

Foreign Ceramists in Japan

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This paper is the result of a preliminary research for a future PhD about non-Japanese ceramic artists who work with Japanese ceramic techniques in Brazil, Portugal and Japan. The main goal is to understand the aspects involved in the internationalization of Japanese traditional culture through ceramics and aesthetics and the way they are represented in the ceramists' discourse.

The article presents the preliminary results of the research conducted between January 20th and February 10th during a visit to the Research Center for Nonwritten Cultural Materials in Kanagawa University, Japan.

The goal of this research was first to locate and then to interview foreigners who were studying or working with ceramics in Japan, in order to understand how Japanese traditional culture was represented through ceramics in their discourse. A total of nineteen ceramic artists and two students living in Japan were identified and nine of them were interviewed. The majority of the interviews took place in Mashiko (Tochigi prefecture) and Kasama (Ibaraki prefecture), countryside areas fairly close to Tokyo where the ceramists live and work. Two other interviews were conducted in Tokyo and in Minakami (Gunma prefecture).

In the interviews with the ceramists the intention was to focus on their life-story in order to comprehend their motivations to leave their homeland and practice ceramics in Japan. The goal was to recognize how Japanese styles, techniques and aesthetics influenced their ceramic work. In order to achieve that, qualitative interviews following the ethno-sociological method of life-story (Daniel Bertaux, 1997) were made.

As well as presenting the life-story of the interviewed ceramic artists and their representations of Japanese traditional ceramics, the motives for their concentration in Mashiko and Kasama area were also addresses. Thus, in the article, the establishment of National Living Treasure Hamada Shoji's studio in Mashiko in 1930 and his relationship with British potter Bernard Leach, who greatly contributed to the internationalization of Japanese ceramics, is approached.

The aim is to show how the aesthetical and conceptual traits that usually define Japanese traditional ceramics, and which are reflected in the discourse of these foreign ceramists living in Japan, are not the result of a Japanese innate and fixed character, like it is supported by the *nihonjinron* (theories of Japanese uniqueness), but a result of two main historical and cultural dialectic processes: the romantic orientalist discourse of the nineteenth century and the construction of Japanese national identity after the Meiji period, which includes the formation of *mingei* (folk crafts) theory by Yanagi Soetsu in 1929 and its appropriation in the West through Bernard Leach's tradition. For that, we will use as main theoretical background the concept of culture as a construct following recent cultural theorist such as Stuart Hall (1992) and his theory of cultural representation (1997).