



Hamada Shōji was a Japanese potter who lived from December 9, 1894 to January 5, 1978. At the age of sixteen Hamada decided to concentrate on ceramics[1]. Originally he considered painting, but his utilitarian ideals prevailed; "Even a bad pot has some use, but with a bad painting, there is nothing you can do with it except throw it away.[3]" Hamada is almost never mentioned without a reference to Bernard Leach, another influential potter. The two met in 1919 at an exhibit of Leach's work in Tokyo[2]. The two found they had a lot in common and began traveling and working together. Before meeting Leach, Hamada was intrigued by the simple straightforward designs of Leach's work. The first major project the two potters worked on together was the building of nobrigama kilns for Leach's studio at St. Ives. A cultural irony that may have set the tone for the relationship between the two is that Leach's first exhibit was in Tokyo, but Hamada's first exhibit was in London in 1923. In 1926, Hamada and others (Yanagi Soetsu, Kawai Kanjiro) were responsible for the Mingei movement in Japan[1]. The philosophical premise of the movement is "minshu-teki kogei" (hand-crafted art of ordinary people)[3]. It is suspected that his involvement with this movement is what lead to Hamada not signing his work, and allowing the work itself to be the signature[1] .

Hamada was considered to be a very influential potter in his time. In 1955, Hamada was designated as a living national treasure in Japan. Leach and Hamada were driving forces behind the Orientalism movement in the western world, as English art enthusiasts became excited about Numerous modern potters claim to derive their style from his work. Michael Cardrew, a significant English studio potter and first apprentice of Leach Pottery, once said "The landing of Bernard Leach and Shoji Hamada on the

island of Britain in 1920 was for craftsmen potters the most significant event of the twentieth century[1]." The village of Mashiko, in which Hamada decided to settle, has become a world recognized pottery center that is synonymous with Japanese folk ceramics[3].

Hamada's work is not complicated, ornate or sculptural at all. His work is simple and true to its form. His utilitarian view can be strongly detected in his work. While Hamada's work is not ornate, it isn't of the wabi-sabi style. The work is very well refined. Hamada added simple decoration to his work by adding brush stroke characters or geometric line drawings. Hamada practiced a variety of construction methods, including wheel thrown, press mould and slab. The influence of Japanese, Korean and English pottery can be found in his work. Hamada sought to not copy the styles he studied (as is common with apprenticed artists), but instead draw from their influence and follow his own creativity to produce his own unique style[3]. Hamada was careful to integrate new styles with the traditional styles to enhance both, being careful to not degrade either [3].

A large portion of Hamada's later years were spent teaching and demonstrating his craft. He was many times acknowledged for his accomplishments. His peers, such as Leach, praised him for his understanding of a Japanese concept of "Mu", a quality that is said to be found in all good art [5]. The Japanese government acknowledged his significance to the cultural heritage by designating him "Holder of Intangible Cultural Property" in 1955. In 1968 the Emperor of Japan conferred the Order of Culture to him. The pottery and folk craft communities awarded him such honors as being appointed as the director of Japan's Folk Art Museum [3].

Observing Hamada at work, one might think that Hamada was meditating and not throwing pottery. Hamada sat quietly while working, completely balanced in himself and focused on his work. Many modern potters seem to have lost touch with this type of ceramic work, as most will hold conversations with each other, listen to music and be involved in other distractions not related to the process. Western potters are the complete opposite of Hamada's personal process. Even the most careful of modern western potters can only imitate Hamada's understanding of traditional folk pottery, none seem to have the necessary understanding to execute it as he did.

Hamada Shoji was a potter, artist, teacher and craftsman in his life. His work and style remain, and likely will remain as long as the practice of pottery continues.

1. Digby/Birks, "Bernard Leach, Hamada and Their Circle", 1992
2. "Shoji Hamada." The Concise Grove Dictionary of Art. Retrieved October 19, 2008, from Answers.com Web site: <http://www.answers.com/topic/shoji-hamada>
3. "Shoji Hamada" The Pucker Gallery. Retrieved October 19, 2008, from <http://www.puckergallery.com/hamada.html>
4. "Shoji Hamada: Japanese Pottery At Its Best", Retrieved October 20, 2008, from <http://mll.kenyon.edu/~japanese02/J28f99/foleyme/>
5. Bernard Leach, "Hamada, potter", 1975