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The Appeal of Korean Celadon

by G. St. G. M. Gompertz

I am not entirely satisfied with the title I have chosen for this talk; however, I cannot really think of a better. Previously, in a book I wrote on the subject of Korean Celadon and other wares of the Koryo period, I attempted to describe the aesthetic approach, but here I wish to discuss a more immediate experience, and one not confined to art historians and connoisseurs but extending more widely to those having little knowledge of artistic appreciation or criticism: in a word, the impact of the Korean wares on those with only ordinary, everyday standards and little ability to express their ideas except on the rudimentary basis―which, however, underlies all art criticism―of: this I like; that I do not like.

Some weeks ago I was pleased to receive a letter from a complete stranger, a lady living in Southern California, asking for information about an exhibition then being held at the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge, to which I had given some assistance. She informed me that Korean Celadon had become for her a hobby—indeed, almost a passion. I have no idea how this interest of hers began, nor what opportunities she had in that locality of carrying it further; perhaps she had been able to visit the main cities of San Francisco, Boston and Washington and thus to see some of the finest surviving examples, or she may only have been able to acquire her knowledge and enthusiasm from books and articles on the subject; but the thing that impressed and delighted me was that here obviously a spark had been struck, perhaps a lifelong interest generated, with all its accompanying excitements and sidelines, in a quite unexpected part of the world, one far removed from the cultural background and milieu of East Asia which had provided the source and inspiration for these art works. Truly, as Keats wrote: ‘Beauty is Truth, Truth Beauty’, and it does not require any special training or experience to perceive aspects of this pervasive fact.

I think it is a great mistake to impute too much significance to ceramic art, as has been done by some celebrated potters, for it has never been generally accepted as more than one of the minor arts. One reason for this judgement may be that it is primarily concerned with the production of practical, utili- [page 46] tarian articles: vessels of all kinds for the serving and storage of food and drink. I am not losing sight of the fact that many very lovely ceramic wares seem to have been made simply for ornament and not for everyday practical use, though opinions have differed on whether this was the case with regard to Korean Celadons. However, it cannot be gainsaid that these represented only a small minority. You will have to visit a high-class art dealer in order to seek and acquire the rare decorative porcelains, whereas any ‘china-shop’, East or West, will be able to supply you with a large variety of pots and dishes for daily use at the table or in the kitchen.

On the other hand, while stubbornly refusing to regard pottery-making as a, vocation so exalted as to confer on ceramic artists and studio-potters special powers of interpretation or prophecy, I do most whole-heartedly subscribe to the view that there is something both mysterious and admirable about an art winch is concerned with the utilization of such basic elements as earth, water and fire to fashion and transmute aesthetically satisfying articles for meeting our fundamental needs: if you have ever watched a vessel ‘growing’ under the almost inspired hands of the potter ana later being immersed in the inert glaze liquid and converted by the white-hot furnace into an object of supreme beauty or utility, then you will understand what I mean by saying that the potter, more than any other artist, seems to be co-operating in some degree with his Maker in the act of Creation itself.

It is necessary to bear these considerations in mind when addressing ourselves to the subject under review, for I believe it is important that we neither over-stress nor minimize the significance of pottery wares: they are not and never will be great works of art in their own right; but it would be quite wrong and altogether misleading to deny that, within their limited range, they are beautiful and subtle manifestations. They exhibit in some way the power granted to man whereby he is able to accomplish by the mastery of mind over matter something which transcends most other artifacts by reason of the creative force, beauty and fitness for purpose which it manifests.

When we come to look at any example of this potter’s craft which is brought to our attention—and by ‘look at’ I mean view it and absorb its full significance, both artistic and functional—it will be a help to realize that our purpose will be best served by keeping in mind the three aspects of form, colour and decoration which are normally involved and must be included in making any critical analysis, although we should never lose sight of the fact that it is the totality of the work which must be our eventual concern; and I have deliberately placed these elements in the above order. For it seems to me that form is the most vital of them all; yet colour must come close to it in our estimation; and what added effect can be imparted by decoration that is [page 47] well composed and suitably matched to the whole!

At this point I find it necessary to invoke the aid of two perceptive Japanese writers: Soetsu Yanagi and Shozo Uchiyama. Dr. Yanagi was a great lover of Korea and became a leading arbiter of taste in Japan. That master potter, Shoji Hamada,once observed to me that ‘Yanagi has the best “eye” since Rikyu’—who you may recall achieved immortal fame as connoisseur and tea-master during the sixteenth century; and Yanagi’s work on Korea and Its Art Treasures, though written so long ago ana inevitably ‘dated’, still retains much that is of lasting value. Uchiyama is less well- known but was likewise endowed with exceptional insight. He was the author of some stimulating essays on Korean ceramic wares in journals such as Yanagi’s Kogei (Crafts), which exerted much influence on Japanese cultural life in the 1920’s and 1930’s.

