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Yagi Kazuo's Pottery beyond Tradition and Modernity: The "Self-skin" Expression

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Foreword

Yagi Kazuo died in February 1979 and in 1981 the Kyoto National Museum of Modern Art held a retrospective exhibition of his works. At that time I was just beginning my studies on Japanese modern and contemporary art history, and the concept which guides my research became clear: the relationship between tradition and modernity. When I saw this exhibition, I was extremely impressed by the beautiful works of a potter who focused on creating very sculptural clay abstract objects and who preserved the meaning and the main techniques of old Japanese pottery. I started to read his book *The Flame of Each Moment* and I realized that Yagi's artistic destiny symbolized the way Japanese artists interpreted the shift towards modernity. When Professor Inaga Shigemi asked me to choose a topic, I thought Yagi's case well represented the symposium's theme "Rethinking Traditional Japanese Arts and Crafts from an International Perspective."

Introduction

In 1948, Yagi and the Sodeisha members shared a very romantic idea of art and optimism towards life. For them it was a completely new departure. Their purpose was to relieve themselves from the restrictions imposed upon ceramics since ancient times and its members were encouraged to put more faith in themselves like painters and sculptors. Meanwhile they did not reject the utility value of ceramics.

The words of Yagi himself express both his respect for tradition and a strong will for new creation: "My goal is the marriage between new things and classics." So if in Japanese modern art history Yagi is considered as the pioneer of the modern pottery current, he is also obviously an heir to the long tradition of Japanese pottery.

1. Yagi Kazuo in the Postwar Exhibition of Japanese Pottery at the Paris Cernuschi Museum in 1950

This exhibition was organized by René Grousset, curator of the Paris Cernuschi Museum, and Vadime Elisseeff, who was assistant curator of the Cernuschi Museum in Tokyo at that time. The selection of the ceramics works was made by Koyama Fujio, who was curator of the Tokyo Ceramics Museum and Serge Elisseeff, a famous Harvard University professor, who wrote that the Japanese Western-style “painter’s soul kept intact his Japanese essence” (*La peinture contemporaine japonaise*, p. 116). They met twice in July and August, 1950 in Kyoto before sending the ceramics in Paris. The exhibition was held from November 28, 1950 to March 1951. The catalogue was written by Madeleine David. After a short summary of the history of Japanese pottery from the Jōmon period, she considered four trends:

1. The official school of ceramists (Nitten group)
2. Tomimoto Kenkichi and other artists of the same trend (the director of the Shinsho Kōgeikai and friend of Yanagi Soetsu, Isso Yagi [Yagi Kazuo’s father], was among this current).
3. Traditional independent ceramists like Kitaoji Rosanjin
4. The popular craft movement (Mingei) associated with the famous Kawai Kanjirō and Hamada Shōji.

Among the avant-garde ceramists included in this exhibition we can find three groups: the Shikokai group directed by the famous Kyoto potter Uno Sango, along with Onishi Kinnosuke and Hayashi Yasuo; the Shinkozosha group with Yamamoto Shonen; and the Sodeisha group with Yagi Kazuo, Suzuki Osamu, and Yamada Hikaru. Isamu Noguchi was also exhibited as an American sculptor.

This exhibition showed quite well the historical and artistic context in which Yagi was living. The evolution of Japanese pottery was quite complicated: there was not only the official tradition and the avant-garde movement. The traditional style was divided into many groups and inside the new avant-garde, several groups were also displayed.

The pottery by Yagi which was exhibited was covered with a white slip and decorated with a carved design of a humoristic figure. It was not yet the kind of object that would characterize his later art, but he had already started to look for a new kind of

clay creation. However, he was still influenced by tradition. He used to say, "I am just a tea bowl maker." Even when he started to make abstract objects, he never stopped making tea bowls. As he wrote in a poem about his raku ware *Suetsumuhana* (Figure 1) a tea bowl is a "living thing," 生きもの "happening of heaven" 天でのできごと (catalogue retrospective p. 214).

