IN REPLY TO PAUL BROWN

(Bernard Leach sends us this reply from R.M.S. Ivernia on the outward crossing for his American lecture tour and exhibition. This article, following Paul Brown’s “Towards a New Standard”, is published in the place of “Tea Bowls of Koyetsu”, originally announced. The extract from “A Potter in Japan” is printed by the courtesy of the publishers, Faber and Faber.—Ed.)

Rather than attempt a long reply in defence of my beliefs, I think that part of a chapter of my recently published “A Potter in Japan”, describing the aesthetic of my Japanese friends, will serve better as it is more recent than the “Towards a Standard” in “A Potter’s Book” and less personal.

I shall only make a few direct comments upon Paul Brown’s article. Let me start by saying that I feel it quite right that another generation should reassess the ideas which I put forward twenty years ago. My own ideas have in fact undergone development and change. I certainly no longer believe that “good taste” is basic, if I ever did. I think it is an incidental and secondary virtue and that vitality is the primary criterion of the good pot.

Much that Paul Brown writes about the dichotomy between our art-school training and industrial practice has justification and I can understand how he feels that I am indirectly responsible for encouraging it. As far as that is concerned he will, I think, see why I am quite unrepentant; but when it comes to a question of a more contemporary basis for a potter’s aesthetic we may not see entirely eye to eye. That the arts should reflect, or anticipate, their
time goes without saying, but what happens when the time is sick? And who would say that ours is not?

We appear to be at the close of an epoch and at the beginning of another. All the old-established values have a question mark against them and the new have not been formulated. It is a free-for-all, no holds forbidden, no road set. I would like to suggest that present evolution in the arts is steadily receiving more and more impetus from the Far East as its antithetical content penetrates and counterbalances our own more scientific and rational thought. Consider its effect upon architecture and painting besides pottery. I would agree that amongst potters the assimilation and digestion is incomplete, hence the complaint of "Anglo-Chinese" or "Neo-Sung" thrown at us. But the process of integration is vast, far beyond the capacity of one man or a few years. Had we in England had the service of the "master of the house", the architect, trained, first, in hand-workshops, to act as a bond between studio and factory, as the Danes have had, the story of the last thirty years might have been different. I am in agreement with Hamada and Dr. Yanagi that the best of the Danish furniture is the most significant craft contribution of today, combining as it does contemporary ideas of form with traditions of right handling of wood. (Incidentally, past English.) Where are the pots which correspond?

The young potter has had to raise his sights from his own land and its traditions to all lands and all traditions. The big divide is between what we call East and West. We can never go back to the 18th or 19th centuries, or even to Sung. We cannot go backward anywhere, so we must go forward, but not before we take our bearings. In that respect, as a potter travelling between England and Japan and reporting in print, I may have made some contribution. Time will show. Time will also show whether the pots which I have made, by which I set more store than by my writing, are alive enough to have a lasting effect. Others will judge.

My belief is that we do not go forward by group but that groups form naturally around path-finders. That is why I question the sufficiency of new schools for potters with an aesthetic which is vaguely "post-Bauhaus".

Sung, or Corean, Persian, or mediaeval and 18th century
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English standards, are only so many jumping-off places for genuine creative potters.

The creative process is fluid and unteachable in its essence.

Oriental Principles behind the Japanese Craft Movement

For me the greatest gain has been in appreciation of the meaning "Mu", or unattachment, deeply imbedded in Taoism, Buddhism and ever present in Zen-inspired arts and crafts. It is from this Eastern source that I believe that the Western world can draw sustenance and fresh inspiration. This is the ground out of which Oriental art has grown: this is the source of Shibuza, of nothingness, of emptiness, of non-action, of Nirvana. But Western interpretations of this antithetical thought have hitherto been altogether too impregnated with overtones of rational thinking. "Mu" is no mere negative but a state of undifferentiated being unattached to either negative or positive. It is the quality we most admire in pots and it is that rare condition of which we catch glimpses in men and women when the Spirit of Life blows through them as wind through an open window. Then action flows easily and naturally and without over-stress. This is the antidote to a "universal grey" but it is not the outcome of individualism or of intellect. It is the treasure of the humble craftsman and the haven of the greatest artist.

