

46:16 "We Do Not Work Alone: Portrait of a Potter"

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WE DO NOT WORK ALONE

Portrait of a Potter

By

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It was a dark afternoon. Outside, the gray mist of the Kyoto hills crept down over the cluster of slate roofs, and the rain fell softly. Inside the home of Kanjiro Kawai, one of Japan's foremost contemporary potters, four of us sat around the warmth of the charcoal kotatsu: Mr. Kawai; his son, Hirotsugu; Claude Laloux, a young Frenchman who was studying with the famed potter; and myself.

Kawai-san leaned on a sturdy little wooden dog that he had carved himself, and smoked a small thin kiseru pipe that held no more than a thimbleful of tobacco at a time. He was dressed in his usual heavy cotton work clothes, similar to the garb of the Japanese farmer, and as always, wore his steel-rimmed glasses with their half-moon shaped lens.

Although Kanjiro Kawai is sixty-three, he is a dynamic and energetic man whose presence fills a room with vitality. Thin and wiry in appearance, his cheek bones jut out, and his close-cropped hair is gray. His eyes, however, are alert and bright, and his movements are full of the same vigor and power which he transmits to his pottery - all of which are sturdy and bold in shape and design. The same massiveness one feels throughout his house is apparent in his work, and one can recognize it immediately, although as is the custom in folk art,

it remains unsigned. "The work itself must be the signature," he says, and his own pottery bears out this truth.

Mr. Kawai was full of lively talk that day, for we were speaking of what he loved best - his work and the thoughts that govern his life. We sat and talked long into the rainy afternoon, and there was no sense of time, for there was nothing to hurry to. Kawai-san knows how to savor fully each moment of the day, and to find joy in whatever he is doing. "What a wonderful Now," he has written in one of his poems, "It is surely eternity."

Before long, Mrs. Kawai appeared and welcomed me with a gracious smile. She sat before the small box containing her tea equipment and prepared powdered green tea for us, whipping it up to a delicate green froth with a little bamboo whisk. She made one cup at a time, and with the steaming tea came small sweet cakes filled with bean paste. We drank the tea from magnificent large cups made by Kawai-san himself, and listened as he talked.

"I want to tell you a story," he said. "It is a story of olden times - of days when men did not display their wealth with jewels or such splendid things, but instead, bought a moss-covered stone or the gnarled stump of a tree for their gardens. In such a time, there was a man who bought a vase. It was a beautiful thing - new and without a flaw. He wanted to show this vase to a friend who was coming to call, but he was embarrassed. It was too new and too perfect. So he took a brush and dipped it into the gilt lacquer which was used in those days to mend pieces of broken pottery. Then, he drew a crooked line across the face of the brand new vase."

Suddenly, Kawai-san had become that man. His hands moved in the air, painting a line on the beautiful new vase. His face broke

into a happy smile.

"Now with the lacquered line on the vase, it looked old and mended," he went on, "It was no longer perfect. The man was satisfied and showed it to his friend. The friend understood and admired the vase. He appreciated what this man had done."

Kawai-san leaned back to look at us. "Isn't that a wonderful story?" he asked. "That is a real Japanese story. If you can understand that, you can understand how the Japanese have found beauty in what may seem imperfect to man, but which is perfect by the standards of nature. The Japanese have accepted poverty in the same way. They have embraced it and conquered it, and ultimately found beauty in it. It is a wonderful thing. The poverty of Japan has been her strength."

It was only a beginning, but that afternoon, I learned something of the strength that lies behind Kanjiro Kawai's work. I learned that he is a man who understands and respects the dignity of simplicity and of what he calls "ordered poverty." He has a profound love for the unpretentious men of the soil and has made their simplicity a part of himself. He understands and respects these solitary men - the farmers who live out their quiet lonely lives in the countryside of Japan.

"They are the kind of people we cannot do without," he says. Then, looking down at the hibachi with its glowing coals, he adds, "They are like embers that lie buried in the ash - dormant yet alive, not seeking to come out; lying quietly until someone digs them out."

The house in which Mr. Kawai and his family live, is itself a reflection of his admiration of the way of life in the country. Modelled after an old farm house, he designed it himself some fifteen years ago, and it was then constructed by his brother, who like their

father, is an architect. Located on a narrow street just off Kyoto's Gojo-zaka with its many pottery shops, his home looks much like all the other quiet brown houses that line the street. From the outside, one could never guess what a vast storehouse of art lies beyond the door, and only the bundles of kindling stacked beside the house give some indication of the activity that goes on inside.

The moment one enters, however, it is easy to see that it is the home of an extraordinary person. One is immediately impressed with its massive sturdiness and the sense of permanence and security that permeate it. All the woodwork is dark, and there are cupboards, chests of drawers, and much sturdy furniture made of similar dark wood.

