

## Traditional Japanese Pottery as a Spirit -Influence of Zen-

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Traditional Japanese pottery has two elements. One is non-glazed pottery, which can be traced back to primitive earthenware in Japan, and the other is glazed pottery, which came to Japan from China through Korea. The former reflects the strong natural beauty, while the latter has been developed into subtle and neat craftwork.

Non-glazed pottery, which can be traced back to the Jomon earthenware (produced in Japan about twelve thousand years ago) is held to be the first representation of the spirituality of pottery that is still observed in modern Japanese pottery. The non-glazed pottery is influenced only by the process of firing. Japanese have long admired the fire as one of many gods, as the place where a god lives (NB: It was said that there are eight million gods in Japan). This does not mean that Japanese people in the modern age admire the fire as a god. However, I, as most potters, being attracted by non-glazed pottery and worked under the direction of a traditionally-styled potter, learned to invite a Shinto priest before firing and to pray for the god of fire. I still decide when to fire based on the principles of Yin and Yang, the positive and negative, together with the conditions of the five essentials of the world, i.e. wood, fire, soil, iron, and water.

Seeing the fire excites passion and spiritual exaltation. It is sometimes hard to resist my temptation to jump into the fire in the kiln when I am providing firewoods into the kiln. It is natural that the fire in the kiln, within the reaching distance but still reject any human touch, was considered as a god. The work of modern potters who make the traditional type of pottery is still related to Japanese traditional faith and custom.

Jomon earthenware, fired in the open field, was regarded as sacred and used in praying. The custom of praying for their ancestors and for nature nurtured in Jomon era became an element of Shinto. Shinto, being born in the fruitful natural environment, has its own generosity. But this generosity is the reflection of the lack of rigid axis for intellect and sometimes turns into fierce violence, as we can see from the history of Japan.

Japanese earthenwares of ten thousand years ago show profound spirituality, which is inherited into modern Japanese pottery. Ten thousand years ago, foods were said to be ample, and the life

was said to be easy. Recent excavations show incredibly rich culture in this era. We can imagine that people living in that age did not make their life complicated with the complex will for intellect and understanding; their life might have been based on sensitivity rather than intellect. Earthenwares in this era were at once primitive and rich, with the wonderful variation of shape and form. How they were used is still unclear now. This fact probably indicates that these earthenwares were used in multiple ways, reflecting the artistic and spiritual experience of people in that era.

The sensitivity we can observe in these earthenwares indicate the producers' interaction with nature as god. Even now, despite---or probably because of---the poor technique and distorted forms, people who face them tend to feel they are thrown into the spiritual sphere of the producers in the ancient age. The development of these earthenwares was particularly slow. Only in 5th century AD, new kiln technique was introduced and the stoneware, or Sueki, was made. Stonewares were much harder, and we can observe some natural glaze on some of the stonewares at that age.

In the 8th century, the glazed-pottery technique was imported from China, an imitation of the famous three-colors ware of Tang dynasty. Japanese at that age were attracted to celadon and three colors. Many people were tried to produce sacred ball by celadon. However, as it was difficult to obtain the necessary materials as well as the technical subtlety of making celadon and three colors, many potters could not active what they wished, the imitation of celadon and three-colors, in many places in Japan. This, however, leads these potters to develop various naturally-glazed wares. One typical place is Bizen, where non-glazed Bizen pottery has been produced until now. The two elements in Japanese pottery was thus established. Roughly speaking---appreciating fully the danger of being misinterpreted---non-glazed pottery and *Bushi-do* are thought to be close to each other, while the glazed pottery is regarded as the Japanese imperial tradition.

Zen was introduced to Japan in the 12th century, after the establishment of two elements of Japanese pottery. Although it is said that Zen greatly influenced the Japanese cultural scene of the age, it is not the case that something totally new was produced. Rather, it triggered the conscious interpretation of what Japanese people already had. The beauty of naturally-glazed pottery was interpreted in terms of Zen philosophy. The direct taste of clay, which is "incomplete" compared to the glazed pottery, the non-homogenous tone of the surface, distortion of form, natural-glaze\_\_\_these "incompleteness" was not the product of consciousness. An example: the slightly-skewed edge of teacups for Japanese tea ceremony, it is naturally made in the process of wheeling, due to the irregularity of the spin of the wheels, which comes from the abrasion of a shaft (that supports wheel head) and porcelain bearing. This consciousness of unconscious, a beauty of spontaneity, has a strong affinity to Zen.

Naturally-glazed pottery and Japanese tea ceremony were combined by means of the philosophy of Zen. Japanese tea ceremony, as is widely known, has many common aspects of Zen. *Sabi* and *Wabi*, which represent the spirit of the tea ceremony, originated from the Buddhist scriptures. To put yourself into a small, enclosed room of 2.7 meters by 2.7 meters is to escape from the real

life and nature. This is interpreted as the core of *Wabi*. Even in Zen, a Buddhism, that denies the "absolute", Zen seems to put in a way absolute value to death. The peace of mind at the face of death is the way to the truth. In the tea room, sharp consciousness leads to the unconscious, and the room is surrounded by the sound, smell and the form of the grand nature. Then take the teacup into your hand at once, the teacup which is skewed, which represents spirituality. It is held necessary to accept this kind of rhetoric to reach to the truth. Neither *wabi* nor *sabi* can be understood without first accepting this rhetoric.

I would say that the spirituality of the earthenware of ten thousand years ago and Japanese version of Zen, a unique religion, together constitute an essential element of modern Japanese pottery, which ignores artificial form and emphasize the spirituality. It is not necessarily bad that one regard the essence of art as something incompatible with intellect or reason. Zen excludes intellectual conscious and tries to reach directly to the bottom of consciousness. Isn't it possible to call it an art of non-art? Naturally made earthenware produced from the consciousness of unconscious with the help of nature is beyond the sphere of reason and articulation. Though I only focused on the first element of Japanese pottery in this essay, it might be possible to observe the reflection of the same spirit in Japanese glazed pottery. The glazed and colored pottery, however, is the one exported to West while, it seems to me, failed to transmit the spirituality of Japanese pottery. As the spirituality might be transmitted more easily through the "incompleteness" of non-glazed pottery, which more directly reflects Zen philosophy of finding beauty in non-beauty.

As a wisdom, Japanese people, living in the mild climate, have tended to avoid the intellect and rigid reasoning. I believe that the tendency to assign a great value on harmony in Japan is still alive. As a potter who inherits this spirituality and believes that the artistic activity is for peace of mind, I feel that I have a great responsibility of transmitting the value observed in traditional Japanese pottery.