

【Commentary】

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In his just-published book, *Handmade Culture*, and in today's presentation, Professor Pitelka has demonstrated how a prominent Kyoto craft tradition can be interrogated via the tools of history and contemporary criticism. This is not critique for the sake of it, and I share Professor Pitelka's unspoken assumption that the historical record is more interesting than fiction even if it means dismantling a few cherished myths. Pitelka's investigation has exposed hitherto ignored aspects of a phenomena—shall we call it “raku in the lower case”—that profoundly transformed notions about how pottery should be made, used, and preserved—and by whom. Furthermore, we learn a lot more about the Raku family itself, who now may be understood as active participants in their own reinvention.

If we accept the notion that Raku (in the sense of an unbroken transmission within the Raku family) is an invented tradition, what is the “other scene” which has been erased or forgotten? Well, as Professor Pitelka tells us, there are, in the seventeenth century, rival producers, and from the 1800s, legions of amateurs for whom making a Raku bowl was an expression of creativity and cultivation on the same level of writing calligraphy or composing verse. But I wonder if we cannot find more outside of the tea and literati ethos. How about considering Raku as part of lead-glazed earthenware production as a whole? The product profile, which we now understand from urban archaeology, includes toys, planters, dolls, a range of ephemera that either addressed temporary fashions or could not be produced elsewhere. Potters were often piece workers, shifting from one novelty item to the next. They were at the bottom of the social scale. This very marginality of goods and status seems, in retrospect, suitable to the project of nascent wabicha, and its instability also explains why any family would want to devise ways of climbing out of it.

Professor Pitelka's attention to hand making is meritorious. Why was this “anachronistic” mode of production cherished in the early modern era? Aside from its suitability to tea drinking itself, the handmade bowl is a materialized form of genealogy, central to Raku identity. I think we are seeing the proliferation of an

older discourse, rooted in the Zen/literati synthesis in eleventh century China, wherein character counts more than professionalism. For Su Shih, among others, “meaning and spirit” (義氣 *yi-ch'i*) were more important than finish. As manifested in the world of tea, we move from admiring *bokuseki* from the hand of Zen teachers to carving flower vases and bowls. Gesture, whether it be the “flying white” of Daitokuji calligraphy, or the marks of the Raku potter’s spatula, makes the trace visible. By acknowledging the bowl’s implicit critique of professional/worldly conceits—the Dharma of Raku, as it were—the user becomes an heir.

Given the theme of this conference, we are interested in the manifold ways in which Kyoto nurtured Raku ceramics. We move from the incubator environment of late sixteenth-early seventeenth Kyoto—new peace, new inhabitants, new cultural practices—into an increasing rationalized cultural mecca of the 1660s. Raku as practice—part of the fluorescence of craft in post-1590s Kyoto—is augmented by Raku in the matrix of performing art/*geino*, another Kyoto specialty. Raku also becomes part of the Kyoto-centered print culture. Professor Pitelka clarifies this process. In every case, Kyoto “tradition” is informed by surplus (words, motifs, techniques, informants) rather than lack.

Weighty names are part of the surplus, exploited by the greater Raku network. And now, in the modern era, Chōjiro is on the pedestal as an individual creator. As to how much the putative “Chōjiro touch,” which supports this image, is indebted to post-Enlightenment aesthetics, we should remember that there is a non-Cartesian dimension to historical tea practice. Anyone who has been to a *chaji* (an intimate—and dimly lit—tea gathering as opposed to the flowery social occasions of the stereotype) will feel the need to employ senses other than sight. Such an environment validates (fetishizes) the tactile dimension, and helps us understand why Edward S. Morse delighted in joining tea connoisseurs in the early Meiji for blindfold connoisseurship of objects. This is not to deny Professor Pitelka’s assertion that today’s privileging of the Chōjiro touch is influenced by Western values; but other forces are brought into those characterizations as well.

Lastly, turning to Professor Pitelka’s idea of the “craftsman as hero” as ultimately being deleterious to traditional craft, I too would like to imagine a craft world without sanctioned heroes. It would be more lively and heterogeneous. Here we would find a lot of backers in the century just passed, including Yanagi Sōetsu, himself a

critic both of Raku and the excesses of hero-worship in the crafts. But the reality of Yanagi's movement was that it depended on the very mechanisms of canonicity and persona that its leader publicly decried. To rid crafts of its heroes is to overturn the political economy of tradition itself. We remember that hero worship benefits not only the heroes, but for those who might bask in the aura. Again returning to Kyoto, there are other Raku potters in the city, and while they may see the Raku house proper as a rival, it is more than likely that they are grateful to Kichizaemon for keeping the name and product in circulation; in other words, they all share in the success, and tolerate the ceiling.

Professor Pitelka's research is the first to fully interrogate one of the sacred pottery names in Japan. It is a field full of apologists and singularly bereft of critics. His project has probably strained some alliances, but in the balance Professor Pitelka has won far more admirers. He should be praised for his tenacity and courage. Raku and its Kyoto background becomes more heterogeneous, alluring—and accessible—under his discerning gaze.