

Bio

Joshua Rogers is a visiting assistant professor at Vassar College. His work traces the connections between literary, religious, and philosophical discourse in pre-WWII Japan. He explores how secularity among literary writers opened up a new space for inquiry into non-rational yet markedly non-religious modes of knowledge and experience.

Title

Mysticism from West to East: Yanagi Muneyoshi, the Thuswise, and Modern Japanese Literature

Abstract

In 1910, Yanagi Muneyoshi (1889–1961) banded together with a group of friends to launch the *Shirakaba* (White Birch) journal, which left a lasting mark on literature and art in Japan across its 14-year run. Alongside serialized novels by leading authors and reproductions of the newest European artworks, we find in the pages of *Shirakaba* numerous articles by Yanagi himself on topics like vitalism, pantheism, and mysticism. How does Yanagi's work fit into the milieu of this journal and into broader literary and religious discourse? What can he tell us about the connection between the world of art and the newly emerging forms of knowledge and experience that distinguished themselves from both traditional religions (especially Christianity and Buddhism) and from scientific materialism?

In this paper I will trace Yanagi's journey from his enthusiastic embrace of the imported ideas of liberal Christian theology, psychical research, Bergsonian vitalism, and the mysticism of William Blake to the creation of his own syncretic belief system. In the late 1910s, Yanagi's focus shifted from Western thought to Buddhist and Daoist ideas, culminating in his own formulation of a mystical absolute beyond rational knowledge that he called "the Thuswise," his English translation of his coined term *sokunyo* 即如. Although Yanagi was the most vocal proponent of these ideas within the *Shirakaba* journal, they were echoed within a wide range of literary writing in the Taishō period. To understand the importance of these ideas, I pursue two questions. First, how did Yanagi distinguish his own beliefs from the many new religious movements emerging in Japan and around the globe at this time? Second, what does Yanagi's story tell us about the global exchange of ideas about the divine and the mystical, and about the orientalist and imperialistic politics that interpenetrated both sides of this exchange?