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A REVIEW

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Bernard Leach

by Edmund de Waal

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Ernst Gombrich wrote at the beginning of his book *The Story of Art* that, "There really is no such thing as art. There are only artists."¹ Edmund de Waal, in his book on Bernard Leach, has given us the first critical examination of "the pre-eminent artist-potter of this century."² Gombrich argues that art is a category that we create and that that category and its contents change throughout history. This is an important point because to understand Leach we have to see him in the context of an artist who struggled, especially, in the early part of his career to establish pottery (albeit pottery based on his beliefs) as an artform in its own right. As de Waal says in the last chapter of his book, "Leach's life up until the publication of *A Potter's Book* was a struggle to find ways of justifying and articulating what he did. Making pots and making definitions about making pots were intricately linked."³

There are few people in the crafts field whether in Britain or the United States, that do not have strong opinions one way or the other about Leach. People either view him in godlike terms or ridicule him as an arrogant and stuffy holdover from the Edwardian era. To find the truth about Leach without falling prey to either of these two extremes is a difficult task and one that de Waal has admirably managed. I think de Waal's own background is part of what makes his examination of Leach's life so credible. When de Waal was in his early teens he apprenticed to Geoffrey Whiting, who was one of Leach's earliest students. Like Leach, he traveled to Japan, made a life for himself as a potter (rather than a university instructor) and spends a proportional amount of his time writing about pottery and the ideas that influence its making. De Waal is, in other words, a direct product of Leach's influence on modern pottery.

In the first chapter, titled "Naive Power", de Waal looks at Leach's life from his birth in 1887 to the summer of 1920 when he returned from Japan with Shoji Hamada to establish a pottery in England. De Waal cautions us in his introduction that:

"Leach's ideas, as much as his pots, must be seen in the context of the times that shaped them. He was accustomed to using sweeping arguments and value-laden terms when scrutinizing the position of potters within society; of talking in general terms of the relationship between East and West. The sources of these arguments and these values are very particular indeed. If we consider the particular make-up of Leach's Japan and Leach's England, the paradoxes at the heart of his creating and thinking become much clearer, and his particular achievements can be better appreciated."⁴

This is something that must be kept in mind as one reads some of the contradictory elements de Waal gives us of the reality of Leach's life versus the way it has been portrayed by Leach and others over the years. He shows us in this first chapter, for example, how Leach's class put him into a position in Japan that allowed his tendency to make sweeping statements about the nature of art and beauty in both

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Eastern and Western culture to go unchallenged. He wrote only a few months after his arrival an article (which was translated for a Japanese magazine) about his views on the characteristics of Japanese art and why etching – which he had come to Japan to teach at the age of 22 – “is particularly suitable for young Japanese artists to learn.”⁵ It was at a lecture he was giving during this period that he met a young aristocratic critic named Yanagi Soetsu. It was Yanagi who introduced Leach to a group called *Shirakaba*, made up of affluent artists, intellectuals and poets. *Shirakaba* would, de Waal says, “mediate his awareness and circumscribe his knowledge of the country and provide him with the key friendships of his life.”⁶ Another friend of Leach, Tomimoto Kenkichi who had lived in England and studied stained glass there and spoke good English was to be instrumental in Leach’s development as a practicing artist. It was Tomimoto who accompanied Leach to the famous Raku party Leach wrote about in *A Potter’s Book* and subsequently went with him when he sought out instruction from a potter named Urano Shigkichi who held the title of Kenzan VI. Both would become Kenzan VI’s students and would jointly receive the title of Kenzan VII. De Waal remarks that: “Given the status as a Western artist and Kenzan’s as a paid teacher, the significance of the transference of this title after only a year, to someone who could barely speak Japanese let alone fully comprehend or literally read the allusions implicit in the tradition arouses curiosity.”⁷

To me, though, one of the most important observations de Waal makes in this chapter is how Leach is able to merge his ideas about the East and West using English slipware tradition which he first encountered in a book that Tomimoto bought in Tokyo.

