

A POTTER'S DREAM

I became a potter at age 13 and five years later I moved to Tahiti where I was the only potter on the island. Twenty years ago, I was invited to Japan to participate in the Mitsukoshi Show promoting pottery, black pearls and Tahiti tourism.

During the show, I met the featured artist, Tsukamoto. He showed me a book with himself on the cover and said that he had just won the Japanese grand prize in ceramics. I did not doubt it- his work was everything I had dreamed of in Japanese pottery, bringing clay alive while keeping it as close as possible to its natural essence. In spite of a language barrier, we hit it off well and exchanged pottery. I invited him to my new Polynesian home on the island of Huahine and he responded "I come September."

Six months later, Tsukamoto got off a small plane from Tahiti to Huahine with his wife and two young boys. When he saw me, he came running, gave me a big hug and said "*Peter I am here.*" I knew the next few days were going to be exceptional because a hug is a rare gesture in Japanese culture.

We spent the next few days talking about Japanese pottery and I asked why some of his tea bowls sold for only \$200 and others for \$2000. The answer was that the more expensive bowls were exclusively for the tea ceremony. With this response, I knew I had a lot to learn from this master potter.

In my studio we were surprised that our pottery wheels turn in opposite directions, making it impossible for Tsukamoto to use my wheel. Instead he taught me his cut-clay technique. It is a Japanese method of cutting textured slabs from a block of clay. I still use this technique adding stamped Polynesian motifs to create bowls and plates over slump molds.

Twenty years later I called Tsukamoto and asked if I could come work with him for a few days. He said: “*you come Toki city train I come car take you home.*” Four months later my wife and I arrived in Toki and Tsukamoto was there to greet us with a big hug. We entered his Japanese style home through 300-year-old Sumi gates. In his beautiful showroom, he served us Matcha tea in his own tea bowls. We admired his latest collection and he asked me which pots I wanted to learn to make.

The next day, in his tiny messy studio (much like my own), he showed me how to throw tea bowls and sculpt them out of a chunk of clay. Then we threw pitchers, bowls and vases. Later we made textured slabs with the cutting wire technique he had taught me 20 years ago. And then, we made rectangular textured plates pressing hard on the clay with a wooden block and tearing the sandy clay to bring it alive.

The following day we textured the bottom of leather hard pots cutting feet into them with a small knife. Tsukamoto said that each pot had to be hand made and individually

sculpted. In the beginning, all of this was like speaking a foreign language, but after awhile I was able to follow along. It was very satisfying to be able to make pots in such a different way. And when the master said he liked my handle better than his own, I thanked him with a high five and “arigato.”

On the third day, he showed us local pottery studios, ancient and modern kilns and museums. For a lunch break we went to his brother’s beautiful Japanese restaurant in the middle of a rice field. Of course, the handmade noodles and tempura tasted even better served on Tsukamoto’s pottery.

After leaving Tsukamoto we toured small pottery villages and visited Japan for three weeks. Meanwhile, he glazed and fired the pots we had made together using his Oribe green color. He packed them into two big handbags and with his family took the train to Nagoya where we were ending our trip. While sitting on the floor sipping sake in a Japanese restaurant, he took out the pots one by one for everyone to admire. He was like Santa as he pulled out each piece, elated with our amazement. At dessert, he took out two of his own tea bowls for a special gift. Back on Huahine Island, I am in the studio more than ever. It is incredible how much this experience has changed my work and life. Arigato Tsukamoto.