In every corner of the house, there are interesting objects from all parts of Japan and the orient. There are solid wooden molds from which the papier mache darumas are made. There are kokeshi dolls of all sizes and shapes. There are woven grass mats, baskets filled with papers and books, brass utensils of all kinds, and even a hollowed out log which is the Korean woman's sink. All of them are objects made by the unknown craftsmen of the countryside, and convey the honest simplicity and strength of true folk art.

In the large front room, there stands a big heavy table lined with benches, and beyond it is an open hearth like those around which farmers will gather for warmth, talk and a cup of tea. In front of the hearth are small barrel-shaped straw stools and short, squat chairs, made at the suggestion of Kawai-san, out of old wooden mortars for pounding rice. Most of the furniture, as well as the wood carvings and such household items as trays, frames, and arm rests, were designed by Mr. Kawai himself.

Not much seems to take place in this front room, however, and it

only when one has passed through it, removed ~~one's~~ straw slippers and stepped into the small tatami matted room in the rear, that a visit really seems to begin. Here, in a room bulging with the latest pieces from the kiln, Mr. Kawai will relax with his pipe for tea, cakes and a good long talk.

There are several heavy carved wooden figures about a foot and a half high standing around this room. Some of these figures look like dolls, some are great hands with the forefinger pointing upward. On some, this pointing finger has become a figure, while on others a ball is balanced at the tip. Kawai-san has recently been much interested in sculpture and has designed clay models from which a woodcarver makes the final piece. These massive fingers and hands are mysterious.

"What do they mean?" I asked Mr. Kawai. "Do they have some special significance?" I had noticed a similar hand with the finger pointing upward or holding a flower on many of his plaques.

Kawai-san smiled. "They have no hidden symbolism or meaning," he said. "They mean whatever you see in them." He went on to explain further. "Any work of art belongs to everyone, because it is whatever each person sees in it."

He looked around the room and pointed to a vase recently made by Claude Laloux. "This is not only Laloux-san's vase," he said, "It is also yours. It is also mine. Isn't that a wonderful thing? Isn't that a fine thing?" And he laughed jubilantly at the wonder of the thought. "It's the same with people," he added, "We are all one. I am you, the you that only I can see."

For Kawai-san, all things and people are an expression of the self. "If I buy something, I have bought myself," he says, "If that

something is worthless, it is still myself."

"But Kawai-san," a friend once said to him, "If all things are an expression of the self, what about God or Buddha?"

Kawai-san smiled and pointed to himself. "Buddha is me. I am Buddha." It is as simple as that for him.

Zen Buddhism seems to have influenced his thinking to a certain extent, but Kawai-san does not like to place himself in such categories as "Christian" or "Buddhist". Such phrases are used too glibly and mean too little. Kawai-san is not one to fit himself into fixed patterns or molds. For him, there is no specific god or buddha to worship. It is enough for him to know that there is a force bigger than himself; that he and this force are one, and that through this force he is able to work and create things of beauty in this world. He sometimes ^{calls} ~~gives~~ this force ~~the name of~~ "the unknown self." "This unknown self," he says, "is revealed through the work of the hands and the body, and is that unconscious element in every man that prods him on to new achievements."

"Anyone can make beautiful things," says Mr. Kawai. "The capacity for expression and creation is in everyone, but not all of us realize this. We work and produce in spite of ourselves. The unknown self drives us on always."

"It is ultimately faith that lies at the bottom of all my work," he said to me one day. "We do not work alone. Man can make a bowl of clay. He can make it round and smooth, but until it is fired, it cannot be used. Man can lay the fire and light the flame," he added, "But still it is the fire itself that really completes the bowl. And that fire is something bigger and more wonderful than any man."

He paused reflectively and puffed at his pipe. "No," he said, "We are not working alone. We are never working alone." And he has expressed this thought in one of his poems which reads simply, "Who is moving this hand of mine?"

Kawai-san knows what it means to work, and he is happy because his work is everything to him. He and his work are one. "I want to see a new self," he says, "And I work." Then he adds, "Man doesn't seek work. It is the work which waits, seeking man."

He believes that only through the discipline of unrelenting work can come the true work of art in which beauty has been achieved unconsciously and effortlessly. Any self-conscious effort to create something beautiful can only be a pretense. "When you become so absorbed in your work that beauty flows naturally from within," he says, "Then, your work truly becomes a work of art."

In nature, he has found both solace and inspiration. "I once used to use the chemical glazes of Europe," he said, "But I returned to nature - to the science that precedes all science - and the return to nature was my salvation."

