

## ***In Pursuit of the Ethical Pot (2015)***

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I have spent a lifetime in search of the ethical pot. People here are astonished, even potters – they have never heard of this and they find it hard to accept that there is such a thing as a pot with ethics. We do not have extensive discussions on this subject in our local pottery culture. The idea of the “ethical pot” was made popular by the pottery icon Bernard Leach as early as the 1940s but it is virtually unheard of here.

The British curator of ceramics Oliver Watson explained that the ethical pot was the idea that if a pot was made, not just using the right technical skills but with the right attitude and values, this vessel would develop moral and spiritual dimensions<sup>1</sup>. The Japanese have long believed in *michi* (“the Way”) that when we make or do something, it is more than the physical form or appearance itself. They have *sado*, the Way of Tea, *shodo*, the Way of Writing, *kado* the Way of the Flower or the more popular term *ikebana*. I have said this before<sup>2</sup>, that *kado* or *ikebana* is not just about arranging flowers but embraces a philosophy of aesthetics, a set of principles or ethics and something more spiritual.

So, for me, the ethical pot is the embodiment of the skills as well as values, ideals and convictions about pottery as well as about life that I, as a potter, have developed over the years.

I am still in pursuit of this “ethical pot” even after so many years of pottery. In fact, I started my search for this pot since 1959 when I was just a trainee teacher doing pottery for my in-service course at the former Teacher’s Training College at Paterson Road and I continue my quest even today.

Are there rules and guides to help me to produce or choose a piece of pottery that holds the ethics of its potter and what is going to help me make a good choice? Quite often, my students, who are adults, have the same questions. It’s not as simple as we think.

Should I follow the guidelines and criteria of the Mingei Japanese Folk Art Movement? Or should I follow the Scandinavian Fiskars who have given rise to beautiful ceramics from the village of Fiskars from Finland or the European guidelines of the Bauhaus? There are many shared similarities between the different traditions.

The Mingei Movement (1926-1945) during the time of Yanagi Sōetsu, Hamada Shoji and Kanjiro Kawai basically stipulates the principles of honesty and utility in the use of materials to be reinforced by the quality of naturalness. Pots were produced without being forced, they were not artificial or imposing. Lastly, the Mingei movement which means “arts or crafts of the people” has a consciousness of the user, which was the ordinary folk-person. Objects were affordable and functional for the purposes of this user. This could be in tea rituals or other simple everyday activities.

This type of pottery embraces the philosophy of *wabi sabi* that accepts imperfections and impermanence as an essential part of life and an essential part of *beauty*. It implies the opposite of “bourgeois fine art” and rejects extravagance or the perfect but soul-less work of factory manufactured objects.

Yanagi Sōetsu published *The Unknown Craftsman*<sup>3</sup> with ideas that were very influential. The anonymous craftsman was respected. The ideal potter was characterised by humility and did not strive for fame or to make a name for himself as is the case for some modern and contemporary ceramic artists. Another pillar of the Mingei movement was Bernard Leach who introduced its aesthetics and philosophy to British studio pottery as well as extended Mingei’s influence to American ceramics.

Then there are the pottery traditions of the Scandinavian region of Denmark, Norway and Sweden and the Nordic countries such as Finland. The Fiskars Village in Finland for instance has a unique pottery culture and structure that I have personally encountered in 2012 with my wife Saleha. The village is linked with the Fiskars Company as well as the Fiskars Co-operative of artists and designers that own brands such as the famous Arabia line of porcelain. The village is located about an hour from Helsinki and is a centre for Finnish design and hosts international exchanges, workshops and residencies. The Fiskars brand had its origins in the ironwork factory in the village but is now global and offers Finnish designers a platform to showcase their work.

Fiskars craftsmen, including its potters, have always been very disciplined and they produce clean lines without the brashness of some modern potters. Their creations are architecturally sound, functionally well-thought through and in simple words, very neat and technically perfect in concept and approach.

Another European ceramic tradition is the Bauhaus pottery school of the 1920s. Basically German in origin, Bauhaus designs suggest understanding functionality and rationality in the use of materials and their creations are quite often technically sound. Their designs were modern, functional and “classic”.

Nowadays, much of contemporary pottery has gone haywire: it is no longer skill-focused or craft-orientated like the Japanese or dominated by clean lines like those from the Fiskars (Finland) and Scandinavian countries. Ceramic artists from the States (America) and some modern and contemporary potters are extremely unorthodox - anything goes as long as the art is made from clay. The clay need not be glazed or fired and can be part of an installation or performance art.

My travels to Europe, Japan, the Scandinavian countries, the Middle East and Southeast Asia made me aware of the characteristics of the pottery cultures in these locations. And for many years, you could say I was and still am, driven by the question, where is the ethical pot?

I admire the ethics of the Japanese and their belief in the anonymous craftsman and gravitate towards the clean lines of the Scandinavian approach as my personal taste. I have also concluded that the ideal potter must have his own identity and culture to arrive at his own "ethical pot".