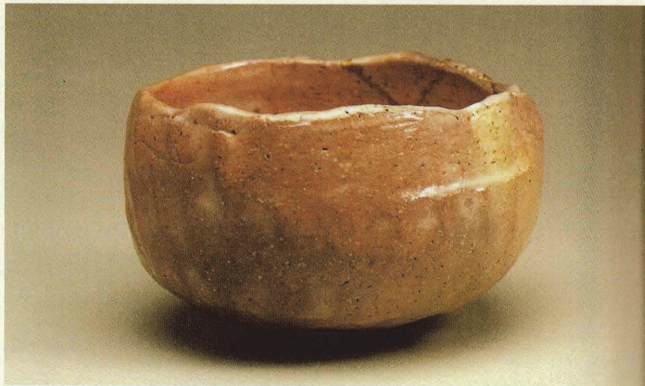


Fig.1 *Tea Bowl "Suetsumuhana, 1977."* Raku ware (7.8×12.1×2.1 cm.). Private collection.

2. Yagi and "Traditions"

2. 1 Tradition = Academic Background

Yagi first started studying sculpture in the department of sculpture at the Kyoto Municipal High School of Arts and Crafts. Then he studied ceramics at the Kyoto Institute of Ceramics and, after he graduated, he worked under the guidance of the ceramist Numata Ichiga (1873-1954).

Numata graduated from the Tokyo Fine Arts School and received a gold medal in the 1900 Paris International Exhibition. He spent two long periods of study in Europe working with the sculptor Auguste Rodin and learning the techniques of firing ceramics sculpture in La manufacture de Sèvres. His works consisted chiefly of animals. He wanted to teach his students about a domain of "pure clay sculpture." Numata encouraged his students to submit their works to the sculpture division rather than the crafts division. (Yagi's father was very opposed to this.) Thus Yagi began his training in a European-derived tradition of ceramic sculpture in making terra-cotta. So as far as his educational background, Yagi is mainly a sculptor who learned both traditional and European style clay techniques.

2.2 Tradition = Yagi Isso's Influence

His father Yagi Isso, who was born in Osaka, had studied in the clay laboratory at the Kyoto Metropolitan Museum. He became an independent potter in the 1920s. He used to make Raku style *chawan*; his Chün ware with a bluish opaque glaze was very well known. From 1919 to 1929, he was active in a ceramists association called Sekidosha which was influenced by the Nihonga painters association Kokuga Seisakusha. His father had a strong influence upon Yagi because they worked together in the same atelier in Kyoto Gojōzaka until his father died in 1973. His father never interfered with his son's work, but Yagi from childhood had watched his father working. Despite the opposition of Yagi's teacher to his move to the sculpture department of the Kyoto Municipal High School, his father insisted because he wanted his son to pursue the same career as himself. He thought that the three-dimensional technique was very important to master to become a ceramist.

2.3 Tradition = Kyoto Gojōzaka Circle

Yagi Isso established himself in Gojōzaka after he graduated from the High School of Arts and Crafts in 1915. So Yagi Kazuo had spent his childhood in this area where many Kyōyaki potters lived. He felt himself to be a potter because, first of all, he was the son of a potter. He belonged sociologically to that category which was a kind of a society inside the society—like textile craftsmen in Nishijin. In his writings he mentioned the potters' workshops close to where he lived. He referred especially to an old potter who worked in his atelier all day long at the wheel. "His way of doing his work looked like a stream of water." (Yagi Kazuo, *The Flame of Each Moment*, p. 33) He rebelled against the conservative world of Gojōzaka because he wanted to be more than a mere ceramist. However, for Yagi to be potter meant that the earth was his essential material for creation. He remained the "rebellious son of Gojōzaka."

2.4 Tradition = Korean Traditional Pottery and Tea Ceremony Bowls

Yagi was fond of Korean traditional ceramics. He said that he was very impressed by the Kyoto National Museum of Art collection. He used to visit the museum every day in order to understand the profound meaning of Korean ceramics. He remembered that at that time in Kyoto, one could see old Korean men wearing white traditional costumes and in Maruyama park, ancient Korean traditional dance festivals were held. He was interested in Korean pottery techniques—in particular the use of white as a pottery glaze. Korean ceramics historically have been important

for the development of Japanese ceramics, especially in the establishment of the Raku style. In that respect he was different from his father, who specialized in Chinese Ming period styles.

Yagi also learned the tea ceremony tea bowl technique under the guidance of several tea ceremony pottery masters. He felt a great respect for one of them—Miyata Sensei—who taught him the spirit of Kyōyaki. He said that it was a very rich and also frustrating experience to create a tea bowl because it was very difficult to find the correct deepness and thickness.

