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Japan's approach to craft art in the International Art Market

Maria Catarina Baluarte Cavaquinho

Master in Art Markets

Supervisor:
PhD. Luís Urbano de Oliveira Afonso, Senior Associate Professor,
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History Department

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Abstract

This thesis explores how Japanese craft art is positioned, perceived, and promoted in the international art market, focusing on London as a key hub. Using cultural economics and art market theory, it traces the historical, cultural, and policy frameworks shaping craft's global trajectory, from the Meiji-era art–craft divide to contemporary cultural diplomacy and market initiatives. The research employs a multi-case study of Japan House London, the Victoria and Albert Museum, Collect art fair, and Flow Gallery, analysed across four dimensions: positioning strategy, market engagement, marketing, and audience impact. Findings show that Japanese craft circulates through a complementary yet fragmented ecosystem: diplomacy frames it as living heritage, museums confer authority, art fairs integrate it into fine art circuits, and galleries cultivate collectors. This ecosystem generates visibility and symbolic value but also perpetuates tensions between heritage and innovation, symbolic and market value, and breadth versus depth of engagement. The study argues that coordinated strategies linking diplomacy, curatorial practice, market channels, and artisans' voices are vital to strengthening global positioning while preserving cultural integrity.

Keywords: Japanese craft art, international art market, cultural heritage, art-craft divide, cultural diplomacy, preservation vs innovation

Resumo

Esta tese explora a forma como a arte artesanal japonesa é posicionada, percecionada e promovida no mercado internacional de arte, com enfoque em Londres como um centro-chave. Recorre à economia da cultura e à teoria do mercado de arte para traçar os enquadramentos históricos, culturais e políticos que moldaram a trajetória global do artesanato, desde a divisão entre arte e artesanato na era Meiji até à diplomacia cultural e às iniciativas de mercado contemporâneas. A investigação utiliza um estudo de caso múltiplo envolvendo a Japan House London, o Victoria and Albert Museum, a feira de arte Collect e a Flow Gallery, analisados em quatro dimensões: estratégia de posicionamento, envolvimento com o mercado, marketing e impacto no público. Os resultados mostram que o artesanato japonês circula através de um ecossistema complementar mas fragmentado: a diplomacia enquadra-o como património vivo, os museus conferem-lhe autoridade, as feiras de arte integram-no nos circuitos da arte

erudita e as galerias cultivam colecionadores. Este ecossistema gera visibilidade e valor simbólico, mas também perpetua tensões entre património e inovação, valor simbólico e valor de mercado, e entre a amplitude e a profundidade do envolvimento. O estudo defende que estratégias coordenadas que articulem diplomacia, prática curatorial, canais de mercado e vozes dos artesãos são fundamentais para reforçar o posicionamento global, preservando simultaneamente a integridade cultural.

Palavras-chave: arte artesanal japonesa, mercado internacional de arte, património cultural, distinção entre arte-artesanato, diplomacia cultural, preservação vs. inovação

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Introduction

Japan's approach to craft art occupies a unique and influential position within its cultural and artistic heritage, where the boundaries between functional craftsmanship and fine art are often blurred. Over centuries, Japanese artisans have developed a profound tradition of producing ceramics, lacquerware, metalwork, textiles, and carvings, works renowned globally for their technical mastery and aesthetic sophistication (Mignosa & Kotipalli, 2019; Irvine, 2016). This enduring legacy reflects not only Japan's respect for craftsmanship but also challenges the dichotomy between craft and fine art that dominates Western cultural tradition and much of the global art market.

In recent decades, efforts to preserve and promote traditional crafts have gained momentum through initiatives such as the Mingei Movement and government programs designed to safeguard intangible cultural assets. Scholarly publications, including *Folk Crafts Monthly*, have also sought to document and disseminate the value of these traditions (Kakiuchi, 2014). Yet, despite these endeavours, significant challenges remain. Government efforts alone have proven insufficient in securing a prominent place for Japanese craft art in the international art market, where its reception often lacks parity with fine art (Goto, 2019). This disparity raises important questions about how traditional Japanese craft art is perceived, positioned, and promoted on the global stage, particularly within a market that, as Iain Robertson (2016) explains, is dominated by contemporary art narratives.

This research seeks to address a critical gap in understanding the relationship between Japanese craft art and the international art market. Specifically, it investigates how these crafts are integrated into the global art ecosystem, the factors contributing to their success or struggles, and the delicate balance between meeting market demands and preserving cultural specificity.

In order to do so, this thesis proceeds in two steps. First, it reviews the historical, cultural, and policy frameworks that have shaped Japanese craft art, from its Meiji redefinition as kōgei and the legacy of the Mingei movement, to the state's postwar heritage laws and contemporary cultural diplomacy initiatives. These developments also reveal how the category of kōgei has been constructed, with artistic and high-quality traditions increasingly distinguished from industrial or mass-produced forms. This

background context draws on government publications, institutional reports from bodies such as METI (Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry) and Bunkachō (Agency for Cultural Affairs Japan)[1], and scholarly discussions on the art–craft divide, allowing us to understand the forces that frame craft within Japan and beyond.

Subsequently, the thesis applies these insights through a focused multi-case study of the United Kingdom, specifically London as the world's second-largest art market (Art Basel & UBS, 2025). Within this framework, institutions such as Japan House London, the Victoria and Albert Museum, Collect: International Art Fair for Contemporary Craft and Design, and Flow Gallery are used as analytical lenses to trace the dynamics shaping Japanese craft art's international presence. Each embodies a distinct mode of engagement, diplomacy, curatorial authority, market visibility, and collector participation, together providing a sample of the symbolic and economic forces influencing Japanese craft's reception abroad.

This thesis will not attempt to cover the full range of Japanese craft traditions, nor will it focus on profiling well-known contemporary artists. Its aim is not to catalogue objects or evaluate aesthetic qualities, but to understand the conditions under which Japanese craft, , examined in its artistic, high-quality forms, is positioned and interpreted internationally. The analysis concentrates on the institutional, policy, and market contexts that influence how Japanese craft is framed, displayed, and promoted abroad. While it acknowledges the importance of makers' voices and the diversity of regional traditions, these aspects remain outside the central scope of this study. Instead, selected case studies are used to illustrate broader dynamics, highlighting both the opportunities and the obstacles that shape the visibility of Japanese craft in the global art market.

[1] METI oversees traditional craft industries and administers the Densan Act; Bunkachō is responsible for cultural property designation, including Living National Treasures.

Historical and Cultural Context of Japanese craft art

To fully understand the evolution of Japanese craft art it is important to first understand the evolution of the terms "art" and "craft" themselves, particularly within the context of Japanese culture. Prior to the Meiji era (1868–1912), Japan did not have a distinct term for “fine art” as understood in the Western tradition. Craftsmanship and artistry were unified under the concept of *kōgei* (*工芸*, meaning ‘craft technique’), a term encompassing both aesthetic and functional creations without imposing a strict hierarchy. Painted decoration could appear on both folding screens and ceramic vessels, illustrating an approach in which artistic value was often associated with functionality and craftsmanship (Goto, 2019).

This began to change in the Meiji Period, a transformative time of societal and political reform, as noted by many scholars. Japan sought to redefine its national identity in response to globalization and modernization, aiming to align its art world with Western standards while preserving traditional practices. This shift was driven by state-led industrialization and the adoption of Western-style institutions, particularly through the founding of art schools, state exhibitions, and structured courses in drawing and design. Technical drawing (*zuan* 図案), meaning designs, patterns, or technical sketches, was institutionalized in schools such as the Kōbu Bijutsu Gakkō (1876) and later the Tokyo School of Fine Arts (1887). It trained artisans to produce standardized designs suited to industrial production, especially in textiles, ceramics, and metalwork. For craftspeople, reliant on individualized production, this posed major pressure: they had to adapt to *zuan*-based systems prioritizing efficiency and replication. These reforms redefined the aesthetics of craft within modern notions of beauty, compelling artisans to reframe their value or risk marginalization. This tension was critical in forming what today we understand as craft art in Japan (Morais, 2019; Satō, 2011).

Liliana Morais, a researcher in the Sociology of Contemporary Culture specializing in the intersection of art, craft, and mobility, provides a global and comparative perspective on the evolution of craft-related terminology in Japan. She highlights Japan's participation in the 1873 Vienna World Exhibition as a pivotal moment. It was the newly established Meiji government’s first major international presentation and played a key role in reshaping Japan’s global image, especially in artistic terms. After Japan’s forced

opening to the West in 1868, the government began showcasing Japanese crafts at international expositions, and over the following decades, Western concepts of "fine art" (painting, sculpture) were increasingly adopted. Building on this momentum, the Meiji government sent Japanese art students to Europe to study Western techniques and aesthetics, while simultaneously reforming domestic art and industrial education to integrate design principles that aligned with international standards and modern industry (Satō, 2011).

Complementing this view, Kazuko Goto offers an economic and policy-centred perspective on these shifts in her chapter on Japanese craft policies in the book *A Cultural Economic Analysis of Craft*. She reinforces how in the pre-Meiji period, the lack of a separate word for "fine art" in Japan reflected a more integrated worldview where art and craft were not hierarchically opposed. In fact, the Japanese government made deliberate linguistic and conceptual translations: "art" was rendered as *bijutsu (美術)*, referring primarily to painting and sculpture, while "craft" was translated as *kōgei*, which included ceramics, lacquerware, and metalwork, categories that in the Western tradition are typically grouped under the "decorative arts." Yet even then, Goto notes crafts were only loosely split into "artistic crafts" and "industrial crafts," and the border between them remained vague, reflecting the enduring historical fluidity of Japanese visual culture. This ambiguity helped set the stage for modern Japanese craft art, where traditional techniques, materials and workmanship are not only appreciated aesthetically but are also bearers of cultural identity.

The Vienna Exhibition underscored an emerging Western fascination with Japanese craftsmanship, fuelled by *Japonism*, a romanticized image of Japan as peaceful, aesthetic, and exotic. In response to this interest, the Japanese government actively promoted craft production as a national industry. Institutions such as the Government Craft Design Office (1876) and the Japan Art Association (1879) were founded to support export-oriented production that catered to Western tastes. In this new context, the government began to distinguish between different types of craft. By 1885, the term *bijutsu kōgei* (artistic crafts) was introduced to elevate certain traditional practices, while *kōgyō kōgei* (industrial crafts) referred to mass-produced items. Even with this differentiation, the boundary between artistic and industrial crafts remained fluid, still echoing with Japan's pre-modern flexible concepts (Goto, 2019; Morais, 2019).

Even so, challenges arose in Japan's efforts to institutionalize and promote its crafts on the international stage. The Ministry of Education's official Art Exhibition (later named the Imperial Art Exhibition) adopted Western categories that prioritised fine arts *bijutsu* such as painting and sculpture, excluding crafts. Artisans were instead consigned to exhibitions organized by the Ministry of Commerce and Agriculture (Morais, 2019). This reflected the internalization of a Western-style hierarchy, even though historically, Japanese aesthetics did not separate fine art from functional beauty. Meanwhile, the early popularity of Japanese crafts abroad led to a push for mass production to meet demand. By the 1900 Paris Exhibition, however, this shift toward industrialization had compromised quality, resulting in diminished international interest and a loss of cultural prestige (Goto, 2019).

A significant shift occurred in the interwar period (1918–1941), when Japan's crafts began embracing individual creativity and artistic authorship influenced by modernist trends. This shift culminated in the emergence of the Mingei (Folk Crafts, or also translated as 'Art of the People') Movement in the 1920s and 1930s. It was a key development in Japan's craft heritage. Led by philosopher Yanagi Sōetsu and potters like Hamada Shōji and Kawai Kanjirō, the movement sought to reclaim the beauty of the handmade, everyday object. It valued the anonymous artisan and challenged the fine art/craft divide imposed by modernization (Morais, 2019).

This revivalist character of the movement meant that handcrafted utensils and art pieces were pervasive in daily life, blurring the line between functional item and art object. A chipped teacup or a woven cloth could embody serene beauty and spiritual value in the Japanese home. A clear example is the work of master potter Miwa Kyūwa, later in 1970 designated a "Living National Treasures" (*人間国宝 ningen kokuhō*) under a system introduced by Bunkachō to recognize master artisans and safeguard important craft techniques. His Hagi ware ceramics feature intentionally irregular, opaque white glazes that capture the wabi-sabi ideals of naturalness and "imperfect" beauty. The Mingei movement's emphasis on the beauty of functional folk crafts, such as ceramics, textiles, lacquerware, and woodwork, signalled a shift in the perception of craft. Objects that were traditionally made for everyday use became recognized for their inherent beauty and spiritual value. Thus, the enduring legacy of this movement reinforced a national narrative in which traditional craft techniques were not only artistic but emblematic of

cultural identity, a belief that continues to shape the positioning of Japanese craft art in contemporary markets.

Figure 1 *Oni (Devil) Hagi Teabowl [Stoneware with feldspar glaze], by Miwa Kyūsetsu XI, 1988–89. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.*

Morais argues this very same concept of tradition has often been constructed, “invented”, in order to promote certain values and behaviours by creating a sense of continuity with the past.

As museum curator Masane Naito explained to NPR American University Radio during an interview at the exhibition celebrating the 100 years of the movement, at the Prefectural Museum of Art and Design in Toyama, Japan, the founders of the Mingei movement, including Muneyoshi Yanagi, sought to elevate everyday objects as works of art. Mingei objects were typically simple, rustic, and intended for daily use, yet the movement insisted they be “*used as much as enjoyed*,” "*Used as much as admired,*" aligning with traditional Japanese values, collapsing the boundary between aesthetic contemplation and utilitarian function. This was a profound reimagining of the role of craft in both the art world and society at large (Naito, 2025).

Mingei was also influenced by England’s Arts and Crafts movement in the sense that it reacted against Japan’s rapid industrialization. The movement preserved and revitalized local craft traditions across Japan. It ultimately established philosophical groundwork for viewing crafts as culturally significant art, laying the ideological foundation for today’s blurred boundaries between craft and fine art in Japan’s artistic culture (Morais, 2019).

The inclusion of crafts in the Imperial Art Exhibition in 1927 marked a turning point, highlighting the emergence of artist-craftsmen and the growing recognition of craft as an

artistic medium. Department stores played a key role in promoting Mingei through exhibitions, capitalizing on a growing nationalist sentiment. By the 1930s, interest in traditional ceramics, particularly those used in tea ceremonies, had revived, with artists like Arakawa Toyozō and Kaneshige Tōyō researching ancient kiln techniques. This revival and the Mingei ideal laid the foundation for the ongoing transformation of the craft scene in Japan, continuing to influence contemporary Japanese craft artists and patrons (Morais, 2019).

