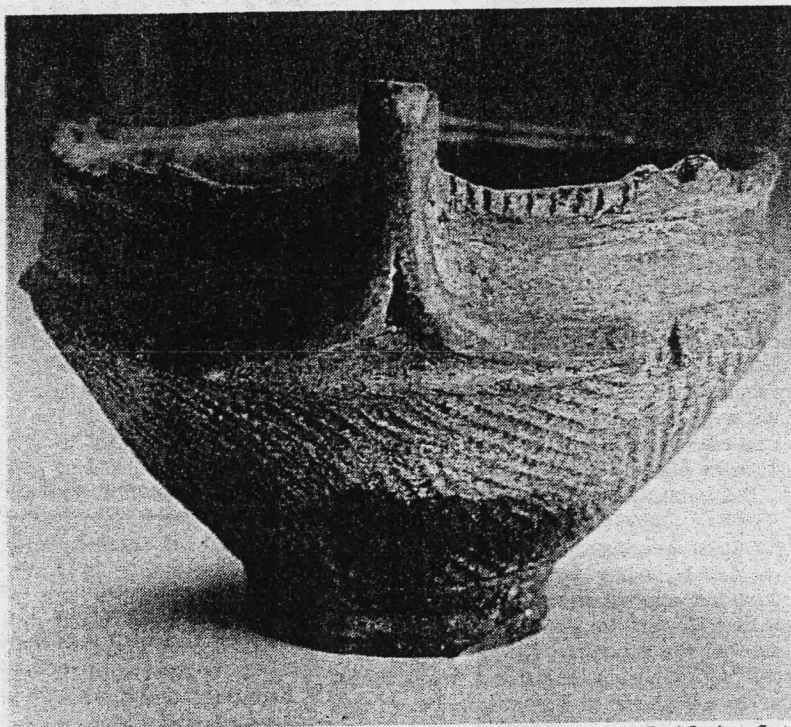


The New York Times

ART REVIEW

Where the Humble Pot Is a Cultural Pinnacle



Bard Graduate Center

A bowl, circa 1000 B.C., showing the impressed-cord technique.

By GRACE GLUECK

No one can accuse the Japanese of not loving pots; Japan is probably the most ceramics-conscious country in the world. A special reverence for crafts pervades Japanese aesthetics. (Before Westernization arrived in the mid-19th century, there was no word in the language for "fine arts.") And the making of pottery is considered on a par with painting, sculpture and architecture.

This may or may not have to do with Japan's credible claim to being the world's oldest pot-producing culture. Jomon pottery goes back to 10,500 B.C., 4,000 years before the oldest pieces from Egypt or Mesopotamia, and it is as venerable as early pot shards found in China.

What's remarkable about the Japanese ceramics tradition is the voluminous production of vernacular folk pottery over the centuries, simple but often beautiful ware handcrafted in a variety of styles by anonymous farmers, country people and others.

But after Japan opened to the West, the making of this peasant pottery began to decline, done in by the wave of industrialization that swept over the country and encouraged factory-produced wares. Not until the 1920's did a movement arise to preserve the fading handcraft practice.

Inspired by the British Arts and Crafts movement of the 1880's, the Japanese initiative was called *Mingei*, or people's art, by its chief proponent, Soetsu Yanagi, and over the years it helped restore demand for traditional handmade crafts and the preservation of craft techniques. Which brings us to "Quiet Beauty: 50 Centuries of Japanese Folk Ceramics From the Montgomery Collection," at the Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts, Design and Culture.

The show presents 100 examples of *Mingei*-style pottery, ranging from 3000 B.C. to about A.D. 1990, from the collection begun some 30 years ago by Jeffrey Montgomery, an American who lives in Switzerland. Today the collection is probably the most important assemblage of Japanese folk art outside Japan.

On view are cooking beakers, wine and storage jars, grinding and mixing receptacles, plates, dishes and bowls in stoneware and porcelain, sake bottles and flasks, oil-drip plates, ornamental sculpture pieces and flower arrangements, including a number of rarities. Don't expect high-style, high-end pottery elegance in this show, but the beauty and animation in some of the objects are remarkable.

