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TRADITIONAL JAPANESE POTTERY AND ITS INFLUENCE ON THE AMERICAN MID 20TH CENTURY CERAMIC ART

Introduction

The Meiji period (Meiji-jidai), or Meiji era (1868-1912), meant the total reform of traditional Japan in every aspect. The particularly constrained, reserved and conservative, in terms of customs, Japanese society found new ideals through the Western way of life and thought, and was soon transfigured from an isolated feudal system into a Westernized social unit which stood out among any other in Asia. The areas of mass production, education, domestic politics, military plans and diplomatic relations of the country experienced gradual but severe changes during this period, too. The rapid and strenuous industrialization of the country had a serious impact on many areas of production, especially on the sector of traditional handcrafted objects such as textiles, metalwork and ceramics. Therefore, it was obvious that the traditional Japanese handicraft activity, and especially the applied arts field, would suffer before this extreme, almost indiscriminate wave of industrialization of almost everything. Ancient techniques, valuable raw materials and, along with them, the world old ideological, cultural, moral and social values of the country, were at risk of getting extinct amidst of this unexpected industrial explosion.¹

The reaction of the Japanese traditional arts and crafts supporters to this ruthless industrialization was the idea of 'inventing' a new, challenging ideal which would redefine the concepts of arts and crafts in Japan. This meant the emergence of the much promising Mingei Movement during the Taishō period (1912-1926, a monumental mound to the foreign wave of new industrial aesthetic and ethical order, which would challenge Japanese society by activating its oblivious interest in its glorious past in the arts. The word Mingei, which stands for the phrase 'the art of people' in the Japanese language, was invented by Sōetsu Yanagi (1889-1961), a Japanese philosopher, collector and art critic in the 1920s, and referred to the everyday objects made by simple craftsmen for ordinary consumers.² His deep

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¹ TSOUMAS, Johannis, «Mingei objects as an antidote to the mass production frenzy in the early / mid 20th century Japan', [online], *KUNSTGESCHICHTE, Open Peer Reviewed Journal*, available at: 2018, [query: 27/08/2020], p. 4.

² YANAGI Sōetsu, *The Unknown Craftsman. A Japanese Insight into beauty*, Tokyo, Kodansha International, 1989, p. 9.

³ BRANDT, Kim, *Kingdom of Beauty: Mingei and the politics of folk art in Imperial Japan*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2007.

⁴ HERRING, James, «The Mingei Movement and Contemporary Ceramics in America», M.A. Thesis, Miami: Florida International University, 2013, p. 14.

⁵ MOERAN, Brian, «Yanagi, Morris and Popular Art», *Ceramic Review*, 66, 1980.

⁶ The author who has researched profoundly this specific area was Brian Moeran, and this can be detected in his fabulous book titled *Folk Art Potters of Japan: Beyond an Anthropology and Aesthetics*, Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, 1997.



Fig. 1. Japanese Mingei pottery tea pot in a brown glaze, late 1920s. © Worth Point Auction House.

knowledge of Zen Buddhism and its dominance over the ruling classes of Japan, but also his fundamental attraction to the Korean traditional arts from which Japanese traditional crafts were heavily influenced,³ made him associate these objects with the deeper values of Japanese religion and philosophy and their everyday rituals such as the tea ceremony⁴ (Fig. 1).

As Brian Moeran has first mentioned in his article «Yanagi, Morris and Popular Art»,⁵ Yanagi was deeply influenced by the ideas of William Morris, the founder of the medievalist Arts & Crafts movement, and thus aimed to protect and promote the preservation of his country's folk arts, which

had much in common with the English traditional arts and crafts resistance to the intense manufacturing system of England in the 19th century. The revival of the Japanese folk arts defending the beauty and the corresponding symbols of the everyday utilitarian, traditional objects soon became the 'iron curtain' between the Japanese tradition and the impetuous, almost exuberant flattening of the country, in terms of mass production methods. The encouragingly repetitive reaction of the humble handicraftsmen, which was no less than the restoration of many forms of high-skill utilitarian art, seemed to be the same as the reform of the national identity of Japanese objects. Developing high cultural speed between the seventeenth and the twentieth centuries, the Japanese sought their aesthetic but, above all, their national purity through the strengthening of their own tradition against Western industrial terrorism. Thus, as early as the 1930s, Mingei Movement was the occasion for the revival of indigenous folk arts, particularly pottery, which benefited more than any other field of the revival of the Japanese traditional applied arts, on a national and later on a global scale.⁶

In this article we try to highlight the importance of the aesthetic-functional revival of the Japanese tradition, through the Mingei Movement, especially in the particularly important field of ceramics in relation to the influence it had on the traditional pottery of a country, not in affiliation to Japan, especially during the World War II, such as the United States. This

may constitute a real enigma, as the political as well as the social identity of the Americans had already acted as a red flag for the postwar nationally devastated Japanese. However, I believe that culture, as well as the principles of creativity, are often above many and severe national differences, discords and even animosities among countries. This can be more easily understood by an extensive reference to the two charismatic representatives of post-war traditional American pottery, Warren MacKenzie, the principal representative of American traditional pottery and the very clay sculptor, ceramist and potter Peter Voukos. The way they both approached, adopted and adjusted to their own culture the techniques, the aesthetics and above all the Asian philosophy of Mingei ceramics, was decisive for the further development of traditional American ceramics in the following decades and this is highly investigated in this research.

