

## r o b   b a r n a r d   e s s a y s

## DELIVERING THE PROMISE

1   2

Published in *Studio Potter*, 21(1), December 1992.

When I returned from Japan in 1978, I heard so many derogatory things said by people in the crafts establishment about so-called Japanese-influenced ceramics that I hesitated to say that I had studied there. The work these people derided, however, bore no resemblance to the ceramic work I was accustomed to seeing exhibited in Japan. The criticism was not only superficial in its formal relationship to Japanese ceramic art but also seemed to be totally devoid of the kind of conceptual under-pinnings one finds in the work they mimic. What really surprised me, though, was that many of these people, who I thought were intelligent and curious, seemed content to believe that these rather shallow and poorly executed copies of Hamada Shoji and 16th-century Bizen and Iga ware were the “real thing”, that they were, in other words, the breadth and depth of Japanese aesthetic thought in ceramic art. Would the same people, for example, judge the state of Kentucky by what they think of their local Kentucky Fried Chicken franchise?

This prejudice has been remarkably persistent. Only a few years ago, a critic told me he was not interested in seeing an exhibition of work by a Japanese potter because the critic thought his kind of so-called traditional work was “irrelevant” to American life. Another critic, trying to explain away his disagreement with a writer over a review of an exhibition of American ceramic art, said the other writer “had spent too much time in Japan.” I cannot help but wonder if the former critic would have said the same thing if the potter in question had been from England or Germany; or if the latter critic would have explained away their disagreement by saying the other writer had spent too much time in France or Italy.

When I went to Japan in 1974 to attend Kyoto City University of Fine Arts, my view of Japanese ceramic art was typically romantic and colored by my readings of Leach and Yanagi. I mistakenly believed that I could learn everything I needed to know by apprenticing to someone and immersing myself in the “how to” of making pottery. Fortunately, Yagi Kazuo was there to disabuse me of this simplistic and naive notion. Yagi was called the “father of modern Japanese ceramics,” and I was aware of his reputation as an Avant Garde ceramist. When he approached me one day after I had finished firing at school, I was understandably nervous about what he might say. I was quite pleased with the work I had made, because I had been able to more or less duplicate in an electric kiln a number of traditional types of Japanese pottery. Yagi began arranging some pine branches in a pseudo-Iga vase; and when he had finished, he retrieved a sleek butane lighter and placed it on the table next to the vase and asked me which I thought was the best or most successful object. I, of course, had an opinion (the vase was better because for one thing it was made by hand and for another it was asymmetrical, which I thought gave it more “life”) but I said none of that and mumbled something noncommittal. Yagi, after explaining his many reservations about the vase, said that he felt the lighter was more successful because it delivered on what it promised. That is, it was well designed and functional and made no other pretense. I, on the other hand, was making art: I was trying to make something far more important than a lighter and had not been able to deliver.

&gt;&gt;

rob barnard essays

DELIVERING THE PROMISE

1 2

It took me a number of months to digest this conversation. I was reluctant to revise my views – adopted wholesale from Leach and Yanagi-about hand versus the machine and the subconscious versus the self-conscious. I realized, though, that Yagi had raised the stakes on me. He forced me to wrestle with what it meant to be a potter at a time in history when handmade pottery was being replaced at the practical, everyday level by plastics. He made me realize that there was no room for mediocre handmade pottery – even if you still drink out of it. I had started making pottery because it moved me and spoke to me, in a way no other Art form did, about what it meant to be human. Now Yagi was making me live up to my responsibility as an artist. He did not try, like teachers in the United States, to convince me that the answer was to abandon pottery and turn to sculpture. He urged me instead to find what made us respond so strongly to pottery – even bad pottery – and then to use that locus as a point of departure for the expression of my own ideas. He made me examine and question my work for false sentiment, reckless bravado and self-conscious affectation, and to look deeper for answers to my questions about the meaning and importance of pottery and its place in the modern world.

It is impossible to measure the debt I owe Yagi for holding me to such exacting standards. I went to Japan imagining that I would find a demanding teacher who would have me making hundreds of teacups every day for months before he found one that satisfied his specific ideas of what a teacup should look like. Instead, I found a teacher who made me think about what a teacup was and what kind of meaning it could carry.