Chiaki Ajoika

Hamada, Shoji 浜田庄司(1894-1978)

Hamada Shoji was a modern Japanese ceramic artist who adopted the medium consciously as artistic expression, taking inspiration from folk traditions, particularly Okinawan pottery and British slipware. His career began in 1920s Britain where he accompanied the British potter Bernard Leach (1885-1979) to help establish a pottery workshop at St Ives, Cornwall. After returning to Japan, Hamada settled in Mashiko, a small village north of Tokyo, with its own folk pottery tradition. Leach and Hamada became icons of early studio pottery in the post-WWII Western world and their work is known collectively as ‘Anglo-Japanese style’ or the ‘Leach-Hamada tradition’. In Japan, Hamada’s work is associated with the Mingei movement. His stoneware shows earthy naturalness and dynamism underpinned by technical mastery and refined taste. Leach described Hamada as the ideal studio potter in whom the head, hand and heart were perfectly balanced. This echoed Hamada’s own words: “With the risk of exaggeration, I occasionally hear this voice in my work: ‘leave the shape to the wheel, leave the drawing to the brush, leave the firing to the kiln.” His Zen-like attitude is reflected in his works that appeared to embody the Mingei ideal in the modern world.

Born in Tokyo, Hamada originally aspired to be a painter, but was drawn to ceramics and began studying at the Tokyo High School of Industry under Itaya Hazan (板谷波山, 1872-1963). In the 1910s, Bernard Leach and Tomimoto Kenkichi (富本憲吉, 1886-1963) were producing ceramics outside Japan’s conventional establishment in a style derived from Western and Middle-Eastern folk pottery. Their work resonated with Hamada’s ambitions and he shared his aspiration with fellow ceramics student Kawai Kanjirō (河井寛治次郎, 1890-1966). After graduation Hamada joined Kawai at Kyoto Ceramics Research Institute, where they studied technical aspects of ceramics, especially glazing. In 1918 Hamada made the first of his many visits to Okinawa, where he found that a strong pottery tradition had ensured the production of robust and lively works. This observation determined his artistic direction and the colour and motif of Okinawa became one of his lasting repertoire [image]. The following year Hamada met Leach on the property of his close friend, religious philosopher Yanagi Muneyoshi (柳宗悦,1889-1961). The acquaintance led to Hamada’s passage to Britain with Leach.

On his return to Japan in 1924 Hamada reunited with Yanagi. Together with Kawai, they shared an interest in folk crafts, which led to their coining of the word Mingei and their lifelong commitment to promote this aesthetic. In 1955 Hamada became one of the first potters to be designated a Holder of Important Intangible Cultural Property (‘Living National Treasure’) in the category of ‘Mingei Pottery’.

Further reading:

De Waal, E. (2003) 20th Century Ceramics, London: Thames and Hudson.

Leach, B. (1940) A Potter’s Book, London: Faber & Faber.

Leach, B. (1975) Hamada: potter, Tokyo and New York: Kodansha International.

Nagata K. & Yurugi Y. eds. (1997) The English Arts & Crafts Movement and Hamada Shoji, Tokyo: Committee for “The English Arts & Crafts Movement and Hamada Shoji” exhibition.

Peterson, S. (1974) Hamada: A potter’s way and work, Tokyo and New York: Kodansha International.

Square dish 1940

Stoneware, cream glaze with red and green enamel; 6.5 x 28 x 28cm

Hamada Shoji Memorial Mashiko Sankokan Museum

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