

about 1949

CA-2

SIX MODERN POTTERS

Hamada, Leach, Murry, Bouvrie, Braden, Cardew

It occurs to me to ask at the very beginning, has pottery ever before been taken so seriously as it is today? I should be inclined to say: certainly not, at any rate in Europe. Neither pottery or porcelain has ever been taken quite seriously as a fine art, and at the times and place when they were nearest to being so considered, they were then almost at their worst; whereas the best pots were made at times when the potter was an unknown, and usually anonymous craftsman.

But at the present time there are several individual potters, working independently of industry as a whole, who claim to be serious, conscious artists; and their claim is to a noteworthy extent justified by the recognition of a small but growing public. This evening I propose to discuss the work of six of these modern potters, who seem to me to have a certain amount of background in common. I shall show some of their pots, on the screen, later on; but before I speak of their actual work, I want to consider one or two questions affecting the common background; to enquire, first, does this common background exist at all? Can we properly speak of modern pottery as well as of some modern potters? If this background of ideas and principles exists, what is its content? What the relation of the potter to his public is, and whether the modern relationship is peculiar to the modern potter; finally what is his relation to society as a whole - his relation to his public as opposed to the public; does it differ from that of any other pure

artist of the present day? Of course the answers I shall give to these questions will be only my own personal credo. I claim no special right to speak for anybody but myself.

Nevertheless, there certainly is a modern school of pottery, and there is plenty of common ground (not merely of a technical kind) in spite of the marked individualism of the potters themselves. That it is modern, in the sense that it is a movement producing creative work, which is new but not ephemeral, may be doubted by some; but ones answer to this kind of question is bound to be dogmatic, on one side or the other. It is sometimes asserted that modern potters are merely engaged in producing imitations of Chinese, Early English, or primitive pots. On the contrary, I hope to convince you that all these potters have something to say, which is of the essence of the modern consciousness. What they are saying, is something very simple, but necessarily rather subtle, and differing also in intonation, in the case of each individual. In other words I would claim that pottery can be validly be considered as fine art, whether the pots are made for use as well, or not.

To return to what they share in common; I think it might be said that they have a certain amount of agreement, as to what might be called classical standards, and that an awakening to a newly realised standard is one of the foundations of the movement. To explain how I understand the phrase, Classical standard; in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the Ming porcelain began to come to Western Europe, from China. That set a new fashion; but also something much more important than a fashion; a new standard. A similar thing has happened in this century. The pottery and

porcelain of the earlier dynasties (especially Tang and Sung) have at last reached us. Our whole conception of Chinese ceramic history has had to be enlarged, and we have begun to realise the existence of a standard unthought of before.

A similar revolution has been taking place in the West, at the same time, so this is not a mere archaizing fad, on the part of modern potters, neither is it an acquisition of dead historical knowledge. If I were asked to express in a phrase, the governing principle of the modern movement among potters, I would call it a desire for pure pottery - a demand, I think, never before consciously made (although this enthusiasm has always existed, in more or less unconscious form in the past, and has been responsible for all great pots in all ages).

What exactly do I mean by pure pottery? You will easily guess, that it is something parallel to pure music, pure painting, pure sculpture, pure poetry, which appears to me to be the most significant modern ideal. In the case of pottery, as in that of the other arts, it is a vindication of the art as existing in its own right, subject to its own law, a kind of self determination in the arts. Extraneous standards are irrelevant. Moral standards as such do not apply to poetry; only the laws of its own being are applicable. Poetical standards do not apply to painting, and pictorial standards do not apply to pots. Of course the standards of true poetry are in the nature of things, conformable ultimately, to the standards of true morality; and the same likeness exists between the standards of pottery and those of sculpture, and painting, for example; But the fact that they all ultimately point in the same direction is the

very reason for not mixing up the standards; that at least only produces a muddle, at the worst the muddle produces corruption. It is like mixing up all the courses of a good dinner in one dish, on the argument that it is all good material, intended to nourish the human body. But the human body knows a subtler logic than that.

So, when I speak of pottery as a pure art, I don't mean quite the same thing as fine art, I think that when pottery tries to be too much of a fine art, it is in danger of becoming less of a pure art, and is therefore by my definition, not so good as pottery. I quite agree that a pot can be a "pure pot" and yet quite a dull pot; and that a great pot is a pure and a great deal else besides; but the purity is a necessary condition of any goodness or greatness in a pot.