The concept of craft art in contemporary Japan has remained largely consistent since this period, still centred on the ongoing balance between tradition and modernity. This continuity has been strengthened by cultural heritage policies, which will be discussed in the next section. Recently, Western interest in blurring the boundary between art and craft has grown, potentially creating new opportunities for Japan's distinctive craft market. Glenn Adamson (*Thinking Through Craft*, 2007) emphasizes that craft has come to be valued not merely for its utilitarian function but as a critical field that destabilizes traditional hierarchies between art, design, and material culture. Similarly, Anna Mignosa and Priyatej Kotipalli (*A Cultural Economic Analysis of Craft*, 2019) highlight how the repositioning of craft within the global market reflects a growing demand for authenticity and materiality, often perceived as a counterbalance to the dominance of conceptual and digital art. Although it is too soon to judge the depth or durability of this trend.

Government Programs and Domestic Institutional Support

Interestingly, Goto (2019) points out how the Mingei movement, though initially anti-modern and grassroot, became institutionalized, especially through the designation of Mingei artists as "Living National Treasures" starting in 1955. This marked its absorption into national policy frameworks, transforming it into a commodified and widely recognized concept.

Morais on the other hand argues how the Japanese governmental and institutional support has played a central role in preserving craft traditions and enhancing their status both domestically and internationally. In the aftermath of World War II, as part of broader efforts to rebuild cultural identity, authorities introduced measures to safeguard traditional arts. This major step came in 1950 with the enactment of the *Law for the Protection of Cultural Properties* (*文化財保護法 Bunkazai Hogohō*), which recognized crafts as vital cultural assets. That same year, the Law for the Protection of Intangible Cultural Properties was also passed, specifically aimed at preserving endangered techniques and skills in crafts such as pottery, weaving, lacquer, and other applied arts. These laws laid the groundwork for a national strategy that treats crafts not merely as historical objects but as living practices to be maintained and transmitted (Morais, 2019).

Building on the earlier case of Miwa Kyūwa, under *Bunkachō*, since 1954 onward Bunkachō has recognized select leading artisans in ceramics, lacquer, textiles, and metalwork as Holders of Important Intangible Cultural Properties. Popularly known as 'Living National Treasures' (人間国宝 *ningen kokuhō*), these figures receive public stipends and are entrusted with preserving and transmitting endangered techniques.

Natsuko Akagawa (2015), a heritage scholar focused on cultural policy and diplomacy, adds that the title also carries significant prestige, attracting apprentices and reinforcing the cultural value of craft practices. Japan's approach stands out for recognizing the process itself, such as weaving or wheel-throwing, as a national treasure. As these artisans embody a performative heritage in which skill and tradition are transmitted directly through practice, ensuring that craft remains a living expression of cultural memory rather than a relic of the past. The government also arranges for Living National Treasures to give public demonstrations across Japan and abroad as ambassadors of traditional culture.

On the industrial side, the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI) took charge of bolstering traditional craft industries. In 1974, Japan enacted the Law for the Promotion of Traditional Craft Industries (the Densan Act), explicitly aimed at protecting and marketing crafts as national heritage. Under this law, METI has to date designated 225 items as "Traditional Craft Products," 31 of which are ceramics. These range from regional ceramics like Bizen ware and Arita porcelain to textiles, lacquerware, woodcraft and beyond. To qualify for this status, a craft must meet strict criteria that prioritise authenticity and continuity. It should be primarily handmade and used in everyday life, produced with techniques and materials that have at least a century of history behind them, and maintained by a specific local community of artisans at an economically viable scale (Morais, 2019).

By legislating these criteria, the government links cultural heritage with economic sustainability, ensuring that officially supported crafts are not just old traditions in isolation, but living industries that can thrive in modern markets while retaining their identity (Goto, 2019). The Densan Act also established the Association for the Promotion of Traditional Craft Industries (DENSAN) in 1975 to actively promote Japanese handicrafts on a global scale and expand their markets. Through DENSAN and METI's initiatives, numerous local craft forms received support in design innovation, marketing, and export promotion. For example, METI sponsors the annual Japan Traditional Art Crafts Exhibition in collaboration with the Japan Kōgei Association, providing a prestigious national platform for artisans. This synergy of cultural and economic policy underscores Japan's holistic approach of treating crafts as both arts to be preserved and industry to be sustained (Rousmaniere, 2007).

Japan's craft culture is further distinguished by its master–apprentice training systems, some formal and many informal, which have long been the backbone of quality craftsmanship. These apprenticeship networks, often supported or incentivized by government and industry groups, ensure that knowledge is passed down through generations. Cultural economists note that countries like Japan, with deeply embedded craft mentorship traditions, serve as exemplars in demonstrating that sustaining crafts requires not only funding or schools but also social values that esteem manual skill and patience in learning (Morais, 2019).

Institutional support extends to the museum sector as well. Japan boasts dedicated craft museums and galleries, signalling official recognition of craft arts. The National

Museum of Modern Art in Tokyo long maintained a Crafts Gallery, and in 2020 this collection was relocated and expanded as the National Crafts Museum in Kanazawa, notably, Japan's only national museum specializing in crafts and design. This new museum (the first national museum on Japan's west coast) stands as a testament to the importance placed on craft art, housing thousands of works across ceramics, lacquer, textile, metal, and other media (Visit Kanazawa, s.d.).

By establishing a national hub for craft, the government provides research, exhibition opportunities, and education centred on kōgei. Together, agencies like Bunkachō and METI, along with national and regional museums, craft guilds, and associations, form a robust support network. They not only preserve traditional techniques but also help modern craftspeople innovate within tradition, ensuring that Japanese craft art remains a living, evolving field rather than a static relic. Domestically, these efforts maintain craft's visibility and prestige, setting the stage for its promotion beyond Japan's borders (Morais, 2019).

Building upon the previous analysis, Akagawa (2015) draws attention to key tensions in Japan's heritage preservation framework. While state-led revitalization programs have played an important role in sustaining traditional crafts, they often promote a stylized and idealized vision of cultural heritage aimed at external audiences, particularly for tourism and cultural diplomacy. Influenced by the Mingei movement, these representations can detach craft practices from their original sociocultural settings, marginalizing expressions that fall outside the state's preferred narrative. The system's emphasis on historically codified traditions further restricts its inclusivity. Peripheral, evolving, or lesser-known practices frequently remain unrecognized and unsupported, contributing to their gradual disappearance without institutional acknowledgment.

In addition to these representational challenges, structural limitations hinder the practical effectiveness of Japan's heritage policy. The Agency for Cultural Affairs operates with just 0.1% of the national budget, leaving many designated properties underfunded. At the local level, spending on heritage preservation is inconsistent, with cultural initiatives often sidelined in favour of infrastructure and other priorities (Akagawa, 2015).

Although decentralization reforms have sought to involve local authorities, the central government retains decisive control over designations and resource allocation.

Moreover, the existing legal framework does not require prior consultation with the communities involved. As a result, communities sometimes bear the responsibility of maintaining officially recognized heritage practices without adequate resources, decision-making power, or institutional backing (Akagawa, 2015).

This centralized and selective model stands in contrast to the principles enshrined in the 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, which emphasizes community participation and the dynamic, living nature of heritage. The divergence between Japan's top-down system and UNESCO's bottom-up approach complicates efforts to align with international norms, raising broader concerns about representation, equity, and the sustainability of cultural policy (Akagawa, 2015).

Morais (2019) also highlights the persistence of gender hierarchies within Japan's craft system. Influenced by the patriarchal "*iemoto"* tradition, a hereditary system in which authority over the transmission and regulation of a traditional art is concentrated in a single head or master, early selections of Living National Treasures overwhelmingly favoured men. Only 11 out of the first 70 honourees being women, mostly in domestic arts such as textiles, reflecting how state recognition has historically reinforced gendered divisions of labour in craft.

Lastly, both Goto (2019) and Morais (2019) point to the commercialization of craft during the 1960s–70s "Mingei boom," when mass tourism and nostalgia transformed traditional objects into branded lifestyle products. Once again, as demand increased, department stores and tourist required reshaped production, and local specificity was often lost.

These dynamics remain central to how Japanese craft art is positioned and perceived in the international art market now. Understanding this involved not only examining the state's historical role in elevating certain craft practices, but also acknowledging the continued influence of gender bias, market pressures, and selective recognition. These factors shape how Japanese craft is framed, valued, and consumed abroad, and they lay the groundwork for the following chapters, which explore the blurred boundaries between craft and fine art and Japan's evolving strategies for promoting its craft traditions on today's global world.

The evolution of the craft vs. fine art divide

Up to this point, we have explored how Japan's understanding of craft art has been shaped over the past two centuries by both internal developments and external influences. This also calls for a closer examination of the enduring distinctions between craft and fine art, particularly within Western contexts, that shape the framework of today's global art world.

Despite its renowned quality and historical depth, Japanese craft has long navigated a complicated position within Western-dominated art systems. For much of the 20th century, finely made objects such as hand-dyed textiles or wood-fired ceramics were often dismissed abroad as ethnographic curios or tourist souvenirs, rather than valued as serious art. This reflected not only the lingering hierarchy between fine art and craft but also broader Orientalist assumptions that framed non-Western material culture as peripheral to the canon. However, global attitudes have been gradually changing. A growing international interest in authenticity, sustainability, and cultural heritage has created space for Japanese craft to be re-evaluated. This discussion draws primarily on *A Cultural Economic Analysis of Craft* (Mignosa & Kotipalli, 2023), a multidisciplinary volume that offers a cultural economics perspective on craft and intangible heritage. It includes contributions such as Goto's and provides insight into how craft operates both within Western traditions like Japanese craft and in relation to Western contexts.

Historically, this division of both 'art' and 'craft' is a modern Western construct. In Greco-Roman antiquity, terms like *techne* (Greek) and *ars* (Latin) referred broadly to skilled making. It was not until the Renaissance that "fine art" began to be distinguished from "craft," largely due to a shift in perception from utility to aesthetics. As Larry Shiner notes, this division became entrenched with the rise of art academies and capitalist modes of art production that sought to elevate the artist as genius and marginalize the artisan as labourer (Shiner L. , 2001; Shiner L. , 2012).

Fine art today is valued not only for its material form but also for the emotional and narrative dimensions it carries. Its marketplaces strong emphasis on originality, authorship, and creative intent, where the artist's biography and reputation become integral to the work's cultural and economic value (Schönfeld & Reinstaller, 2007). In other words, collectors are not merely acquiring an object but entering a relationship with

the artist's vision and story. Research on consumer-oriented evaluation models for Japanese traditional crafts supports a similar dynamic: handcrafted objects are often perceived as holding greater emotional and cultural significance than mass-produced goods (Huynh, Yan, & Nakamori, 2010). This suggests that Japanese craft, with its deep ties to tradition, place, and maker, possesses inherent qualities, narrative richness, authenticity, and emotional resonance, that align with the very attributes prized in the fine art market. As such, it holds strong potential to thrive internationally by appealing to collectors who seek not just objects, but meaningful connections to their makers.

Contemporary movements now actively challenge these inherited hierarchies. Scholars like Shiner argue for a connection between art and craft rather than a duality, noting that traditional boundaries "have all but disappeared" in practice. Hybrid works, such as textile-based installations or ceramics exhibited in fine art contexts, are increasingly common. Yet, the presence of media such as ceramics or textiles in fine art spaces should not be mistaken as evidence that the long-standing divide between art and craft has vanished. While a ceramic bowl may invite contemplation like a painting, or a woven textile may evoke meaning comparable to a sculpture, these analogies coexist with persistent hierarchies of value and legitimacy, particularly in Western contexts (Shiner, 2012). At the same time, it is precisely within these tensions that contemporary markets are reshaping how craft is perceived and positioned. The market dynamics for craft art in the global arena have evolved in recent years, reflecting a broader change in how crafts are bought and sold. Notably, contemporary crafts are increasingly present in galleries and art fairs, interacting with fine art, a trend fuelled by consumer demand for unique, handmade works. In many developed markets, consumers now value craft in terms of authenticity, quality, workmanship, and personal touch, seeing a purchase not just as buying a product but as acquiring an experience and a story (Mignosa & Kotipalli, 2023).

A growing number of international events are contributing to the repositioning of craft within the global art market, helping to challenge its traditional subordination to fine art. One prominent example is the Collect International Art Fair for Contemporary Craft and Design, organized annually by the UK's Crafts Council. The fair showcases high-end galleries presenting ceramics, textiles, glass, and metalwork as collectible art objects, often commanding prices comparable to those of fine art (Crafts Council, 2025). While Collect operates with a promotional mission, its carefully curated format and institutional

backing elevate contemporary craft, reinforcing its legitimacy as both a cultural and economic force within the art world.

Platforms such as the Loewe Craft Prize, at Révélations Biennal in Paris, and the International Folk Art Market in Santa Fe underscore the evolving narrative around contemporary craft by presenting handcrafted works in contexts typically reserved for fine art. These initiatives function as cultural gatekeepers, selecting and endorsing objects that marry technical excellence with conceptual depth. Through their emphasis on curatorial quality, international visibility, and direct engagement, they position craft not as a lesser category but as a dynamic, intellectually robust field deserving of critical and commercial recognition (Adamson, 2018). For instance, during its 20th anniversary in 2024, the International Folk Art Market in Santa Fe welcomed over 18,500 visitors and achieved record-breaking sales of $3.64 million over a single weekend. With 167 artists and cooperatives from 51 countries, including 41 first-time participants present on-site. The event fostered direct engagement between artisans and attendees. It reflects a broader cultural trend in which authenticity, narrative, and ethical production increasingly influence purchasing decisions, standing alongside aesthetic appeal and technical excellence (International Folk Art Market Sets Organizational Record, 2024).

Not only at fairs dedicated to craft art, but also Japanese craft artists are gaining increasing visibility at major international art fairs. Art Basel, for instance, widely recognized as one of the most influential platforms for contemporary and modern art worldwide (Art Basel, n.d.), includes works such as Genta Ishizuka's *Surface Tactility* urushi lacquer sculptures. His work highlights how craft is being actively reframed within the discourse and economy of fine art, granting it new symbolic and commercial value (see Figure 2).

Figure 2 *Genta Ishizuka installing works from his Surface Tactility series, created using the ancient kanshitsu (dry lacquer) technique (Photo courtesy of Sokyo Gallery).*

Ishizuka's Surface Tactility series uses layers of hemp cloth and urushi lacquer applied over a core form and polished to a high gloss. These biomorphic sculptures explore the tension between interior and exterior, surface and depth, transforming a historically utilitarian material into an object of purely aesthetic contemplation. Exhibited internationally at major venues such as ARTCOURT Gallery (Osaka) and Art Basel, Ishizuka's work exemplifies how Japanese craft is reframed as fine art while retaining strong links to material tradition and labor-intensive process.

