

***You can take Orientalia out of the Orient but you can't take the Orient out of Orientalia: Critiquing "Orientalia" – A philosophical and aesthetic analysis of the concepts of spirituality and diversity manifested in ceramic objects***

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**Abstract**

This paper examines the concept of New Orientalia through an analysis of contemporary expression, cast in the shadow of the ideas framed by the cultural critic Edward Said and the potter Bernard Leach. It evaluates new perspectives on Asian and Western ceramic cultures, through a critical discussion of the concepts of 'East' and 'West.' It is framed by a phenomenological perspective, that in its rejection of a dualistic philosophy, of a separation of mind and body, allows new modes of East-West reciprocity.

Leach and his friend, the Japanese aesthete, Soetsu Yanagi, evoked an idealization of "the East" as a site of "innocence": writing at the beginning of the Twentieth Century, they considered that China, Korea and Japan were "uncontaminated" by the decadence of Western Modernism, which was epitomized by the rapid rise of Industrialization and the superseding of craft skills. Leach viewed the Orient uncritically and identified an iconic Korean rice-bowl as emblematic of 'the East'; Edward Said maintained that the concept of Orientalism was in fact a difference established by Western critics as a means of domination over "The Other" – that is non-Western persons, who through (mis)representation of their being can be repressed by ascribed authority.

“Without contraries is no progression” William Blake (1757-1827)

This paper will explore the histories behind the concept of “New Orientalia,” and start to indicate ways in which the narratives binding and defining East and West require re-evaluation; it will lead through an analysis of “diversity” and “spirituality” to point to new futures. By addressing the fundamental question of East (of where?), it will unpack a geographical conundrum that hides intertwined historical legacies, that are relevant to all of us. To be considering the issue of “Orientalia” from the geographical point of a small island off the great landmass of Asia and for it to be written by myself, an author from England, a small island off of the great landmass of Europe already suggests parallel concerns; in fact, we small islands, played a significant part in the trade that dealt in historic Orientalia.

Just as an understanding of ‘East’ requires the concept of ‘West,’ the concept of *Orientalia* implies a base-line, by which we can understand, or indeed judge; but this is where unspoken assumptions enter. This perspective was implied by the West to be value-free, but was, and is, embedded in “Otherness”; a discourse concerning power revealed by Michel Foucault in his analyses of the ways language is used. Thus, we must commence by asking about the “Far-East” of where? This paper argues that these concepts are adopted uncritically, based on an idea of what is normal and how what appears to be a simple descriptive term in fact embodies hidden forms of oppression, dating back to colonial times. Therefore the first task of this paper is to define *The Orient* and locate it spatially (geographically) and only then to understand it ethnographically. We need to ask: who were/are the writers of history? The dominant discourse of the early Modern Period was written by Europeans – this is why “The Orient” starts at the edges of Europe; it stretches through the Arab countries where Islam had made such a dramatic change to the dominant culture in Persia and Mesopotamia, and encompassed the areas of North Africa, and across the trade routes of the “Silk-road” to China, Japan, and Korea. At that time the most advanced technological cultures were located in “the East” and not in “the West.” It is no accident that the dominant political force in the area became known by another of the chief exports from this part of the world – ceramics – and indeed, named, “China.” We all know that China had this nicely tied up with its name: 中國 (literally: the middle kingdom); its own meridian of longitude passed through Beijing. “East” was beyond Constantinople (Istanbul). In the next centuries European countries, and Britain in particular, established themselves as the dominant power in the world. Now, once again, as the peoples of Asia establish themselves as major economic powers as well as being the holders of a privileged access to a spiritual

past, celebrated by Leach and his followers, they are also considered to be equals in a world defined by diversity as well as identity.

Ostensibly, “Orientalia” denotes (indicates) objects made within, and influenced by, Far Eastern traditional practices and philosophies; that is: by “Orientals.” But, in order to really cash out the implicit meanings embedded in “Orientalia” we must examine what it connotes (signifies, in both a conscious and unconscious fashion), through interrogating the closely associated idea of Orientalism.

The post-structural critic Edward Said, in his treatise *Orientalism*, read the ‘project’ of Orientalism as “cultural hegemony at work”; that is it implicitly established the superiority of European identity over the Oriental. It achieved this through the claim, by the Western observers, to objectivity (value-freedom); he demonstrated that true detachment by a scholar is actually impossible (p.7), since Orientalism is “premised upon exteriority” (p.20). Although the main thrust of *Orientalism* is toward an analysis of European dispositions towards the Near East, in the 2003 preface, Said argued that “an Indochinese intellectual space seems to have opened up for the propositions of this book.” (p.xi), and is thus relevant in our instance. The concealed assumption underpinning *Orientalism* is of human creation resulting in the “identification of the Other.” (p.xii). He maintained that fundamental to the reading of the Orient was as a “semi-mythical construct,” that is we in the West have an idea of the Far East, which even in these times of mass-travel is still predicated on stories rather than facts.

Our task here is to understand the concept of “Orientalia”; firstly we need to understand the concept of “the Orient” and how that came into being. To the West the word “Orient” conjures up the exotic – different/“other.” To those of you who live here it is simply home and for many of you Western concepts are simply those of a different geographical world with different modes of thought; but “Oriental” and “Orientalia” also carry connotations from the past; they are code for the historic oppression and exploitation that comes with empire: those very Western societies that defined and gave us the concept of the Orient also assumed an authority over the new cultures that were discovered on the early imperialistic voyages. “Orientalia” is a term used to denote the objects that are made and that are idiosyncratic (special in some sense) to “the Orient,” in Asia, and specifically the Far East.