It would be a great mistake, in looking at pots as art, to look for any subject or literary content. A pot must be looked at, and judged as a pot. If a man gives his pots fancy names, as Mr. Stait Murray sometimes does, the names do not really help at all, to the true appreciation of them as pots. When this is done, it is like programme music. It is not necessary to have the programme, indeed the programme has its dangers. But that is no reason why it should not be done, if the artist, (musician or potter) feels like it. Debussy chose to give his pieces fancy names, Bach probably never thought of doing so. There is no aesthetic law against it, as long as there is no implication, that such literary associations are essential to the art in question. They are in fact gratuitous.

But there are other more particular consequences of the doctrine of pure pottery. The modern potter respects the laws of

Personal
element
+ spontaneity
+ sensitivity

his own country, that is, Pottery; not those of some neighboring state, e.g. sculpture. He utterly rejects the barbaric idea that clay is a base material, to be hidden as much as possible, or made to look like metal or agate or marble or jade. To the true potter there is one material, precious above all others, namely clay, or as potters call it, the body; whether it is a porcelain, a stoneware, or a coarse pottery body. This is to begin at the right end, from the aesthetic, as well as the technical point of view. The colour, texture, and feeling of the body are all important, whether under the glaze or unglazed. Another consequence of this respect for the material is the modern habit (not necessarily an invariable one) of leaving the base of the pot unglazed. Still another is that of shapening the foot-ring of a turned pot, with as much care, as any other part of the pot, this last we learned from the Japanese, who had this conception of pure pottery, long before it was recognized by us. But the most important of all the consequences, is this attitude to the material, is respect for the nature of clay's plasticity. Potters today seem to be conscious, as never before, that some shapes are unceramic, doing violence to the nature of the clay, and as such, undesirable for a pot, however good they may be as shapes in the abstract. We find it very difficult to appreciate those old pots, which seem to be imitating metal, or wood, or glass, or leather or stone. This doctrine of shapes, which are, unceramic, and shapes which are ceramic, need not impose an unnecessary limitation of range on a potter. You can go in the direction of wood, or stone, or any material, as long as your love of clay prevents you from going too far. Clay is rightly a jealous God, to the potter.

So much for the clay. As regards the pot itself, the shape is

③ the supreme consideration. Decoration is not always necessary. Even glaze is not always necessary. The throwing, the making of the shape corresponds to drawing, modelling in painting and sculpture, but is an essentially different process. Like drawing or sculpture, however, it should be spontaneous, not laboured, not mechanical, and not devitalised by too much finicking "after the event". No shape is good which is not spontaneous, but many spontaneous shapes may be bad. To be able to make good shapes which are spontaneous (or rather, to put the root of the matter first, to make spontaneous shapes which are good) is only the fruit of long habitus. In this matter I think some modern potters, like some modern painters, are inclined to carry the spontaneity too far, which produces what might be called a sort of Polagian heresy in art.

④ *
? *
*
As regards decoration, its true function follows from the primacy of the shape; that is, it must be subordinate to the pot and relevant to the pot. The pot is not to be made a mere vehicle, or surface for painting. Even in the Sung dynasty, many Chinese potters departed from this principle, but the principle is valid all the same. I would not go so far as to say that all representational decoration is bad; you can put birds and beasts and flowers and landscapes, on pots or bowls, but they must be subordinated to the pot or bowl (look for good drawing on a pot, yes, but good pot drawing). Birds and beasts on pots should not be looked at as pictures of birds and beasts, but in so far as they bring out the likeness and affinity of pots and bowls to birds and beasts; just as the potter himself looks at birds and beasts in their likeness to pots and bowls, and even looks at men as pots walking. A bird in a

Perhaps the fact that modern potters begin usually as "fine artists" & so intellectuals accounts for - 7 - the concern for "philosophy of pottery"

picture might be very good as a drawing, but bad on a pot, and vice versa. Some of the early Persian bowls are the best examples I know of successful drawings of this kind.

