T H E A E S T H E T I C S O F W O O D ­ F I R. I N G

# S o m e O b s e r v a t i o n s F r o m a P e r s o n a l J o u r n e y

R O S W I T H A W U L F F

When I was invited to make this presentation on the aesthetics of wood-firing, I was deligi because I realised that I had been presented with an opportunity to decant off some ideas I had been fermenting for some time, and which were now ready for distillation.

At first, I wondered where does one begin to explore the nature of aesthetics, and how does focus in on the various traditions of ceramics. and in particular, the traditions of wood-firing. J all, it's this particular focus that has brought us all together this week. We've all chosen to s some time together, I suspect not only to trade the technical details of our recent experience perhaps as much to reorientate our professional well-being.

There are a number of definitions and descriptions of aesthetics. Look at this one from Macquarie Dictionary: ·

'the study of the mind and emotions in relation to the science of beauty'

It inay have been written by a psychologist, very clinical and scientific. Now look at this one from philosopher:

'The science which deduces from nature the rules and principles of art'

I have no quarrel with either of these perspectives. I am sure that they work for the scientist the philosopher. ·

I would like to explore yet another perspective, one that works for me. It has its origins in what believe is every artist's desire ...to achieve spiritual fulfilment.

It may be appropriate, therefore to start this particular exploration in a pretty village in north Germany.

The name of the village is Fredelsloh, and my connection with it is that I spent my early childhood years there. From the hill overlooking the village, you can see that it is not very large. Even today less than two thousand people live there. The village is quite old, however.

In the centre of town, the large stone building is the eleventh century monastery that is today village church, as well as the cultural centre of the district. Concerts and plays are performed t and exhibitions of modem art hang alongside the traditional religious art works of earlier yeus.

It appears that the monks who built the settlement here pursued their spiritual enlightenment number of ways. For example, from diggings around the village, there have been many pie retrieved that show they were also accomplished potters, and given the times, were certc: wood-firers.

And it was wood-fired pottery that I was introduced to right early in my life. Icame to Fredelsloh babe-in-arms from Persia, where I was born. My German parents had been working there on civil project. It was war time, and the British army had entered Persia, interning my father, sending my mother and the three children back to Germany.

My tather got to see Australia first, and spent the war in a settlement in Loveday, South Australia, where he got to meet many of the Barossa Valley German folk that were also sitting out the war years there. But I'lltalk more about how Ibecame an Australian later.

Arriving in Germany in.mid-war, we had nowhere to go. My mother's maternal home in the Ruhr valley was being bombed, so she turned to a girlhood friend, Helma Klett. Helma was a sculptor, who just before the war had purchased a disused brick kiln in Fredelsloh. She had turned this into a ceramic studio, as well as a cafe and living quarters. Among my earliest memories, are roaming th vaulted tunnels of this former kiln; tunnels which had become the cafe kitchens and pottery storage areas. ·

At the onset of war, Helma was unable to produce the ceramic sculpture which had prompted her to move from Hamburg to the country. She had been ordered by the government to produce functional pottery for the local farmers to use - milk jugs, teapots, mugs, plates etc.

Initially she was horrified, but stoic as she was, put the values and skills she had learned as a sculptor into the utilitarian ware she now made to make ends meet. From the age of three months to 8 years, Iwas surrounded by the making and firing of these pots. At first Halma had only the wood-firing kiln in the centre of the building, utilising the old chimney stack. Later this was to t;>e supplemented with a small electric kiln.

Here is the environment where Ifirst saw wood-fired ceramics. The lady on the left of the photo is Helma Klett. My mother is standing in the grey coat, and Iam the munchkin in the white coat with her back.to the camera.

After the war we discovered my father had developed a liking for Australia, and after a few more years of separation,while costs and papers were sorted out, we were eventually reunited with him.

When we arrived in Sydney, my mother brought with her an entire household of pots. It was with these in every day use that Igrew up. Ihad my favourites. Iused to ask why was this one w. so much more beautiful, so much softer, subtler than another.. The answer - it was fired in the wood

kiln.

There were rejects due to too much reduction that were exquisite to my eye.. Pitted and pin-holed but with such evocative texture and colour,compared with the same glaze in an oxidised firing.

Later, when Iwas a first year pottery student at the National Art School, East Sydney, with Peter Rushforth as my teacher, we were. fortunate in having the- tavelling collection of medieval English jugs from London's Guildhall museum in our showcase (therewas some problem with space at the Art Gallery).

We were privileged in being able to pick them up and enjoy at close quarters these magnificent pitchers. In photographs, they had looked heavy and clumsy, but living with them, handling them, seeing how they felt, how they poured, they took on an entirely different force. Unaware at the time we were embracing a very important aspect of aesthetics, an aspect often ignored in our western culture, the tactile importance of the work of art.

Have any of you ever wondered why we potters always want to touch works on display, to pick them up, turn them over, (often unwittingly spilling their contents), to feel theirweight and stroke their .surfaces. Even listen to the pots! ··

Perhaps this is. also the reason why many wood-firers are drawn to the Japanese aesthetic, in which the orchestration of many senses is seen as excellence in the expression of .an arUorm. Andwhere personal.development is1pursued through the contemplative interaction with objects· that engage those senses. As, for example, during prolonged meditative sipping in the tea­ cerernony, bowls are nursed in the cupped palms, and so become a focus for tactile as well as visual contemplation.

