

## A Potter's Look at Tradition -Comparing the Two Traditional Potters-

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As a modern Bizen potter, I produce traditional vessel forms. At the same time, following the tradition, I also create sculptural forms. The value given to the various types of traditional Japanese pottery is difficult to understand for people who do not know the background. Take a sake cup, which is usually smaller than a teacup, for example. In Japan, a sake cup is usually more expensive than a teacup, as it is used in 懷石 *kaiseki*, a type of dinner closely related to the tea ceremony. The fact that the sake cup is used in 懷石 *kaiseki* makes it more valuable than the teacup; however, a tea bowl used in a tea ceremony is far more expensive than a sake cup.

It is said that there are reasons why tea bowls are so expensive, but they are too complex to understand. On the other hand, pottery used in ordinary circumstances is looked down upon as "everyday domestic goods." But how is it that a very closed circle of people can decide the value of the tea ceremony pottery? It is very difficult to accept the values related to the tea ceremony without straightforwardly accepting its system of beliefs, as in a religion.

Bizen, which is basically unglazed (but sometimes naturally wood-ash glazed) stoneware, is one of the oldest types of pottery in Japan. Two of the most famous Bizen potters in modern times were Toyo Kanashige (1896-1967) and Kei Fujiwara (1899-1983). Their philosophies about the making of Bizen ware can serve as background in explaining my own philosophy.

Kanashige, famous for his contribution to the modern Bizen tradition, distinguished pieces made before the *Tensyo* era (1573-1593) from those made after; he called the former the *Kobizen*. In order to recover the look of *Kobizen*, he not only polished up his wheel-throwing technique but also studied the structure of the kiln.

Much *Kobizen* ware was fired collectively in big kilns, up to 50 meters (over 150 feet) long. It is said they were fired from mid-winter to the beginning of spring when the cherry trees bloomed. The kilns are smaller now, and each Bizen potter has his or her own (but the average kiln still accommodates 1000 to 2000 pieces).

To create works that have the look of *Kobizens* in a smaller kiln, Kanashige studied the structure of the kiln to determine how to produce good natural-ash-glazed pieces in a shorter time. He is now highly praised, not only because he created many works comparable to *Kobizens*, but because he invented a suitable downsized kiln.

Kei Fujiwara was said to be a typical *bunjin* (a person who is involved in cultural activities, keeping the distance from ordinary society). He enjoyed calligraphy, painting, and poetry, as well

as making pottery. Unlike Kanashige, who stuck to rigid rules of craftsmanship, Fujiwara played with limits. His wheel-thrown technique was not very good, but some people highly praised his works as refined and dignified.

It is ironic that Fujiwara was also a key figure in making the world of Japanese pottery a big business. His era was also the era of Japanese economic development, so it may be that he was not a willing leader. Still, it is felt that his business activities reflected his own sensibilities. As a result of this commercialization, the pricing of Japanese ceramics has become far higher than that in Europe or North America.

The attitudes of Kanashige and Fujiwara toward creation seem to be quite different, but their ultimate goal was the same. Kanashige was faithful to *kata* (form). He tried to reach *michi* (the road for truth) by following *kata*. Fujiwara, on the other hand, concentrated on expressing naturally, by which he was naturally led to the goal of *michi*. It can be said that to reach *michi*, Kanashige followed the way of *jirik* (polishing oneself to the maximum by deliberately following the "form"), while Fujiwara followed that of *tariki* (minimizing the self by making oneself open to everything). When ultimately pursued, both methods go to the same point, i.e., unconscious creativity.

However, the activity of making is not always a creative activity. Both Kanashige and Fujiwara tried to imitate *Kobizen*. Kanashige followed the style of *Momoyama-Kobizen* (1573-1615), while Fujiwara that of *Kamakura-Kobizen* (1193.11333). If they had just followed these styles without reaching unconscious creativity and if understanding their works needed knowledge of *Kobizen* and traditional styles of Bizen pottery, we could not say that they achieved contemporary creativity.

I believe that true creativity comes from the unconscious. However, this creativity must be activated in the present situation. It is necessary to incorporate a modern sensibility. Just following an old, traditional style does not result in artistic works that can survive in the future.

It is often the case that potters pursue prescribed *kata* without doubting it, while those who appreciate the ceramic works also evaluate them with *kata* in mind, making the whole process a kind of formal ceremony. This is especially true of *chatou* (pots and other works used for the tea ceremony). As a result, those who follow *kata* and protect the value of *kata* obtain authority. The disciples inherit the authority, together with the technique to make prescribed forms and shapes.

The existing *kata* comes from original creative activities, only some of which are retained now. In that sense, *kata* is valuable. However, when *kata* becomes a formalized tradition, recreating or imitating, the predetermined forms that follow *kata* cannot revitalize the original creativity. The clay works thus made may give appreciators a moment of pleasure, but not an enduring, moving satisfaction.

Many Japanese potters have come to believe that the older works are valuable in themselves. They devote themselves to imitating these older works and are very often highly praised by

appreciators. The more precisely one can imitate the older works (i.e., the more one can deceive appreciators), the higher the work is praised. As a result, many potters merely pursue superficial techniques to imitate the older works. The question is can an imitation, however, complete it may be, be called artistic work?

In considering the artistic or creative aspect of pottery making, we cannot ignore the process of firing. In Bizen, the firing can be interpreted as a process of incorporating nature into the works. This makes pottery quite different from other arts and crafts.

As the firing process cannot be free from the accidents of nature, it cannot be controlled technically by the potter. There are, it becomes necessary to positively utilize the accidental nature of the firing process. For that to happen, the potter has to fire without any intention of forceful control. Only in that way does the pottery obtain its own artistic value.

I have emphasized the importance of the firing, including the structure of the kiln, to Bizen ware, but it is also important to note how the pieces are put into the kiln. Placement is almost determined at the throwing stage. It is sometimes necessary to calculate the size so that it fits into the relevant place in the kiln. One may think this is a conscious process in which the potter can systematically predict the result. It is true that it is a conscious and rational process, but only to the extent that the potter has had experience with the natural process of firing. I sometimes dream of obtaining one big piece from smaller pieces separately put into the kiln as a result of melting--some of my sculptural works come from this.

Loading the kiln is part of the creative process for Bizen potters. Sake cups may be put inside bigger pots. Bowls are often placed upside down on top of vases. Some pieces are loaded on their sides. Plates can be stacked, but to make their separation easier after firing, each is wrapped with straw, or straw is put between the stacked plates. The straw leaves marks on the surfaces called *hidasuki* (fire-cord decoration). In short, the process is equivalent to a rough sketch in paint.

The technique is only a means by which one can express oneself. However, Japanese potters sometimes regard it as a goal. Of course, the pursuit of technique and the imitation of older works, with the help of accidents. For instance, *kiseto*, the glaze color that resembles the color of the wall of the tea ceremony room and that is popular for *chatou*, is the product of much-repeated failure to imitate Chinese celadon-glazed porcelain. Shino, which is well known in Europe and North America for its snow-white texture, was also produced in a similar way. I understand that *raku* ceramics in the West have a similar history. Incidentally, *raku* was begun by Korean potters in Japan when they tried to reproduce Korean styles. It is clear that the process of improving techniques for imitation is important, not because it can reproduce what is already established, but because it happens to create works with new artistic value.