

## The Beauty of Soul, Beauty of Form: Naturally-glazed Ceramics and Haiku

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One distinctive trait of Japanese traditional culture is the way in which the sense of beauty tends to concentrate within a small “internal” universe and refine itself within that universe. This distinct tendency often leads to formalization, particularly within the domains of craft and art. Here I will discuss the aesthetic qualities in ceramics made without intentionally applied glaze—unglazed or “naturally glazed” ceramics—in relation to a particular form (*kata*) in Japanese literature, the short poem known as haiku.

Makers of traditional naturally-glazed ceramics do not usually have a passion to express their personal sense of beauty. They envision in advance the necessary appearance of the completed work, and they work to realize it. This process of production, akin to pouring liquid clay into a mold, removes the contamination of the maker's disordered sentiments, like filtering muddy water. What remains of this filtering process is the maker's soul, discovered in the depths of introspection.

Despite the same terminology, the Japanese aesthetic sense differs from that of Western cultures. In the Japanese view, the essence of beauty resides in the purity and cleanliness of the soul in a realm of emotion that intersects with the soul. Beauty is the soul itself. Honing the spirit is a requisite for the maker of things. Within the Japanese aesthetic sense, the maker's sensibility and reasoning are unimportant, because these aspects are not regarded as having universality. The souls of individuals vary greatly, and the forms (*kata*) established by tradition exist as common ground for those diverse souls.

As a literary form, poetry—especially haiku, constructed from syllables arranged in a sequence of five-seven-five—conveys feelings with simplicity and clarity. The approach to naturally-glazed ceramics that focuses on the patterns created without human intervention by falling ash and is drawn to the allusiveness of certain points of interest or appreciation is akin to the relationship between the writer and the reader of haiku that arises from these fixed sound patterns. In Japan, there are many guidebooks offering systematic instruction in how to appreciate (“how to look at”) various arts. These texts proceed from the assumption that the fixed forms (*kata*) enable the maker and the receiver, although separated in their respective realms, to exchange their stances freely.

Haiku originated in the verse composition practice called *renga*, which drew no distinction between maker and receiver. [In *renga* or linked verse, several poets contributed sequentially to the completion of a single poem.] Similarly, in the realm of naturally-glazed ceramics, a lump of clay is subjected to natural manipulation in the form of the fire and according to the Japanese aesthetic interpretation—is returned to the maker as an embodiment of nature. This process is termed cyclicity by the Joōdo Shinshu sect of Buddhism in Japan; more generally, it is called transmigration. When the maker removes the vessel from the kiln, perceives the universe embodied in the piece, and feels it in his or her soul, then the maker is transformed into the recipient.

This manner in which the host and the guest change places is a significant characteristic of Japanese traditional arts. The relationship between the person who expresses and the person who receives is not one-directional; the connection is defined by the freedom with which the two exchange positions. (This can be seen in the tea ceremony, flower arranging, calligraphy, various forms of musical performance, and diverse literary forms.) It is the existence of forms (*kata*) within these various traditional arts that make this exchange possible. It is difficult to compare the special nature of the traditional Japanese maker in terms of a universality of emotions or reasoning. Playing in the ambiguous realm of the emotions gives form to terrains that can be shared by individuals, and those developments are purified and simplified into forms (*kata*) and concentrated into things of beauty. The formalized beauty so characteristic of Japanese traditional arts takes shape in this way.

Haiku is expressed in syllables as a drastically truncated form of literature. An unglazed ceramic may have the form of a vessel, but it passes through the trial of the flame, and the shape that emerges from the kiln is a lump of clay that has little to say. The lump of clay is the embodiment of beauty that has been honored by the god of fire. Through this contact with the gods, its existence transcends logic and is permeated with spirituality. There is no mistaking that in terms of its spirit—it is a beautiful lump of clay.

This very lack of words makes allusion possible. As words beyond words, this natural space separated from the maker exerts a powerful influence on the feelings of the recipient. Allusion—the means of expression through drastically limited words—is a mode of transmission from soul to soul. It communes within the unconscious sense deep in the soul. For haiku, with its emphasis on intuition, the skill of the writer is of little importance. In traditional unglazed ceramics, too, skillfulness is deliberately avoided. If a pure spirit and a beautiful thing speak the same language, skillfulness appears to the spirit as a form of egotism that distracts from the shared awareness of beauty.

Simplification results paradoxically to a richness of expression. The rationality of prose, which attempts to discuss without limits, exposes the dilemma of a world made up of individual distinctions --- of confusion. At the other extreme, the expression that is born from un-prose like limitations is avant-garde. This avant-garde element emerges from the views of religion and nature within the spirit of the Japanese sense of beauty, which deny the existence of the

absolute. The Japanese sense of beauty is the expression of a spirit that explodes irrationally now and then from the total universe of things.

In each naturally-glazed ceramic, we can recognize the traces of the heated clash between the different forces in nature. The maker experiences a single moment, while the recipient is aware of the existence of a small, individual thing passing into the next world of peace and tranquility. Through this introspection is born the shared spirit of beauty.

The naturally-glazed ceramic works seen in Europe and America do not possess this introspection or soul. The works emphasize only the ferocity of the ash accumulation, as though that were the essence of ceramics with natural ash glaze. In such expressionistic works, one may sense the griminess of the falling ash, but unfortunately one cannot discover in them the beauty of a spiritual world. This is a revelation of the impossibility of sharing the aesthetic sense of the heart that focuses on rationality, as expressed in the "awesomeness of nature" and the "minuteness of the self." One must face squarely the unsharable proposition that the sense of spiritual beauty is irrational.

Note: The form of Japanese verse known as "short verse" (*tanka*) began to be composed during the Nara period (645-794). It is written by a single composer in the form of lines of five, seven, five, seven, and seven syllables. In a variant that emerged in the Muromachi period (1392-1573), one poet wrote the first three lines (five-seven-five), after which a separate writer composed the final two lines (seven-seven). This is the form known as linked verse (*renga*). In a further development, the five-seven-five component was separated as a form used to compose seventeen-syllable verses closely related to the seasons. This is haiku.

Joōdo Shinshū (浄土真宗): *wikipedia*

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