It may be asked: ‘But why rely on these Japanese writers for an appreciation of Korean products?’ It is true that there were several Western connoisseurs at this period who were much impressed with the beauty of Korean Celadon—one thinks at once of those two great American collectors, Freer and Hoyt, and the wonderful examples they acquired— but these persons seem to have felt no impulse to set down their impressions on paper; and even W.B. Honey of the Victoria and Albert Museum, who wrote so much that is aesthetically illuminating about ceramic art in general and called Koryo wares ‘some of the most beautiful pottery ever made’, seems to have been more concerned with details of fabrication than with their overall effect.

The Koreans themselves knew little about the masterpieces produced by their twelfth-century ancestors until road and railway construction caused these to be unearthed early in the present century; while their subsequent subjection did not permit of their participating in archaeological researches, which were all in the hands of the governmental authorities. Furthermore, the educational system did not encourage them to take an interest in Korea’s cultural heritage. It follows that, as Yanagi put it: ‘We have the strange phenomenon that it was the Korean people who created the wares but the Japanese who were able to perceive their value’. He attributed this to the lack of any tradition of connoisseurship in Korea, such as that which had been built up over many years in Japan; also, to the ‘sharp eyes’ of Japanese tea-masters, who perceived that even the mass-produced pottery of late Koryo and early Yi was possessed of great artistic significance.

It could have been argued on the other hand that the Koreans had little chance of appreciating the achievements of their forbears, since they were hardly aware of their existence and seldom had the means of acquiring any for themselves, though it must in fairness be admitted that indigent peasants lost [page 48] no time in exploiting this source of income, once the possibility of recovering underground treasure had become known. I feel sure that Yanagi would have recognized the force of this counter-argument, for he had great respect, sympathy and affection for the Korean people. He would in any case never have gone to the length of one Japanese writer among the many who expatiated on the subject who maintained that, since only the Japanese really appreciated the Korean wares, these should properly be regarded as products of Japan! I return now to the three aspects of pottery wares mentioned earlier, namely form, colour and decoration. With regard to the first of these, Yanagi maintained that ‘at least half the beauty of Koryo wares lies in their form’. He went on to say that ‘there are almost no straight lines, only curved lines which are so vital that they seem to be an integral part of the whole... It is more fitting to say that the gentle contour of a vessel is its life than to say that it contains the form... Its beauty is quiet, friendly and lonely―the antithesis of what we find in Chinese pottery’.

This linear beauty had been described much earlier by Yanagi in his efforts to reach the soul of the Korean people. He quoted with approval a letter he had received from Bernard Leach at the close of the latter’s visit to Korea, which referred to ‘that extraordinarily lovely line seen only in Korea and present in everything Korean... in the hills, in men’s hats, in women’s hair and in the shoes of both men and women’.

In a moving passage, Yanagi wrote: ‘That long, narrow, gracefully curving line of the (Korean) ware seems to me like a prayer. How can I be parted from such wares when they speak to me like this: Ah! I touch the piece with my hand almost unconsciously...’He felt that the Koreans expressed themselves mainly by line rather than colour or even shape and gave some concrete examples: ‘Let us look down on the city (of Seoul) from the summit of Namsan. Isn’t everything we see waves of endless curved lines—the roofs of all the houses? It is so different from Tokyo, where there are only straight lines such as are here confined to Japanese or Western houses... The city seems to be floating on the waves rather than resting oil the earth...’

Of course, in the case of ceramic wares these sensitive lines enclose the vessel itself, seem to flow around it, as it were; and often this liquid impression is heightened by resemblance to a drop of water, caught just before it falls to earth. This is particularly true of some pear-shaped wine bottles, whose bulbous bodies are slightly elongated in a way rarely if ever found in Chinese vessels of the same type, while their long, slender necks flare outwards at the mouth much less than in their Chinese counterparts—or even in the numerous bronze bottles made in Korea about the same time. [page 49]

Yanagi drew attention also to the ewers which often have spouts projecting almost straight upwards and have been provided with long, elegant handles, features which seem the reverse of practical, since they could so easily be broken—and indeed most of them have been damaged as a result of rude recovery from burial. He described the typical Korean pots as ‘tall and slender in both body and foot, instead of being round and stable like Chinese pots’ and suggested that this might be explained as an unconscious effect of the ‘sadness and suffering’ which lay at the roots of Korean life at the time.

