

Striving for harmony and healing wounds
The Quest for Beauty

An evolutionary comment on "*beauty*"

As long as you do your best, it is good enough, the Chinese say.

My work these final years have explored Asian ceramics and ended up in some questions.

What is beauty? What is it for? And how can I use it?

By: Magnus Natschki

Process

I have developed a porcelain material with the aim to emulate Japanese anime cartoons. For the material itself to have a specific quality of *kawaii*.

I based my recipe on a Japanese natural clay from *Shigaraki*. The *Shigaraki clay* has grains of minerals which during firing show up as drops of glass on the surface of the clay.

The process of producing the material is a tedious process stretching out over a couple of weeks.

I have chosen to have a colourful approach where the hue of the clay is important. I have chosen colours which create a certain contrasts. The theme of the vessel determined what colours I chose. I want the material which gives the Shigaraki quality, and the clay body to work together, but at the same time, to be some sort of opposites of each other.

With this mixture I made two vessels from three originally planned. One dulled down and one more vibrant.

One to emulate death and one to carry the value of life.

I add the glass material as grog* mainly made from nepheline syenite. (*fired crushed clay)

I start by throwing containers for the material I'm turning into grog. And these need to be fired before I can start making the grog itself.

After those molds are fired I pour in the materials which make up the grog, in the containers, and fire them about 1200 centigrades. For 4 kilograms I use two containers. A shift in 10-30 degrees when firing the grog can prove very disconcerting.

It has a great effect either, it fuses to much and becomes very hard to crush, or with a temperature slightly to low it creates a material which falls to dust during the process turning it into grog.

When fired, the grog is crushed by hand and separated according to size for further processing. This has to be repeated time after time to get a even result in grog size. This is also to prevent to crush already decent sized grains and to make sure I don't have bigger sized pebbles than the thickness of the body wall I'm throwing. If I don't they will rip the wall apart during throwing so this is quite important.

This grog will melt and come out of the clay surface at very high temperatures, around 1310 centigrades, leaving pores and structures on and in the clay body.

The container for the grog can only be reused once or twice, because then they usually crack and also the grog material itself sticks to the surface inside the container. The nepheline syenite melts and form a dense glass "droplet" due to its high viscosity in its molten state and the container cracks in the bottom during cooling.

After this I make the Porcelain body itself. This is made from dry, powdered materials and should be handled with care, mixed together according to my research. The mixture soaks in water for a day or two before I divide it up.

I don't add the grog to all the mixture at once. I need to have pure porcelain for some technical solutions and also for some decorations.

The fittings for the lid must be made out of pure body to stay in shape after firing. Also some part of the neck, heavily decorated is more suitable to be made out of pure clay.

Then I add the grog to the rest of the clay, but I save some if I need more grogged clay at a later stage. And after drying the combined grog and clay mixture on a plaster bat for two-three days, I can start to throw. The making of the material is a process that extends over several weeks.

Alongside this work I have gone around looking for iconographic symbols I can use in my work. Forms which are easily recognisable but with a, for myself, deeper meaning. Out of these objects I have made cast-molds and press-molds to make applications to decorate my vessels with.

I need to mention that I also made sketch work on paper, and working with momentos on a notice board to figure out my themes and what sort of details to incorporate in my finished pieces. I went through quite a lot of material, photos and documents going way back, connected to hard moments during my life. Death and births, heaven and hell, but mostly hell. I tend to go back to death as a theme in my work.

Beauty in momentomori and the beauty that lies in the fragile nature of life.

My pots are paraphrases of Chinese burial urns, sacrificed to the ancestors afterlife. These burial urns are saturated with symbols drenched in meaning as most Chinese art is. My shapes are Chinese forms but from later periods. I got fascinated by ancient Chinese burial urns through my travels to Asia.

Alongside this process visited antiques shops borrowing shapes from historical periods. I rely quite a lot on other makers and for their craftsmanship to extend the “*beauty*” of my pots. I think, with my hand made decorations, the different technical aspects and their expressions, combined with my theoretical ideas will melt into a beautiful orgy of high arts and crafts.

