetsu) Yanagi (1889-1961), defined craft with following diagram in his book, *Kogei no michi* (The Road of Craft, 1928):

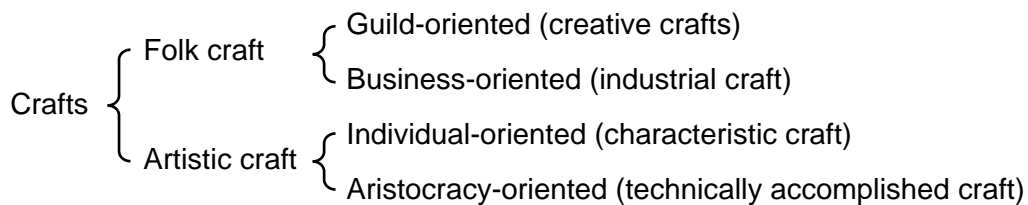


Figure 2. Yanagi’s classification of modern craft (1922)

Yanagi’s philosophy offered a matrix of the definition of craft at that time. He classifies the definition of craft into ‘Folk craft’ and ‘Artistic craft’. The latter means craft as fine art. ‘Aristocracy-oriented’ craft included products for export that showed exaggerated Japanese taste for foreign preference, namely *Western Japonism*. *Kiri-kosho-kuwaisha* and *Yamanaka-shokai* were leading companies that produced and exported elaborate craft.

The definition of ‘Folk crafts’ comprises ‘Guild-oriented (creative crafts)’ and ‘Business-oriented (industrial crafts)’. The latter indicates the fact that the concept of folk craft includes industrial design. They were not conceptually separated at this time. For example, some early modern design of chair often applied conventional bamboo-weaving from the 1930s to 1940s. Because craftspeople were strongly inspired by Scandinavian design, they substituted the word *kurafuto* that came from *craft* for *kogei* in Japanese (Hida, 2004). They truly positioned themselves as opposites to artistic craftspeople who seemed be far away from actual life. The *Kurafuto* school as an artist group was mainly active from the 1970s to 1980s.

Craftspeople of this school have held design exhibitions since 1953. Their themes supposed products for actual life such as ‘things for children’, ‘flower vase’, ‘lamp shade’, ‘tableware’, ‘crafts for life we can buy at 1,000 yen’, etc. It showed modern definition of crafts with practical design, tasteful material textures, and elaborate details of Japanese tradition. Craftspeople of local industries across Japan followed this definition to design their products because its design balances between mass-production and added value from being handmade.

Banks pointed out, ‘Arguably, under individualised conditions, we can identify something of a shift back to “authentic” forms of production (local, traditional, “natural” or “organic”) and a revalorisation of craft production amongst cultural producers as they seek out the benefits of these internal rewards’ (Becker, 1982; Lash, 1994; Banks, 2007). This point is true not only for craft in the post-industrial age but also for craft in the early industrial age of Yanagi’s classification. This genealogy is still continuing. As mentioned above, the Japanese METI selects the best local crafts across Japan to promote crafts through enterprises such as The Wonder 500.

## **6.2 ‘enculturation of administration’ policy**

This definition of craft extended with the local administration climate in the 1970s-80s. The climate called ‘enculturation of administration’ was popular in local areas in the context of critiquing homogeneous and utilitarian management of high economic growth. Osaka Prefectural Government implemented a culture promotion section in 1973. Hyogo (1974), Saitama (1976), and Kanagawa (1976) also initialised it later. Tadao Kiyonari and Satoshi Morito arrange ‘enculturation of administration’ as ten projects: to establish a laboratory centre that researches and develops local products, to found a museum that provides information on the tradition of the local area, and to establish a school that trains the people in craftsmanship or opens courses on local culture, etc. (Kiyonari and Morito, 1980). The definitions of such policy influenced the scenery of producing areas: traditional local design of products applies to a wider context of architecture. Craft has administrative properties in this climate. The Japanese National Land Agency defined culture activities as follows in *Research on the state of local culture leadership and its training method* (1982): (1) activities that plan research, study, conservation, and training local history, tradition, entertainment, nature, cultural heritage, and scenery; (2) creation and performance of citizen visual art, literature, music, plays, and movies, etc.; and (3) learning the cultural value of citizen study and mastery of folk song, reciting Chinese poems, tea and flower arrangement, dance, dressmaking, and language (Uno, 1983).

Local governments came to respect the importance of civil participation to decide policy on local culture. According to Japanese Cabinet Office research on cultural activities of the Japanese, we can see the change in the civil participation as follows (Table 1):



Table1: Have you made an artwork or art performance within the last year?

|  | 1987 | 1996 | 2003 | 2009 | 2016 |
|--|------|------|------|------|------|
| Creation experience in literature, music, and visual art, etc. (%) | 3.8  | 4.5  | 4.7  | 7.4  | 6.8  |
| Participation in local festival or event (%)                       | -    | -    | -    | 10.1 | 13.8 |
| Not particularly (%)   | 81.7 | 82.1 | 83.5 | 76.1 | 71.3 |

Source: This table arranges the results of five research projects entitled 'Opinion polls on culture' from 1987 to 2016.

The number people who made artwork in the last year is increasing in Japan. Its largest category of 'artwork or art performance' was participating in a local festival or event. 'Creation experience in literature, music, and visual art etc.' would go along with 'Participation in local festival or event'.

UNESCO observed the 'cultural participation' in policies and trends in cultural industries as follows: 'Thus, cultural participation includes cultural practices that may involve consumption as well as activities that are undertaken within the community, reflecting quality of life, traditions, and beliefs. It includes attendance at formal and for-fee events, such as going to a movie or to a concert, as well as informal cultural action, such as participating in community cultural activities and amateur artistic productions or everyday activities like reading a book' (UNESCO, 2009).

