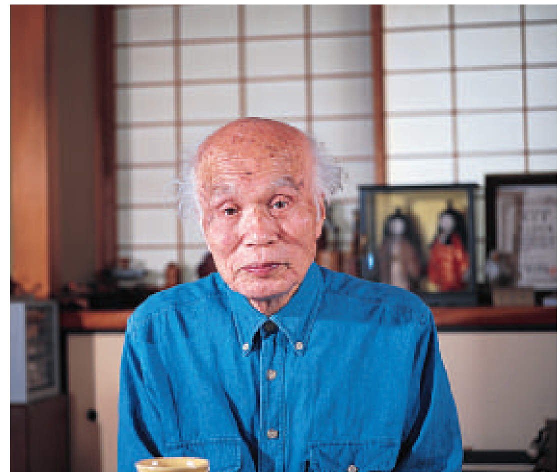
Carrying the Empty Cup

Three Generations Within the Japanese Master/Apprentice Tradition

by Dick Lehman

Metronomic chopping sounds from the neighbor's hoe signaled the end of tenacious weeds and increased chances that the first cucumbers of the season would soon grace the table in front of us. As my question lingered in the air, Hiromi Matsukawa drew a slow deep breath, squinted his eyes just a bit and pinched his lips together. Steam



Suketoshi Matsuyama

from Matsukawa's coffee spiraled up through a slant of sunlight until, exhaling, he chased the curls away with his response.

"Perhaps I can best describe my apprenticeship to Kanzaki *sensei* (master) in this way. It was as if he carried an invisible pitcher in his hand—a pitcher that contained knowledge. The pitcher was always full and ready to be poured, even if the apprentices were not around. As a teacher, Kanzaki was always ready.

"We apprentices carried invisible cups, although the size and shape of each cup was different. Kanzaki saw

"Shigaraki Vase," 29 centimeters (11 inches) in height, by Suketoshi Matsuyama.

each apprentice's cup and poured according to its size and shape. He understood the capacity of each cup. In one, he poured a lot; in another, he poured little by little.

"If the apprentice did not consume what was in the cup," Matsukawa continued, "the master could not pour more. If the apprentice had the cup filled from some other source, the master, likewise, would not be able to refill it. And if the apprentice stopped carrying the cup, there could be no more pourings. But if the apprentice drank from the cup, there would always be more room for the cup to be filled again. To receive these pourings is the most important work of the apprentice."

In recent trips to Japan, I have become acquainted with three Japanese potters who exemplify the success of the master/apprentices system:

Eighty-six-year-old Suketoshi Matsuyama was an apprentice to Kenkichi Tomimoto (Tomimoto went on to become a *ningen kokuho,* Living National Treasure). Over the course of his career, Matsuyama has been an educator and lecturer, as well as a studio potter. He has received numerous awards and commendations, and has exhibited widely in Japan and occasionally in the United States.

Shiho Kanzaki, age 60, was an apprentice to Matsuyama, after which he established his own studio. He has pioneered new textured works from anagama firings (see CM, March 1997, "Shiho Kanzaki: Extending the Tradition"), and has exhibited in Germany and the United States, as well as Japan.

Hiromi Matsukawa, age 44, was an apprentice to Kanzaki. (He was also a student of Matsuyama, when Matsuyama was teaching at Musashino Art University.) Matsukawa recently set up a studio in Oodoi, near Okayama. Although nearer the beginning of his own independent career, he already has a growing exhibition record.

Because of their master/apprentice relationships, I asked them to reflect on this tradition, particularly in regard to how it has influenced how they learn and the way they teach.

SUKETOSHI MATSUYAMA

"As you know, I worked in Tomimoto's studio for three years. Tomimoto invited me to live at his house. I believe that I may be the only Japanese apprentice who actually lived and worked with him under the same roof."

It was common, then, for apprentices to do household duties and to care for the children. Still, Matsuyama spent considerable time assisting Tomimoto in the studio. "I helped him as he was throwing pots. I was to make the wheel move with a belt while he was throwing. There were no electric wheels in those days."

"While he was working, he would lecture me on his craft theory. He tried to tell me everything. I remember the most important thing that he said: 'You should not be making things only according to the old pottery traditions. Those are important. But everything comes from Nature. Nature is very important. Look there too.'"

Said another way, Tomimoto may have been advising him to look for new answers and to not be afraid to work in ways that are outside of what is traditional.

