

## Making Teabowls

By Hamada Shoji

Translated by Victoria Oyama

I found my way in Kyoto, began in Britain, learned much in Okinawa and matured in Mashiko. After finishing working with Bernard Leach in England, upon my return to Japan, someone asked me what kind of pottery I would make. I answered that I was thinking of making pottery that would be functional in every day life, for example a cup for drinking English-style tea rather than tea-bowls for the tea ceremony. I had my first exhibition after my return to Japan at the Kyukyodo gallery on the Ginza, at the end of 1925. A small bowl in that exhibit was bought by a customer who declared to it be just right for use as a tea-bowl in the summer. This chance happening got me started in making tea-bowls. As I began to make tea-bowls I found that size was a necessary step in the procedure and because of the special attention my works were paid by certain connoisseurs, I found the making of tea-bowls to be very challenging. In those days, regular tea cups, *yunomi*, were sold for three yen and when I put a price of five yen on my tea-bowls, Kawai Kanjiro laughed at me saying I shouldn't lower the price for tea-bowls below ten yen. At the same time the person who had earlier asked me of the my intentions regarding what work I would produce, accused me of making tea-bowls because they could be sold for a higher price. As I look back, this admonition still makes my ears burn even now.

Some of the tea-bowls treasured in Japan are good examples of fussy and boisterous designs but for my liking, nothing can surpass the Ido tea-bowls. These Ido bowls were widely used by the common people of Korea as ordinary bowls for rice or wine, but among the early Tea masters were people who could appreciate the superiority of these bowls. Sen no Rikyu was one of these connoisseurs as was Yanagi Soetsu, and I have been fortunate enough to receive teachings from him.

It is said that with a good tea-bowl the inside will appear bigger than the outside. An important concept is that of such tea-bowls as having been born, rather than made. These points became clear to us because of the early Tea masters who had deep perception in regard to those matters. However, Japanese potters were quick to follow such ideals in a superficial manner and complicate things with their self-conscious attitudes.

The purpose of trimming away excess clay on the foot is to enable a pot to be fired properly and to make it easy to use. But many a potter tends to get carried away in shaping the foot by trying to achieve an effect that is clever, interesting or different. As a potter gets older

they become gentler and able to trim the feet of pots in a natural and unselfconscious manner but this takes close to a lifetime.

The *hakeme* or brushed slip technique, which is common in Korea, came about as a method of coating the body of a pot with white slip. If a pot is dipped all over in white slip and the clay body and slip are not compatible, cracks and flaking can occur. The *hakeme* technique evolved in Korea to overcome this problem and the natural brushmarks left on the white slip caught the eye of the Tea masters and were especially appreciated. This resulted in Japanese potters imitating the technique and attempting to produce interesting brushmarks but they were artificial and lacked the natural freedom of the Korean potters. I personally like the *hakeme* technique and have often attempted it but as long as I have the conscious wish for it to turn out successfully, I shall always fail. Strangely enough, after visiting Korea and observing the rural markets and country people's way of life, when I return home to Japan, even though my experiences were not directly connected to the *hakeme* technique, I find my attempts at *hakeme* much easier. This may just be my imagination however.

I would like to try my hand at *raku* but due to the low temperature, the pots retain their original shape and therefore, I would like to wait until I am able to make any shape confidently. Despite having said that I would make *raku* when I turned seventy, I am still putting it off<sup>1</sup>. Red *raku* and black *raku* should be made without the feeling that they are something difficult to do. Last year while viewing an exhibit of Nara two-coloured ware, I was fortunate to see a wonderful bowl glazed all over with an amber glaze. That was when I realized that I should think of it not as *raku* ware, but simply low-fired ware. This made me feel easier. It has encouraged me to think anew about doing *raku*.

Salt-glaze was initially something to fill up the time until I felt ready to attempt *raku*. The odd thing is that first of all salt seemed very Western but in the period of ten years, it somehow metamorphosed to something quite Japanese. The technique is originally German, the clay from Mashiko, and the salt is a coarse salt imported from Spain. Unfortunately the true rock salt is impossible to obtain due to the small amount imported. The results of my salt firings have been sent to England, America, France and even Germany, the home of the salt-glaze technique.

Recently it is difficult for me to find much time to work and I can only work on the wheel before breakfast and again after dinner in the evening. Often I do not have the luxury of time to think while I am throwing or decorating pots as things have to be hurried along in

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<sup>1</sup> Hamada was seventy-seven at the time of writing this article.

order to meet schedules. However, that can sometimes bring about unexpectedly good results which make me wonder why I didn't realize such things earlier on. Of course, while applying a well-accustomed-to design, I often feel that it is the brush doing the painting rather than my hand. Oddly enough, there are few failures.

In choosing pieces for exhibitions, I pick out the best ten per cent from the original candidates. With such high standards, the average marks for such exhibitions would be good for any potter. When the matter is given some thought, it cannot be described as an honest representation after ninety per cent of the pots have been broken or put away. Given the fact that I'm now approaching eighty years of age, I imagine that a chance to show all of my pots which have come out of the one firing, would be a refreshing idea.

This is a translation of an article written by Shoji Hamada in *Hamada Shoji Nanaju Wan Fu, A record of Seventy Seven Tea-bowls by Shoji Hamada*, published in 1972 by the Japan Folk Craft Museum.