Tatsuzo Shimaoka, recognized internationally for his simple, utilitarian pots, died on December 11, 2007 in Mashiko, Japan, a picturesque town 160 kilometers north of Tokyo, where he had lived and worked since 1946. He was a leading proponent of the Mingei, or folkcraft, philosophy and aesthetic, a movement founded in 1926 by the writer-philosopher Yanagi Soetsu (1889–1961) and his closest friends, the potters Shoji Hamada (1884–1978) and Kanjiro Kawai (1890–1966). Yanagi authored The Unknown Craftsman, the “bible” of Japanese folkcraft. Mingei celebrates the humble artisan and a Mingei pot clearly expresses its utilitarian purpose; its inherent beauty derives from the fact that it is an object of daily life.

“When I was lost as to what to do in the future, Yanagi’s theory of beauty and Mingei was like fertile rain on barren soil,” said Shimaoka in a lecture at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts (MIA) in March of 2001. The revered potter, a small elegant man with a quick smile and warm, welcoming eyes, was in the Twin Cities as the Northern Clay Center’s 2001 Regis Master, the first overseas artist recognized in the Center’s distinguished series, which began in 1997.

Shimaoka is known for his handbuilt square plates and jars, as well as his wheel-thrown vases, jars, bowls, platters and lidded boxes, many of which bear his signature rope-impressed inlay technique called Jomon
in downtown Tokyo. His father was a kumihimo (braided silk cord) artisan who, along with his mother, ran a small shop employing several kumihimo artisans. He credits this early experience of being immersed in a craft environment for “wanting to create with his hands.”

In 1939 he entered the Tokyo Institute of Technology and, after studying extensively in the department of ceramics, he decided to become a potter. “However, I had no idea of what kind of potter I wanted to become,” he said. “I only had vague ideas of what I wanted to become.”

At about this time, Shimaoka visited the Nihon Mingeikan (Japan Folk Crafts Museum) in Komaba, Tokyo, that was inaugurated in 1936. Here, he encountered Yanagi’s theory on beauty and works by Kawai, Hamada and others that vivified Mingei’s inherent beauty and spiritual power. The importance of the well-crafted, simple utilitarian pot, made from indigenous materials became clear to him. He also internalized the central supposition of Mingei philosophy that “the craftsman lives a healthy life, has a healthy mind, and is always sincere in the pursuit of utility.” Only then will the craft be “blessed by Taiki (the Buddhist philosophy of the Other Power)… and have true beauty, what Yanagi called beauty with the ‘eternal now.’ This is what Mingei is.”

“With my mind decided, I visited Hamada, an alumnus from my college, in the summer of my freshman year,” he continued. “Hamada worked comfortably in the mountains of Mashiko with great confidence and concentration. His figure was towering. I was lucky to visit his wife, and advised me to learn how to throw pots on the wheel while in school. I did as I was told…”

After being posted in Burma during the Pacific War [World War II], Shimaoka moved to Mashiko with his family. From 1946–1949 he apprenticed with Hamada, who had established his kiln in 1924, and eventually became his primary deshi (student). From Hamada, Shimaoka learned how to use the natural clays and unrefined glazes and enamels from the potter-farmer traditions of Mashiko, with its fifteenth- and sixteenth-century thatched-roof, timbered structures. It was at this time he became more aware of the British potter, Bernard Leach (1887–1979) and his 1940 book A Potter’s Book, with essays by Yanagi and Michael Cardew.

According to Shimaoka, Hamada would teach his apprentices to “leave aside all that had been studied, and to start with a new slate. Handmade work is not to be learned by intellect but with the body,” he related in his MIA lecture. “Technique is not to be taught but to be ambitiously acquired.” Following his apprenticeship, he taught at Tochigi Prefectural Ceramic Institute, returning to Mashiko to establish his own kiln in 1954. A looming challenge was to develop his own aesthetic, one visibly different than that of Hamada but still within the Mingei tradition.

Warren MacKenzie (b. 1924) who lives and runs his pottery in Stillwater, Minnesota, first met Shimaoka in 1974, when he traveled with Shimaoka’s friend, Minneapolis–based potter Taeko Tanaka, and his students Michael Norman, Wayne Branum and Randy Johnston, to Mashiko. [On a parallel path as Shimaoka, MacKenzie apprenticed with Bernard Leach at his St. Ives pottery from 1950–1952. He first met Hamada and Yanagi at Leach’s pottery in 1952 and immediately identified with the Mingei movement, making its philosophy central to his personal and professional life.] MacKenzie recounts a story told by Shimaoka: After establishing his pottery near that of his teacher’s, Hamada would visit Shimaoka after each firing. He always told his former apprentice that his pots were very good and then leave. It was always the same response. Shimaoka knew he must establish his own independent aesthetic path, but how? It was not until he developed his impressed rope and white slip-glaze technique that Hamada responded after one fir-
Shimaoka was delighted but noted, in his MIA talk, that Hamada cautioned him not to “concentrate on one technique, because the pursuit of a single process would lead to a monotonous stereotype. One must always experience the happiness of creation.” MacKenzie also notes that Shimaoka was Hamada’s “best deshi” and that he gave Shimaoka his best slab-building artisan when he started his own pottery.

MacKenzie recounts Shimaoka’s generous nature. “Shimaoka and Hamada were so open and generous with their time,” emphasized MacKenzie. “He was generous with his communication, inviting us to his home and showing us his work. He assumed the generous practice of Hamada, taking on students and apprentices in his pottery to learn about the Mingei philosophy.” In 1978, Shimaoka toured the United States and stopped in Minneapolis to visit Taeko and MacKenzie and did a demonstration at the University of Minnesota, where MacKenzie taught. Concurring, Johnston (who apprenticed with Shimaoka in 1975) states, “Shimaoka saw his role to repay the debt to Hamada for taking him on, so he too takes on students to pass on the Mingei tradition.”

In 1962 Shimaoka was recognized with the Japan Folk Crafts Museum Award and in 1980 received the Tochigi Prefecture Cultural Merit Medal. In 1996 he was named a “Holder of an Important Intangible Cultural Asset,” translated as a Living National Treasure of Japan. After Hamada, he is only the second to be honored in the area of Folk Craft Pottery. “The spirit of Mingei has always been the backbone of my work,” he stated. “Hamada said you should never have to sell yourself to the public. No matter how far in the countryside you work, if your work is healthy, sincere and good, then the public will come to you.”

“Shimaoka’s work developed and gained an increasing richness as he aged,” comments MacKenzie. “Ultimately, the work was quite different from Hamada’s, a very personal style. He broke away, a thing which is very difficult to do.”

In his lecture, Shimaoka explained “Hamada was an individual artist with a strong originality who fully accepted the essence of beauty in folk pottery which implies the Other Power…” He also noted, “My works, made with great effort combined with the sanctification of nature, become beautiful works that exceed my ingenuity as an individual.”

Looking at Shimaoka’s pots, there is a tangible, compelling connection between the maker’s hand, the materials and the pot, a connection that reveals not only Shimaoka’s vision but also Mingei. Looking at a group of Shimaoka’s pots on a low table after a recent firing in Mashiko, there is reason to believe that the master’s work emanates the Other Power, too, in a new guise, conveying the Mingei philosophy itself.

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