

The Deshi's Journey

There is a beauty in nature which we all understand. It is not subject to the superficial tides of fashion nor exclusive to any race, culture or creed. It is quiet and unassuming and is born of a life in rhythm with nature, where the act of living itself becomes art. This is the essence, the core, of the Mingei philosophy; a philosophy that has guided my life and my work. A journey I began as a deshi under Tatsuzo Shimaoka, National Living Treasure, in Mashiko, Japan, over twenty years ago.

I sit quietly at my wooden kick wheel throwing yunomi tea cups, just the sound of my bare foot beating rhythmically on the smooth wood, the singing of the kettle on the stove and the susurration of the snow blowing past the window. Steam rises from my wet hands and the musty fragrance of earthen floors and fresh clay hang in the cold air. I remember other days like this, half a lifetime ago.

I had worked in potteries for twelve years in Australia before I came to Japan, since I was fourteen. Part time as general hand and then production thrower until I graduated from university with a degree in ceramics, then four years full time in my own studio. It was a good foundation, but only a foundation. Shimaoka's was a new beginning and a study in humility.

At 7:30 each morning, six days a week, I would walk up the hill to the pottery, open the wooden shutters on the thatched studio and light the fire to warm water ready for the workers to use when they arrived. Hamada, who was the senior deshi, and I would sweep the garden, clear the snow, or whatever other preparations were necessary for the day. A beautiful work environment is important in order to make beautiful work.

At 8:00am we would gather in the main studio around the stove, each in our reserved positions. Nearest the fire sat Fukuyan, the old and bent foreman, who had been working here since *he* was 14; he and his uncle, a production thrower, had been given to Shimaoka by Shoji Hamada in order to start the new pottery. Mitsuyan, the head thrower, sat the other side of the stove from him, Sabuyan, the general hand, between them facing the door, and their three wives beside and slightly behind them. Hamada and I would take positions near the door and wait for instructions. We would hear sensei's wooden "geta" sandals coming across the gravel from the house and conversation would stop, all heads turning attentively to the door.

Sensei was a man of few words, and even those chosen carefully. He was not concerned about my past experience, accepting me on the introduction and vouchsafe of a former deshi.

It was a matter of trust; how seriously I studied and worked would reflect on the man who introduced me. An introduction is not to be undertaken lightly. Shimaoka sensei entered the studio with a polite "Ohayou gozaimasu" morning greeting, then gave Fukuyan instructions for the day. He then left the main workshop for his own studio, and on a signal from Fukuyan we hustled to our various jobs.

My wheel space was closest to the door. I had specific vessels to make, 200 yunomi for example, or banchawan tea cups, coffee sets, sake cups and bottles, plates...throughout the year I made a wide range of vessels in sensei's "Jomon Zougan" (Rope Marked Inlay) style. It had taken me a month to become accustomed to the kick wheel, making "Nami" (Standard ware) yunomi, analyzing the shape, weighing the samples thrown by Mitsuyan, dissecting my own until they were acceptable. Often whole days of throwing would be rewedged and rethrown. Some deshi spend a year just making yunomi, sometimes more. Sensei was not concerned about deadlines for the deshi's work, only that it was up to his standard. The main role of the deshi was to support sensei and the workers, wedging clay, carrying boards, or any of a hundred tasks which need to be done but do not necessarily require the skill level of sensei or the workers. When glazing we would all work together, Sensei decorating and the workers dipping and pouring, with me at the end of the line, the wiper of other peoples bottoms. Whether I was foot wedging a half tonne of clay with Sabuyan for salt fired ware or moving ten tonne of split pine for the noborigama climbing kiln, polishing a "Youhen Machawan" with a wad of twisted straw rope for hours on end or passing Sensei box lids to sign, each task was important to the entire process; if I was not doing them someone else's time would be taken. It was only when there were no supporting tasks to be done that I could get to my own wheel and the production which had been assigned me.

That is the Japanese way of teaching; the onus is not on the teacher to teach, but on the student to learn. So I watched, and practiced, and listened, and analyzed. When I made mistakes and was taken to task over them, by either sensei *or* the workers *or* the senior deshi, I would listen respectfully and say "Thank you", for they had taken the time and effort to teach me.

Shimaoka once said to me, "I have no secrets, but if you do not ask, I will not tell you." You can learn **what** to do and **how** to do it by observation, but to understand **why** requires language and an ability to communicate abstract ideas. At the end of every day I would climb back down the hill to my wood and paper hut, 8,000 km from my native land, and study Japanese language for three hours, learning to read and write. On the days when I was

helping Sensei in his private studio, I would ask questions. He would chuckle and say, "Euan, you ask difficult things!" but I would ask nevertheless, and he would tell me, and I would listen.

Being a deshi is not a holiday, and it is not a finishing school. You must put your ego and your own agenda aside and be in the moment, a player in the symphony which Sensei is conducting. Otherwise you are just a tourist, and whatever truths you boast to know when you return home will be half truths and misconceptions. Tradition is more than just *knowing* techniques; you must *understand* the principles. That does not happen overnight.

Half a lifetime has passed since then. The last yunomi on the board finishes this hump of clay. I swing my legs out of the wheel well and slide across the polished wooden throwing deck to the earthen studio floor. Japan is my home now and I strive to live a simple life without pretense. Shimaoka sensei passed away in 2007, but my journey continues, and I will always be his deshi. My journey is to find my own voice in clay, as Shimaoka sensei did, and as Hamada sensei did before him, joining the 10,000 year long conversation which is pottery.