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Experiment and Experience: Trans-Cultural and Trans-National Legacies of Black Mountain College. An Interview with Douglas Kinsey

Introduction

A Japanese art journal, *Art Trace Press,* issued a special number in summer 2015 featuring Black Mountain College (1933-1957; BMC). As there has been no scholarly book published in Japan that examines the significance of BMC as a center for art and education as a whole, this magazine is truly pioneering. While people who were involved in BMC have often been discussed individually, such as Charles Olson in poetry or John Cage in music, as have genres such as dance or architecture, the inter-disciplinary experience has not been approached. However, the editors of *Art Trace Press* focused on BMC as a ground-breaking environment in education. The "Round-table Discussion" by art historians, Masayuki Tanaka and Michio Hayashi, as well as critic and poet, Hisaki Matsuura, serves as a brilliant introduction of BMC to Japanese readers. Yet their historical overview of BMC is not sufficient to imagine the actual interfaces of artists and students and the sources of their creative force and new ideas.

In the post WWII era, it is well known that Japanese art and Zen philosophy were an inspiration to many artists in the US, especially the Beat Generation poets. What is less known perhaps is the influence of Japanese craftsmanship. In 1952, Japanese potter Shoji Hamada, along with the founder of Mingei (Folk-crafts), Muneayoshi Yanagi and the British potter Bernard Leach, gave a seminar at BMC. They had already been invited to give several seminars in other parts of America, but they

added a special trip to BMC. Mary Emma Harris refers to this seminar in *The Arts at Black Mountain College*: "The highlight of the Crafts institute was a two-week seminar held October 15-29 with Marguerite Wildenhain of Pond Farm in Guerneville, California; Bernard Leach; Shoji Hamada; and Dr. Soetsu Yanagi, director of the National Folk Museum in Tokyo" (231). In 1951, Olson had written to Leach to ask him to recommend a resident potter, and he suggested his former apprentices Alix and Warren MacKenzie, who were then living in Minnesota. Leach had already planned to come to the US with Hamada and Yanagi for seminars in Minnesota (joining the MacKenzies) as well as in California, so he suggested another seminar at BMC. Leach observed "American potters are drawing ideas of form, pattern, color and skills from beyond the seas, both East and West. One is from China, Korea and Japan the other from the contemporary movements of art and architecture [Bauhaus]" (Leach 29). Although it was seen that American craftsmanship lacked the kind of tradition of Europe or Japan, Wildenhain countered him that, "an authentic American tradition would be forged in time through a synthesis of many cultural influences" (Harris 232). Arguably, American tradition grows through encounters and collaborations by different craftspersons in both East and West, and my paper will focus on such encounters between American and Japanese craftsmen.

The following interview with Douglas Kinsey, an American painter and print-maker, Professor Emeritus at Notre Dame University, sheds light on the encounters, or trans-cultural, trans-lingual exchanges of these great spirits of the East and the West. Kinsey studied with Warren MacKenzie, who was an important student and friend of Leach and Hamada and who also attended the 1952 seminar at BMC. Kinsey grew up in the Midwest and was not a student at BMC, but he was aware of its presence at the time and was feeling the new wind from both sides of the continent – BMC and Japan. He is one who still remembers the spirit of BMC and the influence of the Japanese potters. Through the conversation with Kinsey, I trace the ripples and circles of BMC spirit and the involvement of Japanese craftsmanship in the American scene.

When did you first come to know about Black Mountain College?

Probably when I was in college, 1953 to 1957. It seems I've always known about it. It may have come from attending a college strong in the liberal arts [Oberlin College, Ohio] where you were aware of new developments in the arts.

What do you know about it?

Too much to deal with here! The projects and teaching methods had a great influence on the arts as they developed in mid-century America.

You studied with Warren MacKenzie. How did you meet him?

I took a class from him in 1957 or 1958 when I was in graduate school at the University of Minnesota. Although I was in the painting program I had always been interested in ceramics, so I took the chance of making a fool of myself. Warren approved of such experimenting and I was thrilled with him. He was open and friendly. He also told me that he was a Quaker. At that time, I was the only Quaker I knew of who was devoted to the visual arts. To the traditionally austere Quakers, art had been extraneous or even suspect.

