

# American Impressions

BY BERNARD LEACH



Mid Atlantic—24th June, 1950—The tale is told and already outlines blur, but in the kaleidoscope of memory patterns begin to form. For me it has been an intensely interesting and enjoyable experience: I have encountered generosity, warmth and enthusiasm everywhere, and my life is made rich by many friendships. I look back upon the ten weeks' teaching in Washington, Boston, the New York State College of Ceramics at Alfred University; in Columbus, Toronto, Wichita, St. Paul and San Francisco—12,000 miles of travel and upwards of 100 talks and lectures—and a week for retrospect here on this dividing ocean.

The first new perception which came was a sense of thankfulness that I had been born in an old culture. For the first time I realized how much unconscious support it still gives to the modern craftsman. The sap still flows from a tap-root deep in the soil of the past, guiding the sense of form, pattern and color below the level of intellectualization. Modern art is inevitably eclectic. Abruptly in the unfolding tale of humanity we have become the inheritors of all history and geography. The ancient barriers are down at last. North, South, East and West are ours and all the cultures of the world open their secret doors to us. Picasso—the Catalan—hurls banderillos of many patterns, Parisian or Peruvian, Primitive or Greek—great acrobat that he is. I cannot call him a potter, however, and if a thousand young French potters ape his brilliance of invention and verve of draughtsmanship and color it is just unfortunate for them and for us. Would they have been any better able to find themselves in their quiet roots without him? There is the gist of the modern problem—to find one's quiet root.

Americans have the disadvantage of having many roots, but no tap-root, which is almost the equivalent of no root at all. Hence American pots follow many undigested fashions and, in my opinion, no American potter has yet emerged really integrated and standing on his own feet; not as much as Hamada in Japan, or Michael Cardew in England, or the late Sam Haile when he worked in the United States; nor of painters such as Cezanne, Matisse, Braque, or Rouault, or American Ryder and Whistler and the poets Whitman and Eliot. The poem, the painting, the pot must be the real man. It can be done, but so far it has not been done as well as the Pueblo Indian can still lingeringly do it.

The American Indians of course, together with the "folk" anywhere, do not proceed on individual choice and the root in their case is the race-root. It is a humbling fact that so very few of our evolved, educated, self-conscious, world-conscious potters can stand the test of comparison. And yet a real judgment in pottery must be based upon the highest standards of the past constantly checked by the present, as in all art.

It is for a criterion of beauty in pots that I have been most constantly asked; this seems to me the only possible yardstick. I have also been asked for tricks of the trade. I have tried hard to place these questions in their subordinate place, for to pursue them as short-cuts is futile, resulting in efforts leading nowhere.

That these humble, ordinary, unknown artisans of the past help to set us a standard is an actual encouragement for it offers a prospect as well as a retrospect, art as part of normal life, not something separate or reserved for superior people. It tells of a buried potential in us, cut off from expression by our post-industrial way of life.



*Large stoneware cookie jar, oatmeal glazed over sgraffito black slip by Bernard Leach. Photo courtesy of Institute of Contemporary Arts in Washington, D. C.*

But the overflowing life-force and sensibility of exceptional talent is not thereby excluded in any way.

After all it was the music of the folk which provided the great composers with melodies and healthy stimulus, just as it is the work of unknown peasant potters which serves the same function for the best artist potters today. Behind both lies the immeasurable background of creative nature of which we are, at our best, but a focal point and upon which we inevitably rest our ideas. It is our belief at St. Ives that this is where coöperative craftsmanship has a creative contribution to make to society by bringing the two forces together.

American potters and students have also asked me for practical criticism of their work. There seem to be certain weaknesses which are widespread—handles which are obviously stuck on and do not grow from within as branches grow from a tree-trunk; jug lips which will not pour without dripping; teapot spouts which are either goiterous or camel-like; hollow knobs on covered pots which contradict the formal rhythms of the rest of the shape leaving the whole form with a question mark instead of a conclusion. The major-thrown forms often strike me as unarticulated and uncertain, often from lack of breadth and speed and freedom of throwing. Many of the clays were poor in throwing quality, and the wheels were seldom satisfactory, particularly those to which one had to stand sideways. For them nothing can be said, and they are a great hindrance to students.

There are some 70,000 non-industrial potters of one sort or another in the United States, with a turnover comparable to industry's. Granting that the bulk of the work turned out is not worth serious discussion since it is only money-making enterprise on ceramic "novelties", the fact remains that there are hardly any serious potters who can make a living by pots alone in that rich country. It is much the same elsewhere and the individual potter has to have other sources of income, usually from teaching at least half his time.

This fact helped to push us towards group work in Cornwall motivated by a common ideal. We believe we have found the beginnings of a new way of life combining the individual with the folk. Perhaps the nearest parallel would be a small orchestra under a willingly-accepted composer-conductor. The difference from other coöperative efforts, such for example as that successful, humanitarian, industrial pottery founded by Lew Reese at Scio, Ohio, is in the addition of art to the human coöperation which he has achieved.

Group work requires leadership but not of a coercive, or economic, or merely technical kind, nor will democratic committees, with low esthetic compromise values, carry us far in any field of art. We are left then with Cinderella. Can we trust her sense and humanity? The fable suggests that we may, and the French, Japanese and Chinese have long done so successfully. As far as our own experience goes we have reached economic security

only by this means. It involves a team of twelve, open consultation and profit-sharing, a production of about 20,000 pots a year of which about 3,000 are expensive, selected, individual pieces, and the remainder are sold direct to the customer by means of a catalog covering about thirty varied domestic pots at under \$1 a piece.

