

The Vessel Sheds its Skin

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THE ESCAPE FROM THE VESSEL

FOR many decades, Western critical convention has dictated that the practice known in Japanese as *tōgei* (ceramic art) should be treated as the neglected stepchild of fine art, the assumption being that only artifacts that are autonomous creations, entirely free from considerations of utility, can be considered genuine works of pure visual expression. The term “applied art” is reserved for objects made for a practical purpose whose very existence is predicated upon their function: artifacts in which the free play of an autonomous spirit is subordinated to the practical task of applying artistic skill to raw materials. When such objects fulfill some secondary ornamental function, they are described as “decorative art.” This is why many European and American “Art Galleries” or “National Galleries of Art” have few or no ceramic displays, tending instead to dedicate their spaces exclusively to paintings, crammed onto their walls, and sculptures, ranked in their great courts.

The situation is quite different in the East Asian island nation of Japan, where ceramics have achieved a remarkable status. One thinks especially of the formal tearoom, where guests drink from a ceramic bowl that has been handed down from generation to generation, highly prized as a family treasure and sometimes even given its own special name. Its surface, marked by centuries of history, boasts a pedigree created through the touch of lips and hands belonging to famous samurai leaders and female members of the aristocracy. No matter that it is nothing more than a practical item of humble origin, it is admired for the “landscape” that has formed by chance on its surface or treasured for the fact that it was originally imported to Japan from some far-off land. In neighboring China, balanced form, regular surface, and perfect glaze are the dominant aesthetic criteria, while Japanese connoisseurs, by contrast, crave *ibitsu* (crookedness)—warping, kinks, and accidents that occur at the height of the firing process—or natural marvels such as the chemical reactions that produce “oil-spot” Tenmoku glaze (of Chinese origin but much admired and copied

in Japan). Although vessels formed from clay were also widely used on the Korean peninsula, they were mostly seen as substitutes for metal wares and, with certain notable exceptions, clay can hardly be said to have attained high social status there. But just across the straits from Korea, on the remote islands of Japan there emerged a unique and special aesthetic sense that sought out beauty in simple, undecorated, somewhat unstable-looking everyday pots.

Although Kondō Takahiro was born a rightful heir to this great ceramic tradition, we can perhaps understand how he might have seen the example set by his father and grandfather as a challenge, something from which he needed to plan his escape. We can easily imagine that once he’d mastered the basics of throwing pots and decorating them in underglaze cobalt blue, young Kondō—like others of his generation—would have started to look for ways of liberating himself from the straitjacket imposed by the concept of the “vessel” or “container.”

MUD—SLIP—DRIPS

Kondō Takahiro’s early work clearly bears the stamp of his proud assertion of self-identity as a “painter-potter.” A slip or slurry of pure cobalt blue floats on the surface of a vessel, forming little indentations here and there, painted in a manner that breaks free from conventional auspicious motifs. In place of pine, wisteria, prunus, pomegranate, and the like, we see swirls, smudges left by a paper-blending stump, parallel grooves cut into the clay, and dripped-on ink marks dancing together on the pristine, white porcelain surface. Brush marks and flying droplets, looking as though they owe their origins to abstract expressionism or post-war avant-garde calligraphy, conjure an atmosphere of cool elegance. Every now and then there are impressed motifs as well, or geometric patterns that compete with the acute-angled, three-dimensional forms to which they are applied. Space and time seem to struggle for supremacy, creating shadows like the vague traces of ripple-like brightness that sometimes seem to dance below the surface of shallow water.

THE VESSEL AS A CONTAINER FOR WATERDROPS

Later, Kondō interpolated *gintekisai*, a special patented technique that deposits a “silver mist” on porcelain, almost as if very humid air had coagulated on cold, smooth skin, with the lustrous mineral droplets either completely covering the surface or slipping down the sides, unable to resist their own weight. It is notorious that when the Venus de Milo was first shown Tokyo in 1964, Japan’s high humidity combined with body heat from visitors thronging the exhibition space at the National Museum of Western Art caused sweat-like droplets of water to form on the ancient Greek sculpture’s marble skin. On Kondō’s works, just when you think the massed hemispherical forms look as though they would be completely wiped away if you so much as touched them, they instantly assert their own surface tension, assuming an immutable form as solid particles of metal.