2.5 Tradition = Ceramic Techniques

Yagi preferred to use the traditional kiln for ceramics rather than an electric kiln. He used a very difficult technique borrowed from Korean pottery. For example, in *Annular Eclipse* (Figure 2), he formed the lines by cutting through the coating of a white slip, then inlaying them with black pigments made from iron-bearing clay and cobalt. For him, the process of making was a very important part of creation. Even in making his abstract objects, he never abandoned ceramic techniques; he kept on working as a craftsman as though the abstract objects he made were tea bowls.

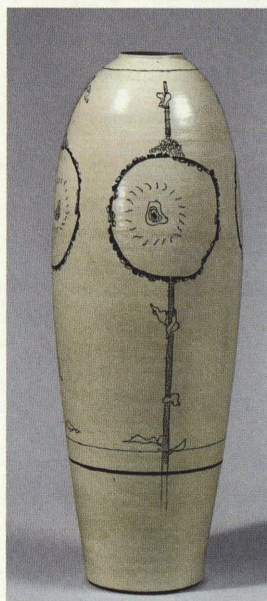


Fig. 2 *Annular Eclipse*, 1948 (48.5×17×17 cm.). Kyoto Municipal Museum of Art.

3. Yagi and “Avant-Gardes” before 1950

3.1 Interest in Surrealism and Paul Klee

Yagi was sent as a reservist soldier to China in April 1939. Because of a serious illness, he returned to Japan in August and, after having recuperated, he was discharged from the army and went back to Kyoto in August 1940. He became aware of Western avant-garde movements such as Surrealism and Cubism through the Nihonga painters group Rekitei Art Association. He had been attracted to Surrealism ever since he was student and particularly by Max Ernst works. After seeing Paul Klee's work in an art magazine, he was impressed by “the pure and autonomous flow

of line” in his painting. He liked also the famous English sculptor Henry Moore.

However, during the war Surrealism was considered as anti-nationalistic. The surrealist poet and painter Takiguchi Shuzo had been arrested and imprisoned. Until 1945, Yagi returned to the study of classics because “at that stage, I had no understanding of what ceramics was really about.” He failed twice to be selected for the Bunten exhibition. After the war he was interested in Miro’s painting and graphics. He met the Spanish painter during his visit to Japan.

3.2 Yagi and the Japanese Avant-garde Young Potters

In 1948, Yagi Kazuo founded the Sodeisha group with Suzuki Osamu, Yamada Hiraku, Matsu Yoshisuke, and Kano Tetsuo. The characters used in the name Sodeisha were found by Yagi’s calligraphy teacher in a Chinese treaty on ceramics. “Crawling through mud” is a fragment of the Chinese expression describing the scars that sometimes appear in the blue glaze on Jun ware vessels of the Jin dynasty (1127-1279). A literal English translation is “earth worm markings.” They explained the foundation of this association in these words written in a postcard:

The postwar art world needed the expediency of creating an association in order to escape from personal confusion, but today finally that provisional role appears to have ended. The birds of dawn taking flight out of the forest of falsehood now discover their reflections only in the spring of truth. We are united not to provide a warm bud of dreams but to *come to terms* with our existence in broad daylight. (*Isamu Noguchi and Modern Japanese Ceramics*, pp. 157-187)

The Shikōkai group of eleven members was founded by the Kyoto potter Uno Sango, who also wanted to create a new type of ceramics. They were more radically against traditional pottery than Sodeisha artists. Yoshihara Jiro, the famous Gutai group leader, was invited to speak at the first Shikōkai seminar. Hayashi Yasuo started to make abstract ceramics from 1948 with his work *Cloud*.

3.3 Yagi’s “Metamorphosis”: From Traditional Bowls to Abstract “Objects”

In 1948, Yagi Kazuo received a major prize for his work called *Annular Eclipse* (*Kinkanshoku*). The form itself is the Cizhou-related bottle shape, but the decoration is very unusual and mysterious. His technique gives an effect akin to etching, which

is very different from the lines applied with a brush. His choice of this technique may have arisen from Korean ceramics, but he was also influenced by Paul Klee's drawings. In *Jar with Sgraffito* (1947), we can recognize a non Japanese sunflower which was painted by the famous Van Gogh. Two years later, a member of New York Museum of Modern Art, Mrs. Raymond, purchased four vases by Yagi Kazuo: it was the start of his international career.

