

Introduction to the Functional Aesthetics of Eastern Teaware

By Ah Leon

Abstract

Since Shoji Hamada brought the aesthetic concept “wabi-sabi” of tea bowl to the U.S. and to the western ceramic education in the 1950s, the origination of teaware has been implanted into the hearts of all ceramists. This paper will explain the evolution process of eastern and western tea culture by discussing my research and exchange experiences. The eastern exquisite tea ceremony has been widely applied in Europe and America. Nowadays, western ceramists are frequently exposed to tea culture and attempts to make tea pots and teaware that meet the functional standards. Tea culture not only allows ceramists to cultivate the concept of “Zen,” but also gives them a new market. Last but not least, I will introduce various teaware, utensils and artworks in Taiwan to provide a better understanding of eastern tea culture.

Since Shoji Hamada influenced the U.S. and western ceramic education with the aesthetic concept “wabi-sabi” of a tea bowl in the 1950s, the origination of teaware has been implanted into the hearts of all potters. Making teapot has always been one of the important focuses for ceramists. By this generation, the refined eastern tea art has been widely enjoyed in Europe and the U.S. Modern potters have already been intimately influenced by tea culture and have tried to make teapot and tea sets that meets functional standards. Tea culture not only allows ceramists to cultivate the concept of “Zen,” but also gives them a new market. Through constant learning and increasing cultural knowledge, ceramists have obtained much understanding about tea. Making teaware has become a new business for artists. The functional aesthetics of eastern teaware will influence the development of ceramics in this generation.

Modern Ceramics and Teaware

Creating teaware may be the most difficult skill for modern day artist to achieve, this is not only because of the precision needed in making, but also to profoundly connect with the culture. Modern teaware requires accurate details, as well as requiring ceramic artists to have the knowledge of tea culture. Knowing the tea culture and performing tea-making rituals is already a new subject for modern day ceramic artists.

Tea Bowl Education for over 70 years

Making teaware has entered into a new phase for ceramists nowadays, which goes beyond just making tea bowls. Since Shoji Hamada brought the “wabi-sabi” aesthetics to the U.S. and western ceramic education in the 1950s, the tea bowl has become a classic icon for the ceramic community, and until this day, it is still a fundamental aesthetic learning process for beginners. However, there is really no place in reality for these tea bowls to be situated in, tea bowls are just respected for their forms and as a décor to be collected. In short, the influence and development of eastern teaware in the western world has been left at a standstill.

Differences between Eastern and Western Tea Cultures

Western and Eastern potters have quite different understandings regarding teaware. Eastern potters are raised in a culture and environment that needs to strictly follow specific protocols and functional standards, whereas Western potters do not have any cultural basis and standards in making eastern teaware, due to the fact that because they don’t have the environment to use these utensils. They are still in the

phase of a nursery rhyme “I am a little teapot short and stout.” Most teapots made by Western potters cannot be used to brew tea because they do not meet the functional aesthetic standards for teaware. Strictly speaking, this kind of teapot form cannot be referred as an eastern teapot. It is difficult for Western ceramic artists to enter the field of eastern tea art.

Eastern and Western Legacies of Tea Culture

I traveled around the U.S. for 30 years and I realized a phenomenon — modern ceramist have not inherited the legacies from the past, examples such as the Yixing teapots in the East and the British silver teapots, porcelain teapot, and basalt teaware, salt-glazed pearlware and the Meissen teaware in the West. These exquisite teaware art are cultural assets that have not been obtained and applied by modern ceramists. This cultural gap phenomenon is an unfortunate and serious issue. Many primitive and childish works are seen due to the lack cultural cultivation.

Teaware in Taiwan

To become a potter, one must have knowledge of tea art and the experience of tea drinking. Potters in Taiwan are influenced by an environment where tea culture has been popular for more than 30 years, their knowledge of teaware are cultivated within their daily lives. What is unique about this is that most Taiwanese ceramicist drink tea and often carry out formal tea-making activities. They are capable to make teaware that meets functional standards. By frequently working with tea masters, they are able to learn how to stimulate the tea to make it taste better. Today, Taiwanese potters are skilled in making high standard teapots, which have influenced China and other Asian countries.

Influences on Western Potters

Ceramic art have matured in Eastern countries such as Japan, Korea, Taiwan and China, etc. These countries all have profound historical background in tea and ceramics. They also have traditions that combine tea and ceramics together, for example, Tokoname in Japan and Yixing in China are all well known for their production of teapots as well as their tea culture. Ceramic makers who are from these countries live in an environment where tea tasting and teapot collections are a part of their life, therefore making teapots for a living comes natural to them. Eastern ceramic teaware has definitely influenced potters in the West, for instance, tea tasting have become trends in the U.S. and Europe, and people have started to pay attention to how to drink green tea. This influence has started around 10 years

ago, especially due to the growth of tea houses, tea shops and tea tasters in the U.S., Westerners have obtained a rudimentary understanding of eastern teaware, moreover, they have begun to learn how to apply these utensils in their daily lives. Tea culture and teaware markets are rising, therefore Western ceramic artists will need learn the functional aesthetics of teaware and how to make a true functional art.

Introduction of Teaware

A lot of pieces in a tea set are stoneware. Let's take a look to see which of these items are related to potters: tea stove, teapot, tea tray, tea basin, pitcher and tea cup. Each of these items possess various cultural contents, which requires strictly following and living up to many standards that are needed when making them.

Teaware in Taiwan



Fig. 1. Ah Leon, *Leon Style Tea Set*, 1990, Collection of New Taipei City Yingge Ceramic Museum