And indeed, the glazes, which he mixes himself, are the rich subtle hues of nature itself: the warm red glow of copper - one of his favorite colors; the rich dark brown of iron; and the colors of chrome and cobalt. "Why not go to the ultimate source of things?" Kawai-san asks. "I would rather eat carrots and daikon than take vitamin pills."

Even for the shape and form of his recent pieces, Mr. Kawai has sought nature as a guide. As he talks, he reaches out with his hands, impatiently, as if plucking things from the air. "There are new and beautiful shapes on all sides of us," he says, "We have only to reach out to find them."

He explained how for thousands of years the circle, and variations of it, have governed the shapes of the pots and bowls man made from clay. But such forms have grown dull and meaningless for him. Many of his recent vases are asymmetrical - angular on one side and curved on the other. And instead of the earlier winged flower-like designs painted on a vase or dish, his designs now are raised in clay slip, thus making his work seem more massive than before.

He has also made plaques and plates in unusual geometric shapes. "What are these to be used for?" he is often asked. But Kawai-san simply laughs and answers, "For anything you like. I had no particular purpose in mind when I made them, but someday, someone will find a use for them."

Kawai-san doesn't worry about the function of a piece when he makes it. He creates whatever shape or form he chooses, confident that if it is a thing of beauty, it will someday, somewhere find a use.

Bound by no conventions, his is a completely free and happy spirit. "Nature is generous and life is full of blessings," he says. He is a radiant personality, with a great sense of joy in life; and outlook that has prompted him to write, "My past has been an infinite past/ My future is endless before me."

Born in the village of Yasugi in Shimane-ken, Japan, Kanjiro Kawai was already interested in pottery when he was still a child. "I used to watch a nearby farmer who made pottery in his spare time," he said, "And by the time I was sixteen, I knew I wanted to become a potter too. My uncle asked if I would like to go to Tokyo Technical College, and I jumped at the opportunity."

Kawai-san shook his head however, and added, "But I learned only theory there. I didn't even see a potter's wheel or know how

to work one. I came next to Kyoto to the Ceramic Institute, but still it was all theory. I learned what I could about the actual making of pottery and the mixing of glazes on my own, at night. I brought clay and a potter's wheel into my little room and went to work. That was the beginning of the 'Kawai Factory'," he said laughing.

And on his own, he gradually developed the style and technique which have placed him among the greatest living potters of Japan. His pieces are on prominent display in the Folk Art Museum of Tokyo, and each year Takashimaya Department Store has an exhibit of his work in their Tokyo and Osaka shops, where his work commands top prices. In November last year, Takashimaya sponsored a special exhibit commemorating Mr. Kawai's fortieth year as a potter, and during the four day exhibit, eager collectors bought up almost all of the 600 pieces on display.

Mr. Kawai doesn't limit himself to the making of pottery alone, however, for writing poetry comes almost as naturally. Like his pottery, it is vivid, forceful, and not bound by conventions. "I cannot fit them into any rhyme scheme," he says, "But as I write, they somehow seem to fall into a rhythm of their own. It is the rhythm of life - like the beating of my heart." Of pottery, he has written, "Fire in my hand/ A cold ball of fire/ Fire which has changed its shape/ Hidden in the clay."

Kawai-san also writes books, and his prose is often as unique as his poetry. There is an earthy humor in much of his writing and he has a way of making things come alive in a completely ingenuous manner. In his recent book, "The Pledge of Fire", for example, he

writes of winter "sitting solid and staring", of the hearth as the "stomach of a house", of the sound of water as "the voice of March", and of pottery as a living thing that can both challenge and comfort him.

Last summer, he spent several weeks collaborating on a book with Shoji Hamada, (another of Japan's leading contemporary potters), Bernard Leach (the famed potter from England), and Soetsu Yanagi (art critic and director of the Folk Art Museum of Tokyo). Together, they are hoping to produce a book that will include not only the technical, but the aesthetic aspects of pottery making. These men have worked together before, and their friendship is a long and intimate one. Some thirty years ago, Mr. Kawai, Mr. Yanagi, and Mr. Hamada together founded the folk art movement of Japan. At a time when the word mingei (folk art) did not even exist in Japan and when handcrafts were slowly disappearing, these men encouraged the people of the country to keep their arts alive. They urged small family units who farmed for their livelihood, to continue making pottery and cloth and paper in their spare hours. Then, they created a folk art museum where such work could be displayed and helped establish shops in the big cities where their handwork could be marketed. Today, these shops are flourishing and a lively demand has grown for the handcrafts they handle.

At a time when the Japanese people were admiring only the porcelains of China and Korea, these men established a new concept of beauty. "Look at the pots made by the farmers of Tamba," they said, "Their form and color have a beauty of their own." And gradually, the public understood and began to appreciate the work of their own countryside. Today, these pieces are not only in demand in Japan, they are going

to markets as far as San Francisco and New York, and the kilns can barely produce enough to meet the rapidly growing demand.