THE VESSEL AND THE COPY

In the intense heat of summer, a vessel holding a chilled liquid will form globules of water on its exterior, creating a naturally ordained feeling of coolness as countless drops are cast up on a porcelain skin that was itself originally formed through a process of ordeal by fire. These minute convex mirrors each echo the shapes of their identical neighbors, mutually setting each other off in an infinite series of reflections. The difference in temperature between the inside and outside of the *utsuwa* (vessel) thus produces on its exterior a series of *utsushi* (copies) that may be perceived as a mechanism for the manifestation of *utsukushi* (beauty), a word that referred in the ancient Japanese language to the process by which something hidden becomes visible. What was latent in the clay is made manifest.

THE VESSEL AND THE BODY

For a time, Kondō’s ceramic practice seemed to have departed from the conventions of the “vessel” but his creative experiences in Scotland led him back once again, almost unawares, to a form he had been avoiding for a while. Until then, he had perhaps failed to confront the significance of the “interior” as an essential aspect of a vessel’s containing function, but now it began to assume

a more prominent role in his creative consciousness, to the point that it even awakened him to a personal need to re-experience his own physical body as a vessel. The body, in the final analysis, is a complex of respiratory, digestive, and reproductive organs, by definition a receptacle. The brain, too, is a vessel for accumulating and circulating ideas and experiences, contained within another vessel, the cranium. Kondō began to create ceramic seated figures that took the shape of his own body and sometimes even eliminated his face, forcing him to confront the fact that the interior formed nothing but a hollow vessel. A ceramic container is created through a process of firing and cooling that purges and condenses all the moisture that was in the clay, but if it is to escape disintegration during this process it is essential that its interior harbors an empty space, the autonomous rules of ceramic creation demanding that there must be this inner void. In this ineluctable truth lies concealed the starting point for all efforts to knead clay into three-dimensional form.

THE VESSEL AND CHANGE

Any *utsuwa* (vessel)—be it a jar for holding liquid or a plate for serving food—must yield to *utsuroi* (changes) in the substances that it contains and transports. In the same way that a leather bottle demands to be filled with newly made wine, a clay vessel seeks to metabolize the substance that occupies its interior void. That substance may occasionally infiltrate the clay’s surface and unexpectedly impart its color to the vessel’s exterior, or sometimes even create random patterns there; when a ceramic object appears to “sweat” it is because the very material of the vessel assumes a permeability that enables it to retain moisture. A vessel that has carried a wide variety of passengers and assisted them in their comings and goings can, over time, take on the characteristics of different seasons and historical eras, maturing into an artifact that embodies vestiges of times gone by.

THE VESSEL AND THE POTTER’S WHEEL

Utsuwa (vessels) secretly carry a *utsuro* (hollow) and are typically formed on a *rokuro* (potter’s wheel), where the artist’s fingers strive to achieve an equilibrium between the cohesive power of the clay and the centrifugal force generated by the rotating platform, using them to throw

shapes that could not be achieved by any other means. As form materializes out of formlessness, from time to time the action of the “pre-established harmony of things” (Leibniz’s “harmonie préétablie”) invites the potter to suppress his ego and surrender himself to self-effacement. But selflessness generates its own *utsuro* (void): The repetition of empty, involuntary manual processes can carry with it the risk of a lapse into habit and inertia. On the one hand, the potter must take pains to animate his raw material and breathe life into clay but, on the other hand, he will inevitably be eager to infuse that material with his own creative volition. It is only when he entrusts these competing tendencies to trial by fire in the kiln that he can find proof of his success or failure. A firm resolve to cut himself off from the temptation to remain content merely with his status as a master of the wheel is an essential precondition of victory in the struggle between “craft” and “art.” The artist’s era, his social environment, and in some cases even factors such as the general economic situation or the state of the market are likely to exert a decisive influence on the moment when alienation from tradition relapses or mutates into perpetuation of tradition.

