BERNARD LEACH – (1887 – 1979)

The legacy of British ceramic artist Bernard Leach encompasses his widely read books, his prolific production of pottery, his many lectures and demonstrations and the students who worked with him. Raised in the East and captivated by the Eastern traditions of ceramic art, Leach’s passion was to “…merge the art of the technical West with that of the organic East” even as Leach did in his own work and his own philosophy. For most of his long life Leach crossed the barrier between Eastern and Western cultures trying to blend the best of each to attain a pure and simple style of art and living, the “unknown craftsman” of his writings, creating for the love of the materials and the purity of the function. The visit of Leach and Hamada to America had a major effect on the revival of functional pottery and the influence of traditional Japanese pottery on Western ceramic art. As probably the most influential British potter of the twentieth century, his concepts of the practice and role of the potter continue to generate both admiration and controversy among present-day potters.


ARTIST’S STATEMENT – BERNARD LEACH

“…since the potter belongs to our own time and aspires to the position of a creative artist, he is divided in his allegiance between contemporary movements in his own art and this challenge from the classical periods of the East. I hope that out of total inheritance we are moving towards balance…”

...We are no longer simple-minded peasants. We inherit all, and we stand alone…The quality which appears to me fundamental in all pots is life in one or more of its modes; inner harmony, nobility, purity, strength, breadth and generosity, or even exquisiteness and charm. But it is one thing to make a list of the virtues of man and pot and another to interpret them in the counterpoint of convex and concave, hard and soft, growth and rest for this is the breathing of the Universe in the particular.”


RESUME – BERNARD LEACH

1887  Born, Hong Kong
1897  Beaumont School, Old Windsor Park, England
1903  Slade School of Arts
1906  Clerk, Hong Kong Shanghai Banking Corporation, London, England
1908  London School of Art, London, England
1909          Etcher, Tokyo, Japan
1910          Married Muriel Hoyle
1911-1920     Studied pottery with Ogaka Kenzan VI, Japan
1920          Founded St. Ives Pottery, Cornwall, England, with Shoji Hamada
1932-1934     Instructor, Dartington Hall School, Devon, England
              Founded Shinner’s Bridge Pottery
1934-1935     Japan
1941-1973     Potter and teacher, the St. Ives Pottery
1943          Divorced Muriel Hoyle Leach
1944          Married Laurie Cookes
1952          Japan
1956          Divorced Laurie Cookes Leach
              Married Janet Darnell
1962          Commander of the Order of the British Empire
1966          Order of the Sacred Treasure, Second Class, Japan
1973          Companion of Honour
1974          Japan Foundation Cultural Award
1979          Died, St. Ives, Cornwall, England
1997          Retrospective exhibition, Crafts Council, England

**BIOGRAPHY – BERNARD LEACH**

British artist Bernard Leach’s early years were spent in the East, a part of the world that would ultimately influence the direction of his art. His British parents were wealthy, his father a colonial judge in Hong Kong at the time of Leach’s birth. His mother died during childbirth and the infant Leach was taken to Japan to live with his maternal grandparents in Kyoto. After his father’s remarriage, Leach moved back with his father and for the next few years the family moved between Hong Kong and Singapore. An only child, Leach remembered his early years as solitary ones, primarily spent drawing and making his own amusements. It was not until Leach was 10 that he first moved to England where he was enrolled in the Beaumont School, a Jesuit boarding school near Windsor. The curriculum was very strict, Leach an indifferent
A student who excelled primarily at art. In 1903 with his father in ill health, his parents returned to England and Leach began his formal art training at the Slade School of Art, studying under Henry Tonks. His schooling was cut short with his father’s death and for a short time Leach worked as a clerk in the Hong Kong Shanghai Banking Corporation in London. Leach hated the commercial world, and upon receiving his inheritance when he turned 21, he completed his art training at the London School of Art in 1908, concentrating in etching. In 1909 Leach returned to the East, moving to Japan to teach etching and make a living as an artist. He and his wife, his cousin Muriel Hoyle whom he married in 1910, were to remain there for the next 11 years, living on the small amount he earned from his work and a legacy from his father.

