

Excerpts from The Zen Master, the Potter and the Poet:

Pottery and Japan?

No other country in the world regards pottery as an important part of its culture in the way Japan does. Other countries might prize other cultural items more highly, but Japan has a very real attachment to the humble pot, largely because of the tea ceremony which more than any other cultural activity has been responsible for pottery being elevated to heights unimaginable in the West.

Herbert Read, writing as far back as 1931, in his important book *The Meaning of Art*, said:

Pottery is at once the simplest and the most difficult of the Arts. It is the simplest because it is the most elemental; it is the most difficult because it is the most abstract. Before man could write, before he had a literature, or even a religion, he had this art...in fact the art is so fundamental, so bound up with the elementary needs of civilization, that a national ethos must find expression in this medium.

He concluded, 'Judge the art of a country, judge the fineness of its sensibility by its pottery; it is a sure touchstone'. (I think many might take issue with that.)

Japan 1974.

Fujiwara Kei, Living National Treasure of Bizen pottery, is being honoured with a retrospective exhibition to celebrate his 77th birthday. In Japan the age of 77 is of special importance and potters from many parts of the country were attending the opening, indicating their esteem for this man, important both as a potter and as a human being. This anniversary exhibition was held, not in an art gallery, but in the Okayama civic centre more accessible to a larger number of people. The opening ceremony was a who's who of Japan's most important potters.

I visited the exhibition four times and on each occasion went with a different person either from the Fujiwara Yu household (his son) or with those who worked in the workshop. I was interested to get some individual reactions to the father's pots and on each visit to the exhibition asked my companions which of all the many pots exhibited was the one they preferred; there were some interesting responses. The Fujiwara Kei exhibition was most impressive, especially for someone who had never before seen so many pots of this tradition together in one place. What did my companions, more familiar with this tradition than I was, think of it all? The younger and more inexperienced of

them responded with some excitement to those pots with ash-encrusted surfaces and peacock- coloured hues, much more than they did to the more subdued pot surfaces. I found their responses understandable, and even predictable.

On my last visit to the exhibition I accompanied the son of the famous father. I asked him the same question: which pot did he prefer? He immediately pointed to one which was something like himself; it was an almost identical form to the pots he had on show in his own house, some of which were from his own workshop. The pot he indicated was shortish and rounded, strong-bodied, even assertive, giving a feeling of comfortable confidence, as one might expect of a successful son of an esteemed father. I asked him which pot his father preferred, out of all those he himself had chosen for exhibition. The son looked somewhat puzzled as to his father's preference, but pointed to a squarish platter which had the faintest trail of a wisp of smoke. It was more softly-orange of colour than were the others, a pale terracotta colour, indicating it had been placed in one of the cooler parts of the kiln, the wispy smoke-trail on its surface clearly marking a slower path taken by the smoke-edged flames. One could almost see the slowly flickering path of the flame, circling and curling around nearby pots, then softly passing over the surface of this platter on its final journey to the chimney at the back of the kiln. The trace of the flame was almost umber in colour, contrasting with the orange of the clay—not something consciously done or clearly defined, but there almost as though painted by a very sensitive artist. It looked like the colours of autumn...I thought of the much-quoted saying by Bernard Leach, the famous English potter who had lived and worked in Japan—that 'the pot is the man' and at that moment I felt I knew the reason for the older man's preference. I was older than the son and realised that the pot was almost a reflection of something within the father himself. He had achieved his dreams in life: gone were the ambitions and struggles of youth and middle age. Gone were the achievable extravagances of life itself, and what was left was almost without ego, a remnant of the passage of life itself. The old potter had himself become like the pot, softer and gentler and almost 'not there.'

Shimaoka Tatsuo, Mashiko.

A few months earlier, when first visiting his home, I had brought with me two traditional Australian Aboriginal paintings. Three had been sent to me from Australia, the purpose being to exchange them for major pieces by important Japanese potters for the Art Gallery of South Australia. They were bark

paintings of exceptional quality and one had already been exchanged with Takeichi Kawai, in Kyoto.

I had told Shimaoka San of this intention and he said that he was very happy to make a 'swap', and was equally sure his old teacher, and now next-door neighbour, Hamada Shoji, would also be pleased to exchange work. I produced the paintings and, as an act of courtesy to my host, asked Shimaoka San if he would like to make his choice. 'On no', he exclaimed, 'Mr Hamada must have first choice'. I could hardly hide my astonishment because, even all these years later, he was still acknowledging his own obligation, deferring to the older man who had been both teacher and mentor. I doubted whether the same would have happened in my country. He rang his neighbour explaining my request.

