



Raku

second edition

tim
andrews

MARVIN SWEET – USA

Through his sculptures, Marvin Sweet aims to broaden the idea of what the raku aesthetic can be. He strongly identifies with the Japanese Zen ideal of restraint, or *wabi*, in his subdued pieces, emphasising quiet colours or tonal blacks, whites and greys. The continuity with Japanese raku aesthetics is part of a conscious aim to 'juxtapose Occidental and Oriental sensibilities'.

Marvin's aesthetic and technical understanding of raku was developed during his time at Boston University under the influential Rick Hirsch. A fellow student was Toshio Ohi who is the eleventh generation of the famous Ohi family in Japan (see p. 74) – potters directly linked to the Raku family. Indeed, the first four generations of Ohi potters signed their work 'Raku'. Marvin found the relationship between the cultures of East and West a fascinating and potent catalyst for his own ceramic expression. He travelled extensively in Japan with Hirsch and Ohi, studying the

temples, gardens and teahouses, and visiting the Raku family. They made pots at the Ohi studio, combining American and Japanese firing techniques. In 1992 Marvin followed up this trip with a first visit to China. There he discovered the antecedents of Japanese aesthetics:

I learned the Japanese had embraced the Chinese sect of Chan Buddhism (calling it Zen), eventually adopting the customs of whisking tea, designing tea gardens with bonsai trees, and other formal aspects taken from Chinese tea gardens. I became as captivated by the Chinese aesthetic as I had been by the Japanese.

Marvin's work became absorbed by these two cultures. He began integrating aspects of 'Scholars' Rocks' and 'Root Art'. These were objects such as beautiful stones mounted on carved wooden pedestals and natural root forms that the Chinese (and subsequently Japanese) scholarly classes displayed in their studios. He researched the historic sources in order to borrow, not only formal aspects, but also their 'symbolic spirit, to help recall shared values and ideas'. It was a way of seeking to bring fresh attitudes to the raku aesthetic.

In 1993 Marvin moved from his city home to the Massachusetts countryside. The move heightened his sensitivity to nature and brought into focus the desire to integrate the natural and spiritual in his work. As hybrids of vessel and sculpture, Marvin's pieces are full of ritual allusion. He feels the raku firing process itself has a ritualistic aspect to it:

Bowl and stand by Marvin Sweet.



Zen tenets of simplicity, humility and rusticity, in conjunction with my growing affinity to natural forms, matched perfectly the use of chance that is an inherent part of a raku firing. Raku is about fragility. Each time a piece is removed from the kiln it can be lost. This is in total harmony with my appreciation of the ephemeral in nature. As I pull work from the hot kiln, place it in a barrel and see it ignite, with flames shooting into the air, my movements around the heat and fire seem like a ritual dance.

In 2003, the sculptor Lu Pinchang, Professor of Art at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing, invited Marvin to return to China to share raku aesthetics and techniques with his students. For him it was like a homecoming, and the chance to give back to a culture whose long history of art had so enriched his life:

For raku, the aesthetic ideals laid down by the Chinese scholars centuries ago were returning in a new incarnation, having been metamorphosed through Japanese and American sensibilities.



Chinese scholar's rock, kept to provide inspiration, 20 x 10 x 8cm (8 x 4 x 3 1/4 in.).

Atavistic Vessel by Marvin Sweet, raku-fired clay and glazes, 28 x 30.5 x 10cm (11 x 12 x 4 in.).