

Craft Technique Documentary

# 小鹿田焼

## Onta Pottery

In May, 1995, the Onta Pottery Preservation Society was recognized as the holder of an Intangible Cultural Asset by the Japanese government. This honor is rarely given to a group.

Onta is a small village deep in the mountains of Hita in Oita Prefecture. How have its potters managed to preserve this magnificent tradition?

This video seeks to throw light on the mystery as it follows the production process of Onta pottery. It documents how these potters have preserved and improved the techniques of the Korean mid-Joseon dynasty to create a rustic beauty that intrigued YANAGI Muneyoshi and Bernard LEACH.

TOGAWA Naoki, film critic

Special Prize, Ministry of Education

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## Prologue

Deep in the mountains of Hita in Oita Prefecture, this small village has produced pottery for over 300 years. The 10 potteries preserve and maintain the traditional method and style of Onta pottery, which is produced without machinery.



## What is Onta Pottery?

Immigrant Korean potters fleeing the Imjin War in the late 1600s brought new techniques to the villages of Takatori, Koishiwara, and finally Sarayama, which began the tradition of Onta pottery.



## Traditional pieces

Until the early 1930s, hardly anyone outside the village had heard of its ceramic folk art, produced by potters who were also farmers. Most Onta pottery is utilitarian jugs, bowls and jars.



## YANAGI Muneyoshi (1889-1961)

Onta pottery first became widely known after YANAGI Muneyoshi praised the beauty of this rustic folk art.



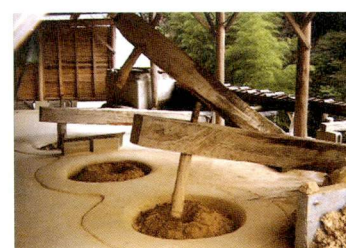
## Bernard Howell LEACH (1887-1979)

The famous British potter Bernard LEACH was another fan of Onta pottery. LEACH had always been fascinated by the *Hihakumon* chatter marks on Sung Dynasty Chinese ceramics. Hearing that a similar technique existed in Onta, he visited the village.



## Producing the clay 1 (Clay gathering)

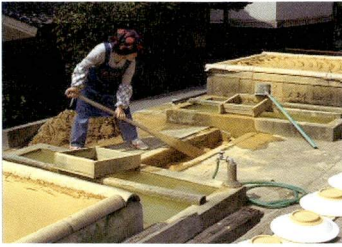
Clay gathering has always been a collaborative effort involving the entire village. The potters are careful to dig up no more than necessary, and to use up all the clay they pound.



## Preparing the clay 2

(Pounding the clay with mortars)

The clay is stored in sheds to allow it to dry before being pounded into a fine powder by the water-driven mortars, a process that takes 10 to 14 days.



## Producing the clay (*Suihi*)

The powdered clay is then taken to the potter's yard for a further refining process called *Suihi*. This process is repeated many times, and then the clay is sun dried. Preparing the clay has always been done by the village women.



## Refining the glazes

The glazes are made from local materials such as white clay, ruststone, straw ash, charcoal, copper and iron powder, using recipes handed down through many generations.



## Forming

Throwing the pottery is a man's job, done on Korean-style kick wheels. Traditionally, each family has two wheels. Small items are thrown using the *Hikizukuri* and *Tamazukuri* methods; large pieces with the *Sokouchi* (hammering out), *Neritsuke* (coil construction) and *Koshitsugi* (hip-joining) techniques.



## Forming tools

A wide range of tools is used for shaping and finishing. Each tool is handmade. The various shapes and the way in which they're used reflect the long Onta tradition.



## Decorative techniques

Decorative techniques include *Hakeme*, *Tobi-ganna*, *Kushime*, *Yubikaki* or finger painting, *Uchikake* and *Nagashi*. These simple techniques produce a charmingly rustic effect.



## Tobi-ganna

*Tobi-ganna* is a chattered pattern on a white clay surface. Bernard LEACH was delighted to discover this Chinese Song dynasty technique preserved here in Onta.



## Glazes

The glazes come in colors such as clear, amber, green, moss green, black and spotted brown. A ladle is used to pour glazes onto the pieces prior to firing.



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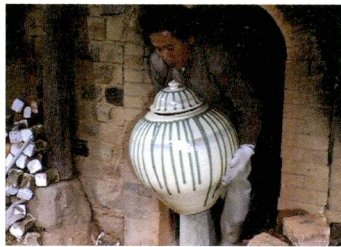
## Community kiln

Some of the Onta potters have their own private kilns, but the old community kiln in the center of the village is still widely used. The 8-chambered climbing kiln is shared by five potteries.



## Firing

Firing is done the traditional way. After preliminary and initial firings in the fire mouth, each chamber is fired to dry it so moisture won't fall on the pieces. The main firing takes 50 or 55 hours, until the final 8th chamber is completed.



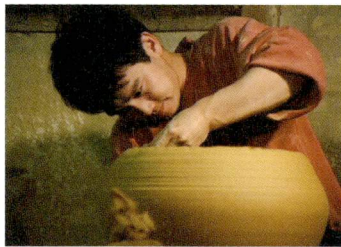
## Opening the kiln

After the firing is finished, the kiln is allowed to cool naturally for three days before it is opened.



## Finished works

Each piece is sturdy and solid, with a natural warmth and grace typical of ceramic folk art. Pieces are inscribed 'Onta' rather than with the potter's name.



## Successors

The tradition of allowing only one son to inherit the kiln is still observed.



## Water-driven mortars

The village even has its own carpenter to build the traditional water-powered mortars. Onta is the only village in Kyushu where these mortars are still in use.

### Special Thanks

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