

## rob barnard essays

ORIGINALITY AT ALL COSTS

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One of the most persistent concerns voiced by some people about unglazed woodfired work is how to translate or turn it into a new and uniquely American expression. Apparently it seems to disturb a few gallery owners, critics, and university professors that a group of potters, working not only in this genre, but in glazed work as well, are influenced by the work of another culture and historical period. What appears to bother them most of all though is that these potters, who exist outside the confines of academe, not only admit to this influence but are unrepentant when urged to become more "original" and "creative."

This unrepentance does not come from the mental intransigence attributed to those concerned only with the back-to-nature lifestyle of the 1960s, but rather it comes from the discovery by the intellectually curious of a body of concepts existing in Oriental thought that is peculiarly compatible with their own. Their intellectual curiosity, not the desire to provide middle-class America with a good three-dollar mug, brought them to pottery in the first place. They saw in pottery the potential to express their concerns and found in Oriental thought the concepts that allowed them to realize the unlimited possibilities existing in this seemingly narrow context.

Not only is it ignorance of the concepts that lie behind and support Oriental pottery which causes confusion and uncertainty about the work of these potters, but it is also an undeniable lack of understanding of these potters' method of perceiving art. In addition, there is a lack of realization that possibly another set of values could be equally valid in determining the ultimate worth of art. Instead, these critics insist on measuring and evaluating Oriental art with aesthetic concepts and concerns that are totally Western. It would be equally absurd to suggest that Western art can be understood from an exclusively Oriental perspective. It is through an understanding of each of these particular viewpoints that we are able to realize the intentions of an artist who may work in either of these traditions. The art critic Timothy Harris has, perhaps, best contrasted these two approaches:

"One could roughly characterize Occidental and Oriental art as being, respectively, inclusive and exclusive. The Western artist has generally aimed at including everything which he feels is relevant and at creating out of these elements a coherent and structured "whole" which exists in contradistinction to the chaos of events. The corollary of this in the Western scheme of things is the high value attached to universality, to an art, which includes, or gives the semblance of including everything. Think of the position, which Michelangelo's painting occupies, in the Western psyche.

But much of Eastern art works by exclusion, by concentrating on one small aspect of the world to such a degree that we may feel it has little to say, and in a direct sense, this is probably so. But indirectly it communicates a great deal. Though it may have little explicit content, it has a correspondingly large implicit content, and creates in the mind of the sensitive spectator an endless evocation of things and thoughts, like the ripples widening from a dropped stone. It is for this reason that a short poem by Tu Fu or a haiku by Basho can be as great and, in its own way, as universal as the *Divine Comedy*, though we may at first find this difficult to accept."<sup>1</sup>

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These differences in approach and concerns can most aptly be illustrated in clay by comparing the differences between raku as it exists in the United States and Japan. The sense of exclusion is obvious in the 16th-century tea bowls of Chojiro, and to many the exterior or physical differences between some of these bowls is indistinguishable and their value almost incomprehensible. In American raku we see the inclusion principle at its best, which is, at the same time, its worst. Countless varieties of contorted forms are subjected to various tortures. Potters put their works in garbage cans filled with everything from manure to human hair in an effort to smoke the surfaces. They pour oil on them, paint them, luster them, and in general try anything to create something new and original. In contemporary ceramics they appear to pursue “originality” by adding to or expanding the physical process. To be “creative” and “original,” the physical appearance of their work must constantly seem to be changing. Timothy Harris points out, however, that:

“Contrary to the opinion of many critics, the quest for originality at all costs leads only to the impoverishment of art or chaos. The point is not that one artist has been influenced by another, but how he uses this influence. An artist who lacks the ability to think for himself will produce inferior copies of his mentors works; a true artist utilizes aspects of other artists’ styles to create something new and original. The same, incidentally, applies in any field of human endeavor – “creativity,” a term which has been drained of nearly all significance by fashionable educationalists, second-rate journalists, gossip columnists, PR men, pop psychologists, and other bores is not the prerogative of artists.”<sup>2</sup>

It is this insistence on “originality at all costs” that has led some gallery owners, critics, and university professors to assume mistakenly that, by contriving novel shapes and glaze effects, new concepts and feelings can somehow be created. This approach is popular among mediocre ceramists because it absolves them from dealing with ceramic history as well as understanding their own reasons for making what they do. It is far simpler for them to follow the trends and fashions of “modern” ceramics that make no reference to the past or to function or, if they do so, they do so metaphorically.

If we are serious about understanding and appreciating ceramic art, then we must look beyond the style or the historical references of work – whether it be the unglazed, woodfired style of the Momoyama period, the California funk art style of the 1970s, or the “necco wafer/new wave graphic” ceramics of the 1980s – to the point the artist is attempting to address by employing that style. It is in this aspect of the work rather than in the stylistic mannerisms of a particular period that we are able to see the true genius of a piece and to determine its ultimate value. It is Michael Cardew who has best expressed these concerns:

“We do not want to make Chinese or Korean or primitive pots. But we have seen clearly what they have which our own so badly lack, and having seen it we are not likely to lose sight of it again.”<sup>3</sup>

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References

1. Timothy Harris in a review of Insik Quac. *Asahi Evening News*, November 3, 1978.
2. Timothy Harris in a review of Shiro Hayami. *Asahi Evening News*, July 28, 1978.
3. Michael Cardew, "An Essay on Pottery." *Ceramics Monthly*, October 1982.