



Reflections of a Lifetime

It's a common fact that the potters of Japan are among the most skilled craftsmen in the world. The consumers of pottery in the Far East have loved and admired ceramics for centuries, and the potters have for years created wonderful models for the West to copy and take inspiration from. The skills of Japanese potters can transfer. The tradition of quality throwing, glazing and firing is not exclusive. Any potter that will take the time to study, practice, then learn to measure can perform these tasks with equal skill. Time and patience are the key.

Many Western potters are caught in an age-old custom of making "just a few pots a day." This practice, coupled with the hackneyed concept that pottery is "art," often holds back contemporary potters. Practice is the key to learning to produce well-crafted, well-designed pots that can be repeated over and over with total control and skill, which can give the potter great pride. Understanding modern science, safe and standardized clay bodies and glazes will lead the modern potter to become more and more efficient, and with this efficiency comes a better product that ceramic customers can afford, and respect.

There has to be a compromise between the poorly made, cheaply sold "art fair" ware and the multi-thousand dollar "collector" pots. Potters must demand a fair price for their work. But potters must first pay the price of learning to take command of their craft. Combinations of good clay, glaze and proper firing that creates an attitude in the population of buyers that pots are safe, will last for years and can be passed to the future generations are essential to our future. Potters cannot take science for granted. What passed for quality 30 years ago is now recognized as poor today. Ill-fitting glazes, crazing, and soft decorative surfaces made from dangerous chemicals must be rectified. Potters must recognize that the "complete pot" is a safe, well-crafted pot.

We are fortunate to live in a time when communications are growing and allowing for potters to see, hear and speak to other potters from



The Sword

During my long stay in Tokyo when I was having my solo exhibit, I had to sit at the gallery all day. Each day around 10 a.m. a man would come in and walk through my show. He only spoke Japanese, we would bow, give greetings and he would smile, say "nice art," look around, smile and leave. This happened every day...same guy. Near the end of the exhibit he handed the receptionist a note. It said, "Could Mr. Jacobson have lunch with me?" So, off we went to lunch.

It turned out he owned the largest Chinese-style restaurant in the Ginza. We went there and he said, "food not good," so off we walked for about 30 minutes down little back alleys, across streets, over rail lines, through more alleys, until we came to a little, tiny, bitty open-air tempura stand. We ducked under the nori (cloth) and there was room for six people to sit—just a counter. He said, "best food in Tokyo." He was correct. It was heaven. We ate tempura until we hurt. On the way back he bought two oranges at a stand, and we ate them as we walked. One of the most wonderful feasts of my life. So simple, easy, free of arrogance.

When we got back to his Chinese restaurant, we went to his office. He opened a big safe, and out he took two swords...samuri, elegant, wonderful...and he said proudly, "I make swords." Oh, my god, did he make swords. He was ranked the number three sword maker in Japan (others told me later that day). The cost of one of his swords was in the \$100,000 range. My head just spun. I was holding in my hands an example of the most wonderful craftsmanship in the world—a handmade sword. Tears came to my eyes, could not help it. He was so damn humble. He just smiled. We did not need language. It was in our hearts...total respect.

I have an old, 14th-century, beat-up samuri sword. It was probably a potter's sword. Kinda crummy, has the flower pattern of the royal family on it. It was more than likely in the hands of a foot soldier. I like to hold it, just look at it. Know it was handmade. The folks that made them had problems to solve. Had to invent, just like us.

About a month after returning to Kyoto, Uchida got a package marked for me. It was from the swordmaker. There was a small piece of cloth, which was cut from a kimono. It was his family crest, about four inches across, perfect circle, silk, grey-green and gold. Elegant. There was also a letter, that said in part:

"Your ceramic work is from your painting, I cannot see your work without your painting. It's very good. For instance, you put your painting on your work very frankly, and that's correct.

Always the art is made by one's deepest heart, and I could catch your inside which we Japanese say it "honmono"...genuine.

I would like to offer you a cloth, it's Edo period, two hundred years old. If you want to know the feeling of real arts you must touch it. It must be felt in your hands over and over. That's the best way I believe.

I know art, I study art, I know. Now you must study and work hard and you'll be accomplished in your work.

Very important, you have real eyes. They are clean and bright, your eyes help you win life. That's a Japanese thing.

I wish that you spoke our Japanese language, we have much to tell each other. You have luck, you have an Oriental feeling."

I felt very warm inside.