Bernard Leach and his innovative vision

Perhaps nothing would have happened as regards the rebirth of the Japanese traditional arts and crafts if Yanagi had not previously met the English potter Bernard Leach (1887-1979). Leach, well known in his home country for his inventive ceramics techniques and research, visited Japan not only to learn the secret techniques and methods of local pottery, but also to transform it gradually according to the Western aesthetics ideals. The two men, despite their great cultural differences and the geographical distance between them during the fifty years of their friendship, managed to develop a brand new cultural environment in the field of ceramics which was highly distinguished by the principles of reciprocal contribution.⁷ The influence of the Arts and Crafts Movement on Leach's personality and work and in particular the radical views of John Ruskin, the English art critic and theoretician, as well as the utopian vision of William Morris to fight the neo-industrial status quo in England and to restore the traditional crafts ideals, was catalytic. But, on the other hand, Yanagi's, views that a return to traditional Japanese folk art should involve anonymous craftsmen, not renowned artists or guilds, and that the items produced should be cheap enough to be accessible to all social classes, not only to wealthy consumers, as happened in England, constituted a significant contrast to Leach's holistic and perhaps no longer applicable philosophy. Above all, though his views constituted the moral superiority of Japanese culture over the Western industrialization spirit⁸ (Fig. 2).

The introduction of this unique ideology to the United States started by the union of the creative ideas of Bernard Leach, Sōetsu Yanagi, and Shōji

⁷ YANAGI Sōetsu, *The Unknown Craftsman...*, p. 10.

⁸ MOERAN, Brian, «Bernard Leach and the Japanese Folk Craft Movement: the Formative Years», *Journal of Design History*, Vol. 2, 2 & 3, 1989, p. 3.

⁹ LEACH, Bernard, *A Potter's Book*, London, Faber and Faber, 1940, p. 43.

¹⁰ COOPER, Emmanuel, «Bernard Leach in America» [online], *Chipstone*, available in: 2004, [query: 22/01/2021].

¹¹ In New York his first important stop was at Alfred University, New York State College of Ceramics, which at the time was considered as the pioneer institution for both industrial and studio techniques.

¹² The word comes from the ideogram meaning 'joy', 'pleasure'. The main feature of this technique is the heat shock to which the clay is subjected. The red-hot piece, coming out of the kiln, is placed on organic material and then is dipped in water to extinguish. The smoke carbon removes oxygen from metal oxides, which are converted into metals, resulting in the creation of metallic surfaces. The three elements of nature –Earth, Fire, Water– play a key role in the aesthetic outcome which can be completely different, each time. Here the potter works with the fire even from the first stage of the technique. Raku wares generally constitute a type of Japanese pottery traditionally used in local tea ceremonies, most often in the form of hand-shaped chawan tea bowls.

Hamada, a Japanese ceramicist and a fundamental member of the Mingei folk-art movement whose simple designs conveyed an elegant beauty, balancing in a unique way aesthetics and utility. With the help of Shōji Hamada, Leach had already managed to set up his own pottery at St. Ives, Cornwall in the 1920s, while in 1934–1935 he toured Japan's main cities and villages working at the same time at local potteries, which further inspired

his understanding of Japanese ceramic art. In 1940 he was the first European potter who managed to publish a very important book titled 'A Potter's Book', which combined the aesthetic ideals with the practical instructions of making pottery.⁹ In my opinion, after so many outstanding achievements in the unification of the European and hitherto mysterious Japanese pottery, and at the beginning of the post-war era, he felt he had a sacred duty to travel and spread his ideas and new techniques to other parts of the Western world.¹¹ As Emmanuel Cooper claims in his article «Bernard Leach in America»,¹⁰ after having completed his successful tour in the Scandinavian countries in 1949, Leach decided to visit the United States in the following year. There, he tried, through his work, to convey his knowledge, but also his innovative ideas, grafted with the Mingei ideology, to the respective artists, potters, curators and ceramic teachers. In his first major tour that included many cities such as New York¹¹, possibly the most important stop of his American tour, Washington DC, Seattle, Minneapolis and San Francisco, Leach gave many lectures and seminars and introduced, through several demonstrations, many new techniques which were then unknown to American ceramic methods and aesthetics, such as the famous raku firing.¹² Leach's second visit to the country took place only two years later, in 1952 with the accompaniment of Shōji Hamada and Sōetsu Yanagi, on a journey that lasted only four months and included an extensive series of lectures and demonstrations in a series of American cities (Fig. 3).

