Randy Johnston: Striking Balance

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The need to create is the need to explore. Human curiosity drives us to explore possibilities, to take on new challenges, to take risks, to push boundaries. Whether in science, sports, or the arts, there are discoveries to be made, records to be broken, ideas to be plumbed. Every endeavor involves a goal and a journey to reach that goal. Although the goal is the ultimate objective and the reason behind the task, sometimes the journey of exploration is just as important.

As a potter, Randy Johnston has made exploration an integral part of his career. Gresh out of college, in 1972 he made the decision to build his own Japanese-style wood-burning kiln, even though he had never seen one firsthand. Using a plan from a book and bricks from a demolished foundry, Johnston built one of the earliest *noborigama* (climbing kilns) in the U.S. Although the results of his early firings were not as spectacular as he had hoped, he was able to achieve measure of success – remarkable for such a pioneering enterprise.

In 1974, Johnston had the opportunity to meet the Japanese potter Shimaoka Tatsuzo, premier apprentice of then-Living National Treasure Hamada Shoji (1894-1978). Shimaoka, impressed by Johnston's drive and eagerness, invited him to spend six months working at his studio in the pottery village of Mashiko. Not one to shrink from adventure or the chance to acquire new skills and ideas, Johnston readily accepted.

During his term as a short-term apprentice (regular apprentices in the Shimaoka workshop generally agreed to stay for three years), Johnston had the opportunity to experience first-hand the daily rhythm of a traditional Japanese ceramics operation. As a potter in the *mingei* ("people's art," or folk art) tradition, Shimaoka did not create his work alone, but directed a workshop employing numerous workers who assisted with various aspects of production. In Shimaoka's studio, Johnston found himself part of a corps of craftspeople and laborers who numbered no fewer than twelve. Each member of the team had his/her own particular skills and tasks. Although he was a newcomer, Johnston was already a proficient thrower, and therefore occupied a relatively high position in the skill hierarchy. When he asked an older worker who

did exclusively press-molding to teach him his techniques, the man replied with wonder, “But you can throw – why would you want to learn to press-mold?” Thus it became clear to Johnston that Japanese craftsmen had no conception of the limited resources of studio potters in the United States.

In Shimaoka’s workshop, Johnston was responsible for throwing *yunomi* tea cups, *sake* cups and components of tea pots for the workshop’s standard ware. The tea pots were assembled by the workshop supervisor, a gruff man people called Fuku-yan, who was sometimes a bit overzealous in his efforts to ensure that the work of his visiting craftsmen met the studio’s standards. Everyone worked from 8 AM to 5 PM, seven days a week – not so different from a Japanese craftsman’s schedule during the Edo period (1615-1868). The biggest challenge, says Johnston, was finding time to do shopping or laundry. Most of the workers had families to take care of household tasks, but Johnston and his fellow foreign apprentice, the Australian Andrew Halford, had to squeeze in trips to the store and coin laundry as they could. Even so, the workers were given a couple of days off while the kilns cooled after each month’s firing.

Most importantly, during his time in Mashiko, Johnston was able to gain a sense of the broader context of Japanese ceramics. In an essay on his website, mckeachiejohnstonstudios.com, he writes

> I began to understand the deep traditions associated with these pieces, that they were more than simple vessels, that in Japanese culture there are ceremonial aspects to the simplest containers and strong associations with social activity. The vessels were expressions of function and tradition, aesthetics and history, embodying old concepts of volume, thin and thick edges and curves. I discovered the discipline that comes from repeated throwing.

The whole contingent of Shimaoka’s workers assisted with the firings of the *noborigama*, which were times of great excitement, anticipation, and hard work. Johnston was able to learn a great deal from participating in the six or so firings he experienced while in Mashiko. Moreover, toward the end of his apprenticeship, Shimaoka allowed him time off to go watch a professional kiln builder construct a woodburning kiln for another workshop. As a result, when he returned to

his Wisconsin homestead, Johnston was able to build a new and much-improved *noborigama*, modeled after the one used by Shimaoka at the time.

The new kiln was placed on the same piece of land as the first one, near Johnston's house on a plot of twenty-four acres of rolling farmland not far from the St. Croix River. Johnston had purchased the land soon after graduating from college expressly for setting up a ceramics studio. There was no house on the property, so he go permission to move an abandoned cabin from across the road. The refurbished dwelling has, with various renovations and expansions, served Johnston and his family for the past thirty-seven years.