In the late 1950's, Warren's idea that form was more important than utility in pottery corresponded to the ideas of Abstract Expressionism in painting that were the leading edge in America at the time. Of course, I had also been playing with those ideas and accordingly trying to paint rapidly, spontaneously and without planning. This approach in ceramics has much in common with Korean folk pottery and with the works produced for the Zen tea ceremony. At any rate, I threw a pot and finished it with a strong, spontaneous calligraphy with a stick that actually poked holes in the pot and made it useless to hold water. Warren was very pleased and encouraged me, even though my concept was more developed than my throwing technique and craftsmanship ever would be.

Warren and his wife Alix would invite me to stay with them at their house in the country. The house was simple and severe in an almost Japanese manner. The walls were white, there were no window coverings, and there was a great deal of unfinished wood. I was amazed and have borrowed their taste ever since then. It might not have been the result of a Japanese influence at that time but surely represented a universally found taste for simplicity and a sense of the handmade that Mingei also exemplifies.

In the Mackenzies' house there was a moss green ceramic vase which held raisins and peanuts to restore the weary potters coming in from the wheel and the kiln. It tapered to a strong rim. The sides had been slapped with a paddle with a fish -scale pattern while it was still wet. It was so understated that I hardly saw it when I first encountered it. Then second time I saw it, I was overcome by the subtle strength under its unobtrusiveness. It was my first sight of a Hamada masterpiece.

After Warren and Alix had finished their MFA degrees in Chicago in the late 1940s, they went to Cornwall in England in hopes of working with Bernard Leach. They had not actually been invited by Leach, but, in the next two years, Leach became the MacKenzies' mentor and friend. When Leach visited them while I was still in graduate school, I spent hours talking with him. I read his books and incorporated his ideas into my graduate thesis on the modern painter Marc Chagall.

As you know, MacKenzie was involved in bringing Hamada, Yanagi and Leach to give workshops and seminars in the States in 1952. MacKenzie came to Black Mountain College during the 1952 session and returned in 1953, the summer after Leach and Hamada's visit, to lead the same type of workshop on his own.

You just referred to Mingei. Shoji Hamada, Kanjiro Kawai and Soetsu Yanagi, who started the Mingei (Folk Craft) movement in Japan and in 1936 founded Mingei Museum. They valued works which we use every day and are made by unknown craftsman. Yanagi's Mingei toha Nanika (What is Mingei) rediscovers beauty in folk-crafts from the point of view of usefulness, simplicity, and anonymity. Mingei also found a healthy aspect in folk crafts. Did you know about Mingei before you went to Japan?

Warren MacKenzie probably told me about it, but by the time we visited Tokyo in 1975, I had been reading about its founder, Yanagi, and about Mingei. My wife Marjorie and I had become friendly with the Weatherhill/Heibonsha publisher's representative at our professional society meetings and had been using the good deals he offered to accumulate a number of beautiful and scholarly books about the arts and architecture in Japan. In 1975, we went to the old Bingoya Mingei shop in Shinjuku that Marjorie had visited on her brief trip to Japan in 1962. She knows she purposefully sought it out but can't remember how she knew about it. We also sought out the Folk Craft Museum in the Osaka Expo Park, as well as the Mingei Museum in Tokyo, and wanted to pay homage to Hamada during that 1975 trip.

Tell me about your visits in Japan and your encounter with Hamada Shoji.

Because of my friendship with MacKenzie, Marjorie and I had hoped to meet Hamada when we traveled to Japan in 1975. However, we were strongly advised by the director of the Folk Museum in Osaka not to do so since he was elderly and overwhelmed by foreigners who wanted to meet him. The director had been so kind to us that we accepted his advice. However, we were already going to be taken to Mashiko by a former student of mine, a Japanese nun who had been studying at the University of Notre Dame (where Kinsey was teaching). We were to visit the father of one of her students who had a large pottery studio, which turned out to be adjacent to Hamada's property. When we explained our promise to not try to meet Hamada, one of the students at this pottery said it would be possible for us to visit Hamada's pottery without meeting him because she knew Hamada's son, and he could escort us. The most important connection I made in visiting Hamada's studio was to see a wooden paddle on top of a pile of tools. That paddle had the pattern I had seen at MacKenzie's house. Hamada's son verified that the paddle was a very old one. My experience at MacKenzie's house in Minnesota had come full circle.