Their first stop was Washington DC, and then they travelled to North Carolina for a two-week seminar. The tour continued later to Boston, Worces-



Fig. 2. Mingei ceramic bowl, 1930s. © 1st DIBS.



Fig. 3. Bowl by Bernard Leach made in St. Ives, Cornwall, 1951. © Courtesy of Leach Pottery.

they wanted to teach to American potters through workshop practice and theoretical lectures. Leach, the great reformer of European ceramics, would talk endlessly and make just a few pots. At the same time, Hamada, who was the main ceramics form creator, did not speak any English, in spite of the fact that he could,¹³ and used only the Japanese language to communicate.¹⁴ His role was to throw quietly on the wheel and create complicated forms, such as traditional tea ceremony teapots, in almost 'no time'. Finally Yanagi's role was to lecture on the unknown, but extremely interesting Buddhist theories which included the difficult concepts of beauty and Zen and Shin, –'the road of the few and the road of the many'– to an audience ignorant to all these, but at the same time particularly curious and sensitized.¹⁵ He spoke of craftsmen as servants of nature itself who would be responsible of revealing the beauty and the truth of materials.¹⁶ He also claimed that Zen, as a deeply spiritual concept, would provide craftsmen with an unprecedented freedom in making objects, as it accepted and even promoted the senses of imperfection and incompleteness and at the same time recognized the meditative and even ritualistic nature of repetitive actions in pottery making, leaving ample space to the potters' imagination and creative talent. As D. T. Suzuki said: 'Simplicity of form does not always mean triviality of content', which resonated with those who saw a social value in handwork, especially in pottery'.¹⁷ Let's not forget that the American people in the post-war period constituted a confused cultural and ethnological formation trying to find 'new and inspiring ideological holdings' that would activate and support its social and even national homogeneity. Thus, in the paroxysm of their world victory after the World War II, American people erupted in a spree of over-consumption of

ter, Ann Arbor, Detroit, St. Paul and to the Montana area where they met the gifted young potters Peter Voulkos and Rudy Autio, while later they visited Santa Fe and finally Los Angeles, California. In these lectures given, all three played particular roles which would help them shape the new aesthetic and technical language

¹³The famous Catalan sculptor Eudald Serra (1911-2002) has been mentioned to have communicated with Hamada in English. (*Eudald Serra: rastres de vida*, Exhibition Catalogue, 1998).

¹⁴PETERSON, Suzan, «Bernard Leach: Two Recollections», *The Studio Potter* 8, no. 1, 1980, p. 3.

¹⁵COOPER, Emmanuel, «Bernard Leach in America» [online], *Chipstone*, available in: 2004, [query: 18/08/2020].

¹⁶KOPLOS, Janet and Bruce METCALF, *Makers: A History of American Studio Craft*, Asheville, University of North Carolina Center for Craft, Creativity and Design, 2010, p. 217.

¹⁷SUZUKI Daisetz Teitaro, *Zen and Japanese Culture*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1970, p. 240.

¹⁸ DREXLER, Lynn Martha, *American Studio Ceramics: Innovation and Identity, 1940 to 1979*, New Heaven: Yale University Press, 2015, p. 27.

¹⁹ SILBERMAN, Robert, «Oral history interview with Warren MacKenzie, 2002 October 29» [online], *Smithsonian Museum*, available at: 2002, [query: 24/08/2020].

literally everything, but especially of items that were typical of the mass production frenzy observed in the post-war United States, trying in vain to find their moral, cultural and ideological identity. On the other hand, strange as it may seem, few Americans were really aware of the terrible effects on the lives of the Japanese the two atomic bombings in Hiroshima and Nagasaki had, and far fewer were aware of and could recognize the profound cultural and religious history of Japan. Consequently, the Mingei philosophy presented during the workshops and lectures of these three gifted personalities was perceived as a new and deeply inspiring way of a productive and worthy living as it bore the spiritual oriental qualities lacking from the American capitalistic lifestyle. The thirst of the postwar Americans on the notion of spiritual transcendence in their lives, the image of the humble craftsmen and their commendable work that stood apart from the industrious Western society, became, for them, new sources of inspiration and fundamental principles that would shape not only their views for life, consumption and taste, but also their respect for the cultural and aesthetic diversity of other peoples (Fig. 4).

