

GENIUS AND CIRCUMSTANCE

Shoji Hamada and Bernard Leach arrived in 1920 to an England critically receptive to Orientalism. Enthusiasm for Chinese antiquities was at an unprecedented level and in the art world, this was directly connected to an emergent British Modernism and its interest in the 'primitive'.

A decade earlier, an editorial on Oriental Art in the Burlington Magazine, probably written by Roger Fry, the arch Modernist of the period, stated that

'There are signs that the present rapidly increasing preoccupation with Oriental art will be more intense, and produce a profounder impression on our views, than any previous phase of Orientalism. For one thing, we are more disillusioned, more tired with our tradition, which seems to have landed us at length in a too frequent representation of the obvious or the sensational. To us the art of the East presents the hope of discovering a more spiritual, more expressive idea of design.'ⁱ

The myths surrounding Hamada and Leach's early years in England are numerous. The imposing Leach accompanied by his quiet friend have been seen as evangelical figures attempting to convert the English to the values of Oriental pottery, in particular that of the Sung dynasty. In fact the converse was true. By 1920 Sung dynasty pottery was already well known, almost in vogue. A series of seven articles had been published in The Burlington Magazine on 'Wares of the Sung and Yuan Dynasties' by R.L. Hobson, the renowned British Museum curator. The Burlington Fine Arts Club Summer Exhibition of 1910 was devoted to Chinese pottery of the Sung and Ming Dynasty. The Clarendon Press published a translation of the highly eclectic 'T'ao Shuo'ⁱⁱⁱ in the same year which was a compilation of writing from 'the old prose authors and poets of the T'ang and other dynasties'ⁱⁱⁱ, while Korean ceramics were also discussed in many articles in, for example, The Burlington Magazine in 1912^{iv}. New archeological excavations in

China in the immediate pre and post war periods were eagerly received in the West and helped establish the provenance of this early pottery, 'wonderful' finds that 'the present century has for the first time brought to the knowledge of the western world.'^v Scholarly interest developed to such an extent in the period before Hamada and Leach's arrival that in 1917 Bernard Rackham, Keeper of the Ceramics department at the V & A, even wrote a survey of critical literature on Chinese pottery^{vi}.

Interest in Orientalism was not limited to scholars and academics. It was also significant to the British avant garde, in its mediation of French Post Impressionism's fascination with the 'primitive', from Van Gogh's homage to Japanese prints to Picasso and Matisse's interest in African art. The connection between ancient oriental and modern art was furthered by collectors such as Mr Kelekian 'the greatest collector and dealer in Oriental textiles and pottery' who moved on to collect modern art. Roger Fry wrote in 1920 'Mr Kelekian's venture in modern art is of comparatively recent date.. His long familiarity with early Oriental art has trained his taste ... in his choice of modern work.'^{vii} The famous 17thc Japanese potter Koetsu's work was illustrated in the second, final issue of Wyndham Lewis's journal Blast in 1915. The antithesis of the anonymous Oriental craftsman later promoted by Leach, Hamada and Yanagi, Koetsu's work influenced the alternative approach to Oriental ceramics taken by the great potter of the inter war years, William Staite Murray.

Chinese pottery featured in specialist exhibitions such as 'Early Ting Ware' at the Victoria & Albert Museum in 1922, but Oriental art had also become a viable financial proposition for many commercial galleries in London such as Messrs Bluett and Sons, John Sparks, Yamaka's, Ton Ying and Co and Knoedler's Galleries. In 1930 The Burlington Magazine revealed the extent of this popularity 'Evidently there is no decline of interest in the material products of Chinese

civilization. The two exhibitions last month were crowded and seldom before have displays been so diversified and of such high excellence.^{viii} Paterson's Gallery also showed early Chinese art. In reviewing this exhibition in 1920 R.L.Hobson wrote 'Carefully selected and tastefully arranged it comprises many of the most attractive types of Han, Tang, Sung and Ming wares.... The Sung representatives include many rare and choice examples.'^{ix} It was understandable that Paterson's should exhibit Hamada only 3 years later in 1923, for in many ways he was the living embodiment of 'Orientalism'. The very first solo show of contemporary studio pottery in a Bond Street gallery, this established a precedent for subsequent exhibitions of all the major English studio potters of the decade - Bernard Leach, William Staite Murray, Reginald Wells, Charles Vyse, Katherine Pleydell Bouverie, and Nora Braden.

Shoji Hamada received generous critical coverage in the British press by the standards of the 1920s. In total, his four exhibitions at Paterson's generated three reviews in *The Times*, two in *The Spectator*, catalogue essays from Leach and Yanagi and numerous references in general articles on studio pottery. The first reference to Hamada was in December 1920, shortly after his arrival in Britain. It was a less than auspicious start. He was described in *The Pottery Gazette and Glass Trade Review* as Bernard Leach's 'Japanese assistant, Mr Hamada 'who had 'studied from the scientific side at the Kyoto Governmental Experimental Pottery Works.'^x The article was 'specially contributed', probably by Leach himself and it effectively placed Hamada at the level of a technician. Three years later this had changed. Hamada's one-man show at Paterson's Gallery was reviewed in *The Spectator*, in which he was referred to as 'a Japanese potter of considerable reputation in Japan, at present working at Mr Leach's pottery in St Ives...'^{xi} These early references encapsulate Hamada's short time in England - the positive acceptance of his work and the rapid progression of his relationship with Leach from 'assistant' to 'collaborator' to 'friend'.

