

Born in Australia, Made in Japan

On the 21st of January, 1990, I did not, in fact, come to Japan. I came to Mashiko. It just happened to be in Japan. I came in search of the "Mingei" ideal, the beauty of function which turned everyday life into art. You see, from a young age I had questioned the values of the disposable society in which I found myself, where convenience took precedence over beauty. Where beauty was an esoteric mystery existing somewhere in the realm of "Art". Where "Art" was sociopolitical comment hung in a gallery somewhere that you visited on a school excursion once a year...maybe. Making a good living was more important than living a good life. I was small and weak and the world around me was a fearful place, full of anger and violence, sickness and pain, death and wasted lives. I knew that there must be more to life than that, and, powerless though I felt, I dreamed of a better world.

Then I discovered pottery. The pottery studio in the old stables at the high school was a sanctuary. I was not particularly talented, but I was dedicated, and learned to make beauty from base earth, to express myself through this amorphous clay. More than this, it was a blend of art and science, of philosophy and physical labour, humanity and nature. When I chose to become a potter, it was not about what I wanted to do, but about who I wanted to be. Here was beauty which could enrich peoples lives, every day of their lives, and give them solace, peace and, perhaps, even hope. I learned about Mingei. About Leach, Yanagi and Hamada and their stance in defence of a healthy, humanistic and accessible art based on the functional beauty of traditional societies.

After four years at university studying ceramics and another four honing my skills and eking out a living as a functional potter, as opposed to a dysfunctional one I suppose, I came to Mashiko. This is where Shoji Hamada, National Living Treasure, had built his pottery and lived his life of peace and beauty. Mashiko, with it's 400 potteries and history of pottery going back 10,000 years. I was accepted as a "deshi", a disciple, by Tatsuzo Shimaoka, who was the leading "deshi" of Shoji Hamada and became a National Living Treasure in his own right. In his earthen floored studio, with it's thatched roof and paper windows, I learned to make his beautiful vessels on a traditional wooden kick wheel and fire them in the noborigama wood kiln. I learned that the healthier and more beautiful the process of making the vessel is, the more healthy and beautiful the finished vessel will be.

I stayed in Mashiko after graduating from Shimaoka's, finding my own voice in clay, striving towards the mingei ideal. A wife, four children and a wood kiln later, I was calmly happily ever aftering. Then, one afternoon, as I was finishing some tea bowls and vases, the world changed. The Great East Japan Earthquake and the nuclear disaster that followed forced us to leave our home in Mashiko. We sought refuge in my wife's home town of Minakami, in the mountains 200km west of Mashiko. After almost a year as refugees we moved into this 140 year old farm house and with the help of friends and strangers, locally and internationally, we are rebuilding our lives.

Shoji Hamada's grandson, Tomoo, gave me one of the old wooden kick wheels from the original Hamada Pottery to help me start my new studio. My studio has an earth floor, I draw water from the well, prepare my clay by hand and make my work on the Hamada wheel. I work by natural light and fire in a wood kiln. As potters have for thousands of years, in rhythm with the seasons, in harmony with nature.

The world has changed and needs to find a way forward. Perhaps the path lies in understanding that we are part of nature, sharing a common understanding of beauty. Art is the beauty, joy and peace of living every day, powerless no more, still dreaming of a better world.