Mingei soon became the notion that appreciating and creating beauty through humble, but original and consequently treasurable materials such as pure clay, was inextricably woven with the high ethical values of Asian ceramics, folk art and Buddhist philosophy. Thus it was spread to and accepted from all people, regardless social position, economic status or education. Soon thereafter, American potters would be profoundly delighted in the Asian way of creating ceramics, an activity strongly associated with experiencing a modest, useful, and decent living.¹⁸

The role of Warren MacKenzie

Perhaps the most emblematic personality in spreading the Mingei philosophy through the ceramic art in America and especially in the state of Minnesota was the American potter Warren MacKenzie (1924-2018). However, even in this case Leach's genius played a prominent role. Both he and his wife Alixandra were the first Americans to have been influenced in a catalytic manner by his revolutionary *A Potter's Book* work, which they accidentally discovered at the Chicago Fine Arts Library, which they would visit regularly during their studies in the early 1940s.¹⁹ Leach's philosophy, much influenced by the Japanese spiritual worldview, seemed to be breaking new ground to the ceramic practices of the West which were uniquely combined with the primordial oriental pottery techniques. All this constituted a new, attractive proposition of life which they only would admire and accept.



Fig. 4. Shoji Hamada, Mingei vase, 1938.
© Tate Gallery.

After their first contact with Leach, followed by an extensive correspondence through which they persuaded him to accept them as apprentices in his famous pottery St. Ives workshop,²⁰ they planned to leave America for some years. Thus, in the late 1940s, they resolutely crossed the Atlantic Ocean by boat and did not return to America until 1952.²¹ Eventually both of them ended up living in Leach's home where they came in contact and experienced a close relationship with authentic ceramic objects from China, Japan and Korea, but also from Europe, which broadened even further their perception of Asian culture and art.

In the last few months of their stay in England, they were fortunate enough to meet Hamada and Yanagi²² personally, and their daily contact with them made Mingei ceramic objects, the philosophical symbols of which surpassed the mere limits of functionality and aesthetics, even more respectful and admired. Hamada's work, however, seemed to have had a particular influence on Warren's aesthetic and formalist notion who, in one of his rather later interviews, stated:

And it was there that we really first came in contact with the work of Shōji Hamada, who was Bernard's best friend from Japan, who had come from Japan back to England with Leach when Leach was establishing his pottery. Bernard had acquired many Hamada works. Some of them, it was interesting – first of all, Hamada worked in St. Ives for about four years before returning to Japan to start his own pottery. He had exhibitions in London, and if these exhibitions didn't sell out, the galleries were instructed to send the remaining work down to the Leach Pottery, where they would go into the showroom for sale. If Bernard saw one that hadn't sold that he really admired, then he would take it (he would buy it), and it would go into the house. It was in that way that we really came to understand the differences between what Hamada made and what Leach was making, or what we were making in the Leach Pottery.²³

²⁰ LEACH, Bernard, «Warren MacKenzie letters from Bernard and Janet Leach, 1947-48 [and undated]», Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

²¹ RIDDLEY, Mason, «Warren MacKenzie» [online], *Minnesota Museum of American Art*, available in: 2020, [query: 21/08/2020].

²² The two Japanese were found at that time in England to participate in the Potters and Weavers International Conference, held at Dartington Hall, where Leach was the co-organizer.

²³ SILBERMAN, Robert, *Warren MacKenzie: A Potter's Hands*, (exhibition catalog), Ramsey, Minnesota, 2014, p. 38.

²⁴ The term 'Mingeisota' was used by MacKenzie in recognition to the Mingei movement promoted by Leach, Yanagi, and Hamada.

²⁵ Warren MacKenzie was twenty nine years old when he built his first kiln in Minnesota. Since then, he had been creating and producing pottery for everyday use with a kiln that could fire almost eight hundred pieces at a time. However, when he wanted to apply his raku technique, he would build the traditional, improvised Japanese raku kilns.

From a purely technical point of view, in Leach's workshop, they had the opportunity to rediscover pottery's secrets as they had to work hard on a daily basis producing high quality pots that would honor Leach's reputation. Leach's second visit to America with Shōji Hamada and Sōetsu Yanagi would then have the support of his two new American friends, admirers and apprentices. It was then that MacKenzie would understand profoundly the Mingei craft tradition philosophy and would consequently use the term 'Mingeisota' in order to describe his new pottery style, in general²⁴ (Fig. 5).

Before Warren and Alixandra returned to America, they had already been, through friends, in the process of finding an old farm in which they would set up their own ceramics workshop.²⁵ Along with this, they soon opened a store where they first began selling their own works, and later the works of other potters and ceramic artists. This store would be proven to be a profitable and culturally fruitful business that would remain alive for about fifty more years.