Craft produces recreation, education, and hobby content in daily life with its manufacture, appreciation, and collection.

## 7 Conclusion

### 7.1 The Peasant Crafts movement, Yanagi's classification, and 'enculturation of administration' policy

We can include the 'situational presence' of craft above in the definition of craft, as shown in Figure 2.

(Comparison of Phase 1 with 2) Although Yanagi's classification arranges the definition of local craft into some categories, the Peasant Crafts products unifies 'Guild-oriented' with 'Business-oriented' as folk crafts. They are creative crafts with an apprentice system but industrial craft for peasants' side work is as mentioned above. The Peasant Crafts products seem to have this dual character from such viewpoints as Yanagi's classification. User-oriented definitions of Peasant Crafts products would be latent under Yanagi's classification (that is, it displays maker-oriented definitions).

(Comparison of Phase 1 with 3) The 'enculturation of administration' promotes craft with workshops or civil participation. However, it does not actually deal with the internal, subjective, specialist, or internal dynamics seen in the 'situational presence' of the Peasant Crafts lifestyle. Therefore, the Peasant Crafts movement is opposed to the enculturation of administration in the context of change from village scale to city scale. Although the 'enculturation of administration', as a policy, made civilian life cultural, the Peasant Crafts movement respected the value of peasants' lives as an irreplaceable culture.

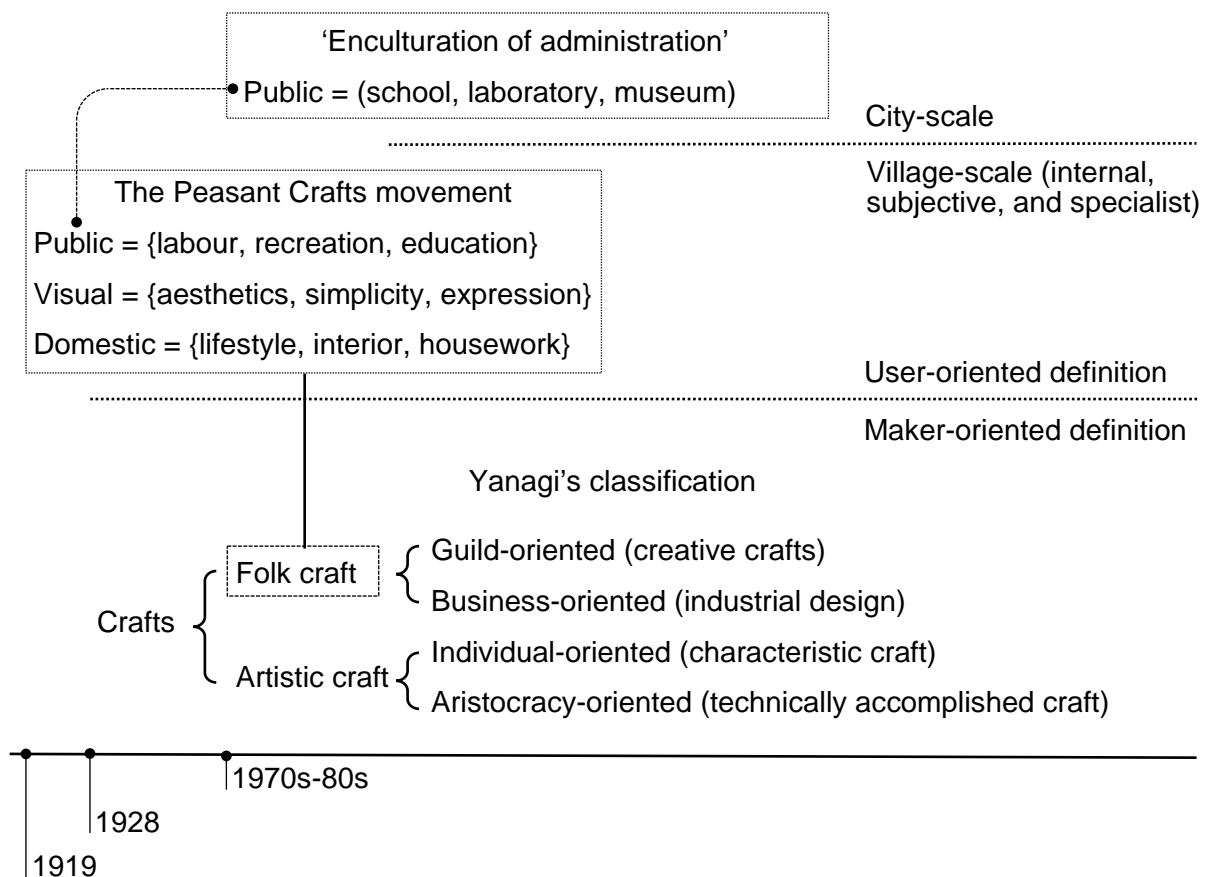


Figure 2. Extension of Yanagi's classification with the Peasant Crafts movement and 'enculturation of administration'.

## 7.2 The Peasant Crafts movement as design thinking

We can see a portrayal of the figurative behaviour of craft in the diagram above. The features of the Peasant Crafts movement are in the middle of the maker-oriented and user-oriented definitions; the peasants were both makers and users.

The diagram above might also indicate the birth of 'design thinking' in local communities. As Nigel Cross points out, 'A central feature of design activity, then, is its reliance on generating fairly quickly a satisfactory solution, rather than on any prolonged analysis of the problem' (Cross, 1982). Peasant Crafts was a solution for peasants to make public and domestic spaces creative or innovative through visual arts. We can interpret the diagram above as a formula to explain modern definitions of post-industrial craft.

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