At the same time, contemporary artists who are not strictly artisans intentionally incorporate traditional craft techniques into fine art contexts. Ceramicist Elizabeth Fritsch hand-builds and meticulously paints vessel forms that reference functional pottery yet are exhibited as sculpture and sold by leading galleries like Erskine, Hall & Coe. Ugandan artist Acaye Kerunen uses weaving and hand-dyeing techniques rooted in local craft traditions to create immersive textile installations, including her critically acclaimed Venice Biennale presentation. Joana Vasconcelos transforms crochet, embroidery, and other Portuguese craft techniques into monumental textile sculptures, such as *Valquíria Miss Dior*, commissioned by Dior and exhibited internationally. Similarly, Korean artist Yee Sookyung's *Translated Vases* reassemble discarded ceramic fragments using gold seams inspired by kintsugi, achieving strong auction results, including a Phillips sale for £25,000.

Looking at these works, particularly Genta Ishizuka's, brings a central debate into focus: at what point do such pieces cease to be considered craft if they are no longer created with use in mind? In truth, reframing craft as fine art risks severing it from its functional roots, which have historically been central to its identity. Some argue this shift expands rather than erases craft's meaning. Risatti (2013) sees function as transformed, not lost, shifting from practical use to symbolic and intellectual work. Benjamin's (1935/2008) notion of aura suggests craft retains authenticity through the traces of labour and ritual it embodies, while Kubler (1962) places craft on a continuum where even unused objects "work" by provoking thought.

Others warn that removing function undermines craft's social and tactile identity, reducing it to elite commodities (Burmer, 2011). In Japan, this tension is especially sharp: domestically, utility and artistry coexist, but internationally works often had to be reframed strictly as "art" to gain legitimacy. Artists who stripped away function aligned with fine art but entered competition in a Western-dominated system, while those who retained utility risked dismissal abroad as mere makers of utensils (Asia Society Japan, 2023).

A middle position, as in Mignosa and Kotipalli (2019), frames display as valorisation, linking craft to economic development and opening it to reinterpretation, including fine-art contexts. Bourdieu's notion of symbolic capital (Jourdain, 2015) explains how craftspeople mobilize heritage and skill to construct value beyond utility. Educational initiatives and immersive experiences (Mignosa & Kotipalli, 2023) further reinforce public appreciation of manual skill. Ultimately, what counts as "art" depends on cultural institutions and markets[2] (Shiner, 2001).

This debate is particularly relevant in Japan, where functionality and aesthetics are traditionally complementary. Goto (2019) highlights the *utsukushisa no yō* ("beauty of use"), showing that practical and aesthetic values are inseparable. Robertson (2016) notes Japanese craft often functions simultaneously as utilitarian and cultural heritage,

[2] One could ask whether design is the missing link between art and craft, as it blends function with aesthetics. Yet rather than resolving the debate, it complicates it. As Shiner (2012) notes, craft and design share attention to material, process, and use, while design also leans toward art through its symbolic and aesthetic aims. Because of this dual role, design further blurs the boundaries, but as this thesis focuses on the positioning of Japanese craft in the art market, design is not examined in depth. It remains, as Shiner's work suggests, a valuable topic for future research.

enhancing its symbolic capital. The hybrid nature of Japanese craft art means its positioned well within today's more inclusive art market with global interest in authenticity (Robertson, 2016; Mignosa & Kotipalli, 2023).

But why seek to position craft within the category of fine art? What, precisely, are the benefits? Reframing craft as fine art elevates its cultural status, granting it entry into museums, galleries, and critical discourse that enhance its visibility and prestige (Shiner, 2001). Such recognition can generate new economic opportunities and facilitate access to international markets, contributing to the sustainability of traditional skills and their transmission to future generations. Simply put, framing craft as fine art could also help artworks can command higher prices, allowing artisans to gain greater financial stability and recognition, while gallerists and dealers benefit from expanded markets. Even at a national level, this valorization could align with cultural diplomacy efforts, enabling governments, such as Japan's, to leverage craft as a soft power asset that promotes national identity abroad (Mignosa & Kotipalli, 2019). It also fosters innovation by liberating makers from strictly utilitarian expectations, encouraging experimentation and ensuring the continued relevance of craft in contemporary culture (Risatti, 2013). Moreover, it enriches public engagement, inviting audiences to appreciate craft not only for its practical function but also for its aesthetic, historical, and symbolic dimensions (Benjamin, 1935/2008).

Yet this repositioning is not without cost. Aligning craft with the fine art system risks detaching it from the everyday contexts and community practices that have historically defined its identity (Burmer, 2011). Much like Japanese art was reshaped to meet Western aesthetic standards during the Meiji period, contemporary craft may be adapted to satisfy global market expectations, sometimes at the expense of its social and cultural functions. In Japan, overemphasizing its status as "art" can obscure the *utsukushisa no yō* ("beauty of use") central to its meaning (Goto, 2019), replacing lived tradition with a more static, aestheticized version aimed at international audiences. This shift may privilege objects and makers aligned with art-world norms while marginalizing local practices, risking a homogenized image of "Japanese craft." How these tensions play out in practice will be explored later on.

Current Dynamics of Japanese craft on the World Stage

Now with its own distinct craft art identity and growing international appreciation, Japanese craft is undergoing a measured transformation on the world stage, shaped by heritage policies, global markets, and shifting aesthetic values. As traditional forms gain new life through fairs, galleries, and diplomatic efforts, questions emerge around visibility, legitimacy, and cultural translation. As we will see, these dynamics reveal both exciting opportunities and ongoing challenges for Japan's craft sector in an increasingly interconnected art world.

According to Managing Cultural Specificity and Embeddedness (2020), the deep cultural rootedness of craft firms, many of which are influenced by Mingei ideals, makes them resistant to innovation or adaptation for international markets. This 'embeddedness' fosters reluctance to alter traditional forms and aesthetics, limiting global reach and relevance.

For instance, in the documentary *Crafting Ancient Japanese Pottery: Keeping Alive a Japanese Art Form* (Journal – History Documentaries, 2023), part of the short trilogy *Handmade in Japan*, which explores iconic crafts such as the samurai sword, the kimono, and Japanese pottery, the Hamada family of Mashiko exemplifies this generational shift. Shinsaku Hamada reflects on past collective production:

> *In the past, Mashiko pottery was made in large quantity, not by anyone in particular but made by craftsmen and recognised as Mashiko pottery. We exhibited these unnamed pieces and many of them were well received as quality work. But now is the era of the individual. To tell the truth, historically it is only quite recent that potters made work for artistic reasons. In the past it was the craftsmen who made pottery. These works had real authenticity* (Journal – History Documentaries, 2023, 6:45).

His son, Tomoo Hamada, Shinsaku's son, offers a revealing counterpoint of his newer generation of artisans:

> *The items I make are also everyday dishes; however, they are not products, they are art. Although I would like them to be used, the people who buy my pieces prefer to display them instead* (Journal – History Documentaries, 2023, 10:09).

Together, these statements crystallize a shift from anonymous, use-driven workshop production to individualized, display-oriented authorship, foregrounding how authenticity, function, and artistic identity are being renegotiated by contemporary artisans.

On the Gallery level, artists like Israeli ceramic artist Ido Ferber, who studied at Tokyo University of the Arts, also offers compelling insight that reinforces this perspective. He shares in an interview with Vessels + Sticks that Japan maintains a clear distinction between craft (kōgei) and fine art, unlike the West, where the two increasingly merge through trends like "functional art" and "collectible design." In Japan, he explains, craft is not seen as inferior but as an autonomous sphere with its own values and prestige. Functional objects like tea bowls are respected alongside paintings for their cultural significance and technical excellence.

Ferber further corroborates what was discussed earlier: when craft objects lose their function by becoming purely sculptural, they are often reclassified as fine art, an *objet d'art*. He observes that many younger artists deliberately remove function from their works to enter the art world, notably employing the term *"sterilizing"* to characterise this process (Poirier, 2023).

The 2015 exhibition at Blum & Poe in Los Angeles (Ollman, 2015) and later in New York (Rodgers, 2016), curated by Takashi Murakami, is proof of how the delineation between craft and fine art in Japan is increasingly permeable. This exhibition recontextualized the works of ceramicists Kazunori Hamana, Yuji Ueda, and Otani Workshop, presenting them within a contemporary art framework. Murakami, drawing upon his deep understanding of tea ceremony aesthetics, orchestrated an avant-garde installation that challenged traditional hierarchies between craft and fine art.

The exhibition featured over 400 ceramic pieces, many of which were displayed outside Japan for the first time. The installation, designed in collaboration with the artists, utilized natural materials like moss, bark, and stone to create settings reminiscent of Japanese rock gardens, emphasizing the organic qualities of the sculptures and vessels. This approach underscored the artists' shared commitment to wabi-sabi aesthetics and the Mingei (folk art) tradition, while also highlighting their individual innovations (Ollman, 2015)

Murakami's curation not only showcased the fluidity between craft and fine art but also illuminated the evolving dialogue between tradition and contemporary expression in Japanese ceramics. By presenting these works in a fine art context, the exhibition invited viewers to reconsider preconceived notions of artistic value and cultural significance. (Ollman, 2015)

Figure 3 *Exhibition installation (Kazunori Hamana, Yuji Ueda, Otani Workshop, 2023) [Photograph]. Blum & Poe, New York. Retrieved from Cfile.Capsule.*

Furthermore, Japan's cultural diplomacy frequently leverages craft-related initiatives abroad. These efforts underscore Japan's broader vision of craftsmanship not only as cultural expression but also as a vehicle for cross-cultural exchange and sustainable development (Miyata, 2013)

Nevertheless, Japanese craft art has gained increasing international prestige, and the Japanese Government is not blind to this potential. Building on earlier discussions, Japanese craft has long served as a tool of soft power, strategically promoted by the government to shape the nation's image abroad. Since the 19th century, state-led participation in international exhibitions positioned traditional crafts as symbols of cultural sophistication, helping to generate global interest and demand. This diplomatic role continues to incentivize government efforts today, reinforcing the importance of preserving and promoting craft as both cultural heritage and international capital (Morais, 2019).

In the post-war era, Japan has continued to promote its craft heritage internationally through a number of public and private channels. The Densan Association, established in 1975, not only supports artisans within Japan but also organizes traveling exhibitions, participates in overseas trade fairs, and runs marketing campaigns to raise global awareness. Through the "Traditional Japanese Craft" certification and the staging of festivals in major cities abroad, Densan helps connect regional craft producers with global collectors and consumers, linking small kilns and studios to the international market network (Huynh, Yan, & Nakamori, 2010).

Despite long-standing efforts to promote Japanese craft, significant challenges remain. High-profile opportunities tend to favour artisans with institutional backing, gallery ties, or strong language skills, leaving many rural producers excluded from global circuits. At the same time, domestic participation is shrinking as younger generations turn away from the economic precarity of craft careers, placing the future of many traditions at risk (Yonazu, 2024). This generational decline is particularly pressing: since 1979, the number of active master craftspeople has dropped by 80%, putting traditional knowledge at risk and threatening the continuity that underpins Japan's craft excellence (Asia Society Japan, 2023).

Against this backdrop of demographic decline and reduced domestic demand, Japan has intensified its strategy to internationalize its craft heritage. With production values falling from ¥328.8 billion in 1997 to ¥92.7 billion in 2017, the sector faces a profound crisis shaped not only by an aging artisan population and waning local interest, but also by heritage policies that often rely on nostalgic and rigid definitions of tradition, failing to engage contemporary audiences. In response, government and cultural institutions are reframing traditional crafts as globally relevant, leveraging international exhibitions, diplomatic initiatives, and design fairs to spark renewed interest abroad. This approach, sometimes described as a revival of "Japonisme," aims to secure a stronger foothold for Japanese craft in the high-end global art market, where it remains significantly underrepresented (Yonazu, 2024).

"*These days the number of traditional Japanese craftworks seen at art fairs that attract wealthy people is extremely limited*" noted Etsuro Ninomiya, counselor at Japan's mission to the EU (as cited in Kyodo News, 2024). According to him, the key challenge lies in finding ways to capture the interest and investment, of this wealthy audience.

In 2024, the Japanese city of Bizen, renowned for its unglazed stoneware, partnered with the Mission of Japan to the European Union to promote its ceramics at leading international design events. Bizen ware was exhibited at Milan Design Week's Fuorisalone and at a gallery in Paris, where it attracted praise from overseas visitors and led to orders from a Belgian gallery dealer. Building on this success, Bizen local officials asserted that strengthening its international brand is "indispensable" for the craft's survival. The initiative also featured *magewappa* bentwood vessels from Akita Prefecture, and further plans are underway to promote *Wajima* lacquerware, particularly significant after a major earthquake struck its region (Yonazu, 2024).

Acknowledging fragmentation in existing support systems, the Japanese government announced in 2024 the formation of a cross-ministerial council to enhance the global promotion of traditional crafts. "*We must strengthen efforts to promote the artistic value of traditional crafts through concerted efforts*," declared Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, signalling high-level commitment to positioning crafts as a key element of Japan's cultural diplomacy (Yonazu, 2024).

Figure 4 *Visitors viewing Bizen ware at the Fuorisalone design exhibition in Milan, Italy (April 16, 2024). Note. Photo by Kyodo News.*

This aligns with the Japan Foundation's long-running efforts to promote Japanese craft art through international traveling exhibitions. Notable recent examples include *Yakishime: Earth Metamorphosis* (Japan Foundation, 2025), which explores the

evolution of unglazed ceramics from ancient Jōmon pottery to contemporary works, and *Japanese Kōgei: Future Forward* (Waldek, 2015), which opened in 2015 at the Museum of Arts and Design in New York, featuring artists who combine traditional techniques with modern innovation. These exhibitions aim to engage global audiences by providing curated displays, bilingual catalogues, and educational programs.

In Europe and North America, Japanese crafts are promoted through cultural institutions, art fairs, and gallery initiatives. Events like London's Collect art fair and New York's Asia Week regularly feature Japanese galleries that specialize in craft. Onishi Gallery in New York, a key player in contemporary kōgei promotion, actively participates in international design events, such as the 2024 Salon Art + Design fair, where it showcased leading Japanese artists working in ceramics, metal, and lacquer. In 2025, the gallery also held a special Kōgei & Art exhibition during Asia Week to further engage global collectors. These efforts, supported by media attention and critical recognition, help build an international market and audience for Japanese crafts. Together, public cultural diplomacy and private gallery initiatives work to elevate Japanese crafts not just as marketable goods, but as a vital and innovative part of the global contemporary art and design scene (Onishiki Gallery, 2025).