In 1953, MacKenzies came to the University of Minnesota, transferring their fresh ideas, grafted by the Japanese philosophy and art, which marked the beginning of an important period in the history of American ceramics. Through his thirty-seven years of teaching at the University, as well as at several international symposia and workshops, Warren influenced thousands of students, proposing new aesthetic and ideological paths which originated from the magical treasures of Asian culture²⁶ (Fig. 6).



Fig. 5. Warren MacKenzie, Mingei type teapot, 1950s. © American Craft Council.



Fig. 6. Warren MacKenzie, a pair of Studio Pottery cups, late 1950s. © Lot-Art.

What however remains remarkable throughout his wonderful journey as a reformer of the new American ceramic ideology is his position towards the concept of crafts, which was meant to influence not only his own attitude about life, but also the attitudes of thousands other people. This can easily be traced in the correlation of his almost massively produced work with his purely personal style: his ability to produce over 5,000 utilitarian pots each year did not deprive him of the ability to create distinctively tasteful and elegant, non-repetitious domestic ware.²⁷ The majority of these objects followed the venerable Japanese ideology according to which they ought to be modest and humble in shape and form, have a disarmingly high quality in terms of craftsmanship and materials, low prices, attractive design and flawless functionality. He used many techniques, mainly kick wheel throwing in which he was much trained at Leach's workshop, but also a variety of glazes, the most typical of which was the traditional Japanese Shino.²⁸ The tableware that he made such as jugs, teapots, dishes, mugs, salad bowls, lidded jars, tall vases, carved and multifaceted boxes were purchased by generations of customers who remained forever admirers of his art. These items enriched their everyday lives in the way imagined by Bernard Leach and Sōetsu Yanagi: the unique combination of beauty, simplicity and functionality that brought joy to the users.²⁹

²⁶ King, Lyndel, «The Persistence of Mingei: Influence through Four Generations of Ceramic Artists» [online], Weisman Art Museum, available in: <https://wam.umn.edu/2019/01/18/the-persistence-of-mingei-influence-through-four-generations-of-ceramic-artists/>, 2019, [query: 20/08/2020].

²⁷ SMITH, Isabella, «Warren MacKenzie's commitment to craft», *Apollo, International Journal Magazine*, 683, 2019, p. 34.

²⁸ A thick white glaze that ranges in color from soft white to pink to dark orange or iron red. The color effect it can produce is greatly depended on the underlying clay body. White stoneware and porcelain can usually give lustrous pinks to light orange.

²⁹ STEGGLES, Mary Ann, «Warren McKenzie 1924-2018» [online], *Mary Ann Steggles*, available in: 2019, [query: 26/08/2020].

³⁰ HERRING, James, «The Mingei Movement...», p. 38.

³¹ AMERICAN MUSEUM OF CERAMIC ARTS, «Peter Voulkos: Echoes of the Japanese Aesthetic» [online], *UCLA International Institute*, available in: 2020, [query: 15/08/2020].

³² Ritual objects in the form of rings, cylinders, figures of people, even animals and houses, which were buried along with the dead interred in particular type tombs called 'during the Yamato Period (大和時代, 250-710 AD) in ancient Japan.

³³ COOPER, Emmanuel, «Peter Voulkos» [online], *Independent*, available in: 2021, [query: 26/1/2021].

The contribution of charismatic Peter Voulkos

In the 1950s America, Mingei ideals continued to be disseminated and began to evolve in a number of ways, while at the same time the larger phenomenon of Zen Buddhist practices in America augmented their importance in studio ceramics.³⁰ During this rather evolving, in terms of Mingei theory and perception, period Peter Voulkos, an extraordinarily talented clay artist and potter would enter the scene of Asian philosophy in postwar America with vigor and power. It is true that his work had received many and significant effects from multiple sources. However, it was during the 1950s that he was much inspired by the Japanese aesthetics. Voulkos, who had come across either through specific exhibitions or even books the work of both the revivalists of the Japanese ceramic art during the Momoyama period (1568-1600) and the interwar Mingei Movement ideals, began to develop a strong interest in the popular ceramic tradition of the 16th and 17th century (Fig. 7).

In complete contrast to his inventive and groundbreaking design ideology, 'classical' ceramic ritualistic objects such as incense containers, tea sets and water jars made spontaneously by the charismatic potters of the time, would affect tremendously his new philosophy on ceramic art for the

rest of his career.³¹ On top of that the enigmatic, mysterious and enchanting philosophy of tea ceremony, as well the unearthly red clay Haniwa grave figures,³² the masterly Edo period ukiyo-e woodblock prints and paintings, the impressive Anagama wood firings and even Samurai's handmade weapons, everything played a particular role to his newly shaped view on the magnificent world of ceramic art. It was not a coincidence that, in the summer of 1953, after the significant visit of Hamada, Leach and Yanagi to America and the contact they had with him through their determinant visit to his own workshop in Montana where he would produce well-thrown and designed pots that had made him famous,³³



Fig. 7. Peter Voulkos, ceramic jar, 1950s. © The Wall Street Journal.

