

The Bowl—A Matter of Poetry

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Abstract

My first ceramics love was a chawan, a black Japanese tea bowl, a raku bowl. In Japan, raku bowls are dedicated to tea ceremony. I do not practice the tea ceremony and neither do most Westerners interested in my bowls. Which is to say? How does the bowl affect us, beyond cultural differences? Is it through its utility? Is it an interest for the technique of raku? The bowl is above all a poetic object and the chawan is not only a bowl...

First we have to consider the history of raku, since 15th century until now: Raku Kichizaemon XV was born in 1949. Zhuangzi, evoking the excellency of Cook Ting, shows how art is beyond the language. But Raku XV insists in naming his bowls...why?

If we think deeper our relationship with Asia, we, Westerners, have to be conscious we are rich in double-binds. East and West are on each side of the bridge. But, if we cross the bridge, we get the famous, yet lost in translation... so, we can't cross. We keep standing on the bridge, looking over there. In any case, this is the Bridge of Creativity!

Introduction: From Technique to Aesthetics

My first love for ceramics was a chawan, a black Japanese raku tea bowl, in Mexico, in San Miguel de Allende, in 1989. Once I returned to France, I decided to give up painting to pursue ceramics. Since then I have not stopped making bowls, I must have made around 5000 of them, if I were to count. Most have gone to the trash, but approximately five hundred bowls have found its owner, and are now used in tea ceremonies (or at least I hope so!).

I, myself, do not practice tea ceremony, this is because I am unable to sit on my heels for more than one minute! Among the collectors who have acquired my bowls, there are Westerners who are reluctant to use them. They often perceive them as Japanese, which probably is due to the result of a Japanese technique, raku. As to the Japanese, my bowls looked French to them. Initially, the misunderstanding frustrated me, but I quickly came to the conclusion that it wasn't my problem.

How does can a bowl affect us beyond cultural differences? Is it through its utility? In the tea ceremony, one does not drink to quench one's thirst, especially in Japan. Therefore, there is something else that goes beyond the merely utilitarian. Neither is the bowl an object of worship or religion. In what way can a chawan be anything more than a coffee mug? As a Western artist, especially after being a painter for more than twenty years, I came to ceramics, it seems to me that this was the moment I was seeking for to beyond the frame. Abstract painting had also led me to research materials and substances. Logically, by choosing earth and volume, I was heading toward the making of abstract, sculptural objects. Nevertheless, I did not stop making bowls, how did this come about?

I realized that if the use of the bowl was in the first place aesthetic, if the history of the chawan was as a support for meditation, then it was neither painting nor to sculpture that it was connected to, but to connect to poetry. The bowl is above all poetic objects, and ceramics should be the most adequate material to express poetry!

This intuition was confirmed when Raku Kichizaemon XV published his book, *Chawanya*. 50 tea bowls, with poems according to their titles: "I am neither a potter nor an artist. I am an author" — (the author of chawans), "I want to be the author of the ceramics I make." (In any case no one needs utilitarian pottery any more. For a long time already, in Europe, America and even Africa, stainless steel, sheets of enameled iron, or plastic is used.)

We have shown 2 bowls made by Raku Kichizaemon XV: *Bôkorôsui* (2003) and *Ganjo ni juko ari* (2004), with his commentary: “The moment when inevitability and chance join hands.”

Bowl and Chawan

1. Etymologically, bowl in English originally meant a hole, a pit from which one removes the clay in view upon working on it. The bowl is an object tied to daily needs, which does not have any aesthetic commitment.

2. Let us quickly present the situation of chawan in Japan: historically, it was a simple container (wan), for either rice or tea. Later, the tea ceremony codified the bowl, according to materials and styles particular to diverse regions of the country. For example, Seto, Shigaraki, Bizen etc... are place names that are also refer to specific styles, this depends on the local clay and the type of firing. At that point, many styles of chawan existed. However, the contributions of Sen no Rikyu, and afterwards, Oribe, was to give to the master of the tea ceremony the power to choose the bowl or bowls he would use on a specific day of the year for specific quests. Ichigo, ichie (“one time, one meeting”) will thus be a philosophy which a meeting is put to the test during the tea ceremony. Hence, in Japan the flow of ideas and intellectual debates will be represented in ceramics in the way that are in the Fine Arts from the West. For example, Rikyu chose humble bowls, which were raku bowls made by a tile maker, in order to reject the extravagance of Hideyoshi’s court, as well as to define the proper Japanese taste, wabi-sabi, against the snobbism of Chinese antiquities.

3. Those who practice martial arts know the importance of forms and manners; the bows have as much importance as the grips. To know how to hold back is as important as giving. It is the same for the tea “ceremony.” All the gestures have been codified, starting with how one comes in and how one sits down. The word “ceremony” does not correspond to the Japanese chanoyu (hot water for tea). Nonetheless, the chawan is handled — and therefore looked at — “with devotion.” For the Japanese, the chawan has always been a Poetry-Object. It has a title which has a history, just like the bowl. It is natural, then, that ceramicists, would wanted to make chawans all the time.

Nowadays, tea bowls made by young artists, like Kawabata Kentaro (2015) or Kuwata Takuro (2014) seem inappropriate for use. But in fact, we can see there is a protest which was already impacted a majority of ceramicists, like Yagi Kazuo yesterday (here, 1977/78 works) or Suzuki Goro more recently (2012).