In addition to these institutional and gallery-led initiatives, effective marketing is key to further strengthening the international presence of Japanese craft. Many small craft enterprises prioritize educating consumers about the cultural significance of their work rather than purely pursuing profit (Johnson, 2006). Storytelling and highlighting the emotional connection between objects and their histories are powerful tools to engage audiences (Huynh, Yan, & Nakamori, 2010). The internet has opened unprecedented opportunities for artisans to reach global buyers (Johnson, 2006), yet digital marketing remains underutilized for Japanese Crafts, leaving a gap between traditional production practices and the expectations of contemporary consumers (Mignosa & Kotipalli, 2019).

Despite these growing efforts, Japanese craft artists have long struggled to gain international recognition comparable to painters or sculptors. The central obstacle remains in the historical Western distinction that ranked "craft" beneath "fine art." Throughout much of the 20th century, museums and the global art market showed limited interest in ceramics, textiles, or lacquerware unless presented as ethnographic or decorative objects. As ceramic art dealer Robert Yellin recalls, "there were very few museums interested in contemporary Japanese ceramic art" when he began promoting it

in the 1980s. As a result, many masterworks remained in Japan or circulated only among niche collectors, limiting their visibility and market value abroad (Asia Society Japan, 2023).

Additional challenges arose from language and cultural barriers, as well as the relatively recent development of an international gallery infrastructure for craft. Paradoxically, Japan's robust domestic craft culture also contributed to the issue. Sustained by tea ceremony connoisseurs, local collectors, and national exhibitions, the internal market was strong enough to absorb much of the highest-quality work. This limited the incentive to pursue international exposure. Consequently, many works were created with Japanese aesthetics in mind, and numerous masterpieces remained within Japan, never reaching global audiences. To this, we can add the other challenges noted earlier, namely, the tension between function and art, and the generational decline threatening continuity (Asia Society Japan, 2023).

Even so, recent years have brought encouraging developments. A broader appreciation of craft media has sparked renewed institutional and collector interest worldwide. "More collectors are acquiring works that can be shown in museums," Yellin notes, with some even donating Japanese ceramics to major institutions. These shifts suggest a slow but meaningful revaluation of Japanese craft as a significant force in contemporary art (Asia Society Japan, 2023). The result is an increasing presence of Japanese craft art in permanent collections and exhibitions outside Japan. For example, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the British Museum, the Victoria & Albert Museum, and others have in recent decades significantly expanded their holdings of Japanese ceramics and decorative arts (Thomsen Gallery, s.d.). This institutional endorsement validates craft artists in the eyes of the global art community.

A case in point is Fukami Sueharu, a contemporary porcelain sculptor whose elegant, abstract form in icy blue seihakuji glaze have earned him a "global reputation" for technical and aesthetic mastery. Fukami won the Grand Prize at the International Ceramic Exhibition in Faenza, Italy, one of the world's most prestigious ceramics competitions, and his work now resides in major museums across Europe and America (Thomsen Gallery, s.d.). Such accolades show that Japanese craft artists can compete at the highest international levels traditionally dominated by Western names.

Figure 5 *Fukami Sueharu, Kei (Landscape) (2015). Porcelain with seihakuji glaze on granite base, height: 54½ in. (138.5 cm) [including base]. Provenance: Acquired directly from the artist. Exhibitions: AWNY 2019 Mar, WAS 2019. Note. This work is the most recently acquired Fukami Sueharu piece in Thomson Gallery's collection as of 2025. Image source: (Thomsen Gallery, s.d.)*

Another success has been the prominence of Japanese crafts in international exhibitions and biennales. The traveling exhibition "Japanese Kōgei | Future Forward" at New York's Museum of Arts and Design (2015–2016) exposed a wide audience to innovative Japanese crafts, highlighting how "contemporary artists are pushing the limits of the form, infusing it with an individualism and global-mindedness not typical of historical works" (Waldek, 2015).

Similarly, the "Living Kōgei" exhibition from the Ise Collection and various Japan Foundation exhibits have presented contemporary Japanese crafts in art capitals around the world. These curated events often challenge viewers' preconceptions, presenting ceramics or textiles not as quaint tradition but as vibrant contemporary art. In the commercial realm, some Japanese craft artists have achieved representation by elite galleries and high-profile art fairs, elevating their international profile. And while obstacles remain, the narrative around Japanese craft art is changing. Rather than being seen as insular or purely heritage-based, it is increasingly celebrated for its innovation, creative expression, and relevance to global art dialogues. There are signs that foreign appreciation sometimes outpaces domestic interest, a phenomenon Yellin hopes will "*open [Japanese] eyes to the value of what they have before it's lost*" (Asia Society Japan, 2023).

In summary, through perseverance and strategic promotion, Japanese craft art, especially ceramics, seems to have begun securing a well-earned place on the

international art stage, even as it continues to navigate the challenges inherent in bridging cultural and market divides. However, the integration of crafts into the global art market is not without its complexities. On one hand, niche platforms like the Santa Fe Market demonstrate how craft can "scale out" by finding enthusiastic audiences; on the other hand, observers caution that such platforms might become victims of their own success, turning increasingly to metrics and competition. There is a risk that as craft markets globalize, they may start to favour easily marketable traits, for instance, requiring artisans to be savvy in branding or to produce in higher volumes. This can sideline traditional craftsmen who lack those resources or language skills. In response, some experts suggest developing more distribution systems that match the capacity of artisans (many of whom are small-scale) with the right buyers, without forcing artisanal work into a mass-production mold. The continued interest in "slow craft" and bespoke, limited-edition pieces in markets from the US to Europe indicates that alternative models such as online direct sales, craft-focused e-commerce, or cooperative galleries can thrive alongside big fairs and auctions, provided they maintain the narrative of authenticity and excellence that consumers crave (Mignosa & Kotipalli, 2023).

Overall, market trends point to a renaissance of craft appreciation. Japanese crafts, with their storied lineages and exemplary artistry, are well positioned in this climate of connoisseurship. In the UK, for instance, studies find that a significant portion of the public engages in craft consumption annually, and consumers consciously associate craft goods with ethical, meaningful purchase choices rather than mere commodities. This signals a positive outlook for the international marketability of Japanese craft art: as galleries and auctioneers continue to educate buyers and highlight the cultural narratives of these works, the demand, and prices, for masterful Japanese craft pieces are likely to keep rising (Greenlees, 2020).

Japanese Craft in the London Art Scene: Case Studies of Key Institutions

The preceding chapters have articulated the historical, cultural, and policy frameworks that inform contemporary Japanese craft (kōgei) and presented select examples of their expression across contexts in Japan and abroad. With this groundwork in place, the present chapter moves from context to a focused, evidence-led examination of how Japanese craft is positioned in international arenas, with four case studies located in London, a leading hub of the international art ecosystem.

The decision to focus on London is grounded first and foremost in research practice. All four case study sites had been visited prior to the start of this project, enabling engagement that extends beyond published sources and incorporates an embodied sense of how these spaces operate, how objects are displayed, how audiences circulate and interact, and how the atmosphere of each setting shapes Japanese craft. Concentrating the case studies within a single city further allows for meaningful comparison across institutional types, museums, commercial galleries, and auction houses, within a shared cultural and market ecosystem.

Beyond feasibility and depth, London holds a central position in the global art market, providing a strategically significant lens through which to study Japanese craft. According to the 2025 Art Basel & UBS Art Market Report, the United States has consistently held the largest share of the global art market since 2014, accounting for 43% of global sales by value in 2024. However, the United Kingdom has predominantly occupied second place since 2014, with 18% of sales in 2024, underscoring its enduring significance. Beyond economic weight, scholars emphasise the symbolic and cultural authority of such a centre. Iain Robertson (2016) describes the international art market as structured around a small number of “alpha” institutions and cities, such as London, whose validation confers legitimacy and enhances market value. Similarly, Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of cultural fields (1993) underscores that markets are not only sites of economic exchange but also arenas of symbolic struggle, where value is negotiated and institutionalised.

Finally, London’s deep historical and institutional ties to Japanese craft art make it particularly insightful. Britain was among the first Western contexts to integrate Japanese crafts into museums, domestic interiors, and artistic movements, a process consolidated

by the Japan–British Exhibition of 1910 and by sustained cultural exchange (Irvine, 2016). Over subsequent decades, networks of collectors, curators, and makers, including Bernard Leach in dialogue with Hamada Shōji and Yanagi Sōetsu, embedded Japanese craft discourses into British craft thinking (Journal – History Documentaries, 2023). Today, London combines unparalleled institutional depth, with the British Museum's Japanese Galleries, the V&A's Japan collections, Japan House London and the William Morris Gallery; regular market events such as Asian Art in London, Collect at Somerset House and London Craft Week; active auction platforms including Sotheby's, Christie's and Bonhams, making it a coherent and analytically rich site for examining how Japanese craft art operates on the global stage.

The four chosen case studies cover different parts of London's cultural scene. Japan House London represents a government-led cultural diplomacy initiative, while the V&A embodies the authority of leading museums in shaping global narratives of design and material culture. Collect art fair illustrates how Japanese craft is integrated into international market circuits, and Flow Gallery demonstrates the role of specialised commercial galleries in mediating between makers and collectors. Together, these institutions cover diplomatic, curatorial, commercial, and market-facing contexts, offering a holistic view of how Japanese craft is positioned in London.

To investigate these cases, the research adopts a qualitative approach, drawing on official materials (catalogues, press releases, and exhibition texts), secondary literature, and media coverage. This allows both the curatorial framing of Japanese craft and its reception within wider cultural and market discourses to be examined. The data collected is first organised and later analysed comparatively across four dimensions:

Positioning strategy *How do institutions frame Japanese craft?* Is it presented as timeless heritage, as fine art, as design, or as lifestyle? Curatorial studies remind us that such framings are never neutral but actively shape how objects are understood and valued (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000; Bennett, 1995). In the Japanese context, this question is particularly significant because ideas of authenticity and lineage have long informed how craft is defined and preserved (Kakiuchi, 2014). This dimension therefore highlights the narratives institutions choose to emphasise, and how these narratives position Japanese craft within international contexts.

Market engagement *In what ways do these institutions connect Japanese craft to commerce and collecting? Do they sell works in shops, encourage acquisitions, or create opportunities for makers to access global markets?* Becker's (1982) concept of "art worlds" reminds us that recognition depends on networks of curators, dealers, collectors, and audiences, rather than on makers alone. Cultural economics and art market studies similarly emphasise that value is created across chains of production and exchange (Mignosa & Kotipalli, 2019; Robertson, 2019). This dimension focuses on those points of connection, showing how institutions mediate between Japanese craft and the international art market.

Marketing and outreach *How do institutions make their programmes visible and appealing?* This includes tools such as catalogues, press coverage, social media, and partnerships, all of which shape how audiences encounter Japanese craft. Marketing research highlights the importance of communication strategies in building visibility and identity (Kotler & Kotler, 1998; Kotler et al., 2008), while Falk and Sheppard (2006) emphasise how institutions must adapt their outreach to contemporary cultural environments. This dimension draws attention to the ways Japanese craft is promoted and circulated beyond the exhibition space itself.

Audience and impact *Who actually engages with these programmes, and what effect do they have?* Visitor studies show that audiences interpret cultural experiences through a mix of personal, social, and physical contexts (Falk & Dierking, 2013), while Hooper-Greenhill (2000) highlights their active role in making meaning. This dimension shifts attention from curatorial intentions to the lived experiences of audiences, and to the influence such encounters can have on awareness of Japanese craft.

By focusing on the UK, and London in particular, this chapter examines how Japanese craft is mediated at the intersection of cultural diplomacy, curatorial authority, and the international art market. The analysis adopts a multiple-case study approach, presenting four sites individually before moving to a comparative discussion across shared analytical dimensions.

1. Japan House London

Opened in June 2018 on Kensington High Street, Japan House London is a cultural centre showcasing Japanese craft, design, technology, and gastronomy, featuring an exhibition gallery, shop, restaurant Akira, library, and spaces for events (Japan House London, n.d.). Operated by Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, it is part of the Japan House network in London, Los Angeles, and São Paulo, created to advance cultural diplomacy and soft power (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2018). Framing Japanese craft as a key part of national heritage, Japan House London describes itself as "the cultural home of Japan in London," positioning the institution as both cultural hub and symbolic embassy (Japan House London, LinkedIn, n.d.).

1.1 Positioning Strategy

Japan House London positions Japanese craft primarily through narratives of authenticity, lineage, and timelessness. Curatorial texts often emphasise continuity of tradition and mastery of technique, situating craft within historical, spiritual, and philosophical contexts. *The Craft of Carpentry: Drawing Life from Japan's Forests Exhibition* (2025), for example, highlighted "deep relationships between humans and trees" and presented temple carpenters (miyadaiku) as custodians of a spiritual craft transmitted across generations (Japan House London, 2019). Similarly, *The Carpenters' Line: Woodworking Heritage in Hida Takayama* (2021) reinforced continuity between past and present by showcasing historical tools alongside contemporary furniture (Japan House London, 2021). Even contemporary design is framed through values such as wabi-sabi, linking modern consumption to cultural notions of imperfection, impermanence, and sustainability.

In *The Craft of Carpentry*, the inclusion of master craftsman Tsunekazu Nishioka brings this narrative to life. His structural drawings and wooden templates are displayed not as personal artworks but as evidence of a collective practice, allowing visitors to grasp the discipline and philosophy behind temple carpentry. By focusing on Nishioka as a bearer of knowledge rather than a singular creator, the exhibition underscores its central message: Japanese carpentry is a living tradition sustained through the careful transmission of skills and values across generations.

Figure 6 *The Craft of Carpentry: Drawing Life from Japan's Forests exhibition at Japan House London.*

Left: Re-creation of Sa-an Teahouse from the Zen monastery Daitoku-ji in Kyoto, with plaster walls removed to reveal its structural joinery. Photograph by Takenaka Carpentry Tools Museum, published in The Guardian (Wainwright, 2025).
Right: Gallery view featuring models, joinery samples, and structural drawings including those of master temple carpenter Tsunekazu Nishioka. Photograph by Jeremie Souteyrat, published in STIRworld (Bhoot, 2025).

This emphasis extends into the retail environment, where products are presented with detailed contextual information about their origins and artisanal methods. The shop avoids stereotypical souvenirs, instead curating ceramics, lacquerware, textiles, and stationery within the philosophy of *monozukuri* (careful making). As noted by Homegirl London (2018), the shop resembles a gallery more than a conventional store, blurring the boundaries between commerce and display.