At this point the soft green mist of spring turned into a downpour. Hamada's son invited us into the main house, a huge, old, traditional farmhouse, one of several that Hamada had moved to his property. The rain pounded down as we dried out and warmed our feet in the sunken hearth of

the vast main room. His mother gave us tea to get us warm and then served us tiny dishes of the plums from the plum wine she was bottling back in her beautiful stainless-steel kitchen. An immense space but very homey. The day already seemed perfect.

As the rain turned back into mist, Hamada's son thought the time was right to visit the little museum of world folk craft that Hamada was developing. Well, to our surprise, as we headed down to the damp path to the museum, we ran into a dozen Western journalists surrounding Hamada himself. When we were introduced and Hamada heard that I was a student of MacKenzie's and had met Leach, he took us to the museum himself – without the crowd of journalists. Hamada's interest in the handmade object was clear as he introduced us to his collection of folk craft from around the world. He and his wife and son were very generous to us. Such a brief encounter did not especially generate new ideas but confirmed old ones.

What influences did Hamada's work have upon you and upon American potters and artists?

I don't know very much about what potters here in America think about Hamada now – or even how many people know about him. I do know that Hamada, through Leach and MacKenzie, was the grandfather of the rediscovery of beautiful form for functional stoneware in America in the 1960s. Right now, there is a diversity in pottery that reflects every development in art, but the Japanese based strain is still strong.

I would say that his legacy is more of an attitude than a specific kind of form. It is an encouragement for a potter to be willing to leave his piece at the point that reveals how it was made. It always suggests movement. The surface is not "cleaned up" or over refined. Rather, the process is direct and shows the discovery of the form. In a sense, the end product is the creative activity made visible. Black Mountain College (1933 – 1957) situated in the mountains of North Carolina, was extremely successful in generating artistic creativity. Students worked in orchards and vegetable gardens. Students could stay as long or as short as they wanted. Many teachers were avant-garde artists from New York or Europe, and many of them have become famous since their Black Mountain experience. They were musicians, poets, dancers, actors and visual

artists including potters. Many art forms joined, creating new ones such as "happenings" which have since thrived in New York and subsequently the total art world.

Hamada, Yanagi, Kawai who started Mingei Movements believed that crafts created out of necessity in everyday life are beautiful. They are not as high art nor are they the product of mass production. These founders wanted to tell the world that a craft made by an unknown person could be appreciated as something beautiful. He had his own view of "art" and "craft." How about you? What do you think of the terms "art" and "craft"?

Or how do I differentiate art and craft? I have pretty defined ideas about this. They are not the generally accepted idea. Art to me is the making of something that the maker hasn't seen before. He starts out not knowing what he is doing. To him his effort is original. A craftsperson is someone who knows from the beginning what he wants to do. The implication is that he has seen it before. His criterion of success is learning to do it well. I must note that this differentiation has nothing to do with the materials used. A potter, by this definition, might be an artist; a painter might be a craftsperson. Nor does this definition have anything to do with whether the end product has a practical use or not. Hamada is definitely an artist. His work has a presence that is inspiring; it doesn't make any difference if it holds water or not.

What is Hamada's legacy in contemporary American pottery?

This is partly answered under "what influences" above. He still has resonance in America where potters have seen his work. It is not easy to see his work. It also takes a meditative person to treasure his unobtrusiveness. He is an amazing designer but is not showy. The observer must be able to recognize authenticity.

What legacy would you like to leave with your students?

I would want it to be close to what I see as Hamada's influence. I want their work to be well designed and to stimulate on many levels. I would want it to feel human and humane in some kind of way. The observer needs to feel able to identify with the work.

What do you think was the impact of the visit of Hamada, Yanagi and Leach on the students at BMC and on pottery in America?