Voukos began to teach ceramics at Black Mountain College, North Carolina.³⁴ There he came into contact with the newly introduced phenomenon of Zen Buddhism, which he was deeply interested in, and met the painter Franz Kline³⁵ who gave rise to his acquaintance with the principles of American abstract expressionism.

His very next step was to move to California where he managed to gain the enviable position of ceramics professor at the Los Angeles Institute of Art (Otis), the most important center of modern American ceramic arts. There, he and his colleagues John Mason and Ken Price, tried to get away from the utilitarian traditions of the clay and began exploring its multifaceted artistic potential. His experiments with the new, utilitarian but spiritually solid forms began to lead him to inventive and challenging paths: he started stacking ceramic pots by putting one on top of another and then he dared to punch impressive holes on the final structure. By the time he decided to increase the size of these experimental sculptures, many of which were really massive, almost person-sized, defying the problem of the small-sized kilns by improvising with bigger, new ones. It's said that the sculptures for his 1959 solo show held in Los Angeles took him five days to fire. These new, creative 'clay games' led him to the unprecedented and unexplored field of abstract sculpture which, however, seemed to incorporate the evolution of the Mingei philosophy.

Soon thereafter Voukos, his students and colleagues created the famous Otis Group, a creative group of artists with subversive ideology based on intense experimentation and the concept of randomness, affecting enormously the next generation of talented young American ceramists such as Mac McLain, Paul Soldner, John Mason, Michael Frimkess and many others³⁶ (Fig. 8). This group worked in a spirit of creativity and spontaneity, while many of its external sources of inspiration came from the Asian cultures and especially from the 20th century Japanese art. The concept of Zen was catalytic in the way they approached ceramic art as they thought it gave them the ability to use clay not just as a simple material with primordial creative qualities and a strong potential, but as a state of mind that could easily render acceptable the final outcome of each experiment. Besides, their only goal was to work with the clay and the new inspiring firing techniques in order to let beauty emerge. In the early 1970s, when his work had been stabilized in style and form, in one of his many interviews he referred to the effect of Zen's philosophy and Japanese culture in general, on his work:

'Of course the whole Japanese philosophy was very influential in West Coast ceramics, especially with the Zen kind of attitude about it. I've seen it also

³⁴ Black Mountain College was an experimental, but liberal college founded in the early 1930s. Until its final closure in the late 1950s the school flourished, becoming well known as an incubator for artistic talent. Its teaching ideology was much influenced by the European new teaching trends and especially by the Bauhaus School which was shut down by Nazis in 1933. At that time many of the school's faculty left Europe for the United States, and a number of them settled at Black Mountain, most notably, Joseph Albers who was selected to run the art program and his wife Anni Albers a weaving and textile design specialist.

³⁵ American abstract expressionist painter who along with John Ferren, Willem de Kooning, Jackson Pollock and other poetry, literature, dance and theatre artists founded in the late 1940's the famous art group, 'New York School'.

³⁶ SORKIN, Jenni, *Live Form: Women, Ceramics and Community*, Santa Barbara, The University of Chicago Press, 2016, p. 49.

³⁷ MACNAUGHTON, Mary Davis, *Clay's Tectonic Shift; John Mason, Ken Price and Peter Voulkos 1956-1968*, Claremont, Getty Publications, 2012, p. 67.

³⁸ HERRING, James, «The Mingei Movement...», p. 57.

³⁹ Temple was introduced to crafted pottery through the ceramic pots his family used on a farm in Indiana. His most important experience for his career was the two years he spent in England in the late 1950s working with Bernard Leach, by who he was introduced to the Mingei philosophy and consequently helped to develop a personal style based on pots both functional and beautiful.

⁴⁰ Highly influenced by Leach and Mingei philosophy developed a unique style of utilitarian, functional objects which was characterized as 'decorated and lighthearted, if not downright shallow and superficial'.

⁴¹ One of the most talented students Warren MacKenzie at the University of Minnesota who after graduating went to work with Leach at St. Ives in 1969 where he stayed for almost two years, acquiring new technical and theoretical training.

in painting. Everybody's talking about Zen and all that sort of thing, uh, I don't know if anyone understood exactly what it was but I sort of had a feeling about it. It was kind of an attitude where—it was kind of a hang loose attitude, you know?¹³⁷

His work, given the influence he received from the sweeping aesthetic and ideological craziness of 1950s American Expressionism, stopped following the predictable path of functional, utilitarian pottery and started becoming gradually an eclectic mixture of thrown and hand built forms in the field of abstract clay sculpture, changing the hitherto established and classic way of making ceramics in America. In the 1960s clay had already become a medium solely appropriate for sculptural works of art which still reflected the Mingei influence it had experienced, and remained as such even in the 1970s.