Japan House has also attempted to diversify representation. *Ainu Stories: Contemporary Lives by the Saru River* (2022) showcased photography and everyday objects from the Ainu community, challenging dominant narratives of Japanese homogeneity. Other regionally focused exhibitions, such as *Biology of Metal: Metal Craftsmanship in Tsubame-Sanjo* (2018), highlighted both heritage and innovation in regional industries, positioning Japanese craft as relevant to global design rather than as tourist curiosities.

Visitor reviews frequently describe the institution as "visually stunning" and "calm" (Homegirl London, 2018; TripAdvisor, 2023), echoing the brand's refined, immersive aesthetic. Media coverage reinforces this but also introduces critique. *The Guardian* praised the elegance of *The Craft of Carpentry* while noting its lack of engagement with contemporary social relevance (The Guardian, 2025). Overall, Japan House London projects Japanese craft as refined, authentic, and culturally continuous, though it is occasionally critiqued for privileging heritage over critical or contemporary perspectives.

1.2 Market Engagement

Japan House London operates as both cultural institution and retail space, reflecting its broader diplomatic mission to foster international appreciation of Japan. This hybrid model balances cultural diplomacy with economic engagement, but tends to privilege education and appreciation over direct commercial activity.

The retail shop serves as a key site of cultural exchange. Products, ranging from ceramics and lacquerware to contemporary lifestyle goods, are contextualised through their regional origins and artisanal methods. Items are priced accessibly, reinforcing the aim of engaging both international tourists and repeat London visitors. The inclusion of regional items, such as handmade toys from Tōhoku (Japan House London Annual Report, 2020), also demonstrates an effort to support smaller makers by introducing them to global audiences.

Figure 7 *Retail space at Japan House London.*

Left: Visitor browsing lacquerware section with urushi educational materials.

Right: Wider view of the shop layout, showing its gallery-like presentation.
Photographs by the author, May 2025.

Figure 8 *Display of handcrafted ceramic tea bowls for sale by Kangawa Yoshio, a Hiroshima-based ceramicist known for wood-fired earthwares and Hakuji and Katade semi-porcelain wares that combine elegance with everyday usability. Photographs by the author, May 2025*

Despite the strength of the retail offer, there is a clear separation between exhibitions and the shop. Craftspeople featured in exhibitions rarely sell work through the retail space. Demonstrations during *The Craft of Carpentry* (2025), for instance, did not translate into related sales (Japan House London, 2019). The retail operation prioritises reproducible, regionally recognised goods rather than unique or experimental works, reinforcing the institution's educational and diplomatic mission over direct support for contemporary craft practitioners.

Public programmes extend Japan House's role as mediator between craft traditions and audiences. Talks such as *Toyama Iridescent: Exploring Takaoka Lacquerware and Raden* (2024) or *Art Without Heroes: A Conversation on Mingei* (2024) contextualise regional crafts within broader cultural narratives. Participation in external initiatives, such as Asian Art in London (2022), connects Japanese craft to international collecting conversations. While these activities rarely generate direct market activity, they strengthen the symbolic value of Japanese craft and support its recognition within global circuits of design and collecting.

1.3 Marketing and Outreach

Exhibitions are promoted through catalogues, interpretative texts, and press engagement. *The Craft of Carpentry* (2025), produced in collaboration with the Takenaka Carpentry Tools Museum, attracted mainstream coverage in outlets and media such as *The Guardian*. This visibility highlights Japan House's success in positioning Japanese craft within the broader London cultural landscape, even if media responses sometimes critique its heavy emphasis on tradition.

The institution situates exhibitions within London's cultural calendar, aligning with major events such as the London Design Festival (e.g., *Pictograms: Iconic Japanese Designs*, 2025). Collaborations with Japanese museums and regional craft associations ensure credibility and access to loans, but partnerships with UK or international institutions tend to be limited, usually framed around short-term event participation rather than long-term co-curation.

Japan House invests in newsletters, artisan profiles, and active social media, particularly Instagram (@japanhouseldn), where it has nearly 100k followers. Posts feature high-quality imagery and strong branding but relatively low user engagement (3–10 comments on most posts). Collaborative posts with artists draw slightly more responses (10–20 comments), suggesting room to develop interactive strategies.

The institution has experimented with hybrid and digital formats. Online talks (*The Art of Kintsugi*, 2020), live-streamed workshops, and 360° virtual exhibitions (e.g., *World of Anno Mitsumasa*, 2020) expanded reach during the pandemic and showcased potential for ongoing integration of digital participation. These initiatives underline Japan House's adaptability and its ability to broaden access beyond physical visitors.

1.4 Audience and Impact

Since opening in 2018, Japan House London has attracted substantial audiences, peaking at 487,000 in 2019 before dropping sharply during the pandemic (35,000 in 2020). Numbers recovered steadily thereafter: 214,000 in 2021, 334,000 in 2022, and 366,000 by early 2024 (Japan House, 2024). While attendance lags behind larger institutions like the Design Museum (648,759 visitors in 2024) or the Wellcome Collection (480,000 in

2023/24), Japan House has carved out a distinct position in London's cultural landscape given its niche focus.

The institution attracts a broad public, not limited to specialists. Its integration of exhibitions, retail, and dining ensures accessibility, while refined exhibition design fosters perceptions of calm and elegance. Visitor reviews emphasise the aesthetic and immersive quality of the experience, aligning with the institution's branding.

Through exhibitions, retail, and programming, Japan House London strengthens awareness of Japanese craft among both culturally curious visitors and design-conscious audiences. Its impact lies less in direct market generation and more in symbolic cultural diplomacy: shaping perceptions of Japanese craft as authentic, refined, and globally relevant. While widely praised, the institution faces critiques for limited critical engagement and for its tendency to prioritise heritage over contemporary innovation.

2. V&A

The Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A), founded in 1852, is the world's largest museum of applied and decorative arts and design, with over 2.8 million objects across 145 galleries. A non-departmental public body sponsored by the UK's Department for Culture, Media and Sport, it plays a central role in shaping global understandings of art, design, and material culture. Japanese craft has been part of its collections since the 19th century, and the V&A continues to highlight it through both permanent displays and temporary programmes.[3]

2.1. Positioning Strategy

The V&A has one of the largest collections of Japanese art and design outside Japan, numbering around 30,000 objects. Since the 19th century, Japanese craft has been integrated into the museum's broader narratives of global art, design, and material culture.

[3] Note: While several exhibitions and initiatives frame the V&A's engagement with Japanese craft, this chapter discusses *Kimono: Kyoto to Catwalk* (2020) in greater detail, as it has been in place long enough to generate substantial visitor data, scholarly reviews, and media coverage. More recent projects, such as *Craft x Tech Tohoku Project* (2024) and the *Go for Kōgei* symposium (2025), are also included but naturally have less publicly available data at this stage.

This scale enables the V&A to position Japan both as a culture with a long craft tradition and as an active participant in contemporary design innovation.

The refurbished Toshiba Gallery of Japanese Art (2015) exemplifies this dual approach. Displays juxtapose Buddhist sculpture and Edo-period prints with works by Issey Miyake and consumer items like Hello Kitty kitchenware. By mixing historic artefacts with modern design, the gallery underscores continuity and adaptation, presenting Japanese craft as both heritage and living practice (Embassy of Japan in the UK, 2020).

Figure 9 *Display from the Toshiba Gallery of Japanese Art at the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A), London.*

This section focuses on Japanese folk craft (mingei), juxtaposing ceramics, storage furniture, and a large indigo-dyed textile with chrysanthemum and wave motifs. As is typical of the Toshiba Gallery, the display foregrounds material, technique, and regional identity rather than individual makers, aligning with the mingei ethos that prioritises collective tradition over the relevancy of the artist. Photograph by the author, May 2025.

Temporary exhibitions extend this strategy by spotlighting specific themes. *Kimono: Kyoto to Catwalk* (2020) traced the garment's evolution from the 17th century to its global fashion presence. *Craft x Tech Tohoku Project* (2024) showcased collaborations between traditional crafts and digital technologies, while the *Go for Kōgei* symposium (2025) explored Japanese craft in international discourse. These programmes situate Japanese craft not only as cultural heritage but also as part of contemporary artistic and design debates.

Figure 10 *Installation views from Craft x Tech: Tohoku (2024), Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A), London.*

Left: Artifact #VII by Ini Archibong, created in collaboration with Tsugaru lacquer artisans, combining FRP, wood, urushi lacquer, and a modular synthesiser. The interactive work transforms Tsugaru lacquer into a sound-emitting device, activated by the movement of the viewer's hands.

Centre: Large egg-shaped lacquer sculpture from the same series, exemplifying Kara-nuri and Monsha-nuri techniques in a sculptural format rarely associated with sound technology.

Right: Null-Beni-An Nouvelle Néant, a benibana-dyed Oitama Tsumugi tea room by Yoichi Ochiai, designed with SUNAKI Inc. Its tensegrity structure eliminates pillars, using carbon fibre, wood, and safflower-dyed silk strings to create a meditative, mobile space that symbolises digital nature and Buddhist philosophy.

Together, these works illustrate how the V&A's temporary exhibitions position Japanese craft as experimental, multisensory, and globally relevant by pairing traditional materials with cutting-edge design and technology. Photographs by the author, May 2025.

The V&A frames Japanese craft through a dual strategy. On one hand, its permanent Toshiba Gallery of Japanese Art, emphasises continuity with the past by presenting craft as an enduring cultural heritage. On the other hand, its temporary exhibitions, such as *Craft x Tech: Tohoku* (2024), adopt a more innovative and experimental approach, pairing traditional techniques with contemporary design and digital technology. Together, these strategies present Japanese craft as both historically grounded and forward-looking,

reinforcing cultural continuity while also highlighting its potential for global innovation and contemporary relevance.

2.2. Market Engagement

The V&A operates one of the most extensive museum retail programmes in the UK, with physical and online shops selling items inspired by collections and exhibitions. Products range from jewellery and fashion accessories to homeware and prints, often developed in collaboration with designers or based on historical reproductions. Japanese craft is a recurring theme: during *Kimono: Kyoto to Catwalk*, the shop featured exclusive textiles, books, and fashion items directly linked to the exhibition. Major exhibitions are accompanied by catalogues produced by V&A Publishing, serving as both scholarly references and commercial products. The *Kimono: Kyoto to Catwalk* catalogue, for example, was widely distributed and reviewed internationally, reinforcing the museum's academic authority while generating revenue.

Membership and patron schemes provide another avenue for engagement. Members gain free exhibition entry, previews, and exclusive events, while patrons contribute at higher levels for access to curators and private viewings (V&A Membership). These schemes not only sustain financial support but also cultivate strong ties with audiences.

Exhibitions are accompanied by lectures, workshops, and demonstrations that link scholarship with public interaction. *Kimono: Kyoto to Catwalk* featured talks by fashion designers and scholars, kimono dressing demonstrations, and even a kimono catwalk show. Such events extend exhibitions beyond static display and position the museum as a hub where scholarship, performance, and public engagement intersect.

The V&A is also a key player in international circulation. *Kimono: Kyoto to Catwalk* was developed with the National Museums of Japan and travelled to Nagoya and Kyoto. Works from the V&A's Japanese collections are regularly loaned abroad, reinforcing its role as a global hub for Japanese craft and design.

2.3. Marketing and Outreach

As one of the world's leading art and design museums, the V&A commands extensive media coverage. *Kimono: Kyoto to Catwalk* was praised by *The Guardian* for "transforming perceptions of the kimono" and described by *The New York Times* as a

"landmark show" (The Guardian, 2020; NYT, 2020). More recent projects, such as *Craft x Tech Tohoku* (2024), were reported in *Wallpaper* and *The Japan Times*, which emphasised the blending of traditional craft with cutting-edge design.

The museum regularly collaborates with Japanese and international institutions, including the Japan Foundation, the Embassy of Japan, and the Agency for Cultural Affairs. Participation in events like Asian Art in London further embeds its Japanese programmes within wider cultural circuits, reinforcing visibility and authority.

The V&A leverages digital platforms to broaden access. Its online collections database makes thousands of Japanese objects publicly accessible, while dedicated microsites for exhibitions provide behind-the-scenes content, curator interviews, and high-quality imagery. During the pandemic, online traffic surged to 14.5 million website visits (2020/21), nearly double pre-pandemic levels (V&A Annual Review, 2021).

With nearly 2 million Instagram followers, the V&A uses social media to amplify Japanese exhibitions through installation shots, close-ups, and event announcements. *Kimono: Kyoto to Catwalk* generated thousands of likes and comments, while *Craft x Tech Tohoku* was promoted as a highlight of the London Design Festival through Instagram storytelling. The museum's YouTube channel further extends access with curator-led tours and recorded talks. Despite high visibility, direct dialogue with audiences online remains modest relative to its follower base.

The V&A's outreach combines international media, diplomatic and cultural partnerships, and extensive digital content. Its status as a national museum ensures broad visibility, allowing Japanese craft to be promoted not only as a cultural heritage but also as part of global debates in design and fashion.

2.4. Audience and Impact

The V&A is consistently among the UK's most visited museums. It attracted 3.9 million visitors in 2018/19, ranking among the top ten museums worldwide (ALVA, 2019). In 2022/23, visitor numbers reached 2.3 million (V&A Annual Review, 2023). Japanese exhibitions have played a significant role: *Kimono: Kyoto to Catwalk* attracted over 150,000 visitors before closing early due to the pandemic (The Art Newspaper, 2020). Around 40% of V&A visitors come from overseas (V&A Annual Review, 2019), underscoring its international profile. Japanese-themed exhibitions benefit from this diversity, drawing not only specialists but also fashion enthusiasts, students, and general

audiences. *Kimono: Kyoto to Catwalk*, for example, appealed across fashion, cultural history, and Japanese studies communities, demonstrating the broad resonance of Japanese craft in different fields.

The museum's Japanese programmes receive strong critical attention. Reviews of *Kimono* praised its ability to reframe the garment as dynamic and globally relevant, while the Toshiba Gallery reopening in 2015 was highlighted in UK and Japanese media as a key permanent showcase of Japanese art (The Telegraph, 2015; Embassy of Japan in the UK, 2020).