Another step towards abstraction is the vase with two small mouths (*Futakuchitsubo*) of 1950 (Figure 3). In this work, Yagi was playing with the conventional use of the potter's wheel when he made this cocoon-like shape vessel on a small, conical foot. He impressed a dent in one side with two small spouts facing one another in the depression. The black design still looks like a Chinese Cizhou-ware prototype and the decoration continues Yagi's use of a slip-inlay technique, but the small dabs of red, yellow, and blue enamels show his interest in Joan Miro's painting and graphics.

Finally, in 1954, he exhibited at the Kyoto annual Sodeisha exhibition a very different piece called *Mr. Samsa's Walk*—a wheel inlaid with tubes stretching in all directions (Figure 4). He wanted to stop using the wheel. From this time on, Yagi and the other members ceased to use the potter's wheel, turning instead to hand building. The title in itself—*Mr. Samsa's Walk*—is relevant because he refers to the



Fig. 3 *Vase with Two Small Mouths*, 1950 (19×20×13.5 cm.). The National Museum of Modern Art, Kyoto.



Fig. 4 *The Walk of Mr. Samsa*, 1954 (27.5×27×14 cm.). Private collection.

hero of a famous Kafka novel. (*The Metamorphosis* is about a man who turned into a cockroach.) In 1978, Yagi created another work concerning the same subject. One can infer that creating this work was such a big change for Yagi that he could hardly recognize himself and had to reconsider his entire artistic life.

4. Yagi's Relationship with Contemporary Sculpture

4.1 Yagi as a Sculptor: The Invention of Kokuto

Tsuji Shindō and the sculptor Horiuchi Masakazu, who like Yagi, taught at the Kyoto Metropolitan Art School, in addition to being good friends, were considered by Yagi as very good artists whom he started to compete with at each exhibition. The first one began to show ceramic sculptures from 1955 and the other one is a pure sculptor, considered as the father of Japanese postwar sculpture. Sometimes it happens that he reproduced the same subject as Horiuchi, like *The Hole Penetrating the Hole*.

Although Yagi had always defined himself as a potter and never as a ceramic sculptor like Tsuji Shindo, his method is linked with sculpture. He expressed some frustrations about pottery because of the difference between the making process and the drying process. He was often disappointed with his works after drying: "Through the process of glazing and baking in the kiln, the work becomes far removed from the artist." He envied the painter or the sculptor who could inscribe his thoughts directly on his works.

In order to avoid this problem, he invented a new technique seen in the *Kokuto* (Black Earth) around 1957. The unglazed forms were fired at earthenware temperatures (450-600°C) and blackened by placing moistened pine needles in the kiln at the end of the firing to create a smoky atmosphere that deposited carbon in the pores of the clay. Yagi fired his black works in a small kiln that his father had built for firing bisque ware and enamels after moving to Arashiyama. To create a lustrous, softly reflective surface, Yagi polished the damp clay before drying and firing it. It is noteworthy that the black pieces he made look like more sculptures than his other works in clay. Yagi wanted to control the entire process from beginning to end, refusing the stroke of luck. He used to say that in ceramics, the state of cooling was as important as the state of firing.

4.2 Yagi's Encounter with Isamu Noguchi (1904-1988)

While Yagi acknowledged that he was deeply moved by the works of Paul Klee

and also by ceramics made by Picasso, the most important artist for him was surely Isamu Noguchi. In a discussion he had with Horiuchi Masakazu and the curator Inoui, he said: "What made me look towards sculpture in the matter of the process of making and the process of conceiving is Isamu Noguchi. When I saw Noguchi's ceramics, I felt instantly that he made it." (Yagi Kazuo, *The Flame of Each Moment*, p. 346) What struck him was the fact that Noguchi used terra-cotta as a process and that he put them directly in the kiln.