One example is a 16th-century sake bottle of Bizen ware (from a town near the Inland Sea known for its iron-rich clay), considered one of the best of its type in the world. A "ship's bottle" of squat form, with a wide, flat bottom almost impossible to tip over, it has an eggplant-purple hue that is classic Bizen, enhanced by mustard-color rivulets dripping down from the bottle's shoulder that were accidentally produced during firing.

One of the show's oldest exhibits is a bowl from the Jomon period, which dates back to 10,500 B.C. The Jomon people supposedly came from Siberia by dugout canoe to the shores of Hokkaido, one of Japan's four main islands, and the most abundant remains of their culture have been found around Tokyo. Jomon means "cord pattern," so called because pottery decoration was accomplished by pressing twisted cord against the soft clay before it was dried and fired, creating patterns of dashes on the surface, often occurring in parallel lines.

The pale buff earthenware bowl, circa 1000 B.C., shows the pressed-cord pattern on much of its surface, from the bottom to a strip that circles it two-thirds of the way up. An unusual feature is a protrusion on the rim that thrusts up to resemble the stem post of an ancient wooden ship.

A great spur to cultural innovation in Japan came about with the introduction of the tea ceremony in the 13th century A.D. The custom of communally drinking a bowl of green tea for its medicinal and meditation-enhancing properties was brought back by monks who had studied Zen in China, and by the late 15th century it had become an elaborately codified secular custom, elevated to aesthetic status by Japanese culturati.

The implements associated with the tea ceremony also took on status, even though the Zen aesthetic dictated that they be made of unadorned natural materials. By the late 16th century, simple Korean and Japanese peasant wares were replacing the expensive Chinese utensils that the earliest tea masters had favored. And effects produced by slipshod manufacture of domestic wares gained aesthetic approval.

A big, rugged-looking 16th-century tea storage jar from the pottery town of Shigaraki, for example, has a rich reddish-buff surface, roughly nub-

Japan's venerable folk tradition barely survived industrialization.

bled by feldspar pebbles that fused during firing into small white beads. The gritty surface effect was originally a result of too-quick clay washing and screening in a cheap production process. But today the surface is much admired by connoisseurs. A decorative smattering of dark olive ash glaze deposited in the firing process adds to its appeal.

Among the more striking plates in the show is a 19th-century horse-eye platter of glazed stoneware, made in the town of Seto, still active in the production of pottery. In the 18th and 19th centuries, its kilns produced robust "picture" plates with painted decorations. The horse-eye plate, so called because of its distinctive rim design of concentric, mussel-shaped ovals in dark brown on a tan surface, was a major item in the Seto pottery line.

The snappiest part of the exhibition is the display of 20th-century contributions made by potters involved with the Japan Folk Art, or Mingei, Movement. The English potter Bernard Leach, working in Japan for a long period, served as an adviser, and two objects of his making are on view here.

One is an elegant rectangular bottle vase in stoneware with a rich glaze of varied browns; the other is a squat, pale yellowish jar whose surface is slightly scored by vertical indentations. Its shape reflects that of 17th- and 18th-century Korean porcelain storage jars, of which Leach had an example in his collection.

A more contemporary-looking piece is a stunning stoneware plate (1958) by Hamada Shoji, one of the movement's leaders, who was designated a Living National Treasure by the Japanese government. Glazed in his signature persimmon, a lustrous, reddish-brown iron glaze that shades to black, it is decorated with his favorite motif, two stalks of sugar cane.

There is even a work here by an American, Warren MacKenzie, a beautiful little tea bowl, circa 1990, in a lustrous brown glaze with irregular stripings of darker brown. Mr. MacKenzie, an internationally known potter and teacher who lives in Stillwater, Minn., worked with Leach as an apprentice in England in the 1950's, when he met the principals of the Mingei movement.

Not a show for those seeking fashions in pots, "Quiet Beauty" offers the fulfillment of its title promise and a glimpse of a long tradition that remains alive and well.

"Quiet Beauty: 50 Centuries of Japanese Folk Ceramics From the Montgomery Collection" is at the Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts, Design and Culture, 18 West 86th Street, Manhattan, (212) 501-3000, through June 15.