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Documenting Mashiko in 1934: Minagawa Masu

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IN 1974, WHILE DOING RESEARCH for my film *Potters at Work* (1976), I discovered a cache of films that must have provided Europeans with some of the first moving images of rural Japan and its crafts. I had been rereading the journals of Bernard Leach in *A Potter in Japan* (1960) and was astonished to find the following from 1934:

When I showed my film to the local potters one evening they roared with derisive laughter when they saw her (Minagawa Masu) on the screen and she, sitting amongst them, laughed too.

Bernard Leach made films in Japan in 1934? Where were they? Would he still have them?

With some trepidation, from Canada I phoned the Leach Pottery and had a brief conversation with Janet Darnell Leach, who confirmed that she and her husband still had the films, but was not at all optimistic about what condition they might be in. I became more determined than ever to find out for myself.

As luck would have it, my first short film (*As We Are*, 1974) was invited to the London Film Festival, providing an opportunity to call Janet Leach once again and propose a visit. She said simply that if I had time to waste on what might well be a lost cause, come see us.

Janet picked me up at the St. Ives station and handed me a key to the small private office at the back of the world-famous pottery showroom. Rusty old film cans were waiting in a neat pile. She and Bernard later told me they were quite relieved that I had shown up—they'd been wondering what to do with his films, which had been sitting neglected for close to half a century.

I had brought along some film-viewing equipment and set to work. What I saw that day was clearly of historical importance. The shooting was not professional, to be sure, but absolutely riveting. Leach had filmed throughout Japan in 1934 and 1935. The people introduced in his writings were



there—in motion. Here was Hamada Shoji at home and in his workshop, and the legendary Minagawa Masu painting teapots in Mashiko—and much more. As Leach wrote in *Beyond East and West* (Watson-Guptill Publications, 1976), page 176, when he sat down to paint some pots with her, Minagawa

drew the patterns of an era elsewhere lost—lightly and with amazing swiftness and impersonal beauty of traditional touch. Thin black lines first, a pause for them to dry while I filled another tea-pot outline with extemporized pattern, then she took a fat brush, tipped it with dark Chinese ink—freshly ground—tried it on a rough piece of paper, after which she dabbed to or the graduated light tones over her former bamboo or 'sansui' (mountain and water) outlines. I added my dabs using a similar brush, but noticed that her patterns were conceived flat, whereas my brushwork inevitably tended to add form and depth. I copied her once or twice, but despite her praise, failed to get that beautiful, nonchalant, almost accidental calligraphy, the quality of which she was almost unconscious of, and for which she has acquired fame, rather to the disgust of local potters who say, "Her nose is growing upward!"

Later, the American artist Mark Tobey came up from southern Japan, where he was staying in a Zen monastery, and Leach filmed him watching Minagawa decorating pots. ☺

Minagawa Masu (1874–1960) decorating pots in Mashiko. Filmed by Bernard Leach, 1934. © Marty Gross Film Productions Inc. <<http://mingeifilm.com/>>