“The appeal of the slipware dishes and jugs was manifold; it was a decorative tradition where a central image was privileged and the need for pattern making in the round was avoided. There seemed to be a good historical grounding here for pottery that crossed the boundaries for being either straightforwardly utilitarian or decorative. Crucially, it gave value to lettering on pots in a way that Leach had been struggling to comprehend within the complexity of the calligraphic Kenzan tradition. It allowed pots to be titled or signed in obvious ways, and above all it gave Leach, whose growth as a decorative artist had taken place completely in the East, some sense of famous Western potters.”⁸

Leach must have sensed that in spite of how “right” his and Yanagi’s thoughts about merging the best ideas of the East and West were, they could not be validated unless he as an artist was able to create some physical manifestation of them that was believable. This discovery of English slipware must have resolved any such questions and given him the push and the confidence he needed to leave the security, comfort and notoriety of Japan for an uncertain future in England.

When Leach returned to an England in 1920, the making of pots was a much less respected activity than the decorating of forms or blanks. De Waal says that at Camberwell School of Art, one of the only art schools at that time to teach ceramics, a local thrower was employed to produce pots to the designs of the students.⁹ There was little written on the technical side of pottery making, glazing and firing and no commercial kilns were available. It was in this atmosphere that Leach moved to St. Ives, which had become a fashionable art colony in the 1880s, but by 1920 was known for rather old-fashioned land-

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scape painting, and started work in earnest on his interpretation of English slipware. De Waal points out the problem that Leach and some of his students were having at the time, however, creating an audience for slipware. He quotes a review of a Guild of Potters' exhibition:

"It is a pity that if artists distinguish their work from the produce of a factory it should in the process become artificial and divorced from the the traditions of English pottery. One potter's work, a Leach student, was rough and would probably pass for peasant's work. But her pots are well shaped and boldly painted. It is a pity that they are too expensive to be used every day. Peasants do not make useless pottery if they can help it, and surely rough pottery should not be ornamental." ¹⁰

At a major exhibition in Leipzig in which Leach exhibited alongside all the important potters of the day, de Waal quotes one reviewer who noted "the Germans frankly think our pots dull" and another who said "we do similar semi-peasant designs, but do not show it as our first-class work." ¹¹ On the other hand, Yanagi, who was arranging exhibitions and sales of Leach's work in Japan, which had become an important source of income for the pottery, asked Leach for more of the slipware and less tea bowls:

"It is awfully pity that you did not sent us more of yellow galena of pure English quality. You must understand how much we like it. All the pieces, which you sent me this time, without a single exception, were sold. The reason is twofold. Firstly, yellow galena is of pure Western quality and suited for the psychology of modern Japanese who live in Western buildings, manners and styles...Secondly, it is beautiful in artistic quality. I, myself, prefer your well-digested English gale-nas to the pieces of Sung pattern because they are born-pottery, not made-pottery." ¹²

Leach, however, had a deep emotional attachment to Sung pottery that would eclipse the slipware as his life's devotion. He used the Sung pots, de Waal says:

"...as a marker of seriousness, clarity and fitness of purpose. They would be used in this way by Modernist critics, most notably Herbert Read in *Art and Industry* illustrated alongside contemporary functionalist designs. The Sung pot seemed to be the clearest manifestation of a growing concern with 'Truth to Materials'." ¹³

Just as Leach had used the slipware tradition to bridge the philosophical and aesthetic gap between East and West, he now used the Sung pot to bridge the gap between that existed between pottery as a rural handicraft and pottery as an artform inside the modernist fine art dialog of that period.

Leach, though, had a difficult time making ends meet while trying to sell his "serious" Sung pieces, whose prices were only within the range of collectors. De Waal gives us evidence of what lies behind another pivotal point in Leach's development.