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In the preparation of food, the Japanese culinary aesthetic calls for all the senses to be stimulated, unlike our western food preparation, which is mainly concerned with taste.

For example; there is a jelly-like substance used in Japanese cuisine that has no taste, no nutritional value, is unobtrusive in appearance, but has a certain texture, and is therefore an important adjunct to the meal.

But to get back to the medieval jugs that Iwas fortunate to have access to at the College during my student days. And also to explain how they are connected with Fredelsloh, the small village where Helma Klett had established her pottery, and where Ihad my introduction to living with wood-fired work. The archaeological finds retrieved ,in the diggings around the magnificent 11th century monastery were very similar.in shape to the jugs made in medieval England. The clay was the same fine earthenware still in use in the Klett pottery, and other potteries that have started up in the village in more recent years.

Perhaps there is a spiritual connectedness with this work, my early work and my relatively recent choice of wood-firing. A desire to convey that connectedness to the user. But Iwill come back to this later also.

Another pot that had a very strong influence on me as a student was a Han Dynasty jar from the Eleanor Hinder collection,. now at the N.S.W. Art Gallery. This was also in the college show-case and could be picked up and touched by us. I learned to love the grey of stoneware with lhe faint dusting of melted ash on it's shoulder, revealing the throwing lines and all the marks of the maker.

Peter Rushforth used words like "Shibui", "Sabi", "Wabi", and "Suki". Later I learnt that Shibui means sober, subdued, unostentatious and with deep simplicity. Wabi, Sabi and Suki are embodied in Shibui and cover such qualities as quietude, modesty, rustic, absence of ornamentation, profound i.n spirit. We touched on the philosophy of tea and thereby of Zen Buddhism and the "wabi" that is incompleteness and showing no sign of incompleteness, no self will,no desire for perfection. Peter showed us slides of Japanese pots, pots with large cracks that were ranked as Japanese treasures.

We learned about Leach's philosphy based on Japanese folk crafts and English slip-ware combining the two aesthetic stand-points of beauty and usefulness. We learned about good craftsmanship being directly subject to the prime source of human activity. The hand can change the process at any moment,.a process that is intuitive, responsive and direct.

Industrial mass-production, on the other hand, is completely out of touch with those variations and effects of hazard which are inevitable in hand-made pottery, and which have always been an important part of the 'life' of ceramics as art. Manufactured objects made to a specification have a consistency of finish. Wood-fired pots are evocative of the human creative spirit. They are alive, complex and unpredictable.

This prompts me to offer yet another definition of aesthetics. The concept of aesthetics is a human "construction", something created by a person. Therefore hand-made objects in their nature provide a definition of aesthetics. And it is the closeness to the natural materials th::;t makes wood-firing such an appealing aesthetic. Packing pots in contact with one another, resulting in dents and scars and encouraging flames to produce mottled effects and variations of colour. Clay and glaze with no ornamentation other than the qualities of fire on clay.

The elegance and sophistication born of a complete empathy with the material can be compared to the formidable charm of a simple Lanvin gown. A dress that falls beautifully over the body, revealing its gracefulmusculature and curves, rather than a dress enhanced by a mass of frills and decoration, destroying any sense of what is beneath.

It is this honing back to the essentials, the honesty of every mark made, that brings a wood-fired pot to life. Like a drawing of a nude, there is a magic quality in the freshly thrown pot which is best

captured when not covered by anything. And like the lines of a body, and the magnificence simple garment-very difficult to achieve. ·

The attraction of the wood-fired pot lives in the total carelessness of how each mark was made, delivered by chance. The appeal of the object lives in this apparent indifferencs of the maker. as if the .maker had interceded in a very minimal way, just enough to enable the object to hapi Yet this indifference is achieved through very deliberate skill, effort and nurturing. The results visible, but can not be seen as the outcome of any explicit action. Like a parent supporting a < to develop, the potter creates the environment in which something can happen. And as with child, it will only happen if it does, and cannot be commanded. Tending a kiln for days on end to get a fine drift of ash on a piece, does not guarantee success, but does have its rewards V\ something occurs, particularly if it is something that was never expected.

Certainly, when I left the National Art School as a ceramics graduate in 1965 Iwas totally awe· the formidable task of making pots in the Japanese aesthetic, aware that Iwould need to C:om,: my 50 year apprenticeship before Icould ever aspire to even consider the possibilities of w1

firing for myself.

I embarked on· 1O years pottery making in good honest German style, pots that bee; increasingly "better" as my skills advanced, increasingly more slick, but in the final analysis, short of the vitality and sensitivity I so yearned for. But they sold well, and I needed to mal living. I had a 1O year mortgage to pay off; unable at the time, being female and single, to £ normal bank loan. At the end of that period Iwas burnt out, exhausted.