Field observation of *Craft x Tech: Tohoku* (2024) indicates that it was located in a less prominent space, outside the main visitor flow. This positioning suggests that most audiences interact with Japanese craft primarily through the permanent galleries, which focus on heritage and continuity. This is not to discredit the importance of *Craft x Tech* or the museum's innovative efforts, but it indicates that the most visible and accessible framing of Japanese craft remains one centred on tradition. Exhibitions are supported by catalogues, workshops, and recorded talks, which extend their scholarly reach and educational value. The combination of permanent galleries, temporary shows, and accessible digital resources ensures that Japanese craft is not only presented to wide audiences but also embedded in academic and educational contexts.

3. Collect art fair

Founded in 2004 by the UK Crafts Council, Collect is Europe's leading international art fair dedicated to contemporary craft. It was first held at the V&A, later moved to the Saatchi Gallery (2009), and since 2014 has been based at Somerset House, London.

Collect is gallery-led, aligning itself with fine art fairs like Frieze. It showcases museum-quality works made in the past five years by living artists, across disciplines such as ceramics, glass, textiles, and jewellery.

The fair attracts around 40 international galleries and 400 artists annually, with strong participation from Europe, Asia, and North America. In 2025, Japanese makers were the third most represented nationality at the fair, ranking just after British and South Korean artists, highlighting their strong presence among the approximately 400 participating artists (Crafts Council, 2025; Author's dataset).

It is also a key site for museum acquisitions (e.g., V&A, British Museum) and promotes contemporary craft as fine art, emphasizing innovation, global scope, and economic sustainability for makers.

3.1. Positioning strategy

Collect frames Japanese craft primarily as fine art and design, rather than as lifestyle or ethnographic heritage. Its gallery-led model, which requires all works to be recent and by living artists, aligns the fair with international art conventions, stressing collectability, prestige, and innovation (Crafts Council, 2023; Collect Fair – Somerset House).

Heritage is reframed as continuity through innovation. At Collect 2025, AIFA Gallery (Tokyo/London) presented three female ceramicists — Chisato Yasui, Teruri Yamawaki, and Sayuri Ikake — whose work challenged male-dominated narratives in Japanese ceramics while engaging issues of gender and identity (AIFA Gallery Collect 2025; *The Art Newspaper*).

Design values are another key frame. Flow Gallery's installation *The Spirit of Things* (2025) emphasised Japanese qualities of minimalism, material sensitivity, and small-scale artistry, with artists such as Kyoto textile maker Yoriko Murayama, whose ikat weaving and natural dyes were presented as explorations of memory and place (The Kind Craft; Flow Gallery).

Importantly, only AIFA Gallery and Flow Gallery consistently promote "Japanese craft" as a cultural brand. Other galleries, including jaggedart (Kazuhito Takadoi), Joanna Bird Contemporary Collections (Hattori Makiko), Maud & Mabel (Kenta Anzai, Yoko Ozawa), and Micheko Galerie (Masako Inoue, Kayoko Mizumoto, Ryo Sekino, Norihiko Terayama), also represent Japanese makers, but they frame them as individual contemporary artists rather than explicitly under a national or cultural aesthetic. This positions Japanese craft within broader contemporary dialogues, while only some galleries highlight its identity as "Japanese."

Figure 11 *Works by Japanese ceramicists exhibited by AIFA Gallery at Collect 2025, Somerset House, London.*

Left: Sculptural form by Chisato Yasui, exploring rebirth and liminality through meticulously hand-built clay surfaces.

Centre: Painted ceramic sculpture by Teruri Yamawaki, treating clay as a spiritual conduit, akin to chanting sutras.

Right: Vessel with gold lattice lid by Sayuri Ikake, combining clay, paper, and pigment to evoke movement and breath.

Source: AIFA Gallery. (2025). Collect Art Fair 2025. Retrieved from https://aifa.art

AIFA's presentation of Yasui, Yamawaki, and Ikake illustrates how Collect positions Japanese craft within a fine art discourse. The works shown were non-functional, sculptural, and concept-driven, aligning with the fair's emphasis on innovation and collectibility. As AIFA notes, "*Emerging as independent voices, these women experimented beyond traditional pottery, moving away from functional objects to sculptural creations*," (AIFA Gallery, 2025), framing their practice as a conscious departure from craft's utilitarian roots. Artist statements accompanied the works, foregrounding themes such as spirituality (Yamawaki), the transformation of clay (Yasui), and movement and eternity (Ikake). Together, the display presented the artists as individual voices, situating their ceramics as vehicles for personal expression and philosophical inquiry rather than as functional craft objects.

Media coverage reinforces these framings. The *Financial Times* praised Yasui's ceramics as "sculptural and emotionally expressive," while Collect's 2025 theme of "gender and heritage identity" further embedded Japanese presentations within wider debates on culture and identity (*Financial Times* review; *The Art Newspaper*).

Overall, Collect frames Japanese craft as heritage-infused yet contemporary, emphasising continuity, innovation, and cultural prestige. The strongest narratives enable

Japanese makers to be seen both as tradition-bearers and as contributors to global artistic discourse.

3.2. Market Engagement

Collect operates as both a sales platform and a cultural showcase, directly linking exhibitions to collecting and commerce. This dual role allows Japanese makers to connect with collectors, curators, and institutions, while also benefiting from the cultural capital of being positioned within an international art fair (Crafts Council Press Release 2025).

Market engagement happens through several mechanisms:

Direct sales and gallery promotion: Japanese works are marketed across a wide price range, typically £500 to £50,000+, attracting both entry-level and high-value buyers (Crafts Council Press Release 2025).

Institutional acquisitions: Collect is recognised as a site where museums acquire contemporary craft. While details are not always made public, reports note that "leading institutions such as the V&A Museum make acquisitions at Collect each year" (europeancraftsalliance.org, 2020). Such purchases integrate Japanese works into permanent collections, strengthening their cultural and economic value.

Hybrid commerce: The expansion of Collect's online platform on Artsy (since the COVID-19 pandemic) extends access for global buyers who cannot attend in person, widening opportunities for Japanese galleries to reach international collectors.

In short, Collect connects Japanese craft to the market by combining sales, institutional validation, and hybrid digital channels, reinforcing its status as a bridge between exhibition and commerce.

3.3. Marketing and Outreach

Collect's marketing strategy combines branding, media coverage, digital platforms, public programmes, and institutional collaborations. The Crafts Council promotes the fair as both prestigious and accessible: a venue for museum-quality acquisitions but also smaller, collectible works (Crafts Council – Collect Fair).

Media partnerships play a central role. Outlets such as *The Financial Times*, *The Guardian*, and *The Art Newspaper* consistently feature Collect, raising its profile and validating its cultural weight. For Japanese craft, this has been especially significant: the

FT highlighted Chisato Yasui as a standout in 2025, while *The Art Newspaper* positioned AIFA Gallery's Japanese presentation as emblematic of debates around heritage and identity.

Digital outreach has become crucial since 2021. The launch of Collect's online platform attracted 42,000 unique visitors from 70 countries in its first year (Crafts Council Press Release 2021). Today, the hybrid model allows audiences worldwide to browse and purchase works, ensuring Japanese exhibitors benefit from global visibility. Flow Gallery, for instance, extends its Collect showcase online, providing detailed narratives about the Japanese artists it represents (Crafts Council Press Release 2025).

Public engagement further supports outreach. Talks and panels at Collect address themes such as materiality, sustainability, and collecting practices, embedding craft within critical discourse. In 2022, the session *Collecting, Collections and Collectors* included Japanese works as part of international collecting conversations (Crafts Council Collect Talks).

Finally, partnerships and networks extend reach. The location at Somerset House enhances prestige and situates Collect within London's cultural calendar. Collaborations with international galleries, including AIFA Gallery (Tokyo/London) and in earlier years Yufuku Gallery (Tokyo), reinforce its role as a hub for global craft exchange.

Figure 12 *Flow Gallery's display at Collect 2022, Somerset House, London. The installation combined ceramics, glass, and floral arrangements in a domestic-like setting, encouraging slow looking and intimate engagement with the works (Photo by Iona Wolff, The Japan Times, 2022).*

Following this approach, Collect strengthens its brand not only through media partnerships and digital platforms but also through carefully curated visual environments that communicate craft as both collectible and lived-in. The aesthetic choices of galleries such as Flow emphasise intimacy, tactility, and the human scale of objects, aligning with Collect's dual aim of presenting museum-quality works while inviting personal acquisition. These staged environments, often resembling interiors, frame Japanese craft not as distant heritage but as part of contemporary lifestyles, reinforcing its accessibility while maintaining cultural depth.

3.4. Audience and Impact

Collect engages a diverse international audience through both physical and digital platforms. In 2023, the fair drew 12,600 in-person visitors and 6,730 online participants, reaching a total of 19,330 (Crafts Council Annual Review 2023). Visitors include

collectors, curators, museum professionals, designers, gallerists, and members of the general public, from high-level buyers to students and design enthusiasts.

For Japanese exhibitors, this diverse audience is critical: professional networks shape institutional collecting, while general visitors broaden appreciation for Japanese aesthetics and design.

The institutional impact is especially significant. Museums such as the V&A have acquired works through Collect, including Japanese pieces, embedding them within permanent collections and affirming their importance in the global craft canon.

Media visibility amplifies this effect. Reviews in outlets like the *FT* and *The Art Newspaper* highlight Japanese makers, such as Yasui's ceramics and AIFA's Japanese presentations, situating them within global debates on identity, heritage, and innovation. This coverage ensures Japanese craft reaches audiences well beyond the fair itself, expanding awareness internationally.

Overall, Collect's audience and impact extend beyond immediate sales. By combining market opportunities, institutional acquisitions, and media visibility, the fair generates both short-term exposure and long-term recognition for Japanese craft in international contexts.

4. Flow gallery

Flow Gallery, founded in 1999 by Yvonna Demczynska, is a private contemporary craft gallery based in Notting Hill, London. It specialises in showcasing international contemporary craft, with a particular emphasis on ceramics, textiles, glass, and jewelry. The gallery is housed in a distinctive live/work space within a Grade II listed building, designed to function as both a home and an exhibition venue. This creates a "salon" atmosphere where collectors, makers, and the gallery director can engage closely with the works on display. Flow is recognised for presenting carefully curated thematic exhibitions that highlight craftsmanship, material innovation, and the intersection of tradition with contemporary design.

4.1. Positioning Strategy

Flow Gallery positions contemporary craft as collectible fine art, but also as something that can be integrated into daily life. Its exhibitions emphasise craftsmanship, provenance,

and emotional resonance, encouraging audiences to see handmade objects as part of a cultural and conceptual discourse rather than as merely functional or decorative. Ceramics, textiles, glass, and wood are framed through themes of material sensitivity, imperfection, and tactility, values closely associated with both Japanese and Scandinavian aesthetics.

Japanese craft plays a central role in this curatorial vision. At *Collect 2025*, Flow's installation *The Spirit of Things* featured artists such as Akiko Hirai (ceramics), Yoriko Murayama (textiles), and Fumiko Nagano (glass), highlighting simplicity, balance, and material harmony (Crafts Council). Previous solo shows at the gallery have also focused on Japanese and Japan-influenced makers, including Hirai and wood sculptor Yukihiro Akama, situating their work within a fine art framework while retaining cultural associations with Japanese design philosophy (Flow Gallery Exhibitions). Flow has also curated shows explicitly exploring Japanese aesthetics, such as *Japanese Aesthetics* (2016) and *Stories from Japan* (2018), which brought together Japanese and international makers influenced by Japanese traditions. In doing so, Flow consistently frames Japanese craft as heritage-infused but contemporary, where tradition is seen as a source of ongoing innovation.

Hirai's *Rin-ne Tensho* exhibition (Figure 13) illustrates Flow Gallery's distinctive approach to positioning Japanese ceramics. While priced and presented within a fine art context, with moon jars reaching five-figure sales, Flow does not entirely strip away craft's functional associations. Instead, its curatorial framing encourages viewers to consider handmade objects as simultaneously usable and contemplative, merging the intimacy of domestic design with the gravitas of sculptural art. Hirai's cracked and layered surfaces, inspired by seasonality and cycles of growth, become both aesthetic statements and meditations on time, resonating with Flow's ethos of integrating craft into everyday life. This dual framing allows Flow to appeal to collectors seeking meaning as well as material value, deepening engagement and elevating Japanese craft's status in international markets.

Figure 13 *Akiko Hirai, Large Crystalline Vessel (stoneware), part of Rin-ne Tensho (輪廻転生), solo exhibition at Flow Gallery, London (2025). This body of work explored the Buddhist concept of reincarnation, with Hirai describing her vessels as "accumulations" of material, gesture, and time, where cracks and layers evoke cycles of growth, shedding, and renewal. Works from this series, such as her Moon Jar XL Blue, reached prices of up to £11,000, positioning them firmly in the realm of collectible fine art (Photo: Flow Gallery / Isobel Napier).*

4.2. Market Engagement

Flow Gallery connects Japanese craft to markets through retail sales, long-term support for makers, and participation in international fairs. Within its Notting Hill gallery, works are sold directly to collectors, accompanied by curatorial framing and artist narratives. The emphasis on provenance and storytelling reinforces the idea of buying not just an object but also the history, technique, and individuality of the maker. Founder Yvonna Demczynska has noted that Flow works "closely with collectors and increasingly with corporate clients building collections of applied arts" (Thinking Through Things, 2011), underscoring the gallery's role in sustaining long-term collector networks and embedding craft in private and institutional contexts.

Flow also actively supports Japanese makers by featuring them in solo and group exhibitions, giving them visibility in the UK market and introducing their work to international collectors. For instance, exhibitions of Akiko Hirai and Yukihiro Akama

have helped consolidate their reputations as artists operating at the intersection of fine art and design. At the same time, participation in international events like Collect and London Craft Week expands Flow's market reach. At Collect 2025, the thematic presentation *The Spirit of Things* featured Japanese and international artists whose work foregrounded minimalism and tactility, directly linking curatorial narratives to sales (Crafts Council). Similarly, Flow's involvement in London Craft Week included a special event with Hirai (2016), where audiences were invited to engage with her ceramics through a tea gathering and artist talk, merging exhibition, commerce, and cultural exchange (London Craft Week).

This model allows Flow to act as a bridge between makers and markets: exhibitions generate sales in an intimate setting, while fairs connect Japanese craft to international collectors, curators, and museums.

4.3. Marketing and Outreach

Flow Gallery promotes its programme through digital tools, targeted media, publications, and partnerships. Its website functions as an exhibition archive and online shop, where curatorial texts accompany high-quality photography, reflecting its commitment to storytelling as part of the sales process. On Instagram (@flowgallerylondon), the gallery reinforces this approach visually, using minimal text and carefully composed images of objects, installations, and studio visits. This aesthetic style mirrors the gallery's physical atmosphere and positions Flow as a brand that values refinement and detail. Email newsletters extend this communication, providing direct updates to collectors and audiences.