Today the property has a number of other structures in addition to the house and the climbing kiln. A bright and airy workshop has been constructed out back, and a wonderfully rustic showroom, created from an old granary, graces the yard. Perhaps the most significant addition in recent years, however, is the *anagama*, or wood burning tunnel kiln, that Johnston built in 2002. This kiln, a single chamber reminiscent of a whale in shape, produces more dynamic effects than the climbing kiln. Firing it also involves more risk; sometimes an *anagama* firing can result in a percentage of usable pieces as low as 20%. When Johnston made it known that he was planning to build an *anagama*, some of his potter friends thought he was crazy. His signature style was established, he had a reliable clientel, and his work was being collected by a growing number of museums, galleries, and individuals. His *noborigama* seemed to serve quite well for creating the wood-fired pieces that were one of his hallmarks. Why go to the trouble and expense to build yet another wood-firing kiln? The answer is that, once again, Johnston wanted to push the boundaries of his art.

It is interesting that, for one so compelled to explore, Johnston has remained firmly grounded in the vessel tradition. Like his college professor, the renowned Warren MacKenzie, his Japanese teacher Shimaoka, as well as Hamada Shoji and Bernard Leach before them, he follows the philosophical vine that sprouted with William Morris and John Ruskin and then later blossomed under Yanagi Soetsu: the idea that the greatest beauty is to be found in solid, handcrafted items of use, which the Japanese refer to as *mingei*. In fact, thanks to Warren MacKenzie, Johnston, and others of similar approach, the area of eastern Minnesota/western Wisconsin has become known in potting circles as "Mingei-sota."

In his ceramics, Johnston utilizes many of the basic techniques used by *mingei* potters such as Hamada, but never uses them in the same way. In addition, he uses other techniques and

materials that Hamada and those working in his style rarely, if ever, used. The most notable is natural ash glaze firing, called *yakishime* in Japanese (RJ-123). These pieces, made and fired with an emphasis on flashing, scorching, and unpredictable vitrified ash deposits, have come to represent Johnston's signature style, even though he produces a wide variety of glazed wares as well. Johnston's natural ash glaze wares are distinctive because he generally uses a kaolin-based, semi-vitreous slip that fires to an orange-red and provides a smoother and more consistent palette for the capricious effects of wood ash. Johnston says that he uses the slip because he wants to achieve a color similar to that of Japanese wares from Tokoname, but lacks a source of suitable clay. More recently, he has explored the effects of partial glazing in combination with strong wood-firing to get new and dynamic effects (RJ-115).

For his glazed wares, Johnston has created his own versions of glazes that are fairly standard in Japan. His *nuka* glaze, based on rice straw ash, is usually a streaky white glaze, but Johnston applies it over a dark slip, achieving something visually akin to the Korean *buncheong* wares known in Japan as *kohiki* – that use a white clay slip to cover a dark clay body. Johnston adds his own twist by augmenting his pieces with wonderfully elegant and subtle effects through wax resist decoration (RJ-78). The designs on those pieces are reminiscent of four hundred year old examples in the *nezumi* (mouse-gray) Shino tradition, but Johnston's own Shino glazed pieces are much more vibrant, with flame-red color and dramatic crackling (RJ-133).

A delightful discovery among Johnston's works are his *yunomi* tea cups. Nearly all Japanese lovers of green tea have their own *yunomi* that they treasure and use daily. Johnston's *yunomi* feature decorative techniques not usually found on his other wares, including overglaze enamel decoration (RJ 24), and inlay slip design (RJ-55), a technique gleaned from his one-time teacher Shimaoka. Yet even when using such relatively involved techniques as these, Johnston's approach remains relaxed and unfussy. Over the years he has developed a remarkably keen eye for judging what makes a good pot, visually as well as structurally.

It takes admirable skill to be able to predict - and execute - pieces like Johnston's that appear elegantly balanced, tasteful, and inviting when shown in a photograph or on a shelf. It is even more difficult, however, to design ceramics that will look their best when they are being used – when they are viewed in combination with other vessels or when their visual impact is reduced due to being partially obscured by culinary or floral creations. In this endeavor, Johnston has an extremely able collaborator. Jan McKeachie-Johnston is herself a respected potter as well

as a wonderful cook and enthusiastic gardener. The grounds around the River Falls studio are filled with beautiful and tastefully laid-out flowers, plants, and shrubs, lovingly nurtured by McKeachie-Johnston. The plantings not only beautify the property, but also provide a source of flowers for arranging in Johnston's varied ceramic vases (RJ-74, 87, 112). The garden includes rogersia, maidenhair ferns, variegated Solomon seal, bark-leafed tingularia, clematis, hibiscus canna lilies, and delphinium, to name only a few.

Adorned with carefully-selected blossoms, Johnston's muted-color pieces simply come alive (photo of vase with flowers here). In the same way, his bold platters, slabs, and bowls (RJ-70, 117, 120, 128) are invigorated when loaded with the freshly-prepared vegetables, rich sauces, and savory breads that grace the household table. Indeed, such use was the inspiration of all the best functional ceramics: a need existed and wares were created to meet that need. The ceramics made by Randy Johnston over the nearly four decades of his career reflect his ceaseless exploration of new ways to connect with his audience – to not only meet the need for functional vessels, but to fulfill the human need for beauty as well.