Chinese pottery was the benchmark for virtually all studio pottery in the 1920s, 'It is said that a man cannot paint who has not studied the Italians; no more can a potter pot who is unversed in Sung.'^{xiii} Given the early stage in the development of studio pottery at a time when it was completely reliant on Oriental models, comparisons were inevitable. In the first reviews by the critic W. McCance in *The Spectator*, Hamada was seen as a potter who 'concentrates on recapturing old traditional effects in glaze.'^{xiii} while Charles Marriot in the *Times* commented that 'In general the shapes are in the Chinese tradition'. These comparisons persisted until Hamada's last show in 1931 in which his maturing work caused Marriot to reflect that 'Oddly enough, his work in general seems to owe less to the Chinese than that of some of our English potters - a case of natural, as compared with adoptive descent, one supposes.'^{xiv}

Hamada was seen as a potter of integrity by his reviewers. Even in comparison with Kawai and Tomimoto, Japanese contemporaries of his who also showed in London, Hamada's work had 'sturdy strength ... a deeper artistic impulse'^{xv}. This theme of solidity recurred throughout many of the British reviews of Hamada's work. Adjectives such as 'economy' and 'simple' were commonly used although Marriot thought the pots 'blunt' and 'just a little lacking in subtlety.'^{xvi} In W. McCance's fascinating review of 1923, following Hamada's second show of stoneware at Paterson's Gallery, he made a revealing comparison of Hamada and Leach's work. In one of the first attempts to place pottery in a modern critical context McCance described Leach as 'a potter with a bias towards painting ... 'he coaxes the mass of inert clay ... works delicately with his fingers,'^{xvii} while Hamada, with a bias towards sculpture 'compels it, by pressure, into aesthetic equilibrium, ... uses his hands more as a whole..' McCance concluded that 'Mr. Leach's (pots) have more of grace, Mr. Hamada's more of power.' In comparing the two potter's use of surface decoration McCance perceptively remarked how

‘In this superaddition of pattern to form, pottery differs from either painting or sculpture.’ Tellingly, he omitted Leach completely. He noted that ‘Mr Hamada has adapted the same basic pattern to a variety of shapes; it becomes a new pattern and an integral part’ McCance was probably hinting at Leach’s tendency to rely on pictorial motifs while Hamada could make ‘pattern synthesize with form’.

Charles Marriot also discussed Hamada’s skill as a decorator and his use of calligraphy. Making tactful comparisons with other English potters he wrote ‘What most obviously distinguishes it from the work of our potters who have studied Oriental methods is the superiority of the brush decoration, broad and free but controlled in a way that is only possible to a trained calligrapher.’^{xviii} Marriot unfortunately also revealed the limits of his appreciation of Hamada’s flair for decoration. ‘Occasionally, ... he seems to make mistakes - applying a rectangular pattern to a circular surface’

Hamada’s association with Leach and their shared interest in English pottery also created an opportunity for writers on studio pottery to discuss Occidental influences. It was noted in Hamada’s pots that ‘in form and decoration Western models have occasionally been adopted’^{xix} and ‘English influences - particularly in slip decoration are apparent ... but thoroughly digested.’^{xx} At times, however, critical comment seemed to be motivated more by a sense of wounded pride than an interest in the underlying issues ‘Mr. Hamada ... was attracted to the craft of potting through having seen examples of an English potter’s work’.^{xxi} Charles Marriot was always keen to reveal English influences and wrote how ‘Mr Hamada’s experiences at St Ives broadened and enriched his art’.^{xxii} Despite the Occidental influence Marriot saw in Hamada’s work he failed to comment on the fact that his “Tea-set for six”, made in Japan for an English audience, was completely alien to Japanese pottery.

One of the most significant themes of the decade was the importance of materials in the making of pottery. Comments on Hamada's methods varied from Marriot's travelogue of local materials - 'china clay from Towednack and red clay from St. Erth' - to the more inquiring approach of McCance in his understanding of historical precedents for 'truth to materials'. 'The older Chinese and Japanese potters understood the value of what are at present called impurities ...(which) must be understood in order in order to be used to advantage'.^{xxiii} Although Leach did not write about materials in his catalogue essay of 1929 he noted that Hamada's first exhibition marked a stage where 'there no longer existed a technical barrier between ancient and modern'^{xxiv}. Yanagi's crusade for the use of unrefined materials was emphasised in his catalogue essay of 1931 in which he stated that 'Few understand that the beauty of ceramics is mainly the beauty of materials.'^{xxv} And he contrasted this with the 'delusion that nature can be refined.'

Although the timing of Hamada's arrival in England was fortuitous the extent and quality of press coverage of his work was undoubtedly deserved. During the three years he worked at St Ives he embodied the phenomenal interest in Orientalism and authenticated the artistic ideals of the period. Prophetically, Bernard Leach recorded a conversation with Yanagi six years before returning to England in which "Y. asked me if I thought an artistic period in history is due to genius or circumstance. I replied that both were necessary."^{xxvi} In the formulation of craft in the 1920s, Hamada supplied the genius and the emerging British studio pottery movement the circumstance.

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- v The Pottery Figures of Mr Charles Vyse, The Studio, Vol 81, May 1921.
- vi The Literature of Chinese Pottery : A Brief Survey and Review, Bernard Rackham, The Burlington Magazine, Vol XXX, No CLXVII, Feb 1917.
- vii Modern Paintings in a Collection of Ancient Art, Roger Fry, The Burlington Magazine, Vol XXXVII No CCXIII, Dec 1920.
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- xiv Two Potters, Charles Marriot, The Times, 10 November 1931.
- xv Some Modern Pottery, Anon, Artwork, Vol 5 No 19, Autumn 1929
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- xvii The Art of Pottery, W. McCance, The Spectator, Nov 24, 1923
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- xix Some Modern Pottery, Anon, Artwork, Vol 5 No 19, Autumn 1929
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- xxvi A Review, 1909-1914, Bernard Leach, Tokyo, 1914.