The only difference in the modern potters approach to the problem is that he is more conscious, whereas the early potters did it more by instinct. But is consciousness in an artist a weakness? If it is, the cure is, to become more and more conscious; because more conscious is more human - unconscious art is often good but by instinct, or by accident - unconsciousness is not good in itself, unless we include in the term, the instinctive rightness which comes from a long cultivated habitus. In any case, the modern potter is forced to be conscious, because he has to break away from a corrupted tradition. He has to work out for himself a philosophy of potting, which was instinctive, in ^(all other historic periods) certain periods and places.

On the technical side, modern potters methods of decoration show, as might be expected, a preference for methods which are direct, and simple, and not far removed in nature from the original clay of the pot. (Here, and throughout, when I say clay, I use the term to include all pottery and porcelain bodies). The decoration is more usually on the body, than over the glaze of it. I don't think there is any especially deep matter of principle involved here. It is rather a reaction from the extremely complicated methods of decoration, used, for instance, by the later Chinese potters, and by modern schools of European pottery. If the modern potter avoids complication, he shows a special predilection for simple but difficult techniques in decoration. For example - wax reserve painting, slip painting, slip trailing, and trailing of glaze. The reason is obvious and sufficient. The difficulty and in a sense the crudity,

Literate
Educated
Potters
- Decadence?
cult?

7

7

over

The claylike decoration.

This tendency grows out of desire to make many pots by hand + in old time methods. Is there a fallacy here?

I.R.: This type of potter refuses to admit that his ware is not essential - that it is a luxury bought by a certain class in society - partly because of its contrast with commercial wares, many American smallscale potters emphasize "differentness" + "originality" at expense of all other qualities - such pots lose their role as pots + become bits of decor.

Element of "differentness" cultivated by this group is attempt to adhere to last classical standards in forms + materials + imbue what was once the commonest of pottery ^{form + technique} with exclusive appeal.

Fallacy seems to be in limiting factor, i.e. By adhering to shapes which were appropriate + functional in other cultural environments - may overlook needed forms for present culture?

of the method effectually keeps the decoration within the limits, proper to pure pottery, so that it is ancillary to the pot, and does not usurp more than its rightful function. For instance, a man or a beast drawn with slip, remains essentially a clayman, or a clay beast. I hope to show some of the virtues, arising from this kind of voluntary limitation in technique.

7 1/2 Another valuable limitation of the same kind, is the case of Sgraffito decoration, where this is done in the wet stage, whether on the slip, or on the raw glaze. There is one optimum stage, and the whole of the work has to be done quickly, before the glaze or slip becomes too dry. This discovery, that the best decoration is often the quick decoration, we learned partly from the East, but there are plenty of examples in European art as well, e.g. the technique of painting on delft glaze.

(1) X The potters attitude to glaze is the same, it is not merely a utilitarian covering, to give nonporosities, nor is it a glassy protection for decoration, nor a means of giving peculiar lustre to bright colours - which seem to have been the guiding ideas in nearly all western pottery and porcelain, of the last few centuries. Certainly it is these things, or can legitimately be them, but it is, or should be much more besides.

(2) Besides colour and gloss, it has texture and depth, both of which are prior in importance, and constitute what the Japanese call the quality of the glaze. I might say in passing, that in this matter of glaze we tend to go too far. Just as some periods have erred in treating colour as an end in itself (which defeats itself), so in some cases, the Chinese and Japanese, (and some modern potters also) tend to treat glaze-quality as an end in itself - which is a

over

of the method effectively keeps the decoration within the limits,

proper to pure pottery, so that it is ancillary to the pot

does not usurp more than its rightful function. For instance,

Re. "Gloze as an end in itself" —

a valid criticism — BUT because of our modern understanding of earth materials & fire the glaze can have benefit of an understanding control + variety of expression undreamed of by ancient potters. Is this "shyness" about "glaze as an end in itself" unconscious rationalization due to lack of broad technical control + skill with glaze composition. Is it another form of "medieval purism" i.e. why deny ourselves the benefits of industrialization + science + modern technology? Is this denial of modern technology based on the realization that to accept it would be to break with the historic forms of decoration + lead to the necessity for adopting new design solutions in a very wide sense?

① Actually glaze is exactly that! Historically it became a necessity for cleaning + holding — — — but its decorative value was recognized in earliest pottery.

more enlightened error, but just as much an error.

