LOST INNOCENCE

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Lost Innocence: Folk Craft Potters of Onta, Japan by Brian Moeran
Published by University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA. 1984.

Lost Innocence, thank heavens, is not another vacuous coffee table book reinforcing the romantic stereotypes held by Americans of folk craft in Japan. One might have guessed as much from the title, and certainly those who are not put off by the book's small format and lack of color photographs will soon realize that this is not the standard idealized approach to pottery making in Japan that has seemed to be the rule in craft publishing. It is instead a serious, thought-provoking, though somewhat academic, account of how Sarayama, an isolated pottery community in Kyushu, was affected by the folk craft boom in Japan and how the resulting economic improvements threatened its primitive methods of making and firing pottery. It was, paradoxically, these very aspects of Sarayama that had brought its potters and their pottery the praise of critics and scholars in the folk craft movement.

Brian Moeran warns us in his preface that *Lost Innocence* is “addressed to people of widely differing interests – to potters and to anthropologists – and consequently is in danger of failing to appeal to either professional group.” Potters reading this book may at times despair at the anthropological style and the innumerable charts on social organization, but the author balances this with anecdotes and stories that are almost gossipy:

> “…Mr. T. made use of his connections to start buying pots from all the potters in the community except Haruzo, whom he has always made it clear he dislikes. At the opening of every kiln, Mr. T. goes up to Sarayama by taxi, and with his back very straight from his early military training, he walks from one workshop to the next and selects the pots he likes. In each pottery he is served tea and cakes, but these he tends not to touch, for he is more interested in conversation. Sometimes he will talk about the war; at other times he will enter into a monologue concerning Japan's early industrialization and contact with the West; more often he will concentrate on what he refers to as “the great problem” besetting the folk craft movement. Potters will try to look attentive and adopt a fairly humble attitude in front of Mr. T., but as he has a habit of saying nasty things about people behind their backs, they tend to ignore most of what he tells them.”[1]

In this way Moeran succeeds in involving the reader in the community and making him more actively concerned about these people as he progressively outlines Sarayama’s problems and dilemmas. It is an effective technique and for the most part it balances the tediousness of the anthropological data. Potters may also feel at times that Moeran is not addressing them. (Indeed, he does seem to consider his main audience to be anthropologists.) For example, after spending three interesting pages on how the ability to produce certain glazes well in certain parts of a kiln affects market demands, Moeran apologizes to the anthropologists: “All of this may sound too technical for a social anthropological study, but these details of the problems faced by potters in firing their kilns are pertinent because buyers consistently order all sorts of different color combinations.” (p. 201) He offers no such apology to potters, how-

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ever, after Chapter 3, “Social Organization of a Pottery Community” and Chapter 4, “Ecological Aspects of Social Structure,” where 13 of some 40 pages are tables and charts on everything from “locations of dams” to “household connections through temple affiliation.” This is not a criticism but rather an observation. Moeran is after all an anthropologist, and it is this anthropological approach and the intellectual discipline it demands that, I feel, make *Lost Innocence* significant.

Americans have held for far too long a simplistic and romantic view of Japanese folk craft and the philosophy of Yanagi Muneyoshi that made it popular. His credo as projected by Bernard Leach in *An Unknown Craftsman* (1972) was embraced by large numbers of Americans who were looking for a philosophy that would explain and justify their choice of pottery making as an alternative way of life. These potters seemed particularly susceptible to the simplistic and ethereal musings of Yanagi. One of the tenets that seemed most attractive to them was Yanagi’s belief that an intellectual understanding of beauty and the conscious attempt to produce it only resulted in ugliness. Great works of art were made, Yanagi felt, only when “a potter’s heart was filled with love.” According to Moeran, “Yanagi visualized the potter alone at the wheel, intent on his work, with no thought in his mind.” (p. 196) This anti-intellectual stance, coupled with an emphasis on the use of simple techniques, natural material and anonymous production, was a heady mixture for young American potters in the 1960s. Their interpretation of Yanagi’s philosophy kept many of them from ever really questioning or trying to understand not only what it is exactly that makes pottery relevant in contemporary society but also what gives it the remarkable potential to express so profoundly such a vast range of human emotions. The work of many of these potters reflects this lack of intellectual inquisitiveness and much of it has become a trivialized commodity rather than an eloquent aesthetic statement.

The plight of these American potters in some ways mirrors that of the potters in Sarayama, whose dilemma Moeran describes:

> “With the increase in demand for folk crafts, Onta pottery has been seen to be losing its qualities of ‘craftsmanship’ and ‘healthy pricing’. It is moving away from the essential characteristics of mingei, which no longer exists in its original ‘beauty’ and ‘honesty’. Those craftsmen who survive have to make the choice between two evils: whether to become individual artists or to merely turn out souvenir items.”[2]

Although their immediate circumstances are different, both groups of potters find themselves at the same point of having to make that choice between becoming an individual artist or a souvenir maker. It is a choice they are reluctant to make because either is contrary to the folk craft philosophy that has been so important to them in their economic struggle for survival. It is this same folk craft philosophy though that, in its inability to bridge the gap between theory and the actual production and aesthetic appraisal of pottery in a modern, industrialized society, has created this quandary.

Moeran’s analysis of the folk craft movement and Yanagi’s ideas goes a long way toward addressing some of the obvious inconsistencies that have affected potters in Sarayama and the United States.

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LOST INNOCENCE 1 2 3

He writes:

> Yanagi himself emphasized that he did not intend to start a movement; he did not begin with a preconceived theory of art which he then tried to apply to Japanese folk crafts. Things were much simpler. He had no aesthetic ideas at all, but just looked at craft objects and experienced a certain “mental shock.” It was from his own. personal experience in “just looking” at crafts that Yanagi developed his mingei theory.[3]

This “mental shock” came to be known as “direct perception” and was a fundamental tenet in his folk craft philosophy. Moeran concludes, however, after a thorough examination of “direct perception” (chokkan), that it “cannot…logically provide a standard of beauty.” (p. 26) Moeran’s tendency to look at Yanagi's philosophy with a somewhat jaundiced eye and his percipient examination of its discrepancies should, one hopes, jolt many American potters who still blindly cling to the mingei philosophy out of complacency and begin to push them to provide intellectual arguments to support their aesthetic choices. As Michael Cardew the eminent British potter once pointed out:

> “…A potter will feel isolated, and will not be able to sustain his confidence long enough to do anything useful unless he can give it a secure intellectual base. The artist must be conscious of what he is doing. Yet the inner springs of art are always unconscious. There is a natural apprehension that if one starts meddling with these and brings them out in the open, they may dry up and the shoots may wither. But it is an apprehension that must be overcome, since all mental and moral progress in the past has required the enlarging of the consciousness and the widening of its field, and has been the direct result of that enlargement.”[4]

References:

1. *Lost Innocence*, Brian Moeran.
2. Ibid.
3 Ibid.
4. *Pioneer Pottery*, Michael Cardew, St. Martin’s Press 1969.