This advice was soon tested, as Tomimoto received word from the civil authorities in Tokyo that they would no longer tolerate his smoky kiln. He would have to stop firing or move! This news brought an abrupt end to Matsuyama's apprenticeship.

Tomimoto reasoned, however, that Matsuyama had learned enough in three years; his apprenticeship would be considered complete. Matsuyama became an independent apprentice, and it was appropriate for him to publicly refer to Tomimoto as his sensei.

Early experiences with failure and limitation seem to have been a significant contributor to Matsuyama's philosophy. He is known as someone who searches for new answers. In his univer-

"Shigaraki Teabowl," 9 centimeters (3½ inches) in height, by Suketoshi Matsuyama.

sity teaching, for example, he did not teach the separation of Eastern and Western art, as traditionally had been done; he refused to draw sharp distinctions between the artistic value of a great painting and a beautiful flower on the side of the road. He taught through the human and spiritual point of view, seeking joy in all of life, whatever life might bring. Later in his career, he addressed a particular issue of national failure/limitation: he involved himself in and made significant contributions to some previously intractable peace and justice issues within Japan, and between Japan and Korea.

Near the end of my visit with Matsuyama, I asked if there was anything else that he wanted to add. He responded: "There is yet the most important thing: it is that failure makes good. Through failure, we can find ways to overcome. In failure, we find new beauty."

And for the next 30 minutes, this obviously feeble octogenarian suddenly regained the vigor and voice of someone half his age. He moved about his studio, pulling pot after pot from storage places. "Look at this one! This wood-fired piece did not get to temperature. It was a failure! But look at what beauty occurred when I refired it in an electric kiln. And this one I made when I did not have access to a reduction kiln . . . , but I wanted reduction effects so I added reducing material into the electric kiln. Do you see what happened? And just look at this one; the ash got piled up so fast on this wood-fired piece that it did not melt. I thought it was a total failure until I brushed off all the dry ash. Have you ever seen such a beautiful surface? And it never could have happened if it had not 'failed.' Failure helps us to see with new eyes—to discover new beauty."

Certainly, his is not the voice of a purist/traditionalist. Tomimoto's advice had found a home in Matsuyama sensei's spirit. "Yes, yes, my apprentices come here to learn ceramics, and they come here with purpose. And so they should see all my ways of working and all my techniques. But eventually they have to learn for themselves. Just like I do. That is the value of failure."

In that moment, I began to understand that Matsuyama had crossed over from maker to receiver. No, I am not saying that he does not possess skills to make the objects he wants to make. He not only possesses the skills and techniques to make, but also has acquired the eyes and spirit to receive.

Suddenly, the last three sentences of his artist's statement—words I'd read repeatedly, with only confusion to show for my efforts—began to make some sense: "Vessels cannot be made, but they are born. I don't make works, but they are brought to me. A whole new life is brought to the one who holds all the experiences, but doesn't stick to them."

"Shigaraki Vase," 27 centimeters (11 inches) in height, by Suketoshi Matsuyama.

SHIHO KANZAKI

Kanzaki's apprenticeship to Matsuyama is unusual, by any standard, as he never spent even one month working for him in a traditional apprenticeship role. Rather, Kanzaki has received from Matsuyama the designation of independent apprentice. Although I attempted to discover the details of this unusual departure from traditional apprenticeships, I continually came up against replies like this: "Well, it is just difficult to explain."

What did pervade and surmount these repeated comments was the understanding that difficult did not mean embarrassing or awkward or complicated. It seemed to be that the explanation was difficult in the same way that sharing a profound experience is difficult—the way trying to describe an epiphany to someone else is challenging.

Whatever occurred, Kanzaki is Matsuyama's apprentice, and Matsuyama is Kanzaki's master/sensei. Moreover, the loyalty and mutual obligation that continues between these two men is as ever-present as it would have been had Kanzaki spent ten years in a traditional apprenticeship to Matsuyama.

Shiho Kanzaki did not study under Matsuyama in the traditional sense. Instead, he received the designation of independent apprentice.

Recently, Kanzaki and I talked about how he continues to learn and how he (as a master) teaches. In regard to learning, Kanzaki observed that, at the early stages, there is a need for inspiration that comes from outside of oneself. When he was much younger, he would sometimes begin intentional learning by examining pots, or images of pots, that he found interesting. He said that he tried to look only at the things that were most stimulating to him. And then he would view a single piece continually for two days. If after two days of constant looking, he was still fascinated with the piece, he would measure it as a piece worth learning from.