Incidentally I thought many of the pots in the Chinese Art Exhibition were examples of this fallacy, thereby to some extent misrepresenting the true achievements of Chinese pottery. This recognition of glaze quality has important technical consequences as well. If the glaze is to have depth, it must be fired on the raw body, or on a biscuit that has been very lightly fired. If the body is hard fired, before the glaze firing, the result will be a hard glassy surface, with no depth. In a good pot the glaze and the clay are deeply united, and to achieve this they should undergo the metamorphosis of the kiln, at the same time, and together, so that they can work together. Clay that has been hard fired before the glaze is put on is clay that has been killed, cannot cooperate with the glaze, but can only play a passive part.

The next question is the relation of the modern potters to their public. I say their public, not the public, because the modern "Studio Potter" (as he is called) works for a very small public, comparatively, but it is one which is "Pot-conscious", to an extent never known before in the West. I think I know of only one parallel to this relationship of potter and public, and that is the tea ceremony or Cha-no-yu, as practiced in Japan from the twelfth century to the present day. I am aware that the tea ceremony ^{is} a sufficiently large subject to occupy a whole lecture by itself. Also that I am not in the least qualified to speak with authority, about such a very specialised, and almost esoteric cult. But as it is a subject that is not very familiar to most people in England, I think it is worth spending a little time on it. First, because of its direct influence on some modern potters has been considerable;

Leach & Hamada

more enlightened error, but just as much an error.

Incidentally I thought many of the pots in the Chinese Art Exhibition were examples of this fallacy, thereby to some extent misrepresenting the true achievements of Chinese pottery. This

This is, of course, a valid point but isn't it
an overemphasis of a technical point? Dogmatic?
Is it not possible to create twice fired, (low temp glazed)
ware having satisfactory artistic technical & visual & intuitive appeal?
If it is possible, then the one fired theory loses some validity.

They can work together. Clay that has been fired before the
glaze is put on is clay that has been killed, cannot cooperate with
the glaze, but can only play a passive part.

The next question is the relation of the modern potter to
their public. I say their public, not the public, because the
modern "Studio Potter" (as he is called) works for a very small
public, comparatively, but it is one which is "pot-conscious", to
an extent never known before in the West. I think I know of only
one parallel to this relationship of potter and public, and that is
the tea ceremony or Cha-no-yu, as recorded in Japan from the twelfth
century to the present day. I am aware that the tea ceremony is a
sufficiently large subject to occupy a whole lecture by itself.
Also that I am not in the least qualified to speak with authority,
about such a very specialized, and almost esoteric cult. But as it
is a subject that is not very familiar to most people in England,
I think it is worth spending a little time on it. First, because
of its direct influence on some modern potters has been considerable;

secondly (and chiefly) because it is the only example I know, of good, and sometimes ideal relationship between potter and public.

As to the direct influence, Shoji Hamada, as a potter, was brought up under the wing of and Bernard Leach was first taught pottery by a tea Master; and these two played an important part in bringing over to England the ideas of the tea ceremony. In the case of the four other potters, the influence is not so obvious, in fact, there is a good deal of reaction against the more extreme forms taken by the cult. But there are many modern pots (especially I think, some by Norah Braden) which might almost have been made for a tea master, and which show the same exacting subtlety of standards.

(see above) The tea ceremony, at its best, (for in the case of such a very delicate and sensitive plant, it must be taken at its best - and at its worst, it could be very bad) - Also produced the nearest parallel to the conception I have been speaking of throughout - of pottery as a pure art; again, not a fine art, in our sense, because all the pots for the tea ceremony were pots with a definite use - but a ritual use rather than a strictly utilitarian use.

The typical pots used in the tea ceremony were:-

- 1) A small jar with a lid (usually an ivory lid) for powdered tea.
- 2) The tea bowl for drinking from. This was often hand-modelled in later times, not turned on the wheel.
- 3) A washing bowl (or slop bowl) with a lacquered lid.
- 4) A cake dish. (Tho' not used in the tea ceremony itself, but at the meal which sometimes precedes, sometimes follows the tea ceremony).
- 5) Cold water pot.

over

secondly (and chiefly) because it is the only example I know of good, and sometimes ideal relationship between potter and public. As to the direct influence, Shoji Hamada, as a potter, was

Next 2 pages detail Japanese tea ceremony.