A chance introduction to ceramics at a party in 1911 would prove a turning point in his career. Leach was introduced to the raku technique and was so drawn to it that he apprenticed himself to Ogata Kenzan VI (Urano Shigkichi), the then master of raku. Leach excelled as a student and in 1913 Kenzan presented Leach and fellow apprentice Kenkichi Tomimoto with their “Densho,” their proof of succession to become the seventh Kenzan at the master’s death, and invited him to have his own kiln and workshop. Over the next few years Leach would have several successful exhibitions and come to know a number of the Japanese ceramic artists and art historian and writer Soetsu Yanagi, the leader of the Mingei movement which emphasized the traditional Japanese crafts. In addition to his artistic development, Leach found in the East a spiritual connection, becoming interested in Eastern religions and eventually espousing the Bahai faith; his theories of the East as representing the spiritual and the West the material evolved. “Art, as we endeavour towards perfection, is one with religion, and this fact is better recognized in the East...All from West to furthest East are unitive and not dualistic. Our dualism commenced when we separated intellect from intuition...,” Leach wrote in Drawings, Verse and Belief.1

Leach’s pottery ultimately burned down, and in 1920 he, along with his wife and their three children, moved back to England where they settled in St. Ives, Cornwall, with the generous funding of a local patron, Frances Horn. Accompanying the Leaches was Shoji Hamada, a potter that Leach had met in Japan and who was skilled in glazes and kiln firing, and together they built a climbing kiln for high temperature and an updraught kiln for earthenware and raku. The early years were difficult, the amount of loss in the kiln quite high, and the art pottery which they were producing too innovative for the British market. After three years Hamada returned to Japan to continue his studies and work but the two would remain close friends and colleagues for the rest of their lives. To increase sales Leach began focusing on functional domestic ware, accepting the idea of production pottery, and taking in students who also helped with the production work. One of his first students was Michael Cardew who would make his own name in ceramic art and later Leach’s son David. Leach also began writing, his first book A Potter’s Outlook, published in 1928. Leach remained at St. Ives until 1932 when he accepted an offer from Leonard and Dorothy Elmhirst to set up a pottery making handmade tableware at Dartington Hall, a progressive school and colony in Devon. At the time, his marriage to Muriel was ending and he had become attracted to Laurie Cookes, a worker at the Pottery whom he would later marry, so the move from St. Ives served as a personal transition as well.

Leach was invited to return to Japan in 1934 to tour country potteries. He spent over a year traveling with Soetsu Yanagi both in Japan and Korea, studying the traditional pottery and crafts, and forming his philosophy of the simple craftsman, leading ultimately to the publication of A Potter’s Book in 1940. In his absence the St. Ives Pottery was run by his son David, who enrolled in a course of pottery management, much to his father’s disapproval, and set about introducing changes to make the pottery more businesslike and viable. By the time Leach returned to England and moved in with Laurie, the idea of a pottery at Dartington had been
abandoned, partly because of the slow progress and partly because of the political unrest as the threats of war increased. When war broke out in England and David was called to serve, Leach returned to St. Ives to take over the Pottery, continuing to produce ware under difficult circumstances.

After David’s return from the war, he again took over management of the pottery production leaving his father free to travel, giving lectures and demonstrations. The marriage of Leach and Laurie was foundering, and in 1952 Leach once again returned to Japan for a long visit, received by the art community there with warmth and esteem. His book A Potter’s Portfolio had been published in 1951, and in 1952 he organized the International Conference of Craftsmen in Pottery and Textiles which delegates attended from Africa, America, Asia and Europe. Leach, Hamada, and Yanagi also traveled to the United States, giving lectures and demonstrations, introducing the potters of the West to the arts and philosophies of the East, and encouraging the rise of the functional pottery movement in the West. Leach would later write of this exchange of ideas and cultures in his book Beyond East and West. He was also to meet American potter Janet Darnell and she would become his third wife in 1956. David left the St. Ives Pottery to establish his own pottery at Lowerdown Cross, Devon, and Janet Leach became the manager of St. Ives, continuing to operate it until 1983. Leach focused on making pots, and while nearly 70, some of the work done at this time is among his best. He published three more books during this time: A Potter in Japan, Kenzan and his Tradition, and A Potter’s Work. He continued to travel, exhibit and lecture until 1972 when failing eyesight brought his years of creating ceramic art to an end. That year he wrote The Unknown Craftsman. Drawings, Verse and Belief was published a year later; Hamada: Potter in 1975; A Potter’s Challenge in 1976; and Beyond East and West was completed with the help of his secretary and published in 1978. The following year Bernard Leach died in St. Ives at the age of 92.

