

GEOPSYCHE

The three souls of art in globality

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How do the differences in ceramics in the Far East, the West and in Africa come about? Thinking environmentally opens up a vista on the world.

It is hard to believe that climate has such a large influence on culture, and that one culture differs from others because of the climate zone. Let us assume for the moment that this is just an opinion, but it is an ancient one and has a history. We can even find it among the ancient Greeks. Hippocrates believed that fertile landscapes brought forth heroic people, and Aristotle thought it was the climate that made the Greeks superior to the barbarians. Why the ancient Greeks again and not the great thinkers of the wisdom of the East? They thought differently: at the same time in northern India, China, Korea and Japan, there was a different climate, and there still is today. It is the monsoon that heats up the land during the summer and cools it down markedly in winter. In this climate zone, there is heavy precipitation and rich vegetation, subtropical moist forest. In Europe, in contrast, there is a temperate climate.

The opinions of philosophers on climate (in the 18th century, Hegel, Herder and Montesquieu were among them) were too important for science to ignore them. First the social sciences turned their attention to them, then natural sciences, and finally they became a branch of psychology. That started a hundred years ago when the Heidelberg professor Willy Hellpach, minister of education and later even state president of Baden, published a book on "Geopsychic Phenomena, Weather and Climate, Soil and Landscape and their Influence on Psychological Life". He made a distinction between three environments: the social, cultural and natural environment. In 1992, the German translation of Watsuji Tetsuro's book, *Fudo – Climate and Culture* appeared, in which he ascribed the strongest influence on human emotions, thought and action to the environment, which could not be influenced by humankind, i.e. the climate. He distinguished between three climate zones and for the first time described their consequences: the monsoon climate with its distinctly moist cha-

acter brings forth a type of people who are passive-resigned, contemplative-emotional in character; the arid desert in contrast produces people who defy nature and are distinguished by permanent force of will and readiness to fight, and who are distinctly rational and are gifted with practical common sense. Watsuji sees this reflected in the Judaeo-Christian and Islamic religions. A pastoral climate, which for Watsuji exists in pure form in southern Europe, is characterised by drought in summer and wetness in winter. The brightness and clarity of the Greek climate led to an emphasis on the sense of sight, and according to Watsuji, also brought forth the impressive clarity in art, architecture and thought in ancient Greece.

If we want to find the influence of these three climate zones on ceramics, we must restrict ourselves to the known cases, because it is absolutely impossible to examine emotion, thought and belief, social and cultural environmental conditions in the past and their changes up to the present all over the world from the angle of climatic influences. Furthermore, local, organically developed pottery of indigenous peoples changes under pressure from outside through commercial demand. There are many examples of this. And, what is otherwise true of art, it is always drawn into the wake of external role models and influences.

However much the ceramics of the pueblo Indians of New Mexico, the Aborigines in Australia or the Mangbetu in Zaire may interest us, the most important thing for us is the difference between East and West. Let us take the monsoon climate prevalent in the Far East, which according to Watsuji produces a contemplative-emotional character.

Our gaze turns towards China, Korea and Japan, because in the world of ceramics, they have become our role models and our standard. Young ceramists from Europe and the USA sought their training with Japanese masters so that they too could make such impressive works and broaden their horizons. All the patience demanded of young Japanese and which forms part of their character could not be expected of them. Their training consists of the continual repetition and imitation of hand movements. Their duties are initially hard, difficult and basic: collecting wood, stoking the kiln and kneading clay. The Japanese apprentice must first master these fundamental tasks to perfection before they receive permission to work on their first pot. Even then years may pass in which they have to make the same object over and over – it is usually a bowl – until the individual actions have become ingrained and can be executed automatically and

flawlessly. Only when having reached the stage at which forming clay in every detail is subject to their will are they considered mature enough to be allowed to experiment with forms that spring from their inspiration. It is only then that the inner core of their being can express itself, revealing features of a natural religion that has been contained in humankind from time immemorial, without the philosophies of the sages being explicitly aware of them. The feeling that guides the ceramists in the Far East is filled with animate nature, including landscape, vegetable and mineral nature. This is true of the entire population and determines their understanding of ceramics. How else could 32,000 potters* earn a living with this craft in a country as small as Japan? And how else could the question of art become superfluous when pots just taken from the kiln are subjected to such a severe examination that everything that does not pass muster is immediately smashed? We are familiar with this from China. In Japan, opinion favours the magical melancholy of nature. The Japanese potter is delighted if his pot falls over in the kiln and a stone sticks to it. He mixes gold dust with lacquer to rub into cracks, picking them out with gold. As far back as the 14th century, the erudite Japanese monk Joshida Kenk wrote in his prose collection, *Tzurezuregusa* (Essays in Idleness), "It is typical of the unintelligent man to insist on assembling complete sets of everything. Imperfect sets are better" (transl. David Keene). This leads to a kind of ceramics that reveals its innermost being, its nature, through imperfection. This spirituality is in opposition to striving for bright, clear perfection widespread in the pastoral climate of the West. Here, the potter must deliver a perfect product to as evidence of their craft ethic.

A monsoon climate is also prevalent in the southern states of the USA (except Florida), in northern Argentina and Uruguay. The ceramics there also have features of natural religions; however, it did not come to the fore there for many reasons, which are related above all to the destruction of the indigenous culture through the Conquista.