THE VESSEL SELF-DESTRUCTS

In 1950s Japan, new ceramic works called *obujē* (*objet* or object) attracted critical acclaim as examples of avant-garde art. These *objets* were superimposed upon Japan’s earlier vessel tradition, making it inevitable that their appearance would lead to an implosion of pre-existing forms: If one, as it were, pours the notion of “autonomous art” into a clay pot, its original function as a container is inevitably eliminated. This act of self-negation was an avant-garde imperative, an essential component of a thoroughgoing campaign of creative destruction, a project to transform ceramics into art. A couple of generations ago, potters who had been regarded primarily as makers of tea bowls underwent this process of transition from traditional ceramic ware to *objets*. Their successors likewise need to learn for themselves, repeating their predecessors’ experiences in abbreviated form and using them to reshape their own artistic trajectories.

Both chance factors and necessary conditions are at work in the affirmation of a vessel’s existence. When a three-dimensional shape made by kneading ceramic

clay exceeds a certain size, it will collapse under its own weight, while a crack formed before firing, a break occurring during firing, or excessive shrinkage during the cooling process can all result in failure. Yet although these kinds of breakdown are routinely regarded as “failures,” if we take the clay itself as our starting point, we can see that they are no more than natural outcomes or spontaneous changes that inevitably manifest themselves due to different conditions of gravity, temperature, humidity, and so on, an accumulation of chance conditions that lead to a predictable outcome. In Japanese, the character *sō* 創 (make, create) can be combined with the character *saku* 作 (make) to form the word *sōsaku* 創作 (creative, creativity), or with the character *shō* 傷 to form the word *sōshō* 創傷 (wound, injury). An open wound or fault can provide valuable evidence of the failure of an undertaking, its very presence an honest warning of some irrational component in a plan. If artists’ works constitute their epitaphs, traces of that character *sō* 創 ought to remain clearly marked, so to speak, on their gravestones.

THE VESSEL AS HARMONIOUS VOID

The construct known as *utsuwa* (vessel) may be defined as that which can impart an outline to an *utsuro* (void) of non-existence; as a product of human agency, it also throws light upon the origins of our primordial skill in bestowing form upon indeterminate materials. If God “formed man of the dust of the ground” (Genesis 2:7), ceramic art tests our capacity to experience that process vicariously, through the act of creation. Prometheus stole a flame from God and manipulated it to fire a kiln that heated clay and gave it form. This foundational moment revealed the part that skill would play in shaping our human destiny, but it also condemned Prometheus to be wounded for eternity as punishment for his transgression. Kondō Takahiro sometimes uses alternative characters to write the word *utsuwa* (vessel), proposing that by filling an *utsu* 空 (void) we can attain a state of *wa* 和 (harmony), a human aspiration that also finds expression in ceremonies that seek harmony in the linkage of heaven, earth, and air; rituals that offer pieces of earth as sacrifices for the blessing of fire; and seasonal festivals honoring ancestral spirits. Along with weaving cloth, the manufacture of vessels is one of the most fundamental of all human activities. The generation and annihilation of ceramic vessels, a process infinitely repeated as each is

eventually consigned to destruction, remorselessly cycles between the two states of life and death that can be described in Japanese by the same or similar words, but written using different character combinations: *utsusemi* or *utsushimi* 現世身 (worldly existence) and *utsusemi* 空蟬 (the emptiness of a cicada's abandoned shell).