Of these shapes I make molds, to be able to copy and maybe alter the forms I have borrowed from others.

Then starts the throwing of the vessels and pedestals. To make one form takes roughly 3-7 days. I need to use at least two wheels and sometimes more because of the many different elements.

I use a “dry” throwing technique where I pinch rings to the wall on a big thrown form. Then I add one ring on top of the other mounted with slip and then throw the coil into the desired shape with a minimum amount of water.



I have to wait for each section to settle and harden enough to be able to support the next section on top of it before I continue.

At the same time the clay can't dry out completely cause of risk of damages during the rest of the making process and difficulty decorating the pot at a later stage.



The lid is made of the grog free porcelain I saved earlier as mentioned before.

Once the form itself is done I start to construct the shape and to plan the different steps. Some decorations need to be in place before I add a different layer to the structure.

These basic elements also need to be thrown or made in to a sheet.

I have to wait for

them to settle and harden, before they can be finalised and mounted, but also keep them from drying out completely. This means I have a very limited amount of time to make each step though this process.

The decorations can only be added during a limited timespan and some decorations need to be added at a earlier stage then others. I have to make some decorations by hand and some, I need to cast days in advance. I work myself into a rhythm.



The decorations carry a, for me, deep meanings. Each surface decoration and element are chosen for an abstract value or a memory.

The flowers themselves, roses, classical and used at all occasions to express everything from love and affection to mourning and death.

Gender. One of the seemingly most important aspects of the individual persona.

Birds, depicting hope, freedom and love, or can be read as a forecasting omen of hard times ahead.

Classical icons, columns and temples with all their interpretations. Showing strength and used throughout history as a way, for many to connect to the glory of Rome, or to the old wisdom of Greece.



The tree, *Gaia*. Mother nature. The tree which modern civilisation are in total control of. A life form we keep in our city centres, for us to reconnect to our evolutionary beginnings. A symbol we chop down and replant, on massive scale, and one of the corner stones of the Swedish economy. The material we burn to keep us warm and which we use to build our homes.

This is a project under a strict time frame and that creates boundaries. Some of the symbols I was planning to use, didn't work technically or aesthetically and were discarded, but not forgotten. One of the original plans was for three firings, for some gold decorations, but now I have cut it down to just one firing per vessel and parts of vessels.

Once the decorations are in place they need to dry, preferably as slowly as possible, which is not workable under these circumstances.

Because of their size they are helped by a slow firing to prevent from cracking. I usually fire the pieces around 1310 centigrades, but instead of pushing the porcelain body, I have lowered the firing temperature 10-20 degrees.

The grog melts around 1200 degrees and a prolonged soak time will still allow the glass drops to form without allowing the porcelain body to flux and fuse too much. I hoped this would hinder deformation and maybe a catastrophe. Also, the black clay contains quite a lot of fluxing materials and can also be easy distorted.

When I was researching Japanese ceramics I was drawn to the concept of *Mingei*, *The Art of The Anonymous Craftsperson*.



I translate Mingei with “A strive for perfect imperfections”. We can’t create as “good” objects as the gods, so we shouldn’t even have those aspirations.

Mingei also carries the value that it is the object which is important, and not its maker. It is how well made the object is, according to the rules of Mingei, which is of interest.

Where it comes from or by whom it is made is of no interest.

You can still determine if the object is made by a master or lesser craftsperson, derived from certain aesthetic rules followed by the makers of Mingei ware.

The pedestals are thrown with the same technique as the decorated vessel. The pedestal elevates the form and makes the viewer feel that the shape is more imposing. It also enhances the classical theme.

Objects on pedestals are often highly regarded and mainly connected to decorative elements in interiors. The pedestal show that the object placed on it is of importance.

The porcelain shrinks a lot in comparison with other clays and is non-compliant and revealing to work with, but at the same time, it has a translucency and a subtle quality I desire.

Statement

I have chosen to discover what lies within “*beauty*” and if I can use it for my own purposes.



My work flirts with “nature” as one of the sources for beauty. Flower decoration are rooted in our deep sense of beauty and is replicated through out human history. I lean against a heavy tradition in the arts of going back to nature as an inspiration.

