

Contemporary Ceramics Today

Since I returned from the United States in 1989, I have been working at the Institute of Ceramic Studies at the Ceramic Cultural Park in Shigaraki, Shiga Prefecture. Before I get into my topic today, I would like to explain a little about the Institute of Ceramic Studies.

What is the Ceramic Cultural Park?

The Shigaraki Ceramic Cultural Park is a multi-purpose facility based around the theme of ceramics. Situated within a 10-hectare park, there are three main facilities: a museum dedicated to contemporary ceramic art, an exhibition hall displaying present-day Shigaraki products, and the Institute of Ceramic Studies, where I work. The Institute of Ceramic Studies is a place to study and create ceramic art. As our method of operation, we have adopted an artist in residence system, which is popular in western countries but not so much in Japan, for reasons I will discuss later. When we began, the Prefecture and various advisors assigned us with the mission of providing a program for studying ceramic art that was not offered at existing institutions such as universities. We established a program that was a combination of a western-style residence program and a university summer school, where guest artists were invited to participate. Since our target residents were young artists with some degree of proficiency, we didn't ask our guest artists to teach a specific curriculum; the idea was for young artists to absorb techniques and ideas from the guest artists by working alongside each other. We are fortunate that Shiga Prefecture has provided us with the facilities needed to accomplish this mission. The studios are equipped with floor heating to cope with the cold Shigaraki winters, and we have a wood fired anagama, a climbing kiln, and electric and gas kilns including one that can fire works up to two meters in height. To repeat, we are very fortunate.

With this introduction, now I would like to examine the world of ceramic art from my perspective at this Institute.

What is a Residence?

At the Institute of Ceramic Studies we accept many artists from overseas. In other countries, the residence system is well understood. Many of our residents are veteran artists who have clear intentions when they come. They want to make work that would be impossible to achieve in their own studios, or to gain experience that is only possible in Japan.

In contrast, the residence program has a somewhat different meaning for the Japanese artists who come to the Institute. After graduating from ceramics departments of art universities, they cannot immediately establish their own studios, so they come to the Institute as a kind of rental studio they can use. They are looking for a place, and a creative style, to settle into.

I believe that this difference in approach to the residence program and its significance in an artist's career is one of the reasons that residence programs have not developed in Japan.

Perhaps another reason is the resistance to creating work in public. Except for those with experience working abroad, many of our residents create work in public for the first time when they come here. This is unavoidable, since there are few residence opportunities in Japan in the first place. However, for the future development of ceramic art in Japan, and for young artists to broaden their horizons, I believe they must enthusiastically seek opportunities to create their work under public scrutiny.

One more reason that residency programs have failed to catch on in Japan is that the ones that do exist, my own included, operate only with the full support of local governments. A more desirable situation is found in the United States, where such programs are generally operated by private foundations. This would be difficult in Japan, however, where cultural projects are operated under government supervision.

With the proliferation of art universities and residence programs, young artists who make their work while drifting from place to place begin to appear. They don't need to have their own kilns; in fact, they don't even need to be able to fire a kiln by themselves. This also presents a problem. It is important for an artist to create his or her own work in his or her own studio. It is not good to wander aimlessly. After establishing their own studio, artists can seek new experiences in residencies with different characteristics, working overseas, making work that would be impossible in their own studios . . . this, I believe, is the proper role of residencies.

Feelings Toward Ceramics

I would like to return to a discussion of young artists. Awhile ago, maybe 10 years, they wanted to do things they couldn't do in college: make huge works, or excessively thick pieces they knew would crack in the kiln, work that went against the physical properties of clay. Filled with a challenging spirit, they were ready to battle even the laws of nature to express their ideas. In those days, they were undoubtedly influenced by contemporary art, as well as a prosperous social environment.

In contrast, young artists these days seem to be going small. There are less crazily challenging works. Perhaps this trend is influenced by social phenomena. It seems to me that the task of creating something has come to be seen as easier than it once was.

I said that artists are going small, but that doesn't mean that they are making better small works or vessels. To make a vessel form, all you need to do is throw some clay on the wheel. It seems that the word "individuality" has taken on a life of its own. I don't want to assert the supremacy of technique over everything else, but I do think that young artists rely too much on sensation. On the other hand, when I visit craft fairs (such as the one we hold at our Park) I see that the sensational types of vessels are the ones that are selling well. Perhaps the public's image of pottery is also changing, too. But there is no doubt that the bar to creating ceramic art has been lowered.

About Ceramic Art Education

Today, most young people who wish to pursue a career in ceramics begin with studying at a university. To make work that can be described as "individualistic," I suppose it is good to study at a university. Young people can polish their artistic senses at urban universities. But where can they learn the necessary techniques?

In pottery manufacturing regions such as Shigaraki, there are many potters with highly skilled techniques. One merit of being in a pottery producing town is the exposure to techniques that cannot be seen in a university environment. In the future I would like to see more exchanges between pottery producing regions around Japan and urban universities.

I have one more thought about ceramic art education in Japan. Although this issue involves the Japanese university system as a whole and is not limited to ceramic art, I believe the time has come to start thinking about this. In the United States, for example, most of the universities are on the credit system. Each student is free to decide which classes to take, receiving credit for each completed course. When a certain number of credits are obtained, the student is eligible for graduation. Japan does not have such a system. In Japan recently there is talk of "lifelong education," but in America the lifelong education system is already in place from the university level.

What is it like to study in such an environment? Someone who wants to study ceramics to become a ceramic artist will make efforts to become a ceramic artist. Even if one does not become proficient in making ceramics, someone with business skills, for example, might become a gallery owner. Someone with financial resources could become a collector. The point is that people receive the training to fill a variety of positions in different areas of the world of ceramic art. The Japanese education system has perhaps had some measure of success in terms of producing ceramic artists, but its effect has not been broad enough to cover surrounding fields.

The world of ceramic art does not depend solely on the work of professional artists creating things. A number of other people with special talents are required to make this world viable: there are professional exhibitors, professional writers, and professional buyers. In the future we need to create an environment that welcomes all of these talents.

The Direction From Here

There are two main schools of thought regarding contemporary ceramic art. One sees ceramics as based on the philosophy of craft. The other sees ceramic art in the broader context of modern art.

I consider both ways of thinking to be legitimate. However, in the study of ceramic art, it is important to maintain a balance between the two. There is nothing wrong with knowing the techniques involved in the processes of creating forms of clay and decorating them.

In the current day and age, If we do not take a bottom up approach to teaching ceramics, starting with the basics, I believe it will be difficult for ceramic art to evolve further. What we need today is to build a strong foundation for the future.

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