



Near where I was staying, the cawing of a few crows was the only signs of nature I saw during the calm but busy working days.

Do people today only approach the lost harmony with nature through the lines of a haiku, or are the birds on the shore, the bare trees in the misty mountains and forests only conjured up by images painted onto porcelain in blue and white?

Yes, this town is the centre of Japanese blue-and-white painting, what is known as sometsuke. The big surprise for me was the rain, which is normal in October and November. Of course there is nothing special about the fact that it was raining, but here, it rained slowly and quietly. Half an hour later, the streams and rivulets rushing down from the mountains are coloured chalky white with kaolin, which is washed from the ground in the hills surrounding the city.

As the region is very rich in minerals, ceramics have been made on the site of the present day city since time immemorial. Natural conditions – rich clay deposits and forested hills to provide fuel for the kilns – were contributory factors in this development.

Thanks to the clay and porcelain and to the efforts of the local master potters, Seto became the only place in Japan where there has been a living pottery tradition for over a thousand years. The hills are covered with a layer of black earth, beneath which lie the white seams of clay. It is not necessary to venture far out of town to see the open cast clay pit.

The individually separate Japanese ceramics centres used various techniques, developed different firing methods, forms,

- top shelves in a brush shop
- below l. open cast kaolin mining Seto City
- below r. the white river

SETO: A Ceramics Paradise

Babos Pálma

When you arrive in Seto City, you notice straight away that you are in a famous, cult location for ceramic and porcelain art. Along the main street in the valley of the Seto River, there is one ceramics shop and gallery after another. There is just one shop selling watches hiding among them.

Here in Seto, there is no rush hour, no traffic jams, you hear no squealing of bakes or honking of horns. In the still of the night, I only even heard a distant siren once. No dogs barking, no cats meowing, no birds squawking; there were no beetles or flies to shoo away, and I found no trace of a cobweb, even if I would have liked to find some.



right an oribe bowl from 1850

centre the old kiln (hongyo-gama)

bottom the potters' way
(Kamagami-no-komichi)

glazes and ranges of decor. Behind the individual characteristics, the local materials are revealed, as are the influential activities of the major master potters. In Seto, two great founders are particularly honoured: Toshiro, the father of the potters, and Kato Tamakichi, the inventor of porcelain technology. Master Tamakichi risked his life travelling to Arita to learn how to prepare and form porcelain, as well as acquiring recipes for glazes and learning firing techniques. When he returned to Seto in 1808, he built a porcelain kiln, introduced the technique of blue-and-white underglaze painting and thus founded the porcelain industry in Seto.

Today, we can walk the ancient “kiln



way”, which leads past the porcelain potter-ies from those times.

At the end of the path stands an old kiln named Hongyo Gama, which has several chambers, but has not been fired for more than sixty years. The individual chambers, which are arranged in sequence, are each as large as a small contemporary Japanese apartment.

The melted ash, which had accumulated in a thick layer over the last decades, gleams on the walls.

The history of pottery started here in Seto around a thousand years ago when the first potters settled in the region. Over its thousand-year history, Seto has always proved itself to be a location that makes outstanding products. In the 15th century, the spread of the tea ceremony had led to the evolution of new vessel forms. This was the period when the famed techniques and glazes emerged such as raku, shino, temmoku, se-ladon and oribe.

In the early 19th century, the produc-tion of porcelain with underglaze blue-and-white brushwork (sometsume) began. Because of the quantity of this kind of ware, Seto became the centre of industrial porce-lain and ceramics production in Japan in the first half of the 20th century. At this time, the word setomono appeared in the Japa-nese language as a synonym for tableware. After the Second World War, the production of figurines after European models began, mainly for the European and American



left glaze samples

below some of my work with Seto celadon glazes



cial branch of industry. The clay pits and the attached clay preparation plants sell standardised bodies of high quality in 10kg packets. Several brush shops provide for the requirements of ceramic decoration.

For the preparation of raw materials and grinding the glazes, or for firing and decorating, the specialist shops offer tools in unimaginable abundance. A number of kiln builders also work in the town.

In Seto, where a special style developed in the Middle Ages, individual glazes are still prepared for the potters today in tiny glaze-making companies, where a delightful array of colourful samples is on view.

I arrived in the Seto of the 21st century. From the airport, I drove through the modern suburbs into the centre of town. The traditional ceramics are not only a subject for museums here but literally belong to everyday reality. The bridges in town, the squares and the suburbs and the walls of public buildings are decorated everywhere with ceramics. The borders of the flower beds, the base of the fences, the terraced retaining walls on the sides of the hills are all paved or reinforced with used kiln elements and saggars.

The master potters throw classic forms on the wheel, use traditional glazes on their tableware, and the shelves of the pottery shops groan beneath the weight of the goods for sale. And the people use and need these pieces, buy them and utilise them for their daily meals. And I have seen wash basins with oribe glazes and toilets with sometsuke. In a museum the privy for men and women is painted in blue-and-white cobalt decor. The small family restaurants, the snack bars, the self service restaurants in the motorway service stations and the food stalls in the shopping centres all use craft-made ceramics.

Tradition may be respected and its history taught, but without personal love and being able to relate to it, it is scarcely conceivable that its products would be used on a day-to-day basis. In Japan, it is the people who keep the tradition alive with their personal loving attention.

The town and local government do everything to maintain the ceramic tradition while promoting innovation. The cause of ceramics is supported by institutions,

markets.

Seto has around 130,000 inhabitants, but it has an unspoilt small-town atmosphere about it. Many ceramists work here. The gas bottles on the exterior walls of the buildings reveal the presence of a kiln inside. Wood-

fired kilns today are only industrial monuments, their task has been taken over by gas fired kilns. Most of the small "factories", as these tiny operations are called, work as family businesses.

The many potteries are served by a spe-



schools, museums, events, exhibitions and festivals. What I particularly appreciate is the Setogura Museum where the technology of ceramics and the art of porcelain is presented by means of models, tools and tableaux. In the video archive, there are documentary films made in 1955 about the firing of the last great woodfiring kilns (no-origama and marugama).

These films show the cooperation among the local potters lasting several weeks, stacking the kiln and the firing process up to 1250°C.

In Seto children's centre, even the youngest members of the kindergarten learn how to work with clay. They make things and fire them in a mini-anagama. It is possible to learn the blue-and-white decoration technique at the Institute for Blue-and-White Painting. In another museum, it is possible to learn the technique of decorating a porcelain figure in onglaze technique. There is a kiln in every primary school in Seto. I believe that someone born in Seto has the privilege of being able to speak the language

of ceramics and porcelain as their own native language.

For the purposes of artistic renewal, to widen horizons and for cultural exchange, in 2000, Seto set up an artist in residence programme as part of the initiative, Seto International Ceramic and Glass Arts Exchange. In 2014, I had the good fortune to spend two unforgettable months in a ceramics studio with Japanese colleagues as one

of the invited artists. I had been selected for this programme, and in Seto I really did feel like a chosen one.

Babos Pálma

Porcelain Artist
International Academy of Ceramics member
2040 Budaörs, Szamóca köz 1. Hungary
Mobile: +36 30 3760383
<http://www.babospalma.hu>

above l. working in the studio

above r. Babos Pálma, **Solitude**
Collection of the Seto Art Centre

right staff of the Seto Ceramic,
Glass Art Centre and
two artists from the
AIR 2014 programme

