

Facing Tradition

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The Tokugawa (Edo) period, scene of the old workshop.

Among the many pottery production sites in Japan, there are six famous traditional ones, called *rokkoyou* which literally means six old kilns: Shigaraki, Tokoname, Tamba, Bizen, Echizen, and Seto. Five of them, with Seto being the only exception, continue to produce traditional unglazed ware. Bizen, which is probably the most famous, has an especially long tradition and is notable in that potters there have maintained the traditional method that originated with *Sueki* (*Sueki* or *Sue* ware was produced from the fifth to twelfth centuries when the hand-wheel became popular.)

Bizen ware has not changed much in its 1000 years, both in the basic methods of production and in the aesthetic concerns of potters. This may reflect the traditional aesthetic ideas of the Japanese, sometimes expressed as *wabi* or *sabi* natural senses that go against the artificial.

One of the basic concepts of traditional Japanese ware is that three factors--the kiln, the clay, and the form--constitute a triangular relationship. This relationship has been strongly maintained at Bizen.

For the traditional religion, Which recognizes a god in the fire, firing a kiln not only means producing ceramics but also forgiving the sins of potters. The establishment of *wabicha* (one of the style of tea ceremony) in the *Momoyama* era and its philosophy also influenced Japanese potters. They recognized a parallel between *wabicha* which realized a synthesizing of man and nature in a very limited space and firing kilns through which man-made ceramics were integrated with nature. As a result, they became and remained enthusiastic about the unexpected results of firing that characterize Bizen ware.

It is sometimes said, however, that you cannot know who made a Bizen pot unless you check the potter's mark on the bottom. Because this type of ware depends so much on effects that occur during the firing (flashing and ash deposits), it has not varied much over the centuries, even if variations are made in the firing.

The Japanese way of viewing Bizen pottery is also confusing. For instance, pots made by the following tradition, which can have high aesthetic value, are claimed as products of individuality.

Then there are those Bizen potters who hire other potters to throw their pots, a practice called *daibiki* (ghost-wheeling), and even have them inscribe their signatures. After all, because the firing of a kiln is a holy ceremony, all human problems in the previous steps are cleaned up by the fire's power.

Established potters also sometimes say that they produce ceramics without earthly desires or ambitions. In these words exists a somewhat religious view, which may be similar to satori (spiritual awakening or integrating with nature by restraining self) or Buddhist priests.

To understand and integrate with nature, it is necessary to live long and to master *kata* (already existing models). Imitating great old pieces as precisely as possible is called *utsushi* (copying). To practice *utsushi* is to master existing models; i.e., *kata*. In this respect, *daibiki* is a process of mastering *kata*. Thus, acquiring techniques through reproduction constitutes a central part of learning to produce pottery. Through repetition, we try to find the inexpressible essence of the ware.

We cannot help being attracted to the heavy presence of tradition. I hope, however, that the tradition does not remain narrow and specific. We should express ourselves in modern terms while seeking the essence of established practices. Real artistic work cannot be just an expression of personal ideas, though; it is self-expression through designs developed from a solid foundation in tradition.