We must explore indigenous materials and local techniques and combine this with timeless, elegant design. We cannot depend on traditional methodologies alone but must improve them with modern ideas and approaches.

Ideally, the potter must use local materials and motifs and evolve an aesthetic that expresses a sense of time and place as well as one's personal identity. For me, this means many things - being aware of my Singapore Malay identity, my spiritual life as a Muslim, my family and social life, the things and activities that I find joy in - gardening, music, motor-biking. I sometimes take clay from the earth found in Singapore or places I have lived in or travelled to; you will see Arabic decoration or the *kendi* form in my works while at other times, you see Japanese or Scandinavian influences; I often refer to popular culture from local bands to Western pop music to P. Ramlee films and use them in my titles.

The cultural impact of pottery culture is long-term in nature. It is necessarily stored in skills and one's understanding of one's own culture and one's actual life experiences.

Pottery as an *artistic* craft is always *individual*, bearing the marks of its maker. Learning this is a process that takes a long time – lifelong learning, in the true sense of the expression. A manual skill that creates objects made by hand, an artistic craft is ultimately knowledge and a consciousness that cannot be taught academically. It has to be learnt and absorbed by doing it oneself and refined when you have developed as a person. It is an intellectual resource, a method of harnessing the accumulated resource but which has to be physically - and not theoretically - undertaken by the potter.

### *A Life Long Journey*

There is no short cut for an apprentice or practitioner in pottery *en route* to becoming a pottery *master* although some have paired up with each other to “shorten” the journey.

To learn how to *make* pottery you only have to take a course from an institution or at a hobby centre. To learn about the history of pottery or to learn it scholastically we may look to some potter or be tutored by a ceramics academic. It is different if you want to *master* pottery – where you understand pottery in a most profound way - as a physical form but also as a philosophy about aesthetics and about life, humanity and nature. I have said this about Japanese *ikebana* or *kado* and it is similar with pottery.

It is a life-long journey. You have to be an apprentice for years to even get a grasp of the technicalities of the craft. You have to exchange glazes and ideas, immerse in clay culture, refine your skills and share many essential techniques with others. It is a memory stored in skills, maintaining the links between past and present.

Historically, it can be seen that most well-known potters partner or pair with another potter. Their store of knowledge is shared with one another and this sharing is a kind of catalyst. Doing it alone doing may sometimes be insufficient – one must galvanise and harness from other potters.

Bernard Leach and Hamada Shoji, Hans Coper and Lucie Rie are prime examples. The outcomes of their combined effort even though they were different individually has been tremendous. It shortens the life-long journey of learning.

My “partnership” with Takeshi Hibi is an example. I first met Hibi-san in the 1970s when he was a glaze scientist and technician and I was a student potter who arrived in Tajimi on my scholarship. We exchanged knowledge and experiments for many years. We often visited each other in Tajimi and Singapore. This kind of mutual sharing shortens the life-long learning journey and we have had these exchanges from 1972 right up to the present.

With each passing year, I believe more and more in the system of mentorship and apprenticeship. Perhaps the word “teaching” should not be used as the process is much more than the transfer and passing on of technical skills or knowledge. It is instead an interaction that develops moral fibre and character.

The apprentice assimilates not just methods, techniques and processes but also starts to understand and hopefully, adopt and internalise a set of beliefs and principles through the discipline and rigour of the apprenticeship. The daily interaction with one's *sinsei* means a daily exposure to his technical mastery, his daily regime and routine as well as his *sinsei*'s ethics and principles.

Through this, the apprentice learns patience, conscientiousness, humility, discipline – not just to arrive at being a highly adept potter but also to arrive at being a person of integrity, of humility, of awareness, of compassion, of thought and of action.

When my apprentices go beyond technical competence and start to develop this essential moral fibre and consciousness, they will arrive at their ethical pot.

The Way of the pot, of pottery, is a long arduous journey - only the hardy can take it and can endure. No short cuts. We should remember that we should not work alone and that we do not walk alone.

*This essay was developed from an original text dated 3 April 2015, handwritten by Iskandar Jalil and adapted to include excerpts and exchanges from oral interviews conducted with editor/writer Lindy Poh including an oral interview on 3 April 2015.*

<sup>1</sup> Oliver Watson propounded that “a pot, lovingly made in the correct way and with the correct attitude would contain a spiritual and moral dimension” in W. Oliver, *Studio Pottery - Twentieth Century British Ceramics in the Victoria and Albert Museum*, (Phaidon Press Limited, London 1990) pg 15

<sup>2</sup> L. Poh & Iskandar J., *Material, Message, Metaphor: The Pottery Voice of Iskandar Jalil* (Art-2 Gallery Pte Ltd Singapore with the National Arts Council Singapore), pg 26.

<sup>3</sup>S. Yanagi, S. Hamada, B. Leach *The Unknown Craftsman: A Japanese Insight Into Beauty*, (Kodansha International, Tokyo Japan, 1972)