Media coverage has further reinforced Flow's reputation. *Wallpaper* praised its *Paper Works* exhibition (2022) for showcasing fragility and skill in paper-based craft, while *The Modern House* profiled the gallery and founder Yvonna Demczynska, emphasising its role as a mediator between makers and collectors. *ArchDaily* highlighted its distinctive live/work "salon" design by John Pardey Architects, which blends domestic intimacy with gallery presentation, making the experience of visiting Flow different from larger institutions. Blogs such as *I Have This Thing With Ceramics* describe Flow as "an intimate gallery … carefully curating its contemporary craft makers," underlining its collector-focused and narrative-driven model.

The gallery space itself is an important part of Flow's marketing and outreach. Its minimalist design and domestic atmosphere (Figure 14) embody the gallery's philosophy of living with art, making it feel approachable while maintaining an air of refinement. This physical experience complements Flow's online and media presence, reinforcing the idea that craft can occupy a place of honour in the home as well as in a gallery or museum. The publication *Flow at Twenty* (2019) further amplified this message by photographing collectors with works purchased from the gallery, turning private interiors into an extension of Flow's brand identity and demonstrating the long-term value and emotional resonance of craft objects.

Figure 14 *Interior of Flow Gallery, Notting Hill, London. The space combines gallery display with domestic elements, featuring open shelving, natural light, and a neutral colour palette. This layout allows for close viewing of ceramics, textiles, and other works, creating an environment that encourages visitors to encounter objects in a setting reminiscent of a lived-in space (Photo: Flow Gallery).*

Publications also play a role in outreach. The anniversary book *Flow at Twenty* (2019), designed by Pentagram, combined essays from collectors, curators, and artists, positioning the gallery as both a cultural authority and a commercial platform. By offering a tangible object that embodied its ethos, the publication reinforced Flow's brand identity while also acting as a collectible piece in itself. Partnerships with fairs like Collect and London Craft Week extend Flow's visibility within global networks of collectors and curators, strengthening the gallery's ability to promote Japanese makers internationally.

4.4. Audience and Impact

Flow Gallery engages a specialist but highly loyal audience. Its Notting Hill location and domestic-style architecture attract collectors, design-conscious visitors, and craft specialists who value close, personal encounters with objects. The gallery describes itself as "an intimate gallery … carefully curating a personal collection for the cherished interior" (Flow Gallery), and its design fosters encounters that feel private and immersive (ArchDaily). Unlike national institutions such as the V&A or Japan House London, Flow does not seek mass audiences but cultivates depth of engagement with a smaller, highly committed community.

Participation in Collect and London Craft Week extends this reach to international collectors, curators, and museum professionals, embedding Japanese makers within broader markets. While visitor statistics are not published, Flow's visibility at Collect situates it among leading craft galleries and exposes Japanese artists to influential stakeholders. This presence is particularly important for Japanese makers, as it facilitates both sales and institutional interest.

Within its London space, Flow has introduced UK audiences to Japanese makers rarely shown outside Japan. Exhibitions featuring ceramicists Akiko Hirai and Yukihiro Akama, or glass artist Yoshiaki Kojiro, have provided close encounters that deepen cultural appreciation of Japanese craft and expand awareness of its role in contemporary applied arts.

Flow's impact is also evident in collector loyalty and repeat acquisitions. The publication *Flow at Twenty* (2019) documented these relationships, featuring essays from collectors reflecting on their engagement with the gallery. Critical reception in outlets such as *Wallpaper* and *The Modern House* further reinforces Flow's reputation as a gallery that combines cultural authority with a commercial model.

Overall, while smaller in scale than national museums, Flow's influence lies in depth rather than breadth. It supports emerging and established makers, fosters long-term collector networks, and positions Japanese craft as both culturally significant and market-relevant within the UK.

Cross-Case Summary of Japanese Craft in London

Having presented the cases individually, the next step is to consider them together in a comparative perspective. Cross-case analysis is a common strategy in multiple-case study research, as it helps to identify both recurring themes and important contrasts (Stake, 2006; Yin, 2018). Visual displays such as tables are often recommended for this purpose, since they allow the dataset to be seen as a whole and make patterns more visible (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2014).

Thus, by placing the institutions side by side, it becomes clearer how different kinds of actors, diplomatic, curatorial, market-oriented, and commercial mediate the international visibility of Japanese craft. Following this approach, the analysis begins with a table that summarises the four analytical dimensions: positioning strategy, market engagement, marketing and outreach, and audience and impact, across Japan House London, the V&A, Collect Art Fair, and Flow Gallery. This structured overview provides the basis for the critical discussion that follows.

Dimension	**Japan House London**	**V&A**	**Collect Art Fair**	**Flow Gallery**
Positioning Strategy	Presents Japanese craft as **authentic heritage** rooted in spirituality and continuity. Regional traditions and minority voices (e.g., Ainu) are included, but innovation is less emphasised. The narrative privileges authenticity and preservation.	Frames craft as both **heritage and design innovation**, highlighting continuity between past and present. Exhibitions situate Japanese craft within wider global design and fashion contexts. Criticised for conservative framing, underplaying alternative or radical practices.	Positions Japanese craft as **fine art**, aligned with international contemporary art discourses. Makers are sometimes treated as individual artists rather than cultural representatives. Diversity exists, including attention to gender and identity, but the framing is strongly	Curates Japanese craft as **collectible and experiential**, stressing tactility, provenance, and emotional resonance. Merges Japanese and Scandinavian aesthetics, creating a distinctive identity. Though smaller in scale, it privileges close engagement with craft over institutional breadth.

			influenced by market logics.	
Market Engagement	Maintains a **separation between exhibitions and commerce**: cultural diplomacy takes priority over direct market activity. The shop supports artisans by selling reproducible goods, offering exposure more than financial return.	Market connection comes mainly through **shops and catalogues**, which complement exhibitions. Makers benefit indirectly through acquisitions, loans, and curatorial recognition rather than commercial gain.	Functions as a **sales-driven platform** where exhibitions and market are inseparable. Galleries introduce Japanese makers to collectors and museums, enhancing visibility and value. Commerce dominates, but cultural prestige legitimises sales.	A **commercial gallery model** where exhibitions are also sales opportunities. Long-term representation supports makers, connecting them with loyal collectors and corporate networks. Commerce is central but framed through strong curatorial storytelling.
Marketing & Outreach	Relies on **branding consistency** and digital communication (Instagram, livestreams, online talks). Partnerships mainly involve Japanese institutions, limiting broader international collaborations. Reach is wide but online engagement modest.	Uses **extensive media coverage, partnerships, and digital tools** to maximise visibility. Strong ties with cultural bodies (e.g., Japan Foundation, Embassy) and a large online following reinforce its global authority.	Marketed as both **prestigious and accessible**, positioning craft alongside fine art fairs. An online platform (Artsy) expands reach to international audiences. Talks and panels add intellectual weight and reinforce its cultural role.	Operates with **targeted, specialist outreach**. Refined Instagram presence and newsletters cultivate a loyal collector base. Media coverage stresses its intimate curatorial model. Visibility is niche but influential within specialist networks.

Audience & Impact	Attracts **large visitor numbers** (hundreds of thousands annually), with broad appeal beyond specialists. Impact lies in symbolic diplomacy and raising awareness rather than driving sales. Critics highlight its polished but conservative approach.	Draws **millions of visitors** with strong global reach. Major exhibitions on Japanese craft achieve high attendance (e.g., *Kimono: Kyoto to Catwalk*). Impact extends through scholarly outputs, education, and long-term collections.	Audience is **smaller but specialised**, including collectors, curators, and institutions. Impact is significant through museum acquisitions and media visibility, embedding Japanese makers in international debates.	Serves a **small, loyal audience** of collectors and design-conscious visitors. Its impact is measured in **depth of engagement and quality of connections**, often introducing makers little known outside Japan. Less about scale, more about influence.

Critical Discussion of Cross-Case Findings

Having presented the four London case studies individually, this chapter now moves from description to analysis. The goal is to identify recurring themes and tensions in how Japanese craft is framed, circulated, and valued in the UK, with the broader purpose of drawing insights that can inform its positioning within the international art market as a whole. It sheds light on a different facet of how Japanese craft enters global circuits, and together they highlight the complexity of balancing cultural heritage with market relevance.

Heritage and innovation

The London case studies reveal that Japanese craft's international positioning continues to be mediated by forces long traced throughout this thesis: the privileging of heritage, the ambiguous place of craft between art and utility, and the uneven impact of cultural diplomacy. What emerges most clearly from comparing Japan House London, the V&A, Collect, and Flow Gallery is that each institution mobilises Japanese craft in ways that reflect these enduring dynamics while also revealing their contradictions. Together, they show how Japanese craft is framed, circulated, and legitimised not only as an artistic practice but also as a symbol, commodity, and narrative within global cultural systems.

A central pattern is the persistent tension between heritage and innovation. As earlier chapters demonstrated, Japan's cultural policy has historically prioritised continuity and preservation, from Meiji-era strategies of showcasing traditional craftsmanship abroad to the postwar frameworks of Bunkachō and the designation of Living National Treasures. Japan House London exemplifies this approach, presenting craft as a living practice to be safeguarded and transmitted, aligning with the state-led frameworks discussed by Akagawa (2015). Its exhibitions offer accessible narratives of wabi-sabi and monozukuri, portraying craftspeople as guardians of tradition and situating their work within a broader story of cultural continuity. Its commercial outlets, reminiscent of the Mingei boom of the 1960s–70s that turned traditional objects into branded lifestyle products, frame craft as both heritage and commodity. While this state strategy undeniably strengthens Japan's cultural diplomacy by presenting a clear and appealing narrative of Japanese craft, the works selected for display are often recontextualised in ways that sever them from their everyday functions and social environments. At Japan House, the polished exhibition

settings risk reducing these objects to aestheticised symbols of "Japaneseness," rather than recognising them as living practices embedded in communities. This selective framing not only marginalises experimental, regionally specific, or less codified practices, but also flattens the field of craft into a narrow vision designed for external consumption. The result is a cultural presentation that privileges recognisability over authenticity, and coherence over the complexity that defines contemporary craft.

The V&A similarly situates Japanese craft within a lineage of design and decorative arts, which allows it to highlight continuity between past and present. Its role, as theorised earlier, can be seen as one of legitimisation: by embedding Japanese craft in global museum narratives, it validates makers in the eyes of the international art community. Yet its curatorial framing tends to privilege heritage over disruption, arguably perpetuating Japonism notions of Japan as a land of timeless tradition.

Both V&A and Japan House hint to what earlier chapters noted about "invented traditions", as their construction of heritage through curatorship can be both enabling and constraining, conferring authority while freezing cultural practices in idealised forms.

By contrast, Collect provides a platform that pushes Japanese craft into contemporary relevance by framing it as fine art. It positions craft within debates on identity, gender, and materiality, giving Japanese makers international exposure and validating them in the fine art market. Even so, as noted earlier, this move sometimes comes at the cost of "sterilising" function, with makers intentionally creating works that forgo functionality and cultural specificity, prioritising marketability and alignment with fine art expectations.

At the same time, Collect functions as a key arena where Japanese artists actively test the boundaries of their practice. The works shown there often emphasise distinctive authorship and global artistic dialogue, diverging from the lineage-based and community-oriented frameworks that have historically shaped Japanese craft. By encouraging innovation and presenting craft as contemporary art, Collect enables Japanese makers to engage with collectors and institutions that value originality and conceptual depth.

Yet this framing also introduces a cultural dilemma, recalling what was said by the two Hamada Pottery generations, in the documentary *Crafting Ancient Japanese Pottery: Keeping Alive a Japanese Art Form*: should the international promotion of Japanese craft art continue to adopt individualised expression to strengthen its presence in the global art market, or does this risk diluting the traditions of transmission and shared identity that underpin the field? This tension makes Collect a particularly revealing site for examining

how Japanese craft navigates the pressures of global art-world participation while striving to preserve its cultural integrity.

Flow Gallery offers a different and equally valuable model: it highlights tactility, imperfection, and sensitivity to materials, drawing from Mingei ideals while translating them into a contemporary aesthetic context. Flow, more than any other institution studied, embodies the Mingei principle that craft should be "used as much as admired," connecting collectors with works that maintain their cultural resonance. Its model could be described as "slow craft," matching small-scale production with discerning buyers and cultivating a market rooted in authenticity, workmanship, and narrative experience. Its limitation lies not in vision but in scale, which restricts its reach despite the depth of engagement it fosters.

The contrast shows a clear dilemma: focusing too much on heritage and continuation of tradition can leave little room for innovation, while pushing for innovation can open doors to the fine art market, but sometimes at the cost of losing cultural roots and the practical function that defines craft.

Each institution, however, brings unique strengths to the ecology: Japan House communicates cultural heritage to broad audiences; the V&A embeds craft within authoritative museum narratives; Collect links craft to global fine art discourses; and Flow sustains depth and intimacy. What is at stake is not what they fail to do, but how their distinct approaches reflect their institutional missions and structural capacities.

Symbolic and Market Value

A second dynamic lies in the divide between symbolic and market value. As discussed in the introduction, Japanese craft has long been celebrated as cultural heritage but has struggled to secure parity with fine art in the global market. The London institutions reflect this imbalance, yet each also brings distinct strengths to the field.

Japan House London and the V&A excel in producing symbolic capital. They shape perceptions, grant legitimacy, and situate Japanese craft within cultural and historical narratives that reach wide audiences. Their authority stems from representation rather than direct market engagement: they foster appreciation and visibility but offer only limited channels for sustained economic support for craftspeople. Its separation of exhibitions from commerce limits its ability to support makers in international markets. Japan House has a retail space, much like the 1960s–70s Mingei boom when Japanese

craft was widely sold in department stores. Like those earlier efforts, it may be boosting recognition and making craft more accessible, but it also faces the same challenge of turning traditional objects into branded lifestyle products, increasing visibility while potentially weakening the sense of scarcity and uniqueness that characterizes fine art.

Collect and Flow Gallery, by contrast, specialise in converting symbolic recognition into tangible market value. Collect achieves this at scale, linking Japanese makers to international collectors and museums through sales, acquisitions, and digital platforms.

It has played an important role in validating craft within fine art contexts, though this often involves privileging innovation or commodification over cultural framing. Flow, meanwhile, cultivates depth over scale: by building loyalty among a small but influential group of collectors, it ensures continuity and recognition for artists whose work might otherwise remain unseen. Yet its reach is inevitably constrained by its size and resources. Both spaces resist purely heritage-based framings and celebrate innovation, positioning Japanese craft as globally relevant and artistically experimental.