Of the future of folk art, Mr. Kawai knows it cannot compete with the machine, and doesn't believe it should try. "Ultimately, it must become a luxury item, like hand-made goods in the United States," he says, "Then, its real task will be to set new standards of good design for the machines to copy. This is the only way it can survive."

There are many young potters in the countryside who bring their work to Kawai-san for advice. He has much faith in their work, and helps them select those of good design and form, which are then produced for the folk craft shops to market. He never tries to impose his own techniques or designs on these young people, but encourages them to develop their own style. When asked what words of advice he would give to a beginning potter, he shook his head and replied, "I cannot presume to teach anyone. Everyone already has in himself the ability to create beautiful things. Laloux-san came to live and work with me for a year. I never taught him anything. He simply worked with me and that was how he learned." Kawai-san's only method of criticism is to praise the pieces he considers good.

The small workshop in which Kawai-san works with his son and apprentices, contains two potter's wheels, and is fairly bursting with the vases, pots, dishes and bowls that he has made over the years. They are piled in stacks around the room, and on days when the kiln has just been emptied, it makes one feel almost giddy to see the rows and rows of rich clay shapes spilling out even into the passageway.

Beyond this workshop, looking like a small-sized hill, is an enormous climbing kiln with eight chambers. Built on a slope, it is

economical to fire because the heat will rise from chamber to chamber, and less and less kindling is needed to bring the higher chambers to the required temperature.

The Kawai kiln is used by about twenty different neighboring families and is fired once every few months. The firing is done by professionals, whose task it is to feed the kiln with over four truck-loads of pine wood. It burns then, for 36 to 48 hours at a temperature of about 1300 degrees centigrade, and it is this high temperature firing that gives Japanese pottery the subtle coloring and character few western kilns can achieve.

The burning kiln is an awesome sight. Bright tongues of flame jut out of the openings along the side and at the top of the kiln, as kindling is tossed in by red-faced, perspiring men. Every once in a while, they will peer into the holes at the sides of the kiln to look at the small Seger cones. The degree to which these clay rods have dropped, together with the color of the flame, will tell them whether the fire is hot enough. Using no instruments, these men can gauge the approximate temperature inside the kiln simply by looking in at the bright yellow-white glow.

The day the kiln is cool enough to open, the Kawais are up early. They never know just what the kiln will produce, for even the same glazes will vary under different conditions of firing. It is an exciting event each time, and sometimes a disappointing one, for there are times when a piece will be underfired, or the glaze will have dripped down into the design.

While the pottery is baking in the kiln, however, Mr. Kawai can take a day of rest. On such days, he often goes walking in

the countryside surrounding Kyoto. "The farmlands are wonderful," he says, smiling at the remembrance of them, for next to his work, he loves them best. On other days, when the Kabuki Theatre is in Kyoto, he will go to enjoy one of his favorite dramas. Kawai-san delights in describing the subtlety of expression in the Japanese theatre. With lively movements, he demonstrates for instance, how looking in the distance is conveyed, not by a direct shading of the eyes, but by turning the arm and shading the eyes with a sort of backward twist of the hand.

"Expression in Japan is never direct or obvious," he says. "When a Japanese is sad and wants to weep, he may laugh because he cannot cry. These things are not understandable to you from foreign countries," he adds, "But never mind. That is good too. It is better not to understand everything. There is excitement and stimulation in not understanding a thing completely. The unknown is fascinating." And then, running a hand over his head, he smiles and says, "What would we have to show you if you understood and knew everything?"

"Every country must simply produce whatever it thinks is its best," says Mr. Kawai. "Never mind wondering whether it is going to be understood in America or in Europe. If Japan makes what is genuine, and its very best, it will be appreciated anywhere."

It is typical of Kawai-san to say "Never mind" to someone who does not understand, for he is quick to find a positive side to most things. He knows too, how to appreciate the small things that most of us simply take for granted. He will hold a box of matches in his hand, for instance, and say with wonder, "A box of fire! I marvel at the match! Just look," he says, putting the box in his pocket,

"We can put fire in a box and put it in our pockets. What a wonderful thing!"

He once showed me a small wooden box filled with neat rows of cherry blossoms that had been preserved in salt. It was an insignificant thing, and something most of us would have looked at once and put aside. But Kawai-san took the box from a drawer full of treasured things. "Look," he said, showing it to me, "Isn't this marvelous? The blossoms are still fresh. A friend of mine made this for me." And this great artist, who is showered with gifts from countless admirers all over the country, held the small box in his hand, and delighted in it with the wonder of a child.