It took a visit back to Germany to make me realise that Iwas now more Australian than.German. I surprises me that people remark about my "Germanness". Isuspect they may not see the s; Germany that I do. Certainly, there are European facets to my personality, but there are 01 deeper differences. What is it about Australia that is so different from Europe? It is multicu1t1 there is a vibrancy of life in Australia. The rules of life are not set, not yt established in hierarchical sense, the formality of Europe. There is enormous variety, contrast, richness of life in the city and the beauty of the Australian outback; the reds pinks and greys of Australian natu

The contrasts are softer; not as strong as in Europe. I love bush-walking, and noticed wildness. Unlike the manicured parks and gardens, even the forests of Germany, the bus nature - born and dying without the intervention of the human hand. The colours and texture the bush are remarkable; the trunks of trees, stones, bushes and mosses. I love the untidine the bush; broken trees lying about everywhere, bush-fires, cliff faces. Shibui!

My aesthetic sense changed also. Ifound the precision of my glazes too tight. Iwanted to loc up, to inject some of this wonderful land into my work; to use this environment to extend expressive vocabulary. It was this thought process that brought me back to my training at thE School and the Japanese aesthetic of wood-firing, which seems to capture the ambiguity 01 landscape - the' wildness, untidiness, on the one hand and the delicacy of the colours on other. I embarked on a body of work totally different to my previous pots. I purposely de: them, pushed them out of shape, encouraged coarse textures. I wanted to capture the deli pinks of the Kimberley region, the red of the centre. The Shino and Bizen pots Ihad so admire a novice took on a new focus.

Perhaps buried memory traces imprinted on *my* mind from past experience were at work here amalgamation of the slides shown by Peter Rushforth in *my* student days, the medieval.Ger: jugs from the monastery, still the desire to make functional pots; pots to display Austrafian·m flowers, platters·to display an international selection of foods (another aspect of Australia ti adore - its multi-cultural gastronomie).

I studied the cracked pots from Tokaname and Shigaraki - the national treasures of Japan, looked for what it was that makes a treasure out of a cracked bowl. Icame back to the word "VI that is incompleteness and showing no sign of incompleteness, no self-will, no desire perfection.

There is the timelessness of aesthetics. We live in a world where fashions change very rapidly, so something which has a particular fashion appeal today, a contemporary component, will tie gone tomorrow. Other things continue to evoke the same responses, feelings over the enturies - like the Han Dynasty jar - whereas much of the work so popular in the 60's has now lost its appeal. ·

When Ihad my first exhibition at the Potters' Society after my yea(s absence from Australia, friends told me the only thing they recognised was my name. My work had changed, as had my appearance. (Whilst in Europe, Ihad had a haircut in Paris, finally getting rid of the long blonde hair that was still left over from the hippie 60's, and the days when Icouldn't afford a haircut).

I also discovered that people find it easier to accept glossiness, technical perfection, prettiness. And people asked me, why the outback, why this style. And whilst Ilove the.bush, Iadore the city. I am a Gemini, a split personality. Ilove Darlinghurst, Oxford Street, with a restaurant of every nationality on my. doorstep, the cinemas, coffee shops, galleries. Perhaps because I am in the heart of things, in the buzz if you like, the reason why Iwant to express the outback and the bush in my work is just that need to' get away now and then, to contemplate, get in touch with myself, my spirit.

It was an interesting part of my life, establishing my own personal aesthetic. In 1984 Itravelled to Japan and was able to research at first handthe aesthetic that Ihad studied and admired since my student days. Iwas charmed by the architecture and delighted by the temple gardens.

Iunderstand why people are so calm and happy when their religion is based around nature and beauty - where contemplation happens in a stunning environment rather than a gloomy church,· with a figure in pain hanging off a cross. Perhaps this is also why Iam so drawn to the Jai:;;nese aesthetic; my rejection of Christianity, yet a desire for spiritual fulfilment. And maybe that's also why we are drawn to the ritual of pottery making, the ritual of wood-firing; life's cycle of the earth, water and fire being the same as the elements in ceramics.

Perhaps this is where my German heritage crops up again - Germans were the great alchemists of history, searching for their aesthetic, namely gold. And haven't we found gold in a beautiful pot. Remember Boetger - the story goes tttat this great alchemist, at one point in his quest to make gold from base metals, had the threat of death hanging over him, as his sponsors were getting impatient for results. But he brought to their attention the quality of the crucible that he was using, and managed to persuade the king that this new material,porcelain,was in fact as valuable as gold.

Susan Brophy put it so nicely when she spoke about the last Woodfire Conference in Pottery in Australia; "Wood-firing is an act of faith, built upon the love of the orchestration of the elements of wood, fire, clay and kiln with pr:ocess and product part of the aesthetic whole".

Making pots is a ritual,a celebration of our physical nature and a renewal of our energy, a ritual that is completed at the meal table. It is at that point that we can most fully enjoy the differences of the senses - the three-dimensional quality of the work. It is when we feel, hold, handle, LIVE with a pot that we develop a certain relationship with the aesthetic, and it comes to life. Making work that challenges the user's preconceptions about the nature of beauty and use, the nature of art, is a personal goal and one that Ifeel is shared by many wood-firing potters all over the world.