When they were brought to the West, Orientalia were objects of wonder. In terms of material culture alone the East was far ahead of Europe in the early period: in

Biblical times silk and paper were exported from China to the West. In the early middle-ages in Europe, 1000 years ago, when technologically Europe was actually lagging far behind the East, Marco Polo returned with the first porcelains. From that time onwards porcelains from China, Japan and Korea fascinated people in the rest of the known world who tried for centuries to imitate them, firstly at low temperature in Holland, Persia and Turkey, then from the 16<sup>th</sup> century paste imitations were created in the German states, Britain and France, where mass-production was introduced through the use of standardized plaster molds into the production process. Modernism witnessed the division of labor involved in the processes of manufacture in the vast factories. These modes of production were subjected to a social and ethical critique by the members of the Arts and Crafts Movement in the U.K. and U.S.A., who perceived these mass-production methods as essentially denying the spiritual and ethical benefits of manufacture by hand.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the revolution in studio pottery in the U.K. and the East Coast of the U.S.A. came about as an accident; to a significant degree it can be attributed to Bernard Leach, a key inheritor of the Arts and Crafts ethos, who arrived in Japan from England to teach engraving. Leach positioned himself in opposition to the industries of Europe – he aspired to become a part of the culture in which he was living and studying, and viewed himself as an artist. His own early narrative of his moment of self-realization, where he recognizes himself as a future potter occurred in Japan; it happens “almost wholly by chance” (Leach p.29), at a party held by his literati friends in Japan when a potter visits to fire the pots brush-decorated by the friends in a portable raku kiln in 1911. He apprenticed himself to Kenzan (the impoverished last in a line of famous potters). The English potter lectured, exhibited, marketed his work, demonstrated, wrote books and articles and disseminated his strongly held personal views on Oriental ceramics; he was a star of the media available to him a century ago. In order to achieve this end he wrote a preface for the reprint of *A Potter's Book* in which he idealized a pot made in the Song dynasty as the aspirational zenith of pottery production.

Through his writings, and inspired by his friend the Japanese aesthete Soetsu Yanagi, Leach evoked an idealization of “the East” as a site of “innocence”: writing at the beginning of the Twentieth Century, he considered that China, Korea and Japan were “uncontaminated” by the decadence of Western Modernism, which to him was epitomized by the rapid rise of industrialization and the superseding of craft skills. Leach viewed the Orient uncritically and they identified an iconic Korean rice-bowl as emblematic of ‘the East.’ This pot and the bowl identified in the *Song Standard* were

Orientalia writ large; Leach and Yanagi 's precepts then became the "mind forg'd manacles" (in William Blake's language) that dominated discourses surrounding ceramics in the English-speaking world for the next generation, ostensibly based on the philosophy they had propounded of the "innocent" potter from the Orient, untrammelled by the experience of the West, but in actuality embodying an unconscious assumption of the superiority of European thought and technology. Their attitude (unconsciously) required a highly refined, superior, aesthetic sensibility to identify the true quality of this artisanal work; in this way they implied their superior expertise, and judgment, over the Korean and Chinese makers.

Leach's attitude is of reverential admiration: "the Song standard" regards the pots made over one thousand years ago as the canonical pottery of the tradition; these pieces were held up as a measure of how we, the reader, might judge our own achievements. Yet in the context of his book this is a strange sort of excellence, for the images of the Song pot are in black and white and give no sense of the qualities of the glaze, or the experience of handling, which are so important to our appreciation of a piece. Nonetheless, the historic attitude to Orientalia does not fully account for the revolution that has occurred in recent years, for now clay artists from Japan, China, Taiwan and Korea and the West have established new ways of thinking through clay that have revolutionized ceramics, creating contemporary practices that are hybridized versions of small scale studio production and reflections on industrialization. Leach wrote his book from his standpoint as an Edwardian gentleman from the dominant culture in the world. Yet we must also celebrate his undertaking, for he wrote in awe of the humble craftsman and inspired a generation to become potters. This has been read as an attitude of superiority and an act of nostalgia for what had been lost by European culture through industrialization; but we know that the commentator can rarely, if ever, leave his or her own unconscious leanings out of the writing – objectivity is a goal seldom unattained. In our more relativist world, we can adopt the phenomenological perspective based on the observations of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, that in its rejection of a dualistic philosophy of a separation of mind and body brings the West closer to Eastern understandings of spirituality and diversity. Emmanuel Levinas developed a philosophy based around an ethical precept derived from the axiomatic "face of the other." He maintained that "the other" is always present in the construction of the self and must be considered in any judgments. This built into his reading of other people an implicit respect that argues from its first principles that the solipsistic Cartesian self requires a recognition of "the other" in order to come to a spiritual self-realization. Jacques Derrida further developed this understanding of difference not just as a description

of separateness, but also as the basis of a power-relation. In our highly connected world we can learn through a re-examination of Leach's essay *Towards a Standard*, where he asserts that the finest pieces of ceramics for a potter to aspire to were the celadon-glazed porcelains of the Song dynasty, and incidentally the finest examples of these are to be found today (here) in the National Palace Museum in Taiwan.

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