Yagi owned a copy of the Japanese publication that introduced Noguchi's 1931, 1950, and 1952 ceramic works and a fragment of the jacket showing Noguchi's self-portrait mask: *Face Dish (Me)* (Figure 17). They remained in contact with one another, and in 1964, Noguchi drew a sketch of a black pottery work by Yagi Kazuo on a heavy square card and added the title *Ah, Sunflower*, as well as Noguchi's signature (Figure 5). On the reverse is Tsuji Shindo's inscription which records the occasion—his fifty-fourth birthday—in the company of Noguchi, Yoshida Minoru, and Yagi. Yagi had shown his black pottery works in a one-person show at gallery Beni in Kyoto in September 1964. One of the most well known works is *Queen* (Figure 6), which can be recognized as a fertility goddess with conical breast and vestigial arms. It was purchased by Mrs. Ferdinand C. Smith. Yagi refers to Noguchi's work *The Queen* (Figure 7) made in Kyoto in 1931 in which Noguchi was inspired by the Japanese prehistoric figurines called *haniwa*.

So the impact of Noguchi's 1952 exhibition is evident on Yagi. For example, Yagi, along with the other members of Sodeisha, decided to use unglazed Shigaraki clay

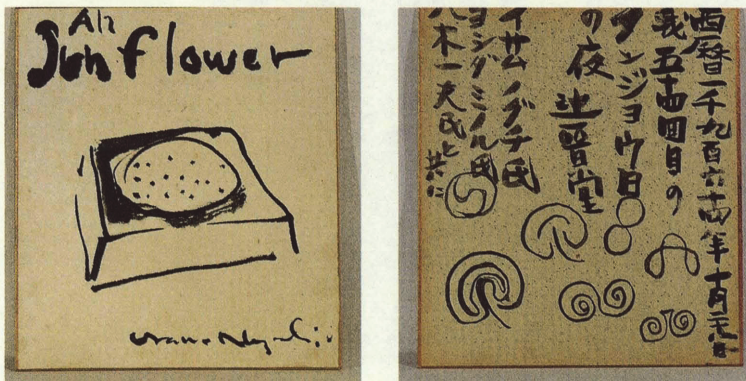


Fig. 5 Isamu Noguchi. *Ah, Sunflower*, 28 October, 1964, Kyoto, Japan. Ink on shikishi paper card (27.1×24.2cm.). Private collection.

which took a warm orange color. In order to make larger sculpture, he first shaped them in several components, each small enough to fit in the Gojōzaka communal kiln. For *A Cloud Remembered* (Figure 8), in order to create freer forms, he did not use the wheel.



Fig. 6 Yagi Kazuo. *Queen*, 1964 (31.5 × 26 × 25.4 cm.). San Francisco Museum of Art.

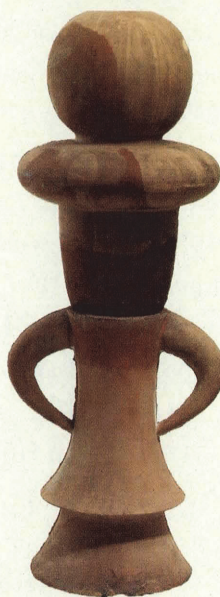


Fig. 7 Isamu Noguchi. *The Queen*, 1931, Kyoto, Japan. Terra-cotta (115 × 40.6 × 40.6 cm.). Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.



Fig. 8 *A Cloud Remembered*, 1959 (50.5 × 33 × 23.5 cm.). Kyoto Municipal Museum of Art.

4.3 Isamu Noguchi and Pottery

As a matter of fact, Isamu Noguchi had begun his experience with pottery before the war during a first trip to Asia, which was his voyage of initiation. He started to travel in China where he spent seven months and arrived in Japan in 1931, despite his father's refusal. His first sculptural work using clay was made in Kyoto. He learned pottery techniques from the Kyoto potter Uno Ninmatsu (1864-1937), who was highly regarded for his skill in Chinese ceramics like the celadon and porcelain vessels of the Song dynasty. But Noguchi was interested in working with pure unglazed earth. So Brancusi's influence in his clay work *Tsuneko-san* is evident. At that time he was especially interested in Tang-dynasty clay figurines whose influence can be seen in his work *Tamanikishi*, a portrait of a leading sumo wrestler. Noguchi then left Japan which was becoming nationalist, and came back in 1950. By then he was already quite a famous artist in America. He recalled his aim to "interpret the East to the West." He spent some time in Seto, where he created the leading work *My Mu*, which is obviously a reference to the central Zen Buddhist concept of void. This work was exhibited at his solo exhibition at Mitsukoshi department store in 1950. He also showed a work referring to the old *haniwa* and he inscribed in Japanese hiragana script the verse of a poem written by his father Noguchi Yonejirō. Isamu had the idea of "a reintegration of arts toward some purposeful social end which is indicated in order to enlarge the present outlet permitted by our limiting categories of architects, painters, sculptors, and landscapists." (*Isamu Noguchi and Japanese Pottery*, p. 29).

