

WHAT IS THE HEART OF THE ARTIST by Janet Selby

Who is an Artist? Who is it that is being an artist?

Is art a self-conscious activity or a spontaneous moment? Is it the thinking, planning mind, which expresses something to others, or is each moment a unique expression of our Self?

Divisions are created by the mind. Thinking about doing Art implies that one moment is more important than another, that there is a different moment, which is Art, and that Art is better than Non-Art. With a Zen perspective this is not the case. The mind can confuse us if we self-consciously believe "Now we are doing Art". But life could be said to be a work of art. Each moment is a unique expression of Higher Self.

From a Zen perspective, the materials of the artist are the myriad things, the sounds, smells, touches of the senses. After a piece has been expressed satisfactorily, it is subject to decay. The actual intention of doing it is immediately dissolving. There is just the doing of it. We work on letting go of attachments of mind, of conditioning, of mere habits, like the importance of what something "should be" as opposed to "what is". Who says what it should be? Is it just fashion or what other people think?

In Western culture, beauty is seen as the ultimate, the complete, the perfect, something to aspire towards, something to gain, to have. I could add, something to think about, to use your mind. Yet for me the most beautiful Michelangelo is one where the artist has carved away revealing the hidden form within, leaving the rough hewn stone as it is.

Whilst studying traditional Japanese ceramics I came across these three words *wabi*, *sabi*, and *shibui*. As I haven't yet studied Japanese language I might let the experts translate but the impressions are of noble simplicity, rustic, quiet austere, refined, profound, humble, unpretentious. These are notions pertaining to the heart, to feelings and ungraspable impressions, as opposed to the western mind.

The unpretentious nature of a Raku bowl shows an honesty of form, not trying to hide the materials or how it was made. This I think is *wabi* - simple, truthful, not artificial. *Sabi* describes something mellowed by use, not ostentatious. *Shibui* has inner implications, like a happy accident or something "made unsuccessfully". You can't imitate it if you tried.

In Japan, the learning of any one of the many arts is an almost wordless process. The Master supplies the model, the pupil copies it. This process is repeated again and again, month after month, year after year. For the Japanese learner this constitutes far less a test of patience than it might seem to us. From childhood on, his method of upbringing has prepared him for it. The Master seeks nothing from the pupil, no gift, no genius. He simply trains the pupil fully to master the pure skills of the art in question. Once this mastery is obtained, a day will eventually come when the pupil is able to

represent perfectly what there is in his heart, precisely because the problem of formulation, of mere technical realisation, no longer burdens him. Only when the heart has attained maturity does true spontaneity arise. Even art must, like every natural being, grow organically: it can never create by act of will.

What is the mind of the artist - no mind, just do it. Mind hinders the natural growth of art.

There is a general expectation that a piece of art is finished if it is the most perfect it could be. Works of art are more beautiful when they suggest something beyond themselves. Objects that are “complete” are not so beautiful because they already show all that they are, they have nothing more to suggest, and so are cold and rigid. Would Venus de Milo be as intriguing if she had arms?

In a book on Ikebana I read, “symmetry is too static, like a law that has been forced upon nature. Form that has no boundaries excites the eye to explore. The incomplete asks to be completed. All things that appear incomplete and unfinished symbolise life’s dynamics. Nothing is definite, everything is in a state of flux.”

“Just as a potter forms the spinning clay on the wheel, so we configure our personality from the spinning clay of existence - The pot does not spin of its own right: it emerges from the interactions of the potter, the wheel, the clay, its shape...” Initially the potter makes friends with the clay by handling it in a gently rocking motion, kneading the particles into conformity suitable to spin on the wheel. The spiral confronts the potter constantly and centering is a necessity. Each step in the process of making a bowl is done with an in-breath, gentle but firm pressure, and release. A dialogue results, not a conquest, between heart, hand and clay. The resultant bowl can be seen as two cupped hands, cupped in a universal caring gesture, holding and giving expression.

Integrity of materials

What can be the materials of the Artist? The one who is doing confronts a blank piece of paper, or a lump of clay. The artist here is poised, hovering on the cusp between nothing and something - formlessness and form, inactivity and activity. Waiting for something to emerge - the next breath, a unique moment that will never happen the same again. There is a need to share with others our experience. A piece of art, or an expression in whatever media, does not arrive fully formed any more than a daffodil arrives fully formed from a sprouting bulb. Many influences, each different and unrepeatable, form that moment which is expressed.

Yet technique and media can block the path of expression. I refer here to works trying hard to use one material in order to imitate another. A painting so realistic it looks like a photo, or a work in clay that looks like metal etc.

Is there integrity in a line seen in the middle of the road? Or does it change if you know it has been made by a person? Is that line meant to affect you? If it is not art, it can

still be considered aesthetic. But art is done by someone wishing to express something, to share an experience, which may help perhaps to save all beings. A beautiful rock in the bush evokes something different to a thumb impression in an ancient shard of pottery. Someone actually made it. There is a human connection, literally hand to hand.

Here is a passage from Daniel Rhodes:

The shaping hands of an individual potter are so much a part of the ceramic tradition that we instinctively respond by wanting to take a bowl in our own hands, to turn it around in the light, to explore the surface with our fingers. An awareness of forms and textures has always been a part of the potter's experience. Elements of nature - earth, fire and water interact. Bodily names refer to pots - the belly, the foot, the neck. He quotes Lao Tsu who wrote the Tao Te Ching, a famous Chinese classic in Taoism - Thirty spokes share the wheel's hub. It is the centre hole that makes it useful: - shape the clay into a vessel and it is the space within that makes it useful. Doors and windows too. Their usefulness comes from what is not there.

Our concern as potters then is to attune ourselves to the space enclosed by the form, as well as the form and its surface.

In order to find the heart of the artist, we need a shift in conventional notion of there being a different kind of person who is an artist, and one who is a non-artist. We are naturally drawn to certain media or activities. Planting a tree in a garden in a pleasurable activity that expresses to the world the belief that trees are important in that garden. This is an enjoyment of natural art, each moment is not artificial although the term "art" is derived from that word. This moment is not contrived and made with the creative human hand.

Whatever form or technique you are drawn towards to naturally express yourself are the materials of the artist. These affinities don't come from the mind, but an inner drawing from the heart.

Art is fundamentally communication. If you create a beautiful garden, and you invite friends for a cup of tea, this action communicates your expression of the importance of the beauty of the bush. This is the exhibition. It is about peace, nature, society, space. This is a work of art. It is something that is inwardly valued, not from a contrived idea.

Art ultimately can't be planned. You can't plan your next moment. You can't experience your next moment, no one ever has. There is only the present moment. The moment the dog barks, the moment the wind moves the chimes, the moment the cloth is felt.

"Fruit falls from a tree naturally when ripe. After due time in spiritual life, the heart, like fruit, begins to mature and sweeten. Our practice shifts from the green hard growth of seeking, developing, and improving ourselves to a resting in mystery. It shifts from a reliance on form to a resting in the heart."

If I draw a tree, I explore the eye-hand co-ordinations; I search the light and shade for line, rhythm and texture. But its depth comes in its meaning beyond the design elements. I draw a tree, its sweeping branches, dark and mysterious. The base, their beginning shrouded, unknown. Where have they come from? Where have *we* come from, and where are *we* going? This subtle meaning speaks not from our mind but our deep consciousness, a place of no words and of no form. A place from our deepest heart - vast emptiness charged within.

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