Most existing studies of early modern crafts in Japan approach the subject as a linear historical narrative, from the perspective of individual masters and media, or within the realms of collecting, curation, and display. This book takes a different approach. By titling it *Craft Culture in Early Modern Japan: Materials, Makers, and Mastery*, I mean to draw critical attention to the dynamic, multidirectional network of forces—both material and immaterial—that underlie the extraordinarily rich, diverse, and aesthetically sophisticated culture of Japan during the period from roughly the 1580s to the 1860s. This includes the particular materials and tools and the people who wield them but also the institutions, modes of thought, behaviors, and the reciprocal relationships among them. Shared assumptions fundamental to ways and values of making that transcend the specifics of each practice constitute what I call “craft culture.”

Craft has been defined by materials (clay, wood, metal), by techniques (throwing, carving, forging), and by the functional products of the interaction between them (teabowls, household furnishings, swords). In the broadest sense, however, it evokes the human capacity to make, with skills developed through experience. I use the term here very loosely to refer both to the process of making with specialized skills and techniques and the results of this activity, ranging from architecture to automata. Consequently, this book is as much a study of process and practice as it is of product.
Today craft is commonly assumed to mean handmade, in opposition to machine-made, but this is not necessarily true since craft making has always required tools of some sort. As woodworker and craft theorist David Pye wrote in a peevish rebuttal to this misapprehension, “some things actually can be made without tools, it is true, but the definition is going to be rather exclusive for it will take in baskets and coiled pottery, and that is about all!”

Objects made by the human hand, even if mediated by tools, have a unique aesthetic appeal that can evoke a world outside modernity. A desire to situate beautifully handcrafted objects beyond the quotidian industrial and postindustrial world and to see them as culturally and historically other has contributed to the enduring esteem that those created in Japan enjoy among Euro-Americans. This appreciation often goes hand in hand with their essentialization and decontextualization. The historical and relational approach adopted here seeks to overcome these tendencies and bring new insights and nuance to the interpretation of early modern crafts in Japan.

There are many challenges in addressing this subject. We are far from the lived material reality of an era in which craft making was based largely on tacit knowledge. We do not share the sociocultural framework within which the resulting artifacts were used and understood. In the industrialized Euro-American world, crafts no longer emerge from within the culture in which they are consumed and, indeed, are often the products of different cultures altogether. In early modern Japan, however, crafts—especially dwellings, their furnishings, and dress—constituted forms of material culture critical to daily life. They were also powerful carriers of knowledge, sociality, and identity. How and from what substances they were made were matters of serious concern among all classes of society.

Craft theorist Glenn Adamson has argued that crafts today are “supplemental” to “the narrative of progress and conceptual discovery” of the history of modern art. This view is a legacy of Renaissance Europe, where crafts
were defined epistemologically in opposition and subordinate to the fine arts. This distinction was not true of early modern Japan, where the category saiku, the closest analogue to “craft,” included painting as well as utilitarian objects made of lacquer, ceramics, and other materials. Most craft makers were officially classified as artisans, shokunin, but could belong to other classes as well. Their relative social stature was informed by factors including patronage, materials, and level of expertise. Because of the intrinsic value of lacquer, gold, and silver and of the intricate techniques with which makie lacquerers worked to create articles with luxurious pictorial decor, they enjoyed higher esteem than potters, who worked with clay. Within a particular profession, there might be further hierarchies: those (invariably male) who fired kilns and threw pots enjoyed higher social and professional status than those who dug and pugged clay (who were sometimes female).

A further challenge to recovering early modern craft culture is the enormous symbolic burden that crafts have carried, especially within Japan. Kōgei, the modern Japanese term for craft, like its counterpart bijutsu, fine art, is a recent coinage. It was first used as a collective category for the ceramics, lacquer, metalwork, and textiles in the context of the Vienna International Exposition of 1873 in order to bring Japanese taxonomies in line with those prevailing in Europe. Since that time, its connotations have evolved in response to a complex interplay of domestic and international social, political, and economic circumstances. Discourses on tradition, colonialism, and nationalism, among other forces, have contributed to its mutations. Today the meaning of kōgei is widely debated, especially by practitioners and curators seeking to draw a sharp line between Japanese materials and making practices and those in other parts of the world. This has included promoting the use of the word kōgei (without the macron) rather than its local translation in foreign language publications, an effort bound up with classifying Japanese crafts in a way that does not imply the Western dichotomy of fine arts versus crafts. Despite its local inflections,
the concept of craft in Japan today cannot be disassociated from patterns of thinking and expectations characteristic of many parts of the industrialized world.