Also structure and order. Borrowing ancient ideals from Greek art and architecture and the development of civilisation. Dividing my art pieces into

clear sections, in a column, body and lid, gives structure to the piece. Playing with the geometric approach in greek temples, also regarded as icons of beauty, is beneficial to say the least for the quest for beauty.

I turn to the material beauty in my porcelain. The effort to make the clay and grog raises the beauty factor of the object. Many labour hours and the long wait, aches and pains, makes it a unique material for me to work with. Not just for it's expression but also for the amount of knowhow that is put in to its creation and development.

I have chosen colours to relate to the theme of the pieces. I have chosen colours that I find beautiful.

Scale also tampers with the perception of the vessels. To have a direct bodily connection due to its size is helpful to stir up other experiences in the observer's mind. But also, the recognition of the craftsmanship into making large vessels elevates the sense of “*beauty*”.

I hope my pieces are perceived as having been “Done well”. This is one of the most important aspects of my work.



A high level of skill in its execution.

We all are drawn to work we find have been done well and I suspect this is of all factors the most important one. I have a feeling that I can disguise things I want to shed light on, behind a curtain of high skill and “*beauty*”.



Many of my ideas and thoughts are frowned upon as most of them are nihilistic. All too often people shun and avoid emotionally disturbing subjects. People avoid many aspects of life and tend to turn away from things they either don't understand or find hard to comprehend. I hope that “*beauty*” helps the viewer to come a bit closer, and view my pieces for a moment longer. I am

convinced I can hide

my own private symbols and outspoken societal comments in plain view, for all to see. To fool the viewer to react less reluctant than otherwise.

It is also important for me to know what I am doing.

I try to have a scientific approach to my research and not only in the lab or as a method of aesthetic research, but I look for evidence of how we perceive reality and interpret stimuli from our environment. I try to understand how we interpret symbols and cultural ideas. How these abstract meanings propagate so they can be read and understood by the next person.

How we as beings, with our limited continuousness, process information.

“BEAUTY”

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OjJbV2hWCUU>

“You see half the moon, its crescent, and one of the planets, maybe Saturn, maybe Jupiter, in the early night sky over Berlin, through the windows of a taxicab, near Potsdamer Platz.

You think: *Beauty*

No, this is not beauty, maybe not, maybe, this is the rest of it, maybe not, maybe, the rest of beauty, maybe not, maybe, what remains of beauty, maybe not, maybe, what is visible, certainly, uncertain.

Your arms would not be able to stretch as far as necessary to form an adequate gesture for beauty.

You know that, don't you?

So, beauty remains in the impossibilities of the body.”

Einstürzende Neubauten

What is Beauty? (for ref. see sources page)

The Question The Designer *Richard Seymour* poses is “How does *beauty* Feel?” Cause we do feel beauty, don't we? He argues that when we observe something, which happens to be beautiful, we do sense beauty in our body. It is not a thought, rather it's an experience. Beauty speaks directly to the limbic system and first after that, we think “*beauty*”. Beauty goes directly to the soul.

“We don't think *beauty*, we feel *beauty*”. / R.Seymour

Why are children cute? And why is sugar sweet? (for ref. see sources page)

Science Philosopher *Daniel Dennett* explains this with evolution: Honey is sweet because we like it. Not, we like honey because it is sweet.

He poses, for some people, a radical thought. That when we describe something in the terms: I like it because of “this” or “that”. We are wrong and have it all backwards.

I concur when Dennett states: *There is not something intrinsic with the sugar molecule which makes it sweet. You can study a sugar molecule for hours and hours without detecting what makes it sweet. You have to look to our brain to find out why sugar is sweet.*

“Our senses are evolved sugar detectors and interprets the sugar molecule as being sweet.” / D.Dennett

And we think children are cute for the same reason, so that we will like them. We don't like children because they are cute, we think children are cute so that we will adore them. Instead of being put off by them, we will take care of them.

I will then argue that the same applies for "*beauty*". Things aren't *beautiful* because of "this" nor "that". Not because of a particular recipe for colour and shape.

