

Images of Japan through non-Japanese potters living in the country

○ Tokyo Metropolitan University
Liliana Granja Pereira de Morais

1. Aim

This presentation is the result of a preliminary fieldwork conducted in Mashiko (Tochigi prefecture) in 2013 and theme of my current PhD project. The aim is to understand the social and historical aspects involved in the global circulation of images about Japanese traditional culture and aesthetics through pottery and how these images are presented in the discourse and work of foreign potters living in Japan.

2. Data & Methods

For this purpose, I conducted semi-qualitative interviews with seven non-Japanese potters of different nationalities (American, British, Australian, Brazilian and Spanish), who have been living and working with ceramics in Japan for the past 20 years. I followed the ethno-sociological method of life-story (Bertaux, 1997) in order to understand the potters' motivations to leave their homeland and practice ceramics in Japan, their images of Japanese culture and the way Japanese styles, concepts and techniques have affected their work.

3. Results

I found that the representations of Japanese traditional culture and aesthetics constructed and reorganized during Japan's affirmation as a modern nation from the Meiji period onwards in dialogue with Western Orientalist discourse, still populate the imaginary of Japan and are present in the discourse of foreigner potters living and working with ceramics in Japan. These images focus mainly on Zen Buddhist aesthetics, the tea ceremony and Japanese connection with nature and have been appropriated by the Japanese folk crafts movement (*mingei*) disseminated in the West by Yanagi Soetsu, Shoji Hamada and Bernard Leach.

4. Conclusion

The traits of Japanese pottery presented in the potters' discourse and influential in their work, often condensed in the concept of *wabi-sabi* (simplicity, imperfection, naturalness), have long been seen as unique aspects of Japanese culture, especially in the *nihonjinron* (theories about the Japanese). However, I will argue that they are a result of specific historical trajectories, political constructions and sociability nets and propose that they might reflect ethical and universal concerns that transcend emic values and national boundaries.

References

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