

Marketing Conditions in Britain for Japanese Potters through the eyes of a Japanese Potter

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Artistic works are not exceptions to market principles in a market economy. It is not the case that the prices of Japanese artwork are translated into foreign prices simply through the application of a straightforward exchange rate, rather, they are influenced by the size of the market in each country.

I recently had a chance to visit Britain again, one year after my last stay. I frequently heard that the prices for the work of Japanese potters were surprisingly high, but this time I realized that they were not as high as prices for the same goods in Japan.

One day I visited an auction house, Bonhams, which is next to the Victoria and Albert Museum. As it was not an auction day, there were few people around. I bought a catalog and, looking around the place, I found a Japanese pottery corner. Some of the work there was exhibited together with boxes made from paulownia wood, on which *hakogaki* (potters' signs) were inscribed. I felt a bit ashamed and sad standing there, as *hakogaki*, also a very old Japanese tradition, distorts the price of ceramic works in the Japanese market. Some people seem to be buying something attached to *hakogaki*, not the works themselves. The exhibition of *hakogaki* with the pottery gave me the impression that this odd tendency was imported together with the pottery.

The works there are quietly waiting for the auction coming a few days later as if they know the heat of auction. Small pieces by Bernard Leach, who is well known in Japan as well as in Britain, cost around 300 pounds, while very Leach-like works cost around 3000 pounds. But these prices are surprisingly low for me.

There is no doubt that London is even now the world-center of the antique trade. While the center of new artistic works is considered to be New York, London, is still the center as far as trading is concerned, both in quality and quantity. Considering this, it is interesting to see that Japanese potters' suggested prices at Bonham are considerably lower than those in the Japanese market. Vases or pots by famous Japanese potters well known in Britain cost only 600 to 900 pounds. Superbly well-done natural-glazed works cost about 600 pounds. These are the prices for living national treasure's works. Exceptional the prices for big plates, suggested prices for which are from 1500 to 1800 pounds. Still, the prices are several times higher in Japan. What's

more, the suggested prices are nothing more than a target, as there must surely be cases where they are traded at much lower prices.

British buyers may be confused if they see Japanese potters show, say, in London, where their works are priced according to the Japanese domestic price, as market prices in Britain are obviously quite different from those in Japan. What would happen if the prices of *chato* (pieces used in the traditional Japanese Tea Ceremony), which are determined by a very specific formula in Japan's very close and special market, are directly imported to Britain?

I am commenting only on the problem of pricing here: the artistic value of such work is quite another matter. I know not all British are interested in exhibitions whose name includes the word "Japan". Only those who are especially interested in Japanese arts are attracted to them. Even for those who have a good knowledge of Japanese pottery, it might be confusing to see a small tea-bowl costing more than very big works such as plates.

Even if some works in exhibitions are sold at the potters' suggested prices, we cannot say they are traded according to market principles if they are sold to Japanese companies or Japanese buyers in Britain. The suggested prices in Bonham, which are much lower than in Japan, seem to correspond to normal market prices in Britain.

The prices of works of Bernard Leach or Hamada Shoji, both being much-respected figures in Britain, are surprisingly low for buyers who are used to Japanese pricing. This shows that Japanese pricing is determined not only by the artistic value or market principle but also crucially by the "name value" of individual potters. British pricing may reflect a tendency in Britain in which a wide range of Japanese pottery is getting attention from a wider perspective, unlike in the past where they were regarded mostly as folk handicrafts, advocated by Leach and Hamada.

It is not desirable to impose the pricing system peculiar to the Japanese ceramics market, which is not only based on the artistic values of the works but also on the name-values of individual potters. Like industrial products, ceramics as the art will obtain universality by world-wide trading through internationally accepted pricing.