However, the unparalleled principle of 'Truth of the Materials', as well as the resulting of the irregular beauty of the wares that dominated the making of Japanese ceramics, continued to constitute basic principles in his own works until the last years of his life. Generally, his whole work can now be seen as an impressive evolution of Mingei philosophy which characterized

the formal American studio ceramics movement and especially its trend toward abstract sculpture.³⁸

It should also be noted that the active participation of these two great American ceramists in the new order of things introduced to the studio ceramics and pottery of the West by Bernard Leach, was also catalytic for many American ceramists of the 1950s and 1960s who also received the divine gifts of Mingei philosophy. Personalities such as Byron Temple,³⁹ Clary Illian⁴⁰ and Jeff Oestreich,⁴¹ to name just a few, reinforced their work with the Japanese aesthetic philosophy and contributed to its dominance in the American ceramic scene in the next few decades (Fig. 9).

Another important phenomenon that seemed to contribute to



Fig. 8. Peter Voulkos, ceramic sculpture tilted 'Rasgeado', 1956. © Courtesy of Dick and Gloria Anderson.

the dissemination of traditional Japanese ceramics philosophy in the late 1960s and in the early 1970s was the emergence of several craft schools which sprang out in the whole country offering a variety of intensive workshop classes. Two of them, the Haystack Mountain School in Deer Isle Maine and the Penland School in North Carolina, constituted the very places where the Mingei modal was taught by specialists but in a rather loose way, distinctively different from the academic, rigorous programs of the American universities. Of course, this new teaching attitude applied not only to ceramics but all sorts of crafts which were meant to have 'deeply rooted meanings in handmade objects that become the most characteristic human objects because of their spiritual nature'.⁴² At the same period many ceramic 'Guilds' and 'Leagues' started flooding the U.S.A. They were considered as unique places of ceramic techniques knowledge and experience exchange and this is probably why many of them still survive. In our opinion all these different types of post-war American institutions, much influenced by the general Mingei philosophy, constituted a specific social network which by the time proved to be powerful enough to protect traditional crafts from the voracious capitalistic system of the West.

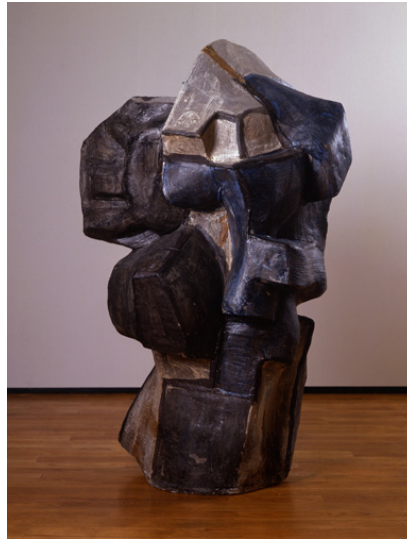


Fig. 9. Peter Voulkos, ceramic sculpture titled 'Sitting Bull', 1959. © S. Barbara Museum of Art.

⁴² Sandra ALDOLFY, *NeoCraft; Modernity and the Crafts*, Halifax, The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 2007, p. 36-37.

Conclusion

It is no coincidence that the post-war American scene of applied arts, especially pottery, was ready to accept the cultural gifts of Japan. The dramatic conflict that had preceded between the two countries in the context of World War II may have been the reason for such a cultural approach, through which Japan seemed to take revenge for the ruthless destruction suffered by the Americans. However, this is perhaps an oversimplified interpretation of the astonishing effect that traditional Japanese ceramics had on the American pottery field. Nothing could have happened if the three

great artists Leach, Yanagi and Hamada had not realized that the post-war period was the most appropriate time to sow the seeds of innovation and the deep philosophical inwardness, to enhance the need of peoples for the understanding of the concepts of simplicity, functionality and aesthetics that derive from them, but also to support the resistance of traditional applied arts to the intense industrialization sweeping wave. Postwar America, for reasons already explained, was a fertile ground for such an initiative and these three artists knew it well. It should be noted, however, that the great American potters of that time who adopted the principles of Japanese ceramic art through its revival, constituted key figures in the further development of American pottery. This does not concern strictly their personal work as a form of new autonomous art, but mainly the impact it had on the educational community of the country, such as the American universities and the schools of applied arts, which warmly welcomed this new aesthetic-functional philosophy and zealously included it in their educational agenda. The first encouraging results of this spectacular, innovative educational process began to appear as early as the late 1950s and were the first signs of the formation of modern American ceramics, which undeniably brought genuine elements of the philosophical, aesthetic and technical superiority of Japanese ceramic culture.