Its influence is obviously great on this group

of potters -

read action carefully because it contains inferences as to derivation of decadent over concern with a cult of aesthetic sensitivity for its own sake. Probably appropriate to orient more than to west. Is this part of same tendency in ^{abstract} modern painting & sculpture. How much chance has it of permanently affecting the culture as a whole - ?

parallel to the conception I have been speaking of throughout - pottery as a pure art; again, not a fine art, in our sense, because all the pots for the tea ceremony were pots with a definite use - but a ritual use rather than a strictly utilitarian use.

The typical pots used in the tea ceremony were:-

- 1) A small jar with a lid (usually an ivory lid) for powdered tea.
- 2) The tea bowl for drinking from. This was often hand-modelled in later times, not turned on the wheel.
- 3) A washing bowl (or slop bowl) with a lacquered lid.
- 4) A cake dish. (This, not used in the tea ceremony itself, but at the meal which sometimes precedes, sometimes follows the tea ceremony).

5) Gold water pot.

- 6) An incense box.
- 7) An incense burner.
- 8) A brasier (sunk in the floor - not a pot)
- 9) A pot usually with a narrow neck to hold a single spray of flowers in the alcove.

The tea ceremony has been defined as "a formal intellectual relaxation in which aesthetic and religious elements are combined" .. Its beginnings were amongst Zen Buddhists - monks, about the twelfth century A.D. and it has always been bound up with the philosophy of the Zen, the least formalised and the most quaker like form of Buddhism. It reached its most typical form towards the end of the sixteenth century, under the influence of Sen No Rikiu, one of the greatest of the tea masters. After eighteen seventy, it nearly died out, many Japanese threw away their tea bowls; but in modern times it has been revived again, with a rather stronger flavour of patriotism and nationalism than it used to have, but is essentially the same thing, the aesthetic still predominating.

One might describe it roughly, as something between a tea party and a sacrament. But this description leaves out the two key ideas which are most important to an understanding of it; first, that it is essentially aesthetic. (The adjective which implies the highest praise in the tea Ceremony is "Shibui" - an untranslatable word combining the meanings of austere, piquant, and chic). Secondly, that it is essentially primitivistic as opposed to primitive, a word analogous to archaistic as opposed to archaic; it implies the conscious love, and cultivation of the primitive, on the part of highly civilized and sophisticated people.

All the furniture used is of the greatest simplicity, and everywhere the archaic and the primitive types are preferred - as long as they are also Shibui.

The basis of the tea masters philosophy is that senses, truly cultivated, are a valid metaphysical instrument. Our classical conception, that the senses give access to a fallible and unreal world of "mere phenomena", that the intellect only is capable of apprehending the real, is, I should say, an impossible idea to the Chinese and the Japanese mind. (I am aware that these are large and dangerous generalizations, but I think that there is enough truth in them for the present purpose). But, as if to compensate for their failure to differentiate the intellectual from the sensory, the Chinese and Japanese have had a much finer idea of the training of the senses - a cultivation essentially aesthetic, of taste. I do not mean a training of the senses for practical ends, but as ends in themselves. This is not exactly [^]our "Art for Arts sake": I should call it rather, a technique of the enlightened use of taste as a metaphysical instrument.

I do not mean to suggest that in the east they have some special aesthetic power, which the unworthy westerner does not possess. We in the west know that beauty is a metaphysical category, and can provide a "Passage to reality"; but also, that it is very elusive. What the tea masters did was realising this, to evolve a training in the use of this instrument, a technique for catching the bird which is always on the wing.

They did not always succeed - they produced much that was, in a very subtle way, affected and artificial. Tea ceremonial often descends to mere aestheticism - abstract experiments in formal

relationship, and similar chimeras culminating in a vacuum, like some results of abstraction in modern art. But occasionally in the hands of a real master, the technique was completely successful.

But the greatest value of the tea ceremony, in my opinion, is that it did inspire a creative criticism of pots - it set up a new ideal of aesthetic pottery (understood in the franciscan sense). Some of the best pots used in the tea ceremony are not those, which the tea masters made themselves, and not the pots made for the tea ceremony, by Japanese professional potters; but the Koreans, Chinese, Annamite and Siamese pots that were brought into use because their aesthetic qualities harmonised with the tea ceremony ideas.