Whatever the terminology, it is clear that bringing specialized know-how, skills, technologies, and aesthetic sensibility to making things of use to society has long been integral to the material culture of Japan. For more than a century, through world expositions and the exports associated with them, crafts have been deemed among Japan’s greatest contributions to world culture—creations that distinguish Japan from and even elevate it above other modern nations. Japanese craft exceptionalism is widely attributed to its makers’ special sensitivity to natural materials, technical mastery, and design sense, as brought equally to vernacular and elite functional and decorative objects. The modern Japanese discourse on craft also has a strong dialectical dimension in the sharp division drawn between useful articles made for the urban elite and those made for rural commoners. The former are often associated with celebrity makers such as Hon’ami Kōetsu (1558–1637), Ogata Kōrin (1658–1716), or Ogata Kenzan (1663–1743). By contrast, folk crafts (mingei), a subcategory of kōgei, are extolled as the products of nameless makers, part of a rural aesthetic tradition that represents an authentic Japan lost to Western modernity. It is widely assumed that these “unknown craftsmen” were male, despite the fact that women in rural areas were active participants in many crafts, especially textiles and papermaking.

Whether implicitly or explicitly, perceptions of all early modern Japanese crafts are bound up with the values of “tradition,” commonly understood to be unchanging and rooted in the past. This outlook has been institutionalized in the modern system designed to protect and preserve the nation’s craft heritage, wherein contemporary practitioners identified as holders of the title of “Important Intangible Cultural Property” (Jūyo mukei bunkazai), popularly known as “Living National Treasures,” have rigid guidelines for the “traditional” tools and techniques they may use, even
when such practices are no longer feasible. In this system, tradition is construed not as a constantly evolving process but as fixed, and thus involving preservation of an imagined status quo. Setting aside assumptions of Japanese exceptionalism, of a division between “art crafts” and “folk crafts,” and of tradition as fixed is a necessary precondition for entering the dynamic world of early modern crafts.

Although this study focuses on Japan, I have framed it as “early modern” rather than within the Momoyama (1573–1603) and Tokugawa (1603–1868) periods to overcome parochialism and encourage comparison with artisanal developments in other parts of the world between the late sixteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries. While the specifics of Japanese craft making may differ—for instance, Japanese saws cut on the pull rather than the push stroke—the deployment of tools must still obey fundamental laws. Making a physical object is a creative process requiring a plan, spatial thinking, knowledge of the laws of nature, experimentation, and consideration of the network of things to which the thing belongs. It has a language bound by rules that govern the codes of its social production and exchange. These rules are first and foremost natural, involving as they do the laws of physics and the limitations of the human body.

A further commonality is that the skill to make most crafts in the early modern world was acquired primarily through embodied practice rather than verbal exegesis or symbolic representation in ways that simultaneously engaged both mental and physical activity. In The Craftsman, Richard Sennett wrote that “ten thousand hours is a common touchstone for how long it takes to become an expert . . . . This seemingly huge time span represents how long researchers estimate it takes for complex skills to become so ingrained that these become readily available tacit knowledge.” Yet art historians have devoted surprisingly little attention to the physiological implications of this prolonged period of “body work” (roughly the equivalent of a seven-year apprenticeship) in the context of premodern Japanese crafts.
There has been a tendency to frame workshop training as mechanical, mindless, and lacking in creativity, often by contrasting it to innate “talent.” The work of sociologists Marcel Mauss and Pierre Bourdieu and phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty, among others, has challenged this mechanical/talent outlook, arguing that mind and body are not separate but inextricably bound up with one another. Historians of science and material culture such as Lissa Roberts and Pamela Smith have brought this phenomenological thinking to their studies of early modern Europe. The interpenetration of mind and body is encapsulated in *The Mindful Hand: Inquiry and Invention from the Late Renaissance to Early Industrialisation*, the title of an edited volume on early modern craft production in Europe. As the title indicates, its authors see craft professionals not just as makers of things but also as makers of knowledge. This study brings these interpretive approaches to the examination of training and practice in early modern Japan.

Situating Japan in an early modern chronology is further justified because Japan participated in global exchanges that transformed the world and the way people saw themselves within it. Contrary to oft-cited claims of national seclusion, interactions with the Asian continent and beyond continued throughout Tokugawa rule. The responses to these interactions had profound implications for political, economic, and sociocultural developments and, more specifically in the context of this study, for the migration of craft specialists, the circulation of technical knowledge, and the availability of raw materials and luxury goods.

The forces of early modern globalization, among others, contributed to the growth of capitalism and urbanization. By 1700 Edo had a population of more than a million, Kyoto five hundred thousand, and Osaka four hundred thousand. Many castle towns had populations of more than ten thousand. There was also significant rural economic growth thanks to expansion in arable land, improved agricultural technology, and the development of cottage industries, resulting in increased and accelerated capacity to make