We have at last moved beyond barren debate as to whether or not works of contemporary *tōgei* can be regarded as fine art. Once confined to the Japanese archipelago, these products of a collaboration between clay, fire, and human skill have taken on a new and brilliant identity in different contexts far beyond our shores. The aesthetics of *wabi* and *sabi*, once defined as luster shining in the midst of darkness, have now quit the traditional tearoom to assume different qualities when displayed in the white spaces of contemporary

Western interiors, where *tōgei* is appreciated for its expression of a vital rapport between mind and material, achieved through the agency of the human hand and engendering an atmosphere of harmony and calm. The clay may not literally “shed its skin” but, by challenging the viewer to abandon all preconceptions, contemporary *tōgei* serves as the essential catalyst for a paradigm shift, a metamorphosis in our received framework of ideas regarding the definition of “art.”

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Translated by Joe Earle

脱皮する「うつわ」

稲賀繁美

「うつわ」からの逃走

「陶藝」と呼ぶ営みは、ながらく「藝術」からは「継子」扱われてきた。それが西側世界の「掟」だった。「藝術」とは実用性から切り離され、自律した造形であることを要請されたから。そして実用に用立てられ、用途に依存した形態は、「自律」した精神の営みを物質に投影した藝術の二次的応用という意味で、「応用藝術」と呼ばれ、何かを装うための副次的な手段だという意味で、「装飾藝術」と呼ばれてきた。「美術館」Fine Art Museumには陶磁器を陳列する場所はなく、もっぱら「絵画」が壁面を埋め、彫刻が広間に据えられた。

ところが極東の島国では、陶藝あるいは焼き物は、別格の地位を獲得した。とりわけ茶席で重宝された器は、代々の所有者によって伝来され、固有名詞まで与えられ、家宝として珍重された。数百年の歴史を己が肌に刻み、著名な武人や高貴な婦人の手や唇に触れたその来歴を誇りもした。たとえその出自は、あるいは貧しい実用品であっても、偶然に浮かんだ「景色」が愛でられ、あるいは遠来の土地からはるばる運ばれてきた舶来の由来が珍重された。

隣国の大陸では、均整のとれた形態や均質な肌、見事な釉薬の光沢が「美」の基準となった。ところが日本では、かえって歪みや振じれを伴い、焼成のさなかの事故で深手を負った「いびつ」さが垂涎的となり、油滴天目のような化学反応が、天然の造化の妙として珍重された。半島の隣国でも、土を捏ねた器は広く用いられたが、多くそれは金属器の代替品として、社会的に高貴な地位を得る素材とは言い難かった。海峡の向こう側の、素朴で飾らず、どこか傾いた雑器に「美」を見出したのは、辺境の島国ならでの、特異な審美眼だった。

そのような伝統の嫡子として生を受けた近藤高弘にとって、祖父や父の手本は、そこからの逃走を図るべき対象ではなかったか。呉須の絵付けや轆轤の基本を学んだ孫の世代にとっては、まずは「器」という軛から自らを開放する方途が模索されたように見受けられる。

どろ - 泥漿 - のしたたり

澄んだコバルトの泥漿がうつわの表面に踊り、そのしたたりが点々と刻印される。松や藤、梅や葡萄それに柘榴といった縁起物の意匠から、絵付けは脱皮する。そして流紋や擦筆の筆痕、土の表層に食い込む平行線の溝、あるいはドリッピングの墨跡が白い陶土の表層に舞う。あるいは抽象表現主義、あるいは前衛書道の出自を思わせる筆跡や飛沫が涼しげな風情を醸し出す。ときにそこには押印が施され、幾何学文様が鋭角のある立体造形と競合した折節もあった。空間感覚と時間の堆積とが拮抗し、浅い水底に舞う不定形の光の水紋の影となる。Painter-Potterとしての立場宣言と自負とが、初期の近藤高弘には明確に刻印されている。