The direct impact on the BMC students needs a first-person informant. Nationally? In that era, before social media, impacts were gradual and incremental. The seminar at BMC was Hamada, Yanagi and Leach's contact with America's East Coast. Even though the school was hidden in the southern mountains, there was a strong tie to northeastern cities, especially as former faculty and students moved away. For instance, poet and former faculty member Mary Caroline Richards, now a potter, returned from New York for the seminar. Her meditative book, *Centering in Pottery, Poetry and the Person* (1964), could be found in every hippie potter's studio in the 1960s and 1970s. The influence of the seminar spread from potter to potter. Today, when I go to a farmer's market, potters will occupy several booths. Their stoneware is almost inevitably based on Hamada and Leach, even though the very young potter may never have heard of them.

The above interview was conducted by way of a series of emails we exchanged from November to December 2016. I may need to restate that Professor Kinsey met Warren MacKenzie in 1957, the year BMC closed down due to financial reasons. Kinsey was then too young to be part of BMC but he knew about it and also learned its spirit from Professor MacKenzie who Leach had recommended to Olson as a new ceramics instructor at BMC, although it was not realized. If it had, Kinsey would have never met MacKenzie, nor Hamada whose work Kinsey saw in MacKenzie's kitchen. I would like to add that without Kinsey I may not have had the chance to become interested in BMC, Hamada, or Mingei. The spirit of BMC, even after its disappearance, indeed kept influencing the wide world.

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A Japanese potter, Hamada, had worked with Leach for three years at St. Ives, UK. Leach, as he writes in his essay, *A Potter in Japan*, lived and worked with him and other Mingei craftsmen in Japan. Their works, interestingly enough, attract all people, regardless of their racial and national identities. They are neither purely Japanese (Eastern) nor British (Western). They are simply beautiful and attractive. What is common among them is that they worked with natural material with their hands and discovered the way to express its essence, or its true nature. Mingei craftsmen preferred to call their work "crafts" and not "art," supposing one is spontaneous and useful and the other more egoistic as a museum piece. But it is also what Kinsey calls "art" as they drew out something new that none has ever discovered before – a new perspective. Moreover, the artists and craftsmen working together and exchanging ideas as Hamada, Leach and MacKenzie have done, set an example of a healthy growth of our culture. Personal contact and collaboration seems to be a way to share and inherit the spirit of craftsmanship and the conduct of life, or "attitude" in Kinsey's word, à la BMC. To add, Kinsey's wife and art historian, Marjorie, and Mary Emma Harris were graduate school roommates. Marjorie wrote in her email: "We have followed developments about keeping the history of BMC through our friendship with Mary Harris. Her records, her interviews with everyone left alive after she began research about 1970, truly show the influence of the college." I, too, through the Kinseys, and they through MacKenzie and Harris, feel part of the encounters, or trans-cultural and trans-national exchanges of great spirits of the East and the West. In these ways, therefore, the BMC legacies are carried on.

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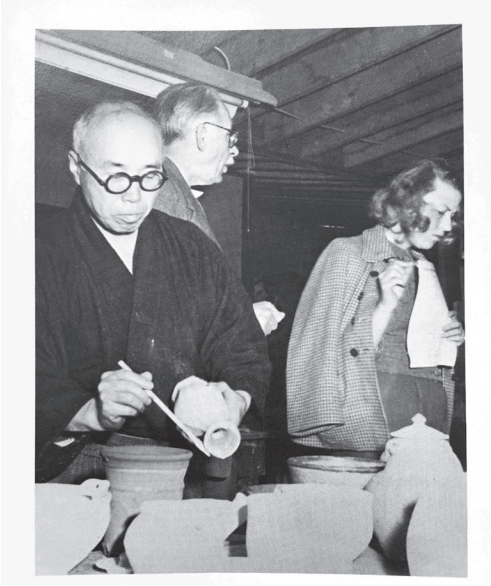
Appendix

(from Art Trace HP: This edition has a thorough chronological index of BMC.)



(Pottery Seminar, 1952 at BMC. From left: Hamada, Leach, and a woman participant, Harris 233)

(A Container by Shoji Hamada. Nabae's family collection)