Beautiful things are *beautiful* for evolved reasons. *Beauty* exists so that we will like things. Beauty is because we feel *beauty*. We don't cherish things because they are beautiful. We feel things are *beautiful* so that we will cherish them.

And then the same will apply:

There is not something intrinsic with beautiful things which makes them *beautiful*. We can study somethings for hours and hours without actually figuring out what makes this thing *beautiful*. To figure out why something beautiful is *beautiful*, we have to look to our brains.

So what do People Generally feel as Beautiful?

Nature, sunsets, clouds and colours. Classical sculptures from antiquities, the human body. Complexity and intricacy. Things we are dependent upon. Things down to earth. We are stunned by order and even more so with order on a massive scale. So what is beauty, really?

There is the image of the generic landscape vanishing off to the far distant, presence of water and game. Open areas with woods or forrest scattered around, with a path or a road falling over the horizon.

This image is not dependent on cultural cues to make the observer feel that it is *beautiful*. The ability to feel beauty is inherent in our presence as a being and this landscapes is perceived as beautiful for the Eskimo as well as for the Desert Nomad. This landscape is regarded as an icon of "*beauty*" even for those who don't have it.



But this is *natural beauty* you might argue, and not the sort of things we discuss in the arts now days.

I beg to differ.

Evolutionary Biologist *Richard Dawkins*, the man who suggested that bats might hear in colour, experiencing texture and materials in different hues, theorises in his book "*The Selfish Gene*", that culture is affected by the same processes as biology (for ref. see sources page).

If you see cultural occurrences like packages like we do with genes, they can easily be understood. "*Memes*" that Dawkins called them, are behaving like outright genes. This theory is supported by amongst others, Dennett and can be demonstrated in various ways. A clear example of *memes* is "*Internet meme's*" (for ref. see sources page).

Any word, tradition, saying, custom or marking performed by any living organism, can be looked upon as a package of information. Information copied and passed on through the sieve of Darwinian evolution to the next individual.

And this has been shown to be true.

The Forces of Evolution (for ref. see sources page)

Genes are submitted to and are changed by the forces of evolution.

Genes are affected by a process called *Migration* or *Gene Flow*. It is produced when genes are shifted geographically and isolated, that over time becomes a different species in its own right.

Genetical Drift which is surprisingly important for creating diversity in biology, is best described in the sense that nature, for some odd reason, is best described in the language of mathematics.

Thus, the same equations which create chaos and randomness, also create order and structure out of the chaos.

Genes clump together by themselves, in the seemingly random nature of reality and create patterns in the information passed along to the next generation.

Random Mutation is also something that gives rise to diversity. Copying errors when the package of information is passed along to the next individual. Mostly insignificant copying errors that sometimes can be beneficial and sometimes catastrophic.

Natural Selection, the famous "survival of the fittest", which more truly means "The most adapted to its environment and the most successful organisms to pass along its genes".

And last *Sexual Selection*. This force is the main driving factor for evolutions most extravagant varieties. According to Professor of Philosophy *Denis Dutton*, Darwin describes the sensation the Pee-Hen experience when she looks at the Pee-Cocks feathers as a "feeling of beauty".

The evolutionary reasons for the Pee-Cock's tail and many of the Birds of Paradise glorious markings, are not to avoid predators, but to show a sign of superiority. "My genes can afford this dress", the markings signal. Another example, closer to our craftly home, comes from another bird belonging to the *Weaving Bird* family. For some species, an extravagant, far to big nest is preferred, explained as a signal of competence to their partners.

And all of this is also true when it comes to *memes* (for ref. see sources page).

Memes, culture, also gets passed along as information, but instead of it being written in DNA, that gets copied and transmitted, the information contains cultural ideas, symbols and practices. This information gets passed along through writing, speech, gestures, geocultural marks and rituals.

Migration of cultural expressions, which in time becomes its own tradition or occurrence, is prevalent in cultural development and easily spotted.

I can just name Karin Bergöö and her textiles inspired by Japanese patterns or the traditional food kebab, or anything else really, from Christmas to designer ware, to prove my point.