The Hamada compound (and it was a compound) consisted of several traditional Japanese buildings. Hamada's interest in folk art wasn't confined to objects and artefacts: he collected buildings, such as old Japanese farmhouses and store-sheds. Both are very beautiful but sadly, as modern life invades the countryside, there are many such buildings which are demolished. People who have both the room and money collect such buildings. They can't be shifted like 'transportables' in my own country, where they are loaded on to large trailer-trucks. In Japan they are pulled apart with each piece being numbered for later re-building. The large thatched roofs, beautifully shaped, more sculpture than anything else, must take much thought and skill to shift. To go to Hamada's compound was a little like walking through an architectural history book. Even his workshop was a traditional building: the floor was dirt, but very sensible for a pottery where clay-dust becomes just another layer added to the already compacted floor.

I took both of the aboriginal paintings to the Hamada workshop. The Hamada scrutiny was instant and sure. 'That one', he said, indicating the smaller of the two. I was wrong: I had predicted he would take the larger of the two, the style of painting we in Australia generally refer to as an X-ray style image. It was a kangaroo, a quite dramatic painting, but he had chosen the smaller of the two, a painting with a more curious presence, coming from what I imagined was a more remote area in the Northern Territory. I was pleased in a way that he did so because had I been choosing for myself it was the one I would have wanted. I was wrong in thinking that he might be tempted by size. He was busy at that time and asked me whether I could come back to get the promised swap for the Gallery.

When I returned he showed me two pots, giving me a choice. I took the one that was a more obvious example of his work, but still looked at the other with a degree of reluctance because I also liked it, and it was a more recent piece. He thrust it into my hands and said, 'This one is for you'. I visited him on several occasions and saw much evidence of the astuteness of his judgement of craft objects. In fact, he was acknowledged by many people as 'having a sure eye'.

Tea shared

Taking tea is not always so formal. A Nicheren priest once offered us tea; his guests were friends, all from different places and backgrounds—Japan, France and Australia—but all had some awareness of tea culture. The kindly priest proffered several cushions on which to kneel, to add a little comfort to the firmness of the tatami floor. It was an impromptu offering of tea, certainly not a formal ceremony, but the tea-bowl was chosen and wiped with care, in some deference to ritual, and the powdered green tea was carefully measured with the bamboo scoop. Next the gentle priest reached behind a screen for the water: he produced a multi-coloured floral-patterned vacuum flask reminiscent of a bold fashion fabric from Scandinavia. Outside, the twentieth century roared past, car-horns honking, tram-cars rattling. It was perfect.

A famous potter, Kawai Takeichi, offered tea in his home. As successor to an earlier and even more famous potter he bore the illustrious name, but as to his own importance he was totally unaware. He was gentle, kindly and without any pretension. His wife brought in the tea utensils, which, curiously, were in an antique portable chest. (It was many years before I learned an explanation for this. Portable wooden boxes, and even lacquered baskets were, and are still, used for tea utensils, for excursions or picnics. Japanese custom might see the taking of tea at a flower-viewing, or while witnessing the first fall of snow from the shelter of a distant mountain hut, or enjoying other instances of the fragile beauty of the passing of seasons. Even in times of war tranquillity of mind could be restored with *chanoyu*.) The famous potter and his gentle wife insisted that the *gaijin*, the foreign guests, sit on soft cushions, legs outstretched like fallen saplings, mercifully hidden under the low table which served many purposes in this warmly generous household. He whisked the tea, passing it to each in turn to share the warm beautifully-green, frothy liquid. Tea at this house was a cup of loving kindness, as warm as were the beautiful aged couple who tended the visitors with such generous comfort and concerned care.

Yet another famous potter on the coast at Hagi welcomed me with customary honour, whisking green tea which he served in a *chawan* he prized. Producing some ordinary *yunomi* for leaf tea, he proffered *bancha*, the common everyday tea made in an ordinary teapot. The hot twiggy tea, slightly roasted, was welcome. 'This is for thirst', he said, and slurped the hot liquid. Formality gave way to informality with a shared pot of everyday tea.

At the home of a Living National Treasure I was offered morning tea, but, in deference to a Westerner, it was served in a cup and saucer. His wife offered exquisite cakes fetched a few hours earlier from the nearest large town (albeit an inconvenient distance away). Their son, also a potter and world traveller, had a different preference and made a pot of steaming coffee from freshly-roasted richly-aromatic beans; he poured himself a cup and also passed one to his father, who now on the table in front of him, had both tea and coffee. Which would he choose? There was no dilemma, he drank both, but I can't recall which he drank first. Did he drink the one he preferred first, or did he save the 'best 'til last'?

There is another memory from that famous household. As I left, before I could reach down to retrieve my shoes, the gently-beautiful, elderly wife quickly stooped to place them facing outwards so that the honoured guest could step into them without effort. She must have been in her seventies. I carry that memory.