Together, these contrasting strategies confirm one of the thesis's central observations: Japanese craft continues to be celebrated abroad primarily for what it represents, heritage, cultural identity, and craftsmanship, but the translation of that symbolic capital into sustained economic infrastructures remains uneven. The value of the London institutions lies not in resolving this divide, but in showing how symbolic and market roles complement one another when viewed as part of a wider ecosystem.

Scale and Depth

A third theme concerns the relationship between scale and depth of engagement. Institutions like the V&A and Japan House London excel at breadth. They reach millions of visitors and raise cultural awareness on a global scale, embedding Japanese craft within widely recognised narratives of heritage and identity. This visibility is invaluable for legitimising craft as part of world culture. At the same time, the impact is diffuse: while broad audiences gain awareness, the benefits for Japanese craft as a contemporary and evolving field remain limited, and direct connections to market or professional networks are minimal.

Japan House, as part of the Japanese government's soft power play, is especially effective at combining high visibility with cultural translation, though, like expressed

before, its reliance on nostalgic and rigid definitions of tradition can risk presenting a static image of Japanese culture.

Collect and Flow Gallery, by contrast, specialise in depth. Collect facilitates acquisitions into major museum collections, shaping the canon of Japanese craft and giving it durable recognition within art institutions, focusing on an elite segment of the art world.

Flow sustains intimate, long-term engagement with collectors, fostering loyalty that ensures ongoing support for specific artists. This curatorial intimacy also challenges the market's tendency to favour easily marketable traits, instead encouraging more diverse expressions of material culture through selling a personal experience and story. Again, its influence is restricted, as Flow's limited scale prevents a wider reach.

This dynamic reflects Bourdieu's (1993) insight that cultural fields are structured by interdependent but competing logics: large-scale legitimacy on the one hand, and restricted, prestigious networks on the other. For Japanese craft, both dimensions are vital, broad cultural recognition and focused, sustained engagement, but they rarely converge within a single institution. The strength of the London ecosystem lies precisely in how these institutions complement one another, even if none can fully balance scale and depth alone.

Institutional interdependence

Finally, the cases highlight a pattern of institutional interdependence. No single institution resolves the challenges of positioning Japanese craft abroad, but each contributes a crucial piece. Japan House London fulfils an important role in cultural diplomacy, offering broad public outreach and an accessible introduction to Japan's craft heritage.

Its partnership with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, METI, and other state bodies ensures that it remains aligned with national policy frameworks, yet this also means it can marginalise expressions that fall outside the state's preferred narratives (Akagawa, 2015).

The V&A provides authority and legitimacy on a global stage. By embedding Japanese craft within a prestigious museum context, it ensures long-term visibility and inclusion in scholarly and cultural narratives. At the same time, its framing on its permanent exhibition tends to privilege heritage, over contemporary experimentation,

which risks narrowing perceptions of craft's ongoing evolution. We see however a sign of change with their most recent temporary exhibitions.

Collect bridges Japanese craft into the fine art market. It generates economic visibility, connects makers with collectors and institutions, and positions their work in conversations about contemporary identity and materiality. It is here that Japanese artists compete most directly in a Western-dominated art sphere, often adapting or even "sterilising" their works to meet market demand, a choice that can raise their status but also detach them from craft traditions. This challenge is especially evident at Collect, where Japanese artists enter the global contemporary art field. Their distinctively Japanese elements often serve as a key differentiator, but when these are softened or removed to meet fine art expectations, that advantage disappears, making it even harder for them to stand out and achieve recognition or economic success. Flow Gallery sustains deep and lasting engagement. Through carefully curated relationships, it introduces lesser-known artists to international audiences and maintains collector loyalty. Its scale, however, limits its wider influence and ability to shape broader market dynamics.

Viewed together, however, these strengths and limitations form a broader ecosystem. Japan House raises awareness, the V&A confers legitimacy, Collect enables market circulation, and Flow nurtures depth of engagement. Japanese craft's international trajectory in the UK thus depends not on one dominant model but on the interplay of heritage-driven diplomacy, museum authority, market platforms, and specialist galleries. What emerges is not institutional failure, but a fragmented yet complementary ecology in which each actor plays a partial, but necessary, role.

London as a Window into Japanese Craft's Global Positioning

Taken together, the London case studies reinforce this thesis's central argument: the international positioning of Japanese craft in the UK is shaped less by individual makers than by the institutions. These frame, circulate, and legitimise their work. Across Japan House London, the V&A, Collect, and Flow Gallery, the same structural dilemmas recur: heritage operates as both asset and constraint, symbolic legitimacy does not guarantee market parity, breadth of visibility rarely coincides with depth of engagement, and institutional frameworks both enable and limit opportunities for Japanese craft.

These tensions do not stem from institutional failure but from their different roles and capacities. Japan House foregrounds cultural diplomacy, the V&A embeds Japanese craft

within museum authority, Collect integrates it into fine art market circuits, and Flow cultivates long-term, specialist collector relationships. Each fulfils its mission effectively, yet only partially. What emerges in the UK is therefore a fragmented but complementary ecosystem, where no single actor provides a comprehensive pathway, but together they generate overlapping forms of visibility, legitimacy, and support.

In this London context, heritage value is consistently celebrated but often overshadows contemporary experimentation; market access exists but remains fragmented across fairs and niche galleries; visibility is strongest in large public institutions, yet sustained engagement is nurtured in smaller, specialist spaces. Japanese craft's positioning in the UK is thus negotiated through the interplay of diplomacy, curatorial authority, market platforms, and specialist mediation. What these findings ultimately suggest, echoing earlier theoretical discussions, is that the objective should not be to resolve these tensions but to harness them: to transform heritage and innovation, symbolic recognition and market access, breadth and depth into complementary rather than competing logics.

The challenge ahead lies not in expecting one institution to reconcile these contradictions, but in strengthening the connections between them so that heritage and innovation, symbolic recognition and market access, breadth and depth can work less as competing logics and more as complementary forces within the UK's cultural field.

Through the London case studies, we gain a clearer understanding of the relationship between Japanese craft art and the international art market, specifically how integration into the global art ecosystem depends on institutions that frame, circulate, and legitimise these works, positioning heritage as both asset and constraint, offering symbolic legitimacy without guaranteed market success, and providing visibility that is shaped as much by structural limits as by opportunities.

Lastly, from this analysis, we can observe that, Japanese artisans often do not appear to be at the forefront of their own work. Their voices are even less present when we look for direct statements about their pieces. At the beginning, we discussed how, in fine art contexts, narratives and the artist's persona often play a crucial role in selling the work. However, as previously noted, it is uncertain whether applying such an individualistic model to Japanese crafts, by placing the artist at centre stage would be beneficial. Doing so might risk eroding the more collective notion of Japanese craft production that makes it what it is. The question, then, is whether we should encourage artisans to actively promote their personal narratives. A sensible first step would be to listen to their own

voices, understand their objectives and visions, and consider how they themselves wish their work and studios to be perceived before suggesting any type of approach.

If we understand that these dilemmas can be found in London not because they are unique to the UK, but because London, as the world's second-largest art market hub, brings together the full range of institutional actors, cultural diplomacy centres, museums, art fairs, and specialist galleries, that also structure Japanese craft's international presence elsewhere.

In this sense, London can be read as a microcosm of the broader art market. The tensions identified here, between heritage and innovation, symbolic recognition and market access, breadth and depth, are not confined to the UK but echo the structural dilemmas facing Japanese craft in other global art hubs. While this thesis limited its scope to London in order to allow for depth of analysis and direct engagement with case studies, the patterns revealed here strongly suggest broader applicability.

Conclusion

This thesis set out to explore how Japanese craft art is positioned, perceived, and promoted in the international art market. The findings suggest that its global presence emerges from a combination of cultural diplomacy, curatorial framing, market initiatives, and collector interest, forming an ecosystem that is complementary yet sometimes fragmented.

Japanese craft art is positioned at the intersection of heritage and contemporary practice. Institutions such as Japan House London and the V&A emphasize its historical continuity and cultural depth, while fairs like Collect and specialist galleries highlight its relevance to the discourse of contemporary art and design. This produces a nuanced placement, neither fully within the fine art canon nor confined to the heritage sector, which both strengthens its distinct identity and poses challenges for broader market integration.

International audiences often value Japanese craft for its technical mastery and ties to tradition, though this can sometimes lead to its reception being shaped by romanticized or exoticized views of Japan. Encouragingly, there is growing engagement with contemporary narratives that present artisans as creative practitioners responding to current cultural and market conditions, expanding the understanding of Japanese Craft beyond a static image of the past.

The promotion of Japanese craft relies on a mix of governmental programs, museum exhibitions, art fairs, and gallery representation. These efforts have raised its visibility and symbolic value but still leave space for greater inclusion of artisans' perspectives and more direct support for small-scale makers. Its future visibility and vitality may depend on strategies that better integrate institutional efforts with the voices of makers themselves, allowing Japanese craft to be seen not only as a treasured inheritance but as a dynamic, living field of artistic expression that continues to adapt and inspire in the present.

A key insight from this research is that the tensions surrounding Japanese craft between tradition and innovation, symbolic and market value, and local and global audiences, are not merely obstacles but productive forces. These tensions compel institutions, curators, and makers to continuously renegotiate the meaning and purpose of Japanese craft art, keeping it relevant, adaptable, and resonant within international contexts.

London emerges as a valuable microcosm of the global ecosystem in which Japanese craft circulates. Here, cultural diplomacy, museum authority, art fair circuits, and gallery networks converge, shaping how audiences encounter and interpret Japanese craft.

At the same time, the research highlights that cultural diplomacy, while crucial for sustaining international visibility, can sometimes present a static or idealized image of craft. By focusing primarily on heritage, these efforts risk "freezing" craft in time rather than celebrating its capacity for innovation. Future promotion strategies may benefit from greater emphasis on living makers and their contemporary contributions, framing craft not just as cultural memory but as a practice that continues to evolve.

Across all case studies, one observation reoccurs: the voices of artisans are often missing from international representation. Greater inclusion of makers in curatorial decisions, exhibition design, and public programming could enrich authenticity and ensure that global narratives reflect the diversity and realities of those who sustain and reinvent Japanese craft traditions.

Focusing on London necessarily restricted the geographical scope of this study, as it privileges one major cultural and market hub over other global contexts. These limitations mean that the findings should be read as an analysis of institutional positioning rather than a full account of how Japanese craft is experienced and negotiated across all stakeholders.

This limitation suggests that future research could extend the comparative scope to other art hubs such as New York, Paris, and Hong Kong. Doing so would shed light on how different cities frame Japanese craft and reveal the common threads that connect their approaches. At the same time, incorporating ethnographic fieldwork with craftspeople actively navigating international markets would address the current gap by integrating makers' lived realities into the analysis. Together, these directions would complement the present findings and offer a richer, more nuanced picture of how Japanese craft art continues to evolve on the global stage.

Ultimately, Japanese craft art is uniquely positioned to challenge and expand traditional boundaries between fine art, craftsmanship, and material culture. Its ability to combine technical mastery with symbolic meaning allows it to act as a bridge, between past and future, between local and global, and between function and contemplation. Rather than simply participating in the global art market, Japanese craft art has the potential to shape it, encouraging audiences to reconsider what counts as art and why.

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Appendix A: Glossary of Japanese Terms

Bijutsu (美術) *Romaji:* bijutsu

Japanese term for "fine art," introduced during the Meiji period to translate Western concepts of painting and sculpture, establishing a distinction between fine arts and crafts (Goto, 2019).

Bijutsu Kōgei (美術工芸) *Romaji:* bijutsu kōgei

Literally "artistic crafts." Term introduced during the late 19th century to elevate certain traditional practices (such as ceramics and lacquerware) by distinguishing them from mass-produced goods (Goto, 2019).

Bunkachō (文化庁) *Romaji:* bunkachō

The Agency for Cultural Affairs of Japan, responsible for safeguarding tangible and intangible cultural properties and for promoting cultural diplomacy (Akagawa, 2015).

Bunkazai Hogohō (文化財保護法) *Romaji:* bunkazai hogohō

"Law for the Protection of Cultural Properties" enacted in 1950. Recognizes crafts as cultural assets and provides a framework for their preservation as living traditions (Morais, 2019).

Kintsugi (金継ぎ) *Romaji:* kintsugi

Traditional technique of repairing broken pottery with urushi lacquer and powdered gold, highlighting rather than hiding the breakage, and creating a new aesthetic value.

Kōgei (工芸) *Romaji:* kōgei

Literally "craft technique." Refers to crafts that integrate functionality and aesthetic value, including ceramics, lacquerware, textiles, and metalwork. In contemporary contexts, it designates the field of Japanese craft art as a whole (Goto, 2019).

Kōgyō Kōgei (工業工芸) *Romaji:* kōgyō kōgei

"Industrial crafts." Term used during the Meiji era to describe crafts produced for mass consumption, in contrast to bijutsu kōgei (artistic crafts) (Goto, 2019).

Mingei (民藝) *Romaji:* mingei

Literally "art of the people." Movement founded by Yanagi Sōetsu in the 1920s–30s that celebrated the beauty of everyday, handmade objects, emphasizing anonymity, functionality, and spiritual value (Morais, 2019).

Miyadaiku (宮大工) *Romaji:* miyadaiku

Traditional carpenters specialized in the construction and restoration of shrines and temples, often highlighted in exhibitions of traditional Japanese craftsmanship.

Monozukuri (ものづくり) *Romaji:* monozukuri

Concept meaning "the act of making things." Embodies care, dedication, technical mastery, and the transmission of knowledge, and is often cited as central to Japanese manufacturing and craft culture.

Ningen Kokuhō (人間国宝) *Romaji:* ningen kokuhō

Literally "Living National Treasure." Honorary title granted to individuals recognized as "Holders of Important Intangible Cultural Properties," who are entrusted with preserving and transmitting traditional techniques (Akagawa, 2015).

Urushi (漆) *Romaji:* urushi

Natural lacquer derived from the sap of the lacquer tree, used in traditional Japanese arts for coating, decoration, and repair (including kintsugi).

Utsukushisa no Yō (美しさの用) *Romaji:* utsukushisa no yō

"Beauty of use." A Japanese aesthetic concept that highlights the inseparability of practicality and aesthetic value, central to understanding the cultural meaning of craft (Goto, 2019).

Zuan (図案) *Romaji:* zuan

Term meaning "design" or "pattern." Institutionalized during the Meiji era in art and industrial schools to train artisans in standardized designs for industrial production, particularly in textiles, ceramics, and metalwork (Satō, 2011).

Appendix B: Table of figures