After this initial concentrated looking, Kanzaki would not look at the piece for at least one year. (And he would not try to make a piece that was inspired by this work for at least a year.) Instead, he would let the image of the work, and his own imagination, begin to mature in his mind. He describes this process as "chasing the image."

The image would begin to change as it integrated with Kanzaki's heart and soul and spirit. As the image changed, Kanzaki continued to chase it. Over time, it became his own—not so much resembling the initial form, but having been distilled into something of the spirit of the initial piece, having been flavored by his own spirit.

When the making eventually began, the chase continued. The works themselves began to inspire a new round of chasing. "It is a matter of making works according to my own mind and heart and spirit," Kanzaki emphasized. "If you are a ceramics artist, all your life and spirit and self can be explained through your work."

In regard to teaching, Kanzaki went on to explain that he never demonstrates the making process for his apprentices; they never watch him actually make the pots.

"Why?" I wondered aloud. "How can this approach teach the kind of making that you describe?"

"If I show them how to make a *chawan* (teabowl), maybe my apprentices will always be only tracing my work. Maybe they will not be making works that come from their own heart and spirit. Sometimes my apprentices ask me, 'How do you do that?' Sometimes I say, 'I don't know.' In this way, I help them discover for themselves.

"Of course, they make some failures when they try to make their works. But there is much learning by trying and failing [an echo of Matsuyama's convictions about the ultimate value of learning from failures]. And if I tell them how from the beginning, they will not know, forever, the things they did not learn by trying. In this way, I teach them everything that I know. If I told them all the details of how-to-do, they might be successful one time. But by failing, they will have learned in a way that will cause them to be successful every time in the future. If I show them how, they know only that technique and cannot change easily. If I don't show them how, my apprentices have to be thinking, thinking, thinking to learn many ways of working and making . . . , then they can change their way of working easily, and make the works that come from the heart.

“Water Jar,” 17 centimeters (7 inches) in height, by Shiho Kanzaki.

“This is the important learning: to know more than technique. In this way, I open all secrets to my apprentices. To have a big heart is to open all secrets. And big hearts can make big works. If my apprentices learn this important lesson, they will become successful at making their own works. If they become successful, I do not hate or envy them. To envy their success would be to have a small heart, and small hearts can make only small works. No, to the contrary, I am very proud when my apprentices succeed in learning all my secrets. I will have been, for them, the founder of this way of working.

“I always try to teach my apprentices everything . . . , to teach them to go beyond all that they have been taught. To really learn my techniques is to make their own works, to go beyond my works by making works that express their heart, soul and spirit.”

HIROMI MATSUKAWA

Matsukawa’s apprenticeship to Kanzaki lasted 11 years: 11 years of being on call nearly 7 days per week; 11 years of receiving a *kozukai* (allowance/stipend/pocket money, in addition to the provisions of food, clothing and housing) of ¥10,000 (about US$100) each month; 11 years of learning by not being shown. Interestingly, Matsukawa lived quite frugally over those years, and saved almost ¥1,805,000 (US$15,000) in preparation for setting up his studio, once he had become an independent apprentice.

Once, near the end of Matsukawa’s apprenticeship, Kanzaki called all the apprentices together for a little quiz: “What is my most important lesson to you? What am I trying to teach you?” [What was he pouring into their cups?]

Matsukawa answered, “Your lesson to us is that we are to express ourselves as fully as possible, with all our might and strength; to be ourselves; to work within the limitations that greet us; and, through our works, to express our spirit, mind and heart, as best we can.”

“Yes!” said Kanzaki.

Over the ensuing years, Matsukawa has learned additional lessons in retrospect: He recalls the day that he and Kanzaki were firing the anagama during particularly difficult weather. They were taking turns: Kanzaki stoking while Matsukawa watched, and vice versa. The firing was not going so well. It was Kanzaki’s

turn to stoke when his wife came to the kiln to watch. Suddenly, Kanzaki said to Matsukawa, "You begin stoking now." And with that, Kanzaki walked away and up the hill that was behind the kiln. Matsukawa was worried, wondering where he was going, why he was leaving him alone with that difficult firing, how long he would be away. After a while, Kanzaki returned with a wild lily in his hand. He gave the lovely white flower to his wife and resumed stoking. Suddenly, the firing began to improve.

"Since then," commented Matsukawa, "I have come to learn that it is most important to see the whole picture at all times—not just the kiln, not just the problem that is immediately in front of me. We know that we have five senses. But I think that there is perhaps at least a sixth or maybe a seventh sense. And it has to do with our sensitivity toward all of the rest of the world. Real concentration is not focusing on a single thing. Real concentration is taking in all things—the entire environment. Real concentration is seeing the flower in the middle of such a time as that."

