

## A POTTER'S OUTLOOK.

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When it was first suggested to me in 1921 to write a personal statement with regard to my own work, I resented the idea, feeling that a potter's business was to get on with his job, and leave writing to those who make a profession of it. I was then fresh to the conditions of English Craftsmanship.

Having become a potter in Japan ---- a land still new to the affair of industrialism ---- I did not realise the chasm which a century of factories had torn between ordinary life and hand crafts such as mine. I thought that, as in Japan, the work would speak for itself. But I have been forced to the conclusion that, except to the very few, this is not the case, and that unless the potter, weaver, wheelwright, or other craftsman, tells his own tale, no one else will or can do it for him. At this peculiar junction of two centuries nobody apparently is able to perceive the elementary conditions of our work, unless he has himself seriously tried to make some organically useful and beautiful article.

On my return to England after many years absence, the first thing that surprised me was the lack of any acknowledged classic standard of pottery. Out in the East this is the thread of life which runs through tradition. It once made a Japanese farmer say to me apologetically pointing to an ugly glass vase "Please excuse that, I know it is not according to a Tea - Master's taste, but it pleases me". It is only during the last few years that our archaeologists have discovered that we had a mediaeval pottery tradition with a form-sense equivalent to the contemporary architecture. An indigenous 17th and 18th century slip-ware is quite screened from our view by a hundred years of industry, although even here in the distant fields of Cornwall I have picked up many shards of the combed oven-dishes which were in use until 30 or 40 years ago: the name Wedgwood is still invoked as if he were a great artist instead of only the first and greatest of commercial potters. Even painters and sculptors are wildly ignorant of the elements of potting, and when confronted by pots are inclined to look only for such qualities as are aimed at in their own work, missing the beauty which is pressed, and thrown, and cut, and burned, and subtly devised to meet a daily need.

This confusion is depressing, for by it, the thought is again and again forced upon us that nothing we could do, not even the production of veritable masterpieces, would receive the recognition which we all naturally crave, and without which, we can still less carry on than those in freer fields of art.

From this arises the questions: Who are we? What kind of person is the craftsman of our time? He is called individual, or artist ---- but how vague is the general understanding of the distinction even amongst educated people ---- and what is his relationship to the peasant, or to the industrial worker?

A moment's thought must make it clear that he is different from these, if only because he comes later in evolution. Factories have driven folk - art practically out of England, and it only survives in out of the way corners of Europe; and the artist - craftsman, since the

day of William Morris, has been the chief means of reaction against the materialism of Industry. But, as a reaction, he has been almost as extreme as the thing against which he has reacted. Antagonism has resulted. The strife has been over the body of the public. After 100 years, the trade offers us crockery which is cheap, standardised, thin, white, hard, and waterproof --- good qualities all --- but the shapes are wretched, the colours sharp and harsh, the decoration banal, and quality absent. There can be no two minds about it, if judgement is made from the level of the World's classics of pottery.

Let me mention a few such periods and sources:- Chinese T'ang, and Sung, and some Ming. Corean Celadons, Japanese Tea-Master's wares, early Persian, Peruvian, Hispano-Moresque, German Bellarmine, some Delft, and English Toft Dishes. Such pottery was a completely human expression, it had not been mechanised. But who has ever seen a factory -- made pot with a nature of its own --- a soul? How should it have one, except it were breathed into it by the love of its maker?

Very well! What have the artist -- potters been doing all this while? Working by hand to please ourselves as artists first and therefore producing only limited and expensive pieces, we have been supported by collectors, purists, cranks, or "arty" people, rather than by the normal man or woman. In so far we have tended ourselves to become abnormal, and consequently most of our pots have been still-born: they have not had the breath of reality in them: it has been a game.

I feel that we must be prepared to relinquish half our "artist", "art for art's sake", "misunderstood", "solitary", "hand-made", "hand-spun", "hand-thrown", "hand-any-thing" attitude, and come right down to solid earth and actual conditions, and leave our phantasy. I say "half", for it is not a question of giving up that which is true in the "artist" or the "hand -- made" attitude, but that which is false.

The next step is to get rid of the idea of the machine as an enemy. The machine is an extension of the tool; the tool of the hand; the hand of the brain; and it is only the unfaithful use of machinery which we can attack. It is here that Industry is to blame --- just where it is unfaithful to Life in putting money values first. Science which has invented machinery in the XIX century, is no enemy of life, but "business first" has turned it into a bully, a slave-driver, and a cheat. Art which is the outcome of and proof of life, must come into the firm again in the XX century as an equal partner, or there will be disaster.