We are at home in a pastoral climate. What we know of others and simplify as a generalisation, we have learned to be complicated from our own past and present because it is our world that has been most thoroughly studied by our thinkers. As if there were nothing else. We are the Western world. In the West, UNESCO sees the rise of knowledge societies. They supersede information societies as a liberal, holistic age and are seen to be an age of similar importance to agrarian and industrial society. Art in ceramics

The monsoon climate in eastern Asia.

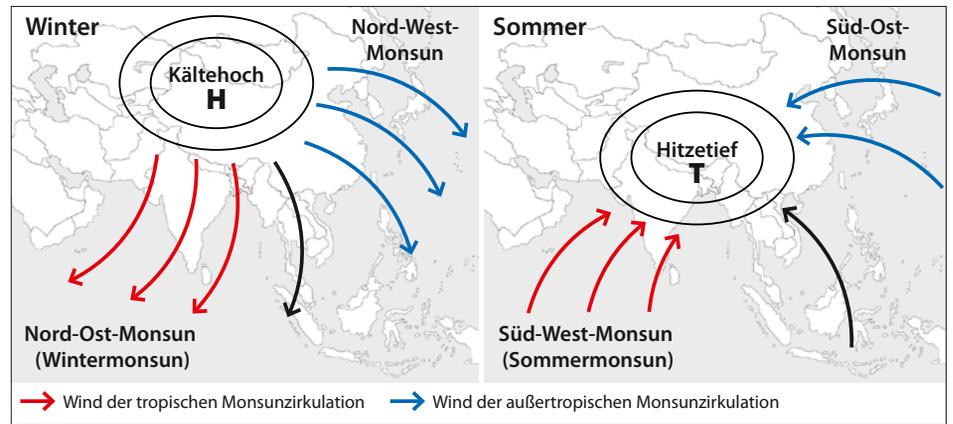
According to Tetsuro Watsuji it has the strongest influence on people's emotions, thought and actions in China, Korea and Japan.

must not be excluded by knowledge society. Individual thought, shared knowledge and a thousand heavens of belief can inspire the creative imagination. From the spirit, art receives the ineffable, which distinguishes it from the rationality of science. Art, which for a long time only proceeded from creativity and imagination, and was sought after if it was beautiful, original or individual, is moving more and more towards the experience of knowledge that demands expression. Beauty beyond the beautiful fulfils the demands of the Enlightenment in the 18th century, of art with an inner image.

Ceramics in the European pastoral climate zone always followed models from the East, from desert climate regions. Greek painted vases were a reinvention of slip painting from Mesopotamia. Roman terra sigillata was invented in the Middle East, faience came from Samarra on the Tigris, white earthenware from Iznik in Turkey, porcelain from China, Raku from Japan. There was only one European invention: saltglazed stoneware.

And the desert climate? Ceramics in the sub-Saharan sandy desert has always been mysterious because of a lack of a written history, and it made a profound impression on modernist artists. Like the ceramics from the sandy deserts of New Mexico, South America and Australia, it is dominated by a spiritual affinity to symbolic content.

This differs from the great desert areas of the Middle East with its civilisations. In pre-Islamic times, the ceramics of Mesopotamia and Persia were so superior that archaeologist could not comprehend that these peoples had achieved such cultural heights. They initially thought it was imported from Greece. In the Islamic era, the ceramics of these countries was the technical and artistic model that Europe followed since the invention of faience. When lead glaze was invented in Asia Minor, technical difficulties were solved through geological and botanical conditions. In geological terms, these were the chalky, lime-rich clays; botanically, the halophytic plants of the arid climate. Neither exists in Europe. The lime-rich clays bore the slips without them flaking off and the alkaline glazes without them cracking. And the glazes needed the ash of the halophytic plants at low temperatures. The kilns and the firing temperatures of the Middle East were also predominant in European pottery. This only



changed with the migration of the Slavs, who brought cross-draught kilns to western Europe. Böttger's experiments to invent hard paste porcelain started from lime-rich bodies, following the example of the Middle East, until this earth-alkaline porcelain became alkali porcelain after Böttger's death through the use of feldspar. It has never been proved to what extent a knowledge of Chinese soft paste porcelain contributed to this. It is only with the addition of feldspar that porcelain became translucent because sanidine, the high temperature form of feldspar, is so viscous that it does not crystallise. It remains glassy. The invention of hard paste porcelain was the second autonomous technological invention in Europe before the outbreak of the industrial age. It brought about the separation of technical and artistic ceramics.

We take Böttger's invention of porcelain for granted, without realising its massive importance. The invention of a synthetic body after many experiments was superior to Chinese porcelain, which only required the potter's experience. With Böttger's alchemical research, research began to dominate experience in the world of things, and the Western world began to dominate the East. The significance of Böttger's scientific invention lies in synthesis, and it goes far beyond its ceramic significance. The bright, clear thinking that Tetsuro Watsuji ascribed to a pastoral climate thus achieved its breakthrough.

Eastern philosophy, the monsoon climate, after Watsuji, on which ceramics is based, is closer to nature, and from its proximity to nature follows its egocentric ethic. It is subjective. Eastern ceramics draws its inspiration from its cultural past, religion and the environment, and artistic imagination is stimulated by the possibility of symbolic representation in varying degrees of abstraction. The Western philosophy of the pastoral climate, in contrast, seeks to find an explanation for the world. As a result of its objectivity it follows the insights of science. In terms of this philosophy, Western ceramics

is more adaptable, more flexible and increasingly spiritual. As art, it is striving towards tradition-free globality.

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**) Cf. Gabriele Fahr-Becker (ed.):*

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