American potters seem to fight shy of such a venture, perhaps from an exaggerated importance attached to individualism. Students seem to rush through a training as quickly as possible—"making the grade"—setting up—exhibiting in shows—gaining national prizes whilst still immature—forging ahead on trick differences from other potters. Perhaps this is a residue of the rugged individualism of pioneering days, I would not know (it was suggested to me by an American friend), but at any rate this spirit of competition is far removed from the lover's approach to perfection. Art schools tend to foster this fast personal progress and exhibitionism, and prize money is attendant thereon. One cannot help wondering if prizes always go to the best work. Who selects the selectors? Art education is not simple, the best artists usually emerge despite it or without it.

As far as crafts are concerned I believe that far and away the best training is in the workshop of a good craftsman. There the slow transfer of concept and technique can take place under conditions of apprenticeship and reality. The precepts of a man who practises what he preaches carry weight. If one integrated potter could be found and persuaded to carry on a workshop with the assistance of students, I believe it would do more to foster the making of fine pots in America than all other endeavors put together. There must be a conductor for the orchestra and the nervous student need not fear obliteration of personality any more than the musician. If he has genuine originality it will emerge; if not, let him in heaven's name love music enough to be content with the more modest orchestral function.

This was the only answer which was found in the Japanese Craft Movement, and those who organized it. My old friend, Dr. Yanagi, outstandingly, did so in the closest collaboration with the most creative craftsmen such as Hamada. The planning in the main came out of an internal drive, not the other way about, hence its vitality.

If I am right in my supposition that there is no American potter who has yet reached complete integration, then it would be best to invite one from abroad, preferably from the East. America is at the crossroads in art as in life. So is Western civilization for that matter in its suicidal pursuit of external at the cost of the internal and spiritual and artistic values. But as I have pointed out, Europe has old cultural roots which America has not in the same organic sense. For that reason Americans have a freedom of choice greater than ours, an openness and a more insatiable hunger. Two world wars have thrust upon her global authority and responsibility. Another war threatens and the Western democracies have obviously not found the answer to Hitler or Stalin.

I am writing about art and deliberately make the suggestion that since art springs from life and often has a prophetic character, the answer to the problem of the American potter may contain the seed we are seeking in the wider field.

Every modern artist, the potter included, has to find his own world-synthesis of thought and action. He has to choose between East and West to discover out of his

own deep perceptions how they can dovetail. It is a question of marriage, not of a haphazard mixing. I have seen so many stoneware or pseudo-stoneware pots from coast to coast which are mixtures, Bahaus over Sung, or Sung over Bahaus free form, unintegrated. Can they be integrated? Can the free geometry of the post-industrial era assimilate with the organic humanism of the pre-industrial? Is it a *mésalliance*? Is this the cause of the potter's dyspepsia? If the problem is approached from outside instead of inside, I believe so.

What then is In and what Out?

That is a philosophic question. I have raised many on this tour but, somewhat to my surprise, I have been thanked repeatedly for doing so—which indicates a considerable uncertainty about primary values in potters' minds. Now how can a marriage of opposites, the living, integrated pot come out of uncertainty—a question which the American cannot escape. It has him in thrall.

America lies an island between East and West and is destined to become the magnetic center of the world's polarities of race and thought. She is no longer wholly protected by two oceans. Isolation is no longer a reasonable possibility.

So an American potter needs to discover his own soul and to live in and to contribute to an America which has found its meaning and purpose, by producing pots as an expression of his whole being, heart, head and hand. Just as the heart beat keeps our physical organism alive, so too do the heart beats of feeling, intuition, and, at its height, inspiration pulse through our spirits and vitalize our actions. This is what I mean by working from inside out. Pots produced from an intellectual level, or for utility alone, or to display technical skill, or just to make money are progressively outside in. Such is our procedure most of the time, not only in pots, but in everything else in our modern Western civilization.

A potter starts with an intuitive concept, he thinks of a combination of shape, pattern and color which will answer a given need of utility and beauty at one and the same time. God knows from what sources the mental image springs. That he can analyze later on if necessary. Then he brings experience and knowledge of material and technique into play—intellect supporting intuition—and so carries the image into actuality. I see no reason why he should puritanically refuse mechanical aid provided it does not in any way master his intentions.

From the foregoing it may be seen that I connect pots very closely with life—life in the potter and life in society. When society is in confusion or decay the artist and the potter have to find what truth and beauty they can for themselves. Going a little further, with insight and experience, the qualities of the man may be seen in the pot. We are more accustomed to the idea in the unapplied arts. To the trained eye, decision or hesitation, sensibility or dullness, breadth or narrowness, tenderness or sentimentality, nobility or the commonplace are all nakedly exposed. There are, too, other more formal values of esthetic composition which must be taken into consideration in judging pots such as proportion, symmetry and asymmetry, positives and negatives, but they all come back to the manner of application. The manner is the man, so all through I have laid stress on the humanist approach, and I hope I have been humanist enough so as not to offend all those who have done me honor and shown me a thousand kindnesses.