"It was becoming clear that he couldn't survive in the manner to which he aspired as an art potter. Leach's movement, therefore, towards making a more extensive range of pottery began as a

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matter of expediency: “everything is so dominated by the damnable shop-minded and commercial burgher of England. So in spite of the recognition [sic] of my work as the best it is difficult to sell except to collectors and a small public. I shall have to limit myself to certain things and produce them more cheaply in order to keep going.”¹⁴

Here we see Leach the pragmatist not the romantic idealist who wants to produce things of unconscious beauty for everyday use, that would come later. With the fine arts world no longer financially viable, Leach looked for other ways to keep the pottery going. He began producing decorative tiles for fireplace surrounds and started to show his domestic ware in galleries that dealt in handmade artifacts and ethnic items. De Waal tells us that these exhibitions “...were not seeking to gain critical exposure: it was the genesis of a distinct ‘craft world’, and it was a world that Leach, feeling increasingly embattled, was warming to.”¹⁵ Leach ultimately found the need to justify this activity intellectually and wrote a pamphlet entitled *A Potter’s Outlook* that was published in 1928 by the New Handworker’s Gallery. In his thesis he attacks factories as producing a kind of de-graded folk art which in his eyes had absolutely no redeeming qualities. De Waal writes:

“*A Potter’s Outlook* shows Leach to be keenly aware of the deficiencies of his position, both philosophically and materially, and desperate of resolution. He was forty years old, with a large family of five children, no financial security and a strong awareness of how well other, metropolitan, art-potters were doing. His desire to make what he vividly called ‘necessary pots’ was evangelical.”¹⁶

Leach the idealist began creating philosophical arguments for these ‘necessary pots’, pots that would be made mostly by others to his designs and under his supervision. I cannot say that Leach was disingenuous in his analysis of the work being produced by industry at the time, it certainly could not have been any worse than the work now produced, yet Leach unlike us had a memory of better things. It is clear though, that his prescription for the cure of this ill was not as pure in its origins as we would like to have believed.

It was not his necessary pots though, that would deliver him from financial disaster. In 1931 Leonard and Dorothy (an American and heiress to the Whitney fortune) Elmhirst invited him to set up a pottery based on the ideas he was trying at St. Ives. He told the Elmhirsts that he needed to experiment with prototypes of domestic ware that could be manufactured at Dartington as a ‘commercial unit’. In 1933 he received a grant from the Dartington Research Grants Board to return to Japan for this purpose. De Waal spends not quite two pages on this return to Japan, but adequately captures its effect on Leach. He had left England a somewhat marginal figure struggling to run a rural pottery on the verge of financial collapse and arrived in Japan to be greeted by friends who had published a new biography about him, full of illustrations, reminiscences by Japanese friends and reprints of his earlier articles. He was asked to lecture everywhere he went and was treated as a celebrity. Nationalism, however, was sweeping Japan and his group of friends from the old days with whom he had spent hours talking about Western philosophy and art were now involved in a new interest, the term for it, coined by Yanagi, was ‘mingei’ which meant ‘art of the people’. During that year in Japan Leach and Yanagi traveled to Korea,

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which was then occupied, by Japan and Leach had an exhibition in a gallery the Japanese military authorities had allowed Yanagi to establish. De Waal writes of Yanagi and Leach that:

“Their language when talking about Korea – isolation, sadness, loneliness – gave a sense of inevitability to the political situation. The Koreans as measured by their folk-art, were doomed to remain a subjugated people. Indeed this model of a pre-industrial society where inexpensive and simply made functional and decorated domestic objects were the norm seem predicated on a form of oppression.”¹⁷

American potters who have found themselves enamored with Yanagi and ‘mingei’ need to read this section of de Waal’s book before they are tempted to justify their work by quoting Yanagi again about the ‘unconscious’ beauty of Korean pottery. You hear over and over from these potters that the best pots are those created for daily use. And what they mean by “daily use” is, of course is cheap. This idea of the inexpensive pot having a certain moral cache that other more expensive work cannot aspire to has been remarkably tenacious. We have things that we use every day, however, like the computer I am using at this moment, the car I drive and the television I watch, that are expensive, not particularly beautiful but eminently functional and whose life span is significantly shorter than the pottery I own. While I am not suggesting that the work Leach and Yanagi found beautiful, isn’t. We have to look at the context in which this paradigm was created and question its intellectual soundness.