Dr. Yanagi's aesthetic philosophy, consistently supported by Shoji Hamada and Kanjiro Kawai, is rooted in a belief in the "unknown craftsman". In the kind of people I found at Onda and in the kind of work which sprang from life nurtured in the framework of an old and wholesome culture. The twin foundations of such life and such work are belief and humility, two virtues of which we have become sadly bereft in the Western world. Dr. Yanagi’s opponents accuse him, and the movement, of being retrogressive, they say that an attempt is being made in the teeth of progress to manufacture folk-art. I do not believe that he is so foolish as to think that such a thing is possible. The challenge in his doctrine is more radical than that for it is directed at the modern artist, the artist craftsman and the Tea Master alike. He does not suggest that they should pretend to become uncon-
conscious but, for the lack of a better term, what I shall call superconscious. He states that the artists and the craftsmen, whether they be Bachs or Beethovens, Koyetsus or Cellinis, produced less significant art than the unknown writers of Plain Song, and the unknown weavers of Coptic or Peruvian tapestry, or all the host of unknown artisans who worked humbly in clay and stone and metal and fibre in the protective unconsciousness of great belief all over the world. This is a drastic revaluation which leaves the modern artist stripped naked and on a dunghill of over-stressed individualism. It is an attack upon our current social values, but it is not an attack upon the function of the genuine artist in his proper unobtrusive place in a healthy society. What Yanagi proposes is an abandonment of ego-centricity and pride, which is but good Buddhism and good Christianity. Losing oneself in art in order to find oneself, whether by the simple way of belief in tradition and hard repetitive work, let us say as a journeyman potter, or by the intense search and self-discipline of “satori”, a reintegration, of the more conscious artist or craftsman.

It may be that I personally would place more emphasis upon this process of reintegration, or attainment of wholeness, in the individual artist, because I am one, but it is also because, a Western man, we are disintegrated. But this has also become true of modern, and particularly urban, Japanese. Which is illustrate by the fact that forty years ago in Tokyo artists were close together than they are today, and also by the imitation and indigestion to which I have drawn attention on many pages. The process in Japan has been hastened by an increase in an already powerful national inferiority complex which was the inevitable result of the first defeat of a proud race. Therefore Dr. Yanagi meaning to us Westerners and to Westernized Japanese is reintegration, whereas to the Japanese artisan, as distinguished from, artist, and to those of a conservative turn of mind, it is the preservation of integration.

So much for the people and their life; with regard to the works which they produce, these may be judged upon their merit and defects, but we can rest assured that if they are good there must be truth of being behind them, thought that may be, as often is, only a private truth of life in comparison to the congre
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gate truth of good traditional periods of society. The best of these appear to me to lie not in those periods when we are accustomed to look for them, such as the High Renaissance, but earlier, even perhaps in what for centuries we have called the Dark Ages. These incubating or smouldering periods burst into first flame in China in the fifth or sixth centuries, in Japan in the seventh to eighth and in Europe between the tenth and twelfth, and never was the light so bright again, although there may have been more of it. Then it was that “men of abounding energy”, those whom we later called geniuses, themselves enflamed, worked in the common cause like Prince Shotoku or the great monks of East and West.

If I read Yanagi right, and he says I do, this is what he means. The only difference between us is that he, however he may feel the desirability of the sweeping unifying power of a great inclusive wind of religion, does not see its likelihood, but as a Japanese with the characteristic “seeing eye”, knows that art is an unarguing language of communication between one man’s heart and another in his “Kingdom of Beauty”. I, as the reader may have already sensed, believe that the Great Wind is already on the way.

Another form of the same kind of criticism which is levelled against Yanagi and his followers is that he, and they, talk and write so much about “Gate” (the ordinary) and so little about “Jōhin” (the refined). Taking the former to mean the plains and the latter to mean the hills, it appears to me that the landscape is incomplete without both and that the one calls for the other. If, as I am told, it is true that Yanagi writes little about the mountains, it is surely because they are molehills and not real mountains. Koyetsu not a mountain? Bach not a mountain? That certainly is looking gift horses in the mouth! And yet I am with Yanagi for wanting to look every gift horse in the mouth in this age of ours, for if we don’t we’ll never get out of the rut we’ve got into. It has taken us long enough to discover that we are in one and most people, including artists, complain, but won’t admit the fact even now. Besides, Yanagi has never said that both of these great men were not mountains in their landscape, what he did say was that there have been bigger ranges formed out of whole peoples over long periods of time. We are at the close of one age and at the commencement of another, that of the maturity of mankind as a
whole, and one of the focal points where the greatest experiment in the fusion of the two halves of human culture is painfully taking place is Japan. Our English historian, Arnold Toynbee, explains clearly how Japan has gone headlong into industrialism and lost the ballast of her inheritance. He also states that “unity is the only alternative to self-destruction in an Atomic Age”. If, as I believe, this is true, we must seek a road towards human unity. Beyond my love of the Japanese people and of the beauty of their land and the warp of its culture, that is why I have come back again and again. It is the excuse for the foregoing pages with all their shortcomings.

This is Dr. Yanagi’s contribution to the world of art and by reason of his lifelong search, persistence and eloquence he has gathered his followers and held together the strongest craft movement of our day. By the examination of art in the light of “Mu” he has broken the dualistic tensions between the “I” and the “not I”, between artist and craftsman and between the individual and community. One of the best examples of “Mu” in pottery is the work of Cōjeans during the Ri Dynasty, but it shows itself all through Corean crafts to such an extent that it is almost impossible to find any really bad, impure or diseased work. As with the drawings of unspoiled children, no ego obtrudes, never does self-consciousness show its uncomely face.

To a large extent this is true about folk-art. Such has been the service of the unknown craftsman all over the world. We who have split personalities and split culture are no longer unself-conscious. We have to discover a process of reintegration; the journey from the self back to the whole.