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Perhaps one of the greatest questions facing modern pottery is how to create work that conveys or comments on the complexities of modern life. For an artist's work to be relevant in modern culture, it has to find its meaning in the issues that surround and confront us daily. Does this mean, therefore, that tradition-based crafts work has no place in the future? On the contrary, I would suggest that to be modern is to be, in the best sense of the word, traditional. This struggle for relevancy in one's own time is in itself traditional. It is something all truly creative artists have been engaged in throughout history. The kind of tradition I am speaking of, however, is not a timid or blind adherence to specious standards set by previous generations. Nor is it enough simply to say that certain styles of work – such as Japanese pottery from the Momoyama period – are relevant today merely because they were important in the past. The kind of tradition I am speaking of is a questioning and probing dialogue with the past about the nature of human existence.

Tradition, however, has come to mean something entirely different in modern craft: It has been pejoratively defined by the modern crafts establishment as anything useful that makes reference to the past. Those who engage in traditional or useful crafts – such as pottery – are viewed as conservative romantics who wish the cultural clock could be turned back to the kind of lifestyle that existed before the industrial revolution. They are presumed to be out of touch with modern sensibilities and are thought to be either unwilling or incapable of addressing contemporary concerns in their work. The modern crafts establishment is, in essence, saying that society has changed so greatly that the history and tradition of craft is no longer able to speak to us in a meaningful way or provide us with any kind of moral, philosophical or aesthetic lessons. This is, of course, a ridiculous argument that is contradicted by innumerable examples of historical work that speak to us as eloquently and with the same kind of urgency now as they did when they were contemporary works.

Modern crafts seem to have an equally simplistic and naive view about what it means to be modern or, should I say postmodern. Generally speaking, they believe that to be modern, all one's work has to do is to avoid any but the most superficial references to history and use, while at the same time stylistically mimic the most recent trends in painting and sculpture coming out of New York. In modern craft, novelty seems more important than content and the invention of new techniques substitutes for new thought, reducing the work of artists who engage in it to nothing more than fashionable clichés that have little to do with expanding the language of crafts to make it a viable, relevant force in modern culture. T.S. Eliot, one of the founding fathers of modernism in English poetry, wrote in his essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent" that we have a tendency to praise artists based on:

"...those aspects or parts of his work which least resembles any one else. We dwell with satisfaction upon the poet's difference from his predecessors, especially his immediate predecessors; we endeavor to find something that can be isolated in order to be enjoyed. Whereas if we approach a poet without this prejudice we shall often find that not only the best but the most individual parts of his work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously."¹

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This historical sense, which Eliot believed was indispensable to a writer, involves not only a perception of the 'pastness' of the past, but also of its presence. This sense makes the artist both traditional and at the same time acutely aware of his or her place in history, in other words, their contemporaneity.

My point is not that we should be ruled by the past constantly reworking old masterpieces – but that we should recognize the past for what it is: an inseparable part of us and our awareness of the world. It seems preposterous to me that modern potters, for example, believe that they can employ a kind of selective amnesia concerning the past and then expect their work to challenge in eloquence, the great works from the history and tradition of ceramic art.

The shapes and techniques of traditional crafts represent, I believe, more than nostalgia for a way of life long since past; they are the residue of our predecessors' struggle to express and communicate through handwork, their deepest and most profound insight into the human condition. I believe, therefore, that these shapes and techniques are not just valuable, but indispensable to us, because they are part of a visual language that allows us as modern artists to express our ideas and feelings in a way that would be impossible without them. Their loss would impoverish our art and reduce it, in the name of being modern, to nothing more than a trendy, fashion-conscious commercial pursuit. Kazuo Yagi, who is often referred to as the father of modern Japanese ceramic art, offered, in an essay on Ogata Kenzan, a starting point for modern potters struggling with this problem of tradition and its role in the future. He wrote that "...Those elegant designs that are Kenzan at his best are still being repeated in today's ceramic world, but I feel that they have no significance as the formal patterns they have become. Instead, it is worth experimenting with them as a means of returning to the process through which they were developed, or even to the invention itself."²

REFERENCES:

1. T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent", *Selected Essays*, London 1932.
2. Masahiko Sato, *Kenzan*, Kodansha 1975.