It seems that the craft world has always had an innate sense of sharing ideas, in fact the history of our models, our chemistry has passed from person to person, recipes written on scraps of paper, on the back of books of matches. Craft is founded on the master teaching the apprentice, and today it does not change. But, we have opportunities of communication that allow all of us to be sharing together. The world of ceramic craft can only increase its history of sharing. Communications, of instantaneous quality will help that cause.



The Translator

After I had been working in the pottery for about three months, Mr. Uchida came to me and said, "Mel-san, we should get a translator and sit down and have a long talk." I said, "fine, Sensei." So the next day we went to the American embassy in Kyoto (they called it the cultural center). A very nice woman met us, and had us sit in a small room. Mr. Uchida started and asked the woman if I understood instructions, and she translated in English. Before she could finish, I told her that things were very clear. I asked some questions to Uchida about my ideas and philosophy, he said he understood very clearly. He asked, I asked...same result, we both understood. Then she said, "well, boys, I don't know why I am here?" So, she left and we went on talking in pigeon Japanese, some English, some Japanese, and often drew pictures, laughed like hell. Then we went and had a beer or three, and talked and laughed for about two more hours. Next, we went to dinner, on to the geisha house, drank some more, had more to eat, and wandered home about 1 a.m. As usual, next morning it was all business as usual—no smiles, no talking, and get to work. And we worked with hangovers, or not, feel good or sick...the studio was all business.

I was very happy that Mr. and Mrs. Uchida decided to come to Minnesota several years ago. I had a wonderful reception at our home for him...had about 50 good friends that had supported our trip and our family. I was able to stand in my own home, with him at my side, and thank him publicly for all that he had done for me. A wonderful Japanese pastor that had known Mr. Uchida as a young man acted as translator for the group, and Mr. Uchida gave a warm and lasting talk about our relationship. His final comment was, "Mel-san and I never once, not once, had a doubt about how we felt about our craft, and that's amazing." And as usual, he was never wrong.

Postscript

As always, we live in changing times. My time in Japan is long gone, and the old ways there are dying as Japanese attitudes become westernized. There is something special about people that work with their hands and minds, and although we work alone, we need the sharing and giving that keeps the craft moving along. Without question, I will try and hold onto the attitude that good teaching, caring for the craft, and passing on the best we have to offer will survive. I am confident that it will.



Mel and workers.

around the world. Sharing ideas, technique and attitudes will only help to make the “craft” healthy and vigorous.

We are about clay. We are about craftsmanship; that’s the legacy of potters. It is a noble effort. It has value and cannot be ignored. The world will embrace the crafts, but craftpersons must first embrace each other. Many of the modern founders of the ceramic arts during the 1950s are fading from our view. We honor and respect them, but new and well-deserved leaders are entering the arena. It’s hoped that they understand the craft and the science of making pots. The next generation of potters is waiting. What will we give them?

The clay community

Potters come in all sizes, shapes, genders and origins. The fact that they all use clay and heat bonds them together with common interest and problems. Local conditions such as weather and changing climate generates unique problems for each potter. Available clay and the formula for that clay causes each potter to “think” that their problems are unique only to them. That’s not true. With modern technology and communications, potters are finding that as a group they have many common problems that can be solved as a group.

Standards of clay production and glaze materials are going to be the next great movement in the pottery world. Potters are going to demand proper blending of clay bodies, and that glaze materials are consistent. Potters are going to start to combine their talents and needs and form a common front. This is going to be difficult for many, as they have chosen to make pots because it allows them to work alone and be autonomous from others. However, the need for good clay bodies, and quality glaze materials are going to drive potters to bond together.

It seems that potters all over the world, from Canada to Australia have the same thoughts and problems. The Internet and listservs are bringing potters together to discuss and disseminate information common to all. Men and women, old and young, professional and amateur, hobby potters and teachers are finding that instant communications allows ideas, recipes, clay formulation and chemistry to be shared. It’s a brand new world of craft and art that allows this kind of communication. It’s vital that potters and craftspeople take advantage of this wonderful opportunity.



The End

Sensei, the word is the last of the Japanese stories for now. my brain is dry and I have to get back to the studio. If I sit at the computer too long my ankles swell up like elephants. thank you for the many notes and personal thoughts. As you can tell, I enjoyed this a great deal. It's fun to share. and I will never stop being a teacher. I sometimes think the reports from the potteries in Japan read like romance novels, and I want you all to realize that it's bloody hard work, done by very dedicated, serious people. they are the masters of ceramic art because they get after their craft.