Janet Leach inherited the Pottery after Leach’s death and soon ended the production of functional ware; she continued to make pots until her death in 1997. Over the next few years the Pottery came under governmental protection for its cultural heritage, and restoration of the property into a museum and showroom began. The legacy of Bernard Leach lives on, however, in his sons and grandsons. David Leach’s workshop produced tableware as well as stoneware and pottery and David’s three sons became potters as well. Bernard Leach’s second son, Michael, also set up a pottery and his son operates a pottery.

Emmanuel Cooper has written that Leach’s pots “fall into those inspired by the West and those by the East.” The earthenware dishes and pots with their honey-colored glazes, slip-trailing and combing drew from English traditional pottery and the decorations reflected Leach’s strong graphic abilities. The Eastern influence shows up in some of the decorative motifs but more significantly in the raku ware and the high-fired stoneware and porcelain. Cooper notes that to the English eye the stoneware and porcelain appears very Eastern while to the Japanese they seemed very Western. He usually made sketches of his pieces before making them, and often the decoration was as carefully sketched out as the pot. The decorations were integrated with the shape of the pot itself, and the entire piece – shape, decoration, material and tools – was designed to produce a harmonious whole.

It is not surprising, however, that such a prolific, well-known, passionate artist should engender controversy and criticism, both of his art and his philosophies. As Garth Clark said in The Potter’s Art: “Part of a balanced appraisal … requires that his achievements as a potter and scholar be viewed separately.” Clark states that Leach’s pottery was somewhat academic, that he did not have the easy touch with clay that others such as Cardew and Hamada exhibited, although his pots were good, his best ones particularly so, and his decorations showed his gifts.
Clark notes also that Leach never came to terms with the modern movements in ceramics, remaining, in the words of Michael Cardew ‘a perfectly preserved Edwardian.’"5 John Britt, writing in Critical Ceramics found numerous contradictions among Leach’s stated beliefs and his own work and practices. What is unchallenged, however, is the place Bernard Leach occupies in ceramic history and particularly in ceramic art history of the twentieth century, where his influence on the revival of functional ceramics, the forging of the relationship of Eastern and Western ceramic traditions, his contributions to the ongoing discussion of art theory and practice, as well as his writings and work assure him of a pre-eminent position.

During his lifetime Leach was the recipient of a number of awards that honored his contributions to the world of art, among them: Commander of the Order of the British Empire; Order of the Sacred Treasure, Second Class, Japan; Companion of Honour; and the Japan Foundation Cultural Award. Retrospectives of his work were held in 1977 and 1997. Since his death many of his papers and a large number of his own pots as well as those he collected of other artists have been housed in the Bernard Leach Archive at the Crafts Study Centre, United Kingdom.

4. Ibid., 154.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY – BERNARD LEACH

Books and Catalogs


**Periodicals**


Mangus, Kirk. “Permission to be an Individual.” *Ceramics Monthly* 48 no. 7 (September 2000): 114-120.


Shapiro, Mark. “Lyric Functionalism.” *Studio Potter* 33 no. 2 (June 2005): 30-35.


Video and Other Media


“The Leach Pottery 1952.” Toronto, Canada: Marty Gross Film Productions, 2000, 1952 VHS


GALLERY REPRESENTATION – BERNARD LEACH

Garth Clark Gallery, 24 West 57 Street, Suite 305, New York, New York 10019

WEB SITES – BERNARD LEACH

http://www.leachpottery.com/
Web site of Leach Pottery studio and museum

http://www.garthclark.com/Artist-Detail.cfm?ArtistsID=135
Garth Clark Gallery web site for Bernard Leach

http://www.frankpishkur.com/lecture2.doc
Articles on Bernard Leach and Shoji Hamada

http://bahai-library.com/?file=scott_bw18_bernard_leach.html

http://www.csc.ucreative.ac.uk/index.cfm?articleid=19922
Crafts Study Centre series of articles and photos about Bernard Leach

http://www.ccca.ca/c/writing/w/watson/wat012t.html

Biography and photos of Bernard Leach, Aberystwyth Ceramics Collection

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ty0ePBZHoUc
Video of Simon Leach Pottery

http://www.bahai-library.org/bafa/l/leach.htm
Biography of Bernard Leach with photos

http://www.oakwoodceramics.co.uk/DartingtonB.htm
Articles on the Dartington Conferences 1952, 2003, with references to Leach

http://www.uwic.ac.uk/ICRC/issue003/leach_cardew.htm

http://www.oakwoodceramics.co.uk/Magazine6PR1B.htm

April 2009