Leach returned to England in 1935 and eventually settled not in St. Ives, but in Dartington where he began writing *A Potter’s Book*. It is a book that has had and I believe will continue to have a tremendous influence on young potters. De Waal analyzes its appeal saying:

“Indeed its significance and popularity are due to the complex way in which Leach’s technical descriptions are bound up in his values. It is a book that seems to encode the whole meaning of being a potter and working as a potter, not simply the making of pots.”¹⁸

De Waal quotes for us some of the more negative reviews of the time, most of which take him to task for being too dogmatic and his view of ceramics as being too narrow. This book, however, put Leach on an intellectual course that he would maintain, publicly at least, for the rest of his life.

In Chapter 3, “The Need for Roots”, de Waal covers Leach’s life from 1940 until his death in 1979. He discusses his emergence as an important figure in the British crafts movement, his return to Japan after the war and his visits to the United States and a few reactions to that visit and his ideas from people like Marguerite Wildenhain. He also goes into some of the aspects behind Leach’s book *Kenzan and His Tradition* and what became known as the Sano scandal that surrounded it. About which de Waal correctly concludes “...shows Leach adrift in a Japan outside the mingei world of friends and admirers, and in a world where his own knowledge of Japanese art was so mediated through translators and intermediaries that he was able to become implicated in a palpable fraud.”¹⁹

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In the final chapter, “Beyond East and West”, de Waal examines what he feels are some of the major contradictions of Leach’s life. Of his relationship with Yanagi, for example, de Waal looks beyond the obvious friendship to more pragmatic issues that have never been closely examined. He argues:

“Leach is anointed by Yanagi, Yanagi is anointed by Leach...For just as Leach’s authority in the West was constructed around the mythic story of his knowledge and insight into Japan, of his apprenticeship into the Kenzan school, of his ‘natural’ absorption in Japanese life, so Yanagi’s authority in the West was constructed through Leach’s placing him as not only famous in Japan but amongst the most profound thinkers on Japan.”²⁰

And lastly he looks at the paradoxes between what Leach wrote and what he practiced in his art. In Leach’s writing the stress, de Waal says:

“...was on that of integration; that at this particular moment in history the potter could and indeed should have control over all the processes of creation. This has been the great and powerful seduction of *A Potter’s Book*: its sense of self-sufficiency. Leach’s relationship with those he ‘conducted’, seems to stand in direct opposition to such rhetoric. Leach’s relationship with those who worked for him in the studios, those whose ‘orchestral playing’ he ‘conducted’, seems to stand in direct opposition to such rhetoric.”²¹

De Waal’s book, from the parts I have quoted at least, may seem overly critical to some, but I came away with a different feeling. I must admit that Leach was a powerful force on my development and I probably would never have gone to Japan if I had not read *A Potter’s Book*. Once there, however, I found few if any of the things he wrote about Japan to be true. At some point (I can’t recall exactly when) I felt slightly betrayed because I had been lured into this predicament – this struggle to be a potter and find meaning for that occupation in modern culture – by the strength of his ideas, expressed so eloquently in his writing, only to find many of them to be a cul de sac. De Waal’s book, however, allows us to see Leach not as someone who is in touch with some higher secret that the rest of us cannot access, but simply as one of us, an imperfect being who is subject to all the vicissitudes of life like the rest of us. That means potters can get on with the business of creating work that challenges and questions assumptions about the nature of beauty and pottery’s role in culture and quit worrying about whether or not what they make fits a frozen standard that was never quite as real as we all somehow wanted it to be. Potters, in other words, have to grow up and take responsibility for their own work and quit falling back on Leach’s ideas whenever they are forced to justify what they are making. They need instead to develop their own ideas and arguments for what they make and then be unrelenting in their efforts to convince culture of the importance of those ideas and the work that embodies them. That is what Leach did.

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