We can see the effects of *Drift* in culture. How patterns arise where there should be no patterns.

We can also clearly see *Random Mutation* in our own work as artists and in cultural development as a whole. The slight mistakes which get incorporated in the work, passed along and propitiated in the next piece, in the end gives way for a greater verity of expressions and patterns, markings and form, but also it gives rise to individual styles and concepts.

Like species in nature, most cultural memes have gone extinct. The cultural practices alive at any given moment, are those which have adapted most to the time and place in which they occur. This following the law of *Natural Selection*.

And “Sexual Selection” (for ref. see sources page)

Dutton theorises that it's sexual selection which has given rise to the experience of materialistic beauty in humanoids.

Cultural practices arose long before modern humans even walked the earth. Shell-necklaces and ochre pigments existed long before speech.

One of our early ancestors, *Homo Erectus* adorned herself with body paint and jewellery, tens of thousands of years before she could even utter words to describe “*beauty*”. This is important.

It shows that the roots of “*beauty*” stem from deep within our development.

The oldest objects produced by man, so far are found in *Oi Duvai Gorge* in Africa. Our early ancestor *Homo Habilis* made tear shaped stone axes which date back 2.5 million years. This shows that *H.Habilis* started making stone tools whose shape and qualities people go mad about even today.

1.4 million years later, *H.Erectus* kept the practice of tear shaped tools alive, with slight technical developments, until modern humans were around to make our own copies with adaptations.

We have found so many of these *Acheulean* hand axes that *H.Erectus* made, that it is obvious they made far more of these than they needed. Many axes show evidence of never to have been used and some even can't be used due to the design of the object itself.

“The sheer number of these hand axes shows that they can't have been made just for butchering animals.” / D.Dutton

But Why?

“Their symmetry, attractive materials and above all, meticulous workmanship, is simply quite beautiful, even to our eyes today.” / D.Dutton

Dutton argues: *The best available explanation for these axes is that they are literally the earliest know works of art. Functional tools transformed into captivating, aesthetic objects, contemplated for both their elegant shape and virtuoso craftsmanship.*

Dutton, explains that these tools are in evolutionary terms “*Fitness Signals*”. He continues by saying: *...like the Pee-Cocks tails, except that unlike hair and feathers, the hand axes are consciously, cleverly, crafted. Competently made hand axes indicate desirable, personal qualities. Intelligence, fine motor control, planing ability, conscientiousness, and sometimes access to rare materials. Over tens of thousands of generations, such skills increased the status of those who displayed them and gave a reproductive advantage over the less capable.*

The hand axe tradition is the longest surviving tradition in human evolutionary history. It spans over millions of years.

The bipedal primates developed their skills and found new ways of displaying their social status and capability through music, dancing, clothing, jewellery, decorations and art. To display “*Fitness Signals*” to the rest of the group.

Over the generations these expressions get more advanced and now we express emotions through media like fictional novels, film, symphonies, theatre, web design, blogs and other works of arts and craft.

Dutton states: *...but still, one fundamental trait of the ancestral personality persist in our aesthetic cravings. The beauty we find in skilled performances. From Lascaux to the Louvre, to Carnegie Hall, human beings have a permanent innate taste for virtuoso displays in the arts. We find beauty in something done well.*

This combined with our fascination and inherent sense of materials, explains the surviving objects, selected for museum displays, we see today.

It also explains how man made objects get sent around the globe, cherished and praised, transcending millennia and cultures, again and again, and how some works made by hand withstand fads and revolutions. It explains why we still can enjoy a play, in a language not native to our mothers tung.



We have a quirk for well performed and well made art.

This also has other evolutionary advantages. To make the objects we create, beautiful objects, prolongs their lifetime. We want to look at them and we like to have them around. When we feel that an object is a work of "*beauty*", we want to take care of it and look after the tool, garment or vessel which creates the sensation of "*beauty*".



We mend them and bring them back from death, time after time. And we make sure our precious objects pass oceans of time.

And the same must be true for natural beauty. It is when we experience nature and feel the "*beauty*" we tend to take care of her.

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Meme

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