When asked how he would describe the full measure of success in a master/apprentice relationship, Matsukawa paused for several minutes before saying, "During my apprenticeship years, I grew up. I gained skills. I became more successful. I began to learn the most important lessons, and my cup continued to be filled. Also during this time Kanzaki grew. He became more successful, too. If there is a good match between the master and the apprentice, both can grow and succeed and change.

"A poor match can inhibit the growth of both. It is a little like the relationship between a husband and a wife: while it may be difficult to put into words the exact qualities for a successful marriage, we know when it is happening and when it is not. The measure of the most successful relationships is when there is mutual benefit."

Matsukawa continued, "I want to add one more thing. Earlier I told you, 'To receive is the most important work of the apprentice.' But there is another equally important job. After receiving, it is important that you take all that you have been given, and invest it into and through your work, just as Matsuyama and Kanzaki have done. In fact, all the work I make comes *through* Matsuyama sensei and Kanzaki sensei. The pots were not made by me alone. Yet the works are wholly my own. But one must make work, not only to satisfy oneself, not just for self-satisfaction or self-expression; that is not enough, of course. The work must satisfy others, and share happiness with them. The work dares not satisfy only the one who produced it."

There is a similar and beautiful paradox in the way the artist/apprentice looks backward, honoring the teachings of the master; yet, at the same time, looks forward, honoring the master by surpassing the master. It is the remarkable paradox of mutuality.

Matsukawa mentioned something Matsuyama says: "Aging and gaining experience makes you more sensitive to nature and beauty. The older we get, the more we grow up, the more we are able to see real beauty—in nature and in others."

For Matsukawa, "the ability to continue to have the cup filled depends on a sense of humility: the ability to receive even from

"Iga Vase," 26 centimeters (10 inches) in height, by Shiho Kanzaki.

"Big Pot," 47 centimeters (18 inches) in height, by Shiho Kanzaki.

"Iga Vase," "Shigaraki Gourd-Shaped Bowl" and "Iga Teabowl," to 17 centimeters (7 inches) in height, with natural ash glaze, by Hiromi Matsukawa.

Hiromi Matsukawa in his studio.

the smallest, youngest and least significant. If you remain ready to receive, then your cup can be filled."

Maybe the real meaning of independent apprentice is that you keep carrying an empty cup, waiting, expecting it to be filled—not by any single person or master, but by and through your increasing abilities to apprehend, receive, recognize, express and embrace beauty.

Some Observations

When reflecting on how the apprenticeship system/tradition served these three men, in their individual and quite-different life circumstances, it is apparent that this system has a certain amount of flexibility built into it—that it is responsive and not rigid, at least in how it operated in the lives of these three. And within the flexibility there seems to have been (what Eric Erikson's theory of psychosocial development calls) *generativity:* the ability to pass along, to subsequent generations, important techniques and values and vision and inspiration in a manner that will allow them to surpass us.

Perhaps of even more importance to potters, these anecdotal narratives may give us the opportunity to reflect upon our own settings and ask ourselves: how are we contributing to generativity?

In North America (and I address this location, not to the exclusion of others, but only because this is my area of familiarity), we have a remarkable number of organizations and events and systems in place that function to pass along what is important: we have annual gatherings, such as the "Functional Ceramics Workshop" in Wooster, Ohio, and other similar events; we have international conferences, such as that hosted by the National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts (NCECA); we have numerous craft centers (we could name Anderson Ranch, Arrowmont and the Archie Bray Foundation, without even exhausting the As); we are resourced by college and university course-of-study opportunities, and medium-specific periodicals, videos and books; and (to the extent that they are not only focused on marketing) exhibitions, to mention just a few.

Perhaps it is precisely because we, here in North America, have not inherited a system or some other prescribed tradition that we have this abundance of opportunities supporting the possibility of our being generative. Yet their mere presence does not ensure that we will move, with generativity, toward the other.

That, it seems to me, is the challenge of our living. And Matsuyama sensei's words may indeed be the measure of whether we are meeting the challenge of living, by really growing up: "The older we get, the more we grow up, the more we are able to see real beauty—in nature and in others."

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"Iga Vase," 42 centimeters (17 inches) in height, with natural ash glaze, by Hiromi Matsukawa.

"Iga Jar," 16 centimeters (6 inches) in height, with natural ash glaze, by Hiromi Matsukawa.