Contemporary trends in the younger generation—bowls usable for a metaphysical aim, perhaps, though they always ‘give shape to tea’ (We are reminded by Heidegger: ‘the bowl gives shape to emptiness.’)

Zhuangzi’s Lesson

Creation is beyond language.

Coming from self-taught, gestural painting background, I work intuitively. I wait for the moment of grace that the kiln will reveal. One has to have some notion of geology, physics and chemistry, but never would I want a scientific know-how. The technique of raku suits me because its parameters are numerous. I have always thought that through time with chance, I would internalize these influences, which will reproduce themselves without me. And then one day, Eureka! I read Zhuangzi. The story is described as below:

Cook Ting was cutting up an ox for Lord Wen-hui. At every touch of his hand, every heave of his shoulder, every move of his feet, every thrust of his knee - Zip! Zoop! He slithered the knife along with a zing, and all was in perfect rhythm, as though he were performing the dance of the Mulberry Grove or keeping time to the Ching-shou music.

"Ah, this is marvelous!" said Lord Wen-hui. "Imagine skill reaching such heights!"

Cook Ting laid down his knife and replied, "What I care about is the Tao, which goes beyond skill. When I first began cutting up oxen, all I could see was the ox itself. After three years I no longer saw the whole ox. And now - now I go at it by spirit and don't look with my eyes. Perception and understanding have come to a stop and spirit moves where it wants. (...) "However, whenever I come to a complicated place, I size up the difficulties, tell myself to watch out and be careful, keep my eyes on what I'm doing, work very slowly, and move the knife with the greatest subtlety, until - Flop! The whole thing comes apart like a clod of earth crumbling to the ground.'

The cook speaks of experience. First, he sees the whole ox, doesn't know from which end to start, after three years, he sees the parts underneath the skin, he knows what he can expect, how to cut the parts up, and, finally, he "finds the ox through the spirit, and no longer sees it through his eyes." What is the spirit? (*shen*)

Well, the spirit is in no external action; it signifies on the contrary of a perfect internalized activity. For cook Ting, to cut up the ox skillfully has become natural. This means that for him there is no longer a distance between the subject and the object. His exclamations—Zip, Zoop, Flop! Indicates that this goes beyond language, which is consciousness. For the Chinese wisdom, grace is not transcendent; it is in activity itself, since activity can be perfect.

I conclude from this that by a dint of experimentation, we can “see,” and a practical know-how would emerge by itself. All one needs is perseverance and... time!

Raku Kichizaemon’s Lesson: Words to express our Binds to Nature

Raku came to me four years in a row; we spent five weeks every time. We worked side by side and chatted freely. Although I do not speak Japanese very well, and neither did he speak French nor English, we communicated well without too much difficulty. People who have witnessed our communication and had always wonder how we managed it. Often I would use English and he would speak Italian, moreover, we are not afraid of being silent, so generally, the oral communication eventually works out.

Raku came to my house, in the countryside of Loubignac located in the southwest of France, without tools. He flattened a piece of iron and took a batten of wood to hit it and gave shape to the base of the bowl. He then used the glaze that I made, and fired in my kilns. We each worked in separate spaces, but we fired together, ate together, looked at the bowls as they came out one after the other — without allowing ourselves to say “that is good,” and “that is bad.” We first kept everything that came out of the kiln and threw out pieces afterwards.

While having a drink on the terrace, we spoke of ceramics, painting, trees, and family. Even though he has inherited the fifteen generation history of the makers of tea bowls, Raku never took the position of being the master. I asked him about it. He answered that the bowl was the most personal thing one could make. I asked him about transmission of the title. He took over from his father, and in 2019, his son will become Raku Kichizaemon XVI. From his perspective, raku cannot be taught. Words do not explain anything. It is a way of seeing, a perception of work projects the world.

In his book, he chose fifty bowls, each marking a stage of his life. He was born in 1949. Facing each tea-bowl is a poem that does not explain the bowl, but, in some

way comments on the title, so as to produce an “objective” poetry. Here too words do not explain anything; they broaden perception. No explanatory link exists, therefore, between the words and the images (the pieces of ceramics.). For example, p. 69: “Forms give birth to themselves/At the moment of the completion/I sliced into the base as if with a sword/The bowl leaned over.”

My Way

Chawanya appeared in 2012. I have always written poetry, and from the beginning, given titles to my bowls, considering them poem-objects. But now I thought it could be done in another way. In 2011, for a solo exhibition, I chose 30 chawan; I wrote a poem of 30 lines and appointed each title to each bowl. I imagined once the bowls are sold and dispersed, the bowls would preserve an essential link to me. At no point the décor figurative has any link between poem and bowl that can be illustratively avoided. If the poem remains, the bowls are taken as a whole to remain in the images that the words bring to life. We will always crave for something beyond what we see.

Conclusion

We are rich in double-binds. Among these, there are the East and the West. We are on each side of the bridge. But, if we cross the bridge, we get famous yet are lost in translation...so, we can't cross. Therefore we keep standing on the bridge, looking over the other side. In any case, this is the Bridge of Creativity!