However, I have previously criticized this constant Japanese refrain about the miserable conditions of Korean existence and pointed out that, so far as we can tell, the Koryo period was as full of light as well as shade as most other human eras; and I should personally prefer to attribute it simply to the Korean love of long, slender lines and deliciously sensitive curves, which is no more than a psychological trait and devoid of any deeper significance.

We observe, then, in Korean ceramic wares of this time a unique linear sense which expresses itself in various ways but particularly in elongation and graceful curves and, as we shall see later, is found also in many of the decorative patterns and designs.

At one time it seemed to me that the number of different forms among the Koryo wares was rather limited when compared with the great range and variety found in Chinese wares; and it came as a surprise when I was able to enumerate 32 types in my own small collection, though it must be admitted that this resulted from counting large and small examples separately where these fell broadly into two groups. However, I think that special mention should be made of the numerous bowls made by the Koryo potter, for most of these are extremely graceful, so that they are seldom surpassed in beauty even by Sung wares. Just as an early Japanese tea-master regarded ‘tea-bowl’ and ‘Korean’ as almost synonymous, so I believe that Korean Celadon may be thought of basically in terms of bowls and dishes, although the Koryo potter’s repertory was larger than appears and his inventive power almost unlimited.

Turning next to the aspect of coloration, it is evident that the Koreans preferred subdued colouring and were averse to bright hues, such as the red and green Chinese wares of Tz’u-chou type. In later times the Koreans readily adopted underglaze cobalt blue and copper red, but they ignored the wu-ts’ai and other Chinese porcelains with brilliant and variegated colouring. The Korean predilection seems always to have been for sobriety and quiet effects, almost the only bright colours seen in modern times being the gay bands of red, green and yellow on children’s clothing and the ornaments used in palace and temple architecture.

Yanagi regarded these as exceptions to the rule and pointed out that [page 50] Korean potters never employed red enamelling nor made any attempt to obtain a bright green glaze from copper. The Japanese use the word shibui to denote quiet, subdued, restrained or ‘astringent’ taste, and this might fittingly be applied to the Korean ideal, though I cannot recall any Japanese writer going quite so far in his admiration as to use this almost hallowed term.

Thus, while the Koryo potters sometimes made white, black and brown glazed wares, their main concern was always the subdued yet glowing colour of Celadon, and more than nine-tenths of their production was centred on this class of ware. To untutored Western eyes Celadon may at first seem uninteresting or monotonous; but this is the result of familiarity with porcelains which rely for effect on the bright colours of floral or pictorial decoration. When one is attuned to the sobriety of Celadon ware and sensitive to its great variety of tone, ranging from an ethereal bluish green to a soft dove-grey, also to its subtle changes of lustre, at times brilliant or else withdrawn like polished marble, a whole new area of visual enjoyment is unfolded. The Koreans of the Koryo period seem to have found this completely satisfying and never regarded brighter colours as necessary; except, on occasion, to touch up or give point to a design.

In decoration the Koreans at first used incised and carved designs to great effect, while their moulded or impressed patterns seem to have a freedom and spontaneity lacking in the Chinese wares which were their models, The incised designs are at times no more than suggestions: ‘a few indeterminate lines, possibly representing clouds or waves, on the inner surface of a bowl’, as Uchiyama put it; or they may be more complex, ‘seeping into the mind and spreading like the flowing of water’ or even ‘running all over the surface in an extremity of elaboration’. In either case they ‘appeal powerfully to the mind’ which is ‘stimulated by contemplating these freely-drawn lines so that one never tires of them.’

It was in this field of decoration also that the Koryo potters made a great and original contribution to ceramic art, namely the inlaying of designs with different coloured slip―though this was limited to white and black—whereby they were emphasized and made to stand out clearly. Some of the earlier incised decoration was difficult to discern through the overlying glaze, especially when this became heavily crazed in the firing; but the inlaid decoration stood out clearly in its contrasted colours, while being in no way discordant with the general effect.

Here again the designs were often freely composed and quite spontaneous, unlike the great majority of rather formal patterns used in Chinese wares; while Margaret Medley has drawn attention to the insouciance with which the Koryo potters used various motifs, whether formal or not, with a charming [page 51] disregard for their scale, so that floral sprays could appear much larger than the diminutive cranes flying beside them.

