## Ancient Style, Modem Sensibility

**The Japanese potter Makoto Hatori works in the Bizen tradition but has developed a contemporary language in sculptural works which links his own lineage with life today. Andy Cordy reports.**

In Britain associations with the Japanese art in clay depend to a large extent on cultural ties established in the early part of this century by Bernard Leach, Shoji Hamada, Kanjiro Kawai, Kenkichi Tomimoto and Soetu Yanagi, whose efforts catalysed a revival of interest in the traditions of pottery making and whose teaching and research not only founded the modern framework of craft pottery in Britain but established the folk craft revival in Japan the 'Mingei'.

Leach and his Japanese friends were interested in all ceramic traditions especially those of Song Dynasty China, Korea, Japan and England. Shoji Hamada exhibited works based on forms such as English medieval jugs. Our view of Japanese craft ceramics is distorted by masterpieces from the Leach/Hamada circle, which is why few makers have a clear understanding or better an appreciation of the ancient traditions or Japanese pottery.

Bizen ware is the most highly regarded of the six famous ancient pottery traditions: *Bizen, Echizen, Seto, Shigaraki, Tamba* and *Tokoname*. Each of these regional styles has its distinct tradition, using local materials and particular firing characteristics. Unlike the refinement associated with more familiar Japanese pottery, the surface of Bizen ware is admired for its natural qualities. It is unglazed before firing, developing a unique surface on each object during the arduous nine day firing process.

The ancient kilns at Bizen near *Okayama* date back to the eighth century but the earliest records referring to specific kilns are from the early fourteenth century around *Okayama* and *Imbe*. Many examples of Bizen wares carry the distinct markings of glaze formed by flying ash and the rich red stripes which come from straw packed between or wound around the pots but over the centuries the body color has undergone subtle changes. For example fourteenth century pots exhibit paler brown than fifteenth and it is during the sixteenth century that the rich purple red brown now associated with Bizen evolved. Deliberate distortions in neck or foot ring became a distinguishing feature of Bizen pottery, and are very much part of the living tradition.

Makoto Hatori was born in 1947 and in 1969 became apprenticed to the Bizen potter Ken Fujiwara, at a kiln founded early this century by Toyo Kanashige. He was a pioneering potter who

is credited with the founding of modern Bizen pottery and was in 1956 awarded the recognition of a Craftsman of important cultural asset from the Japanese Government.

After training at his master's kiln, Makoto Hatori studied sculpture at Nihon University College of Art then technology at the Gifu Prefectural Institute of Ceramics in 1974. His first solo exhibition took place in 1978 and many others have followed establishing his national reputation. Makoto Hatori is regarded as something of a maverick, as although the great majority of his output is in the traditional Bizen style of domestic ware, tea wares and sake wares he also makes large sculptural pieces. Though his kiln is the *Noborigama*, a chamber kiln traditionally used as an alternative to the *Anagama* and fired as tradition demands with wood of a very specified kind, his workshop is sited outside the Bizen area and there are those who would argue that Bizen ware can only be made in Bizen.

Last year he spent six months as a guest tutor at Manchester Polytechnic an experience which he considered very valuable and liberating and which he gratefully acknowledges as of profound influence. He was surprised and delighted by the freedom exhibited in the work he saw. Some of the pieces to be exhibited were created during his stay in Manchester, others are from his kiln in Japan and display the traditional form and surface that can only be created in the wood kiln with its extraordinary firing technique.

This style of work places great emphasis on the firing, as the artist says "... the last and most important part of making pottery." Nine or perhaps ten days of intense work monitoring the firing process carefully from beginning to end and committing over 1000 pieces to the fire at one time. Anyone who has attempted or regularly practices wood firing will comprehend some of the skill involved in controlling this most volatile of firing techniques. In an environment like that of modern Japan, to be able to practice this craft at all is little short of a miracle with space and the firing medium, wood, at a premium. There is a conscious effort to decorate the pots with the firing by the direction and the nature of flame and flying wood ash, taking the greatest care with the packing of the enormous kiln.

Makoto Hatori particularly values the accidental products of the kiln, not least broken pots welded together or kiln shards that attach themselves to the pieces during firing. These are traditionally known as 鬼子 *Onigo* or 'evil children' and are ordinarily cast aside as wastage, but he feels these are the true creations of the kiln and has adapted the idea of these broken and welded objects for use in his sculptures. These pieces represent for him the chaos of modern metropolitan society using bottles etc. as components, pressed together, sometimes into a mould, expressing the limitation of city or society or a landscape as a composite of individuals, much as his kiln is the summation of his pottery work each time it is fired.

Excerpted from the following: *Ceramic Review Number 141, pp.10 (May June 1993)*

Makoto Hatori's exhibition is at Leigh Gallery, 17 Leigh Street, London WC1 June 15-27, 1993.