Art has been a horrid "veneer" in trade so far, but that is wrong, for beauty is an inherent demand of human nature, and work done without it is a starvation diet bound in the long run to produce disorder. The enjoyment of work for its own sake is what we individual crafts-men and women have to offer to an age which has mistaken the means for the end. It is this rather than shorter hours and longer pay which is at the root of our industrial unrest.

The widened demands of the increased population of the world make inevitable the mass-production of many utensils. It is good that machinery should stamp the iron of a railway track, or the glazed bricks of London Tubes --- better than that it should be done by hand --- plain, and clean, and strong and no nonsense about it! But that does not mean that labour should be employed eight hours a day, year in year out, upon mechanical work which gives no play to its creative faculties, for that is ROBOT work. With the increase

of mass-production shorter hours are bound to come, and with them the time and energy for individual and home production with power supplied by electricity.

Granting then the need of industry and the function of the machine to reproduce with fidelity, the first necessity in pottery is obviously to reproduce good pots. This simply is not done. There are no commercial pots being made which can hold a candle to the classics I have mentioned for beauty. The merits which fall within the industrial scale are utilitarian and comparative; the larger historic, human, aesthetic values are unperceived. There are no hills on this horizon.

The pottery manager needs the collaboration of a man whose sense of fitness has not been crushed, a man who can design plates, cups, tea-pots, handles, spouts etc., in terms of clay and glaze with intimate knowledge of process. A knowledge that I can only describe as a sense of wholeness in which use and beauty find a new unity. He must enjoy each phase of the work himself and be able to convey that joy to his team. The work must become an end in itself and not a mere means to an end. He should know and really feel the rightness of the relationship between work, tool, and material which long ages had evolved before mechanization came, and not just have run perfunctorily through a course in historic ornament. We have no evidence of the existence of such a man in the trade today. But in other crafts, such as printing, the thing has been done. In any case it can only be a question of time.

There is a chasm which urgently needs spanning, but before a useful bridge can be built there must be sounder foundations and truer understanding between the business man, the scientist, and the artist-craftsman. Progressive firms have been working in this direction even in pottery, but it can be safely stated that nothing approaching the standard I have mentioned has been reached yet. Whichever side the initiative comes from first, matters little.

Efforts from both sides are wanted --- the factory needs quality, and we hand-workers must produce in greater quantity if we are to bring the prices of our pots down to a level at which our friends can purchase them for use. That is my essential point viz., that we free craftsmen must supply an actual need to a much greater extent than we have hitherto done. This will involve an element of restraint on the part of the potter-artist which will bring him in closer contact with life, and thereby provide a discerning public with pots in which utility and beauty are one. This business of going back as confederated purists to the hand which preceded the machine has served its purpose. The next step awaits us. In Japan a small pottery such as mine would have a sort of family of half a dozen expert craftsmen each trained to a particular job from childhood in a very definite tradition. Two kinds of pots would be made, the "bread and butter" pot, such as tea sets, sold at a moderate price, and pieces very carefully selected from each firing and correspondingly valued.

It is worth while noting in passing that the mental foot-binding which prevails in all these centres of traditional craft is a thing which has to be experienced to be believed. As long as that underlying spirit of race and place answers the slow change of circumstance the work done has national vitality, but when the barriers fall, and demand becomes suddenly international, and quite beyond the experience of the men in those work-shops, the springs dry up. Then a long time is bound to elapse before individual and conscious craftsmen emerge who can deal with the situation.

In Tokio I made shapes and patterns with the same enthusiasm as I spent on drawings and etchings, without thinking very much at first about utility and price. The pots were bought by people who looked, and were accustomed to looking, for the same essential qualities in Handicraft as in so called pure art. By degrees I paid more attention to use, but it was only when I returned to England that I found, as in so many ways, an opposite tendency, a valuation as matter of course of the utilities first and the spirit second. It was impossible to continue here in so "idealistic" a condition as to make just what I liked with only kiln and saggers as my limit.

The first daily-use pottery I was asked for was invariably a tea-set, but without the eastern teamwork, or our western machinery, the effort, especially at high temperature, is both back and heart-breaking. Making nothing else, I have calculated that by hard work I and a couple of apprentices could produce some 200 fifteen piece sets in a year, and we would have to sell them all at about £5 per set to keep going. I have often been asked why, given a good sample hand-made tea-pot, it cannot be reproduced indefinitely by machinery. In the first place your hand-made pot has to be translated into factory terms of devitalised clay, of plaster moulds, of unvarying thin fritted glazes, of coal-fed muffle kilns, and most of all, of men and girls who care so little for their dull jobs: the process is not faithful enough, not humanly comprehensive enough to reproduce living beauty. Secondly there is not the will on the part of the Industry. Thirdly, there is a chain of middlemen, with orders in their pockets, who have a fatal capacity for under-estimating latent public taste.