水滴を宿す「うつわ」

そこに特許となる技術が指し挟まれる。「銀滴」silver mistが陶磁の肌のうえに析出する。あたかも高湿度の空気が、冷たく滑らかな皮膚のうえに凝結したかのような、光沢ある鉱物質の水滴が、あるいは表層を覆い、あるいはその自重に耐えかねて滴り落ちる。かつてパリから初来日を果たした《ミロのヴィーナス》の大理石の肌は、高温多湿の日本、西洋美術館の会場の人いさきで、肌に汗を噴いたことが知られる。触れれば拭い取れてしまいそうな半球群が、自らの表面張力を主張したまま、その場に金属の固体として不変の相をなす。

「うつわ」と「うつし」

「うつわ」は内部に低温の液体を含めば、その外皮の表面に水滴を生じる。夏の暑さの盛りに涼を感じさせる自然の采配。それが炎の試練を経た陶磁の肌のうえに、無数の水滴をなして漂着する。その微細な凸面鏡のひとつひとつには、隣にある同類の姿が映り、無限に相照相発する。「うつわ」の内面と外面との「温度差」が表面に「うつし」出される。「うつし」によって「うつくし」が顕現する機構がここに捉えられている。日本の古語の「うつくし」とは隠されていたものが現れることの謂。土に含まれていた潜在がここに顕在化する。

「うつわ」と「からだ」

こうして、一度は「うつわ」から離れていったはずの陶藝の営みは、作者のスコットランドにおける海外体験を経て、いつしか「うつわ」へと戻ってくる。今までは忌避してきたはずの「うつわ」の容器としての「内面」が、作り手の意識に浮上してくる。それは作者みずからの肉体すなわち「からだ」を「うつわ」として再体験する自覚の覚醒でもあった。「からだ」とはせじ詰めれば呼吸器と消化器と生殖器という管の複合体であり、それ自体が「器」。頭脳もまた知恵や経験を蓄積・流通させる「器」であり、それが頭蓋骨という「器」のなかに収められている。自らの身体で型取り＝象^{かたど}りをした坐像を焼成した近藤は、その顔面をすっぱりと削ぎ落とし、中が空虚な「うつわ」であることを自らに突き付けた。陶磁器は焼成とそれに続く冷却で水分を放出し凝縮する。その途上で自らの破損を避けるためには、内部に空虚を蔵することが不可欠な条件となる。陶磁としての造形の自律には、内部の無を捨象することはできない。そこに土を捏ねて立体を生む営みの原点が隠されていた。

「うつわ」と「うつろい」

液体を貯める壺にせよ、ものを盛る皿にせよ、「うつわ」はそれを運搬し貯蔵する「中身」の「うつろい」に身をゆだねる。革袋が新しい葡萄酒を求めるように、土の器もまた内部の虚空を占める物質の新陳代謝を要求する。そして内容物は、時として土肌に浸潤^{しんじゅん}し、それを通して表層へとゆくりなく染み出し、いつしか偶然任せの文様を描く折節もあった。「土もの」が「汗をか掻く」のも、器の素材そのものが水分を含む浸透性を身上とするからだ。「うつわ」はそこに様々な旅人を乗せ、その往来を助けながら、いつしかその「うつろい」ゆく季節や時代を己が身のうちに「写しこみ」、その痕跡を体現する「うつわ」へと成長する。

「うつろ」と「ろくろ」

内部に「うつろ」な空間を隠し持つ「うつわ」は、多^く「ろくろ」によって成型される。そこには土の凝集力と、ろくろの生み出す遠心力との相克があり、その釣り合いを探る手の指が、それ以外にはありえない造形を巻き上げてゆく。無形からかたちが立ち現れる。そして予定調和の営みは時に自我を殺した無我の境地へと陶工をいざなう。だが無私の営為は、それ自体「うつろ」とな