The Korean love of linear design which was described in regard to the forms of their vessels is also apparent in the decoration. Among the more naturalistic motifs none achieved greater popularity than those of water-fowl among reeds and willow trees and cranes flying among clouds. Yanagi observes: ‘The reason (for this predilection) will be obvious to everyone. Among all the trees in the world there are none with such long, fine and slender branches—regarded from the standpoint of their lines―as the willow-tree.... and the water-fowl disporting themselves under the willows float on flowing water, always flowing, never still...’

Like other Japanese, Yanagi felt that such designs had some hidden significance and betokened a longing for a better life to come and a general ‘loneliness’. With regard to the cranes and clouds design, he wrote: ‘When we look at the pale, quiet bluish green Celadon ware and see the design of a few torn shreds of cloud floating in the lonely void with a few cranes flying among them, we think of the destination of the birds, vanishing high up in the sky and leaving a few sad cries behind them.... There are many different kinds of birds, but among them the crane is tall, with long neck and legs, and flies in the sky with narrow wings, and so naturally they would appeal to the Koreans.’

While it seems to me that Yanagi was here assuming that the Koreans shared his own somewhat sentimental feelings on contemplating their artistic designs—and in support of this conclusion I might point out that he makes no mention of the very droll antics or postures shown by some of the cranes which introduce a note of gaiety and humour far removed from the despondency he infers, one must accept that, as a fellow Oriental, he could perhaps enter into the Koreans’ feelings better than can we. In any case, the descriptions are in my view quite charming and exactly suited to their subject without worrying about any mystical interpretation.

It goes without saying that the two motifs just described are seen at their best when inlaid. Indeed, this technical innovation of inlaying must be regarded as the chief glory of Koryo ceramic decoration, but it seems also to have proved the downfall of Celadon ware, for it led to excessive ornament coming into fashion. More and more attention was focused on the decorative elements, with the result that form and glaze colour showed a steady decline. However, this is a matter which is not our concern here, and may be left to art historians, while we concentrate on the striking effect of this decoration at its best.

Having thus considered Korean Celadon from the three angles of form, [page 52] colour and decoration, I now come to the most important question of all, namely its total effect. And here I find Uchiyama’s views of great value, though occasionally verging on hyperbole. For example, he begins an essay on Koryo pottery with the sweeping statement: ‘Koryo wares are a religion to me. If someone were to ask we “What is the pathway towards God?” I should not hesitate to reply: “Through Koryo wares”.’

He goes on: ‘Whenever I hold a Koryo ware, my weariness is relieved, my severity relaxed, my irritation alleviated, my parched feelings quenched and my ugly heart purified... It is because of this noble moment that I am able to endure and even enjoy this confused life in the world of today. I am deeply grateful for the strange fate which has linked we to Koryo wares’.

It seems that for twenty years he had lived, as he says, ‘with a hollow feeling, as though in search of something, trying one thing after another but all in vain’. He was astonished when he was suddenly confronted with ‘the world of Koryo wares’ and found that this was indeed what he had been unknowingly seeking.

Uchiyama denies that this attraction he felt so powerfully lay in the ex- ternal characteristics of the wares, in their forms, colour or decoration: it resided in their very essence, of which these were merely the outward expres- sion. He believed the reason was that they were an embodiment of ‘quietness’ or the Absolute: ‘the mind that is invested with ‘non-attachment’ or selflessness is the source of everything pure, beautiful and profound; and Koryo wares are the true products of this state. The forms of these wares move our hearts; their shades of colour possess unique inner depth; and their fine, freely carved designs are no less derived from this source.’

The standpoint is thus frankly Buddhist, yet it finds a close parallel in Christian idealism, and I for one would accept that there is something tran-scendental about Koryo wares which is not to be found in Chinese or any other porcelains. As examples of this concept Uchiyama instances an inlaid vase with a swelling body at the shoulder but tapering towards the foot, which gives an impression of tall, slender grace; likewise, a Celadon bowl with a deep blue-green glaze that resembles a lake and with incised floral designs that intrigue and beguile; and finally a white porcelain covered box which is at once too green to be called white and too white to be considered green. He concludes by asking whether it is an overstatement to say that Koryo wares are supreme manifestations of that oriental philosophical ideal of ‘quietness’ or the Void

At this point it will be useful to diverge from the main argument, as does Uchiyama, to refute the contention that Koryo wares are no more than copies of Chinese Sung porcelains, which in turn were partly derived from Persia or [page 53] other lands further to the West. That this was the case historically is undeniable, but it needs only a short further step to realize that Koryo wares soon became essentially Korean in character and free from external influence. While expressing the admiration and wonder which all must feel on being confronted with such ceramic masterpieces as the ineffable white Ting wares or the Celadons of Lung-chHian, it must be evident that ‘Koryo wares occupy a place of their own and are in no way inferior to the Sung porcelains,’ which are the expression of a more practical and material culture.