The most intensive period of clay work in Noguchi's career began when he married the actress Yamaguchi Yoshiko, who was born of Japanese parents in Taiwan. At that time Takiguchi Shuzō wrote that Noguchi had become a potter. In 1952, the new Museum of Modern Art in Kamakura exhibited 120 new works by Noguchi, of which 119 were ceramics. Among these works, there were a lot of little figures in terra-cotta, like a portrait of Yoshiko, his wife. There were also bigger works like *The Curtain of Dream* which recalls the wall (*Hekitai* 1964, Private collection) made later by Yagi. He created a kind of installation which was characteristic of his conceptual type of design art. He was still very inspired by primitive art such as the Japanese avant-garde artist Okamoto Taro's work *Face* (1952).

After his divorce, Noguchi ceased to make pottery and he went back to sculpture, design, and landscapes.

5. Originality in Yagi Kazuo's Works: The Master of "Hands"

5.1 Yagi as Musician and Poet

Yagi's works are actually very different from artists like Noguchi, Tsuji, and Horiuchi. His own way is close to a poet or musician. Yagi used to write poems and his favorite subject of conversation was about Beethoven. He was also interested in modern composers such as Xenakis and Boulez.

One of his remarkable series is devoted to books: he shows very thick books with hardened pages which seemed to be turned over (Figure 9). In touching the rough clay surface with one's fingers, one can read the words like a blind person reading braille. One of his pieces called *Secret Talk* (1972) shows an wide-opened book on which appears a hand and some unreadable inscriptions (Figure 10), which is perhaps one of the keys to his art. This hand initiates a secret way like in all Japanese traditional art: hidden. The disciple cannot understand the master's method by words—he has to feel it, to experience it. This is a kind of answer to Mac Luan: hand is the message.

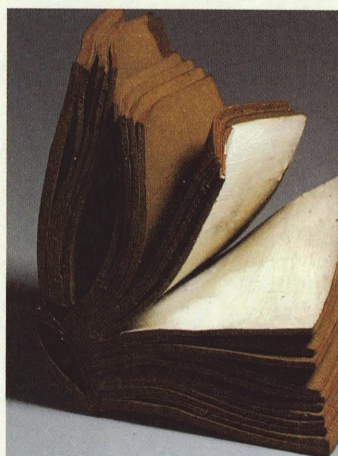


Fig. 9 *Ruffling Pages*, 1972 (15.5×14×10.5 cm.). Private collection.



Fig.10 *Secret Talk*, 1972 (3.5×25×16.6 cm.). Takamatsu Museum of Art.

In his series *Haiku* (Figure 11) Yagi expressed the rhythm of the syllables of the words: many strokes or dots are inscribed on the surface. Sometimes he also adds a finger trail. No words are written—only the fingers touched the surface. As a matter of fact, for Yagi, the act of creation of a potter making his piece with earth is like a musician playing an instrument. Pottery as music is an art of time. There is a limited time during which the action is achieved. He is a musician without musical instruments who does not produce sounds and a poet without a brush who does not write words: he prints the rhythm of time on earth with his hands.

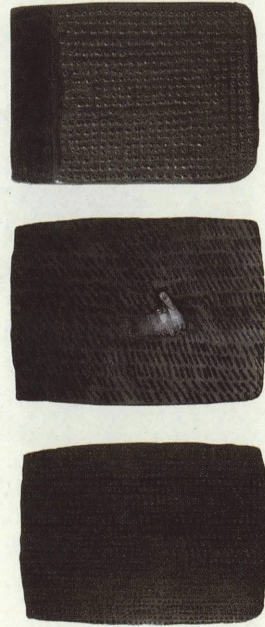


Fig.11 *Haiku Series* (1,2,3), 1978 (22.5×30 cm.). Private collection.