り、空虚で無意識な手仕事の反復は、惰性へと墮する危険からも無縁ではない。一方で素材を生かし、土に生命を吹き込む配慮。他方では創作者の意思を素材に吹き込む意欲。その両者の拮抗は炎の試練に委ねてはじめて、その成否を証しする。「ろくろ」の名人藝を極めたうえで、そこに安住する誘惑から我が身を振りほどく切断の決意。そこに「陶藝」を「美術」と切り結ばせるための、不可避^{けいまい}の契機が姿を現すことになる。伝統からの乖^{かい}離^りが伝統の継承へと変転を遂げる瞬間だが、そこには作者のおかれた時代、社会環境、場合によっては経済状況や市場の動向といった世相も、決定的な影響を与えるだろう。

自壊する「うつわ」

とりわけ「前衛」を謳った陶磁のオブジェ objet にあっては、「器」に盛り付けすることによって「器」そのものを破壊する自滅が、不可避の行程となった。「自律した藝術」という観念を器に盛れば、「容入れ物」としての器は壊れてしまう。この自己否定の掟が「前衛」の定義だった。新たな理念を「盛る」ことにより、その当の「器」が破砕を遂げる。「陶磁」を「美術」へと脱皮させ、変身させるには、この突き詰めた「創造的破壊」が不可欠だった。ひと世代あるいは二世代前の京都の「茶碗や」たちが体験したこの「^{また}跨ぎ」を、後続の世代も、我が身をもって縮約しつつ追体験し、自らの生涯として生き直すこととなる。

偶然と必然とが、この「うつわ」の存在確認に働きかける。陶土を捏ね上げた立体は、ある寸法を超えると、自重に耐えきれず崩壊する。あるいは焼成前の亀裂として、あるいは焼成中の破断として、あるいは冷却中の収縮率の^{たか}多寡^{くわ}によって。だが日常的には「失敗」と判断されるそうした破砕も、土にとってみれば自然な成り行き、おのずと生ずる変形であり、重力や気温・湿度と土の置かれた条件から導かれる必然が、姿を現した結果に過ぎない。いわば偶然の条件の重なり合いが、必然の結果を創る。「創」とは創作でもあれば、創傷でもあり、傷口とは、^{くわ}企て^だが破綻した様の、貴重な明証でもあれば、^{たくら}企みに内在した無理が、すなおにその姿をそれとして示してくれた教訓でもあろう。作品が作者の墓碑銘となるのならば、その墓碑銘に刻まれた「創」の跡が、ここに顕現して遺る。

「うつわ」と「空和」

「うつわ」とは「うつろ」なる不在に輪郭を与える営みであり、不確定な「もの」に「かたち」を授けるという根源的なわざの原点を照らし出す人為でもある。神が泥から人を捏ね上げたとするならば、陶藝はヒトがその創造を追体験する試練でもある。神から盗んだ火を操り、窯を焚いて土を焼き締める「行」はまた、ヒトの「業」を晒す創業であり、創傷でもある。近藤高弘は「うつわ」に「空和」を充てる。「空」をもって充足させることで「和」を獲得する「わっぱ」としての「うつ-わ」。それは大地と大気、天と地との間を繋ぐ「和」を求める祭儀であり、炎による祝福に手向ける犠牲としての土くれを整える神事でもあり、季節ごとに魂を送る祭礼でもあろう。「うつわ」づくりには、機織りと並んで、ヒトの営みの原点のひとつがあり、無数に繰り返されてはやがて破壊に委ねられる器の生成と消滅とは、「現世身」と「空蟬」との往還、生と死との円環を、倦むことなく、なぞり描きする。

「現代陶藝」はもはや「美術」か否かの不毛な議論の彼方にある。日本列島に閉ざされた土と炎と手わざとの協働という域を越え、海外の環境に置かれるや、別の生命を得て輝いている。漆黒のなかの光沢といった「侘び」や「寂び」の美学も、茶室を去り、欧米の応接間に据えられると変身を遂げる。「手」を仲立ちとして「もの」と「ところ」の「触れ合う」臨界が、陶土の肌として慈しまれ、「和」のなごみを醸し出す。それはおのずと旧来の「美術」の通念という「うつわ」をも、その内部から「脱皮」させる「皮膜」へと変貌した。

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ジョー・アール訳