During my absence in the East I had become aware through books of our old English slipware, and one of my chief objects in returning was to permeate my work with its spirit. Since 1920, Hamada, Michael Cardew and I have revived the technique of the 17th Century slip-ware potter. Cardew and I have tried moreover to provide sound hand-made pots sufficiently inexpensive for people of moderate means to take into daily use. But my own experience which culminated last year in an exhibition at the Three Shield's Gallery in Kensington, has taught me that however much this ware expressed the English national temperament of one or two hundred years ago, it does not fit in with modern life. Its earthy and homely nature belongs to the kitchen, the cottage, and the country. Many refuse it because it only harmonizes with the whitewash, oak, iron, leather, and pewter of "Old England" - moods which have been creatively "worked out", however much I as an individual, or a few others, may have needed this experience as part of our personal growth. We cannot forego those other qualifications, of thinness, hardness, non-porosity, and light toned colour.

I then determined to see how far I could succeed in making semi-porcelaineous stoneware. I have reason for the belief that under favourable conditions it is possible to make household pottery with some of the qualities of the "Sung" or "Tang" wares of China. Such pots would satisfy the finer taste and the practical needs of today. The æsthetic perception of the modern French stoneware potter-artists since as far back as the "eighties" proves it. They, as usual, are in much more advanced position with regard to their manufacturers, middlemen, and public than we are here. But there was a significant interest shown in their work during the recent Paris Exhibition by our trade potters: a leaven is at work. The gradual acceptance of eastern classic standards is an

accomplished fact, and the museums of Europe and America have during the past twenty years set the periods of greatest achievement in Far Eastern art back by many centuries. These among other factors are producing an international public, not very large, but growing, which has a new classic conception of pottery. And it is chiefly through its vague perception of our gropings towards a new synthesis that we individual potters exist. \* Barriers of time and place have broken down and we craftsmen who have been named "artist" have the whole world to draw upon for incentive beauty. It is struggle enough to keep one's head in this maelstrom, to live truly, and work sanely without that sustaining and restraining power of "tradition" which guided all the yesterdays of applied art. Such nevertheless, as I see things, is our task and our privilege.

The outward changes I am making in my Pottery are very gradual, for any sudden alteration of equipment to a mechanical basis is out of the question. Each power driven device for saving monotonous human effort has to be tested not only, as in the industrial world, for efficiency, but also for what I have called its artistic faithfulness, An illustration may be useful:- In a Japanese pottery the impure cobalt ore which yields the lovely blues of old porcelain, is ground by hand for months on end by some old woman, who reads the paper, or chats, or sings to the quietly working painters. I have asked the latter repeatedly what difference there was between colour so ground and the same ore ground by power, and they have invariably said that the "quality" of the power-ground pigment for fine painting on porcelain was very inferior. It would seem that the microscopic granules of the hand-ground colour have greater variety, and that the tendency, as with the use of every new source of power, is towards abuse, or thoughtless overuse.

Actually, my first steps have been to begin with a change from wood to oil-firing, and from hand-grinding to power-grinding, and I shall not hesitate to put in an electrically-driven potter's wheel as soon as I can find a silent and efficient one.

When it comes to the question of multiplying production, the complexity increases. I have not gone further than to have tiles made in quantity by semi-mechanical means, thereby halving the price, and to devote the time saved in wood-cutting, grinding etc., to the reduplication of the more useful stoneware jugs, vases, bowls etc., by the old hand processes.

It may seem to some critics that craftsmen like myself can serve the most useful purpose, and incidentally be a great deal happier, by remaining free in our crafts, and not attempting tasks which they would probably describe as foredoomed to failure. Though they may be right as far as immediate success is concerned, I beg to differ. Instead I ask for support for a tentative and difficult undertaking.

*\*In my own case the problem has been circumstanced by my birth in China and education in England. I have naturally had the antipodes of culture to draw upon, and it was this which caused me to return to Japan where the meeting of East and West has gone furthest. Living among the younger men, emancipated from the shackles of the past, I have with them learned to lean forward in the faith of a binding together of those elements from the ends of the earth which are now welding the civilization of the coming age. The potter, in his concepts, must possess such a sheer love of truth as will carry him past the dangers of revivalism on the one hand and of futurism on the other. With his elements of clay, water, fire and air he must, as long as he lives, strive fearlessly to clothe his vision in a garment of living beauty.*