5.2 The Master of “Hands”

An impressive series of late 1970 is devoted to “Hands”: hands shaking, hands applauding (Figures 12-15).



Fig.12 *Space of Applause*, 1974 (21.7×17.5×13 cm.). Private collection.



Fig.13 *Indication* (Black Ware), 1974 (40×24×25 cm.). Private collection.



Fig.14 *Works* (Black Ware), 1974 (23×42.5×14.5 cm.) Tokoname City Board of Education.



Fig.15 *Distance*, 1974 (27.7×59.5×16.5 cm.). The National Museum of Modern Art, Kyoto.

One can interpret that Yagi wants to express the movement of his hands, of human hands. With hands the potter touches, kneads, and modulates soft clay. Pottery is an art of touch.

One photo shows Yagi holding hands he made of clay holding a cigarette between the clay fingers. It refers to a poster showing a hand holding a cigarette by Marcel Duchamp (Paris Givaudan Gallery's exhibition, 1967). It is the process of identification: the clay hands become his own hands. Through hands Yagi Kazuo wants to explain the deepest and most essential sense for human beings. Hands are the tools of creation for the potter: they replace the painter's brush, the musical instrument, the sculptor's tools. During the process of making works, hands always have intimate relationships with the earth.

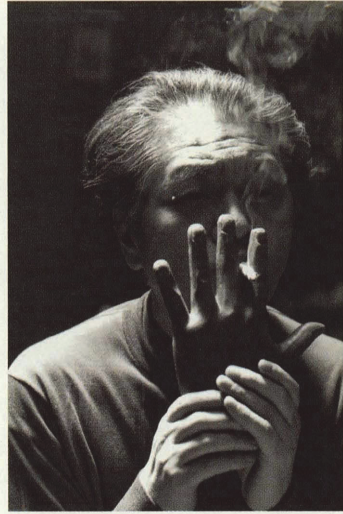


Fig.16 Yagi Smoking a Cigarette with His Work *Clay Hand*. Photograph by M. Sumaga. Nihon Keizai Shinbunsha.

6. The Profound Meaning of Pottery: “Self-skin”

A journalist once asked Noguchi why he was so influenced by Japanese art and what he was searching for in Japan. He answered: “It is the earth, the coarse earth which only Japanese people have. It is not in America. I am drawn to the skin of the pottery, the Japanese earth.” (*Isamu Noguchi and Modern Japanese Ceramics*, p. 38). Thus Noguchi understood the real meaning of pottery: the art of earth, “skin of pottery.”

Yagi wrote that he became aware of the importance of ceramics during the war when he had to eat from a metal vessel. For the first time he could feel existence of earth—the Japanese skin. Perhaps this experience is linked to the “wound” mentioned in Inaga Shigemi's article. For Yagi, creation comes from a wound (Yagi Kazuo, *The Flame of Each Moment*, p. 20).



Fig.17 Isamu Noguchi and His 1952 Work *Face Dish (Me)*. Published in *Time* magazine, 10 January, 1955.

The psychologist Didier Anzieu introduced a new concept of “self-skin” (*moi-peau*). He explained that at the beginning an embryo is formed with an ectoderm and endoderm, skin and brain. So skin is the most fundamental sense for human beings. Human beings cannot survive without skin. Human skin, like earth or like a bowl, is an envelope, a kind of bag (a container and content)—it is a limit, a screen and a sieve.” (Anzieu, p. 121) As Paul Valery said, “the deepest thing in the human being is the skin.” Brain is like skin. We find in Yagi’s works many evocations of the brain: his figures are brains (*Figure*, 1964; Figure 18). In a work like *Queen Consort* (1962), his pottery is as thin as real skin.



Fig.18 *Figure*, 1964 (2525×14 cm.).
Private collection.

While Noguchi was searching for his self-skin through Japanese pottery, for Yagi, the art of pottery was self-skin expression. Yagi’s art is far beyond the opposition between tradition and modernity, because nowadays, what is striking in his works is his true expression of human beings’ existence. In creating his works with earth he found his own “self-skin” because he reproduced his body’s skin with clay. For him, pottery “is the rhythm itself between earth and hands, the heart of human emotion goes inside.” (Yagi Kazuo, *The Flame of Each Moment*, p. 45)

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