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TRADITIONAL JAPANESE POTTERY AND ITS INFLUENCE ON THE AMERICAN MID 20TH CENTURY CERAMIC ART

The Japanese ceramic tradition that was to emerge along with other forms of traditional crafts through the Mingei Movement during the interwar period, as a form of reaction to the barbaric and expansive industrialization that swept Japan from the late nineteenth century, brought to light the traditional, moral, philosophical, functional, technical and aesthetic values that had begun to eliminate. Great Japanese artists, art critics and ceramists, such as Sōetsu Yanagi and Shōji Hamada, as well as the emblematic personality of the English potter Bernard Leach, after caring for the revival of Japanese pottery, believed that they should disseminate the philosophy of traditional Japanese pottery around the world and especially in the post-war United States, where it found a significant response from great American potters and clay artists, but also from the educational system of the country.

This article aims to focus precisely on the significant influence that postwar American ceramic art received from traditional Japanese pottery ideals. The author in order to document the reasons for this new order of things, will study and analyze the work of important American potters and ceramic artists of the time, and will highlight the social, philosophical and cultural context of the time in which the whole endeavor took place.

Keywords: Bernard Leach, Mingei pottery, postwar American ceramics, Sōetsu Yanagi

LA CERÁMICA TRADICIONAL JAPONESA Y SU INFLUENCIA EN EL ARTE CERÁMICO ESTADOUNIDENSE DE MEDIADOS DEL SIGLO XX

La tradición cerámica japonesa (así como otras formas de artesanía tradicional) que surgió durante el período de entreguerras bajo el Movimiento Mingei como una forma de reacción a la industrialización salvaje y expansiva que arrasó Japón desde finales del siglo XIX, sacó a la luz los valores tradicionales morales, filosóficos, funcionales, técnicos y estéticos que habían empezado a eliminarse. Al velar por el resurgimiento de la alfarería japonesa, grandes artistas, críticos de arte y ceramistas japoneses, como Sōetsu Yanagi y Shōji Hamada, así como la personalidad emblemática del alfarero inglés Bernard Leach, consideraron que debían difundir la filosofía de la cerámica tradicional japonesa por todo el mundo, y especialmente en los Estados Unidos de posguerra. Allí encontraron una respuesta significativa por parte de los grandes alfareros y artistas de la arcilla, pero también del sistema educativo del país. Este artículo tiene como objetivo centrarse precisamente en la influencia significativa que el arte cerámico estadounidense de posguerra recibió de los ideales tradicionales de la cerámica japonesa. Con el fin de documentar los motivos de este nuevo orden de cosas, el autor estudiará y analizará la obra de importantes ceramistas estadounidenses de la época, y destacará el contexto social, filosófico y cultural en el cual dicho proyecto tuvo lugar.

Palabras clave: Bernard Leach, cerámica Mingei, cerámica estadounidense de posguerra, Sōetsu Yanagi

LA CERÁMICA TRADICIONAL JAPONESA I LA SEVA INFLUÈNCIA EN L'ART CERÀMIC ESTADUNIDENC DE MITJAN SEGLE XX

La tradició ceràmica japonesa (i altres formes d'artesanía tradicional) que va sorgir durant el període d'entreguerres sota el Moviment Mingei com una forma de reacció a la industrialització salvatge i expansiva que va arrasar el Japó des de la fi del segle XIX, va treure a la llum els valors tradicionals morals, filosòfics, funcionals, tècnics i estètics que havien començat a eliminar-se. En vetllar pel ressorgiment de la terrissa japonesa, grans artistes, crítics d'art i ceramistes japonesos, com Sōetsu Yanagi i Shōji Hamada, així com la personalitat emblemàtica del terrissaire anglès Bernard Leach, van considerar que havien de difondre la filosofia de la ceràmica tradicional japonesa per tot el món, i especialment als Estats Units de la postguerra. Allà hi van trobar una resposta significativa per part dels grans terrissaires i artistes de l'argila, però també del sistema educatiu del país. Aquest article té com a objectiu centrar-se precisament en la influència significativa que l'art ceràmic estatunidenc de postguerra va rebre dels ideals tradicionals de la ceràmica japonesa. Per tal de documentar els motius d'aquest nou ordre de coses, l'autor estudiarà i analitzarà l'obra d'importants ceramistes estatunidencs de l'època, i en destacarà el context social, filosòfic i cultural en què l'esmentat projecte va tenir lloc.

Paraules clau: Bernard Leach, ceràmica Mingei, ceràmica estatunidenca de postguerra, Sōetsu Yanagi

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