In fact, Uchiyama claims that the Korean wares possess ‘some deep, strange fascination, compelling profound thought in the minds of all who contemplate them’, and maintains that, at least in this respect, they may be held superior even to the revered ‘Kinuta’ Celadons of Sung.

‘If we were to judge the Korean wares inferior’, he writes, ‘because of their greater delicacy, tenderness and grace, then we should be allowing ourselves to be carried away by outward appearance... In general, the superiority of Chinese porcelains is in their appeal to the eye, whereas the strength of the Korean wares is their appeal to the heart... They enter the mind quietly and move all who observe them with understanding...’

It will be noted that Japanese connoisseurs make frequent use of the term sabi-shi, or ‘lonely’, when discussing the appeal of Korean Celadon. Is this merely the response felt by the sensitive but emotional Japanese, perhaps under the influence of a pessimistic view of the Korean predicament and experience in a long and troubled history? Or does it contain some hidden truth which is discernible to oriental eyes, especially to those as gifted as the Japanese, but seen less clearly by pragmatic Westerners? And to what extent does it stem from that ‘Light of Asia’ which is the teaching of Gautama Buddha?

Well, I must admit that the sole Korean authority who wrote perceptively about Korean Celadon at this period, that promising young scholar Ko Yu-sop, also felt that the people of Koryo were imbued with other-worldly ideals and had developed an attitude of indifference and resignation to the affairs of this life and that this was exemplified in their pottery. As he put it: ‘The noise and clamour of this world were to them nothing more than waves on the surface of the ocean. The famous Koryo scholar, Yi Kyu-bo, declared : “There is no one who does not long for the world of Nirvana and stillness, because it is pure and undefiled...” What a lonely, quietist state of mind this betokens!’

This would seem to support the views of Yanagi, Uchiyama and many other Japanese on the ‘sehnsucht’ expressed by Korean Celadon ; but Ko’s learning was based firmly on Japanese studies from which he quoted liberally, and we [page 54] cannot be sure that he was taking a truly Korean viewpoint. Indeed, this same sentiment was put forward by Uchiyama when he touched on the history and psychology of the Koryo people, steeped in Buddhism and the hope of a rewarding after-life: ‘It cannot have been an accident’, he wrote, ‘that the people of Koryo produced wares which exude quietness of spirit... It does not, of course, follow that the potters themselves were conscious of this state of mind; most likely they were no more than uneducated craftsmen. They were unable consciously to reflect their state of wind in their products. But simply through devoting themselves to the making of ceramic wares, as innocently and unaffectedly as clouds floating in the sky or water running in the streams, they were able to produce these porcelains’.

This penetrating passage of Uchiyama’s must indeed carry a great deal of conviction, for it does exactly express the spirit of Korean Celadon; yet one must pause before accepting the proposition that the humble Koryo potters had absorbed the spirit of the age so deeply that they quite unconsciously reproduced it in the wares they made. The problem is whether these concepts or overtones were inherent in the wares themselves or only in the eyes and minds of their twentieth century beholders.

I must leave it to others better equipped than myself to resolve this question; but I should like to say in closing that, when I see a Korean coun- tryman, wearing the traditional horsehair hat and flowing white garments and carrying his long, thin pipe a trifle absent-mindedly, bent on a day-long kugyong, during which he will observe the wonders of nature in a country blessed with superb mountain scenery and exchange ideas with other contemplatives on the way, then I can think of nothing that so well expresses his condition and state of mind as those often-quoted lines of Wordsworth:

I wandered lonely as a cloud

That floats on high o’er vales and hills...

There can, I think, be little doubt that this attitude is profoundly Korean, and must to some extent have been shaped by historical experience and centuries of Buddhism; yet I suggest that it owes as much to some peculiarly national traits such as a basically philosophical outlook, a love of natural scenery, a delightfully whimsical sense of humour, and a recognition that life has much to offer but should never be regarded as an end in itself.

Are not these characteristics equally or even more evident in the pottery they made? And have they any deeper import than their artistic love for sensitively curving lines and quiet, subdued effects?