One other feature of the tea ceremony is important from our point of view. From the sixteenth century onwards, Amateur as well as professional potters were making hand modelled bowls; this amateur element, while it produced many bad and indifferent bowls, certainly had the effect of bringing the potter and the amateur class together, and of initiating the amateur into some of the practical aspects of pottery.

In England at the present day, studio potters and the art schools ought to be (and to some extent are) doing something similar, and creating a public which knows what to look for, in a pot. But the process has only just begun; there is still a vast public, which is hardly aware of pots at all, and an equally vast public that is very much aware that pottery could mean something, but is quite at sea as to what to look for in a pot, in the prevailing confusion of standards. What is the duty of the studio potter to these publics - his obligation to the community at large? One is sometimes told

Creative criticism of pots based on cultural roots

our - Exhibition system?

" - Factors governing choice on part of average american

growth
Comment Re amateur potters today but
on their motives and societies!!

x It is in these paragraphs that we can best see the fallacy
in this philosophy.

There is no parallel in western society for the characteristic
Japanese tea ceremony. Pottery is not a cause of "culture"
it is a result. Cart before horse. We do not
determine - The public must like so + so - The public
gets what it needs - if it likes what it gets - it comes to
glorify the object + we have a work of art.

There is also a slight suggestion that industry should
imitate the "artist handicraftsmen". Industry can be
influenced. but if it is too directly imitated it will only
perpetuate a 200 year old mistake.

The whole criticism of commercial pottery is based
upon comparing it with classical hand made pottery.
Whereas mechanically made pottery is a NEW THING
an unspontaneous logical art which embodies different
standards. It can learn from historic pottery but it
cannot follow.

"You ought to descend into the arena of purely commercial pottery, and work for the masses, not only for the few; you ought to make designs for mass production - improve the standard of commercial pottery, and so on.

One possible answer is very simple: as Mr. Stait Murry said to me once, speaking of this very subject, "there is no need to worry about it, your ideas will be taken fast enough, and adapted to mass production, whether you like it or not". But it is not quite so simple as that. Commercial potters might copy superficially, the ideas of artist potters and still be no nearer making good pots.

Or the studio potter might himself work in a factory, directing mass production. The objection to this is, it is treatment of symptoms, not of causes. The unstifacoriness of the modern commercial pot is more than skin deep; you won't do much good by "improving the shapes", or putting more interesting decoration on, or taking the decoration away altogether, or using using 'art' glazes. Commercial pottery is not so much uncivilized, as superficially over-civilized. Ever since the seventeenth century, our industry's ideal has been to equal the refinement of the Chinese porcelain; its progress was wonderful progress, but too fast. It aimed at imitating Chinese refinement. It copied Ming, without realising the centuries of more fundamental ceramic achievement, which proceeded that period of almost excessive elegance. With the nineteenth century, there came a new element, to the too successful pursuit of elegance, there was added a race for commercial expansion, with the result that the commercial potters technique has become a technique of short cuts (judged by Chinese standards). The artist who went to the commercial pottery, would have to persuade the

see book
9 page 13
X

X
over

The history of

producing goods has been the history of the
constant development of "short cuts" - i.e. labor saving.

Bad effects of this race were real in England up to
1950 - but so real in America as by 1940:

Mechanization tends to become standardized -
Production has reached the simplest level & is
uniform in large potteries. England is now following
same path.

Simplicity in design goes with low cost - Mr. Henry
But not by 19th century variety!!

* industrialist to carry out such an evolution in methods, as would be practically unthinkable.

Meanwhile the studio potter can choose a middle course, he can (if he is lucky) attach himself to what remains of the preindustrial pottery tradition, and make a small factory his studio. This is what Soji Hamada has done, in Japan, and what I am trying to do in England.

But the reform of the industry as a whole, when it does come, will come from the inside. Staffordshire may one day awake, to find itself with a new vision of what a pot can be. When and how it will happen, is not easy to say, but the independent artist potter will be part of the source of inspiration, of such revolution.

Also I think that such a revolution will be away from mass production and back to the potters wheel; because pots are things to be used, intimately, in human homes, and human nature demands an answering humanity in these things.

