

Interview with Elmar Weinmayr, Kyoto

Fifteen years ago, Elmar Weinmayr began an unique experiment in Japan. He opened a gallery in Kyoto, specializing in Japanese lacquer ware, ceramics, bamboo, and woven and dyed fabrics created by traditionally-oriented craftsmen and artists. As a German living and working in Japan, his projects, exhibitions and publications have brought him international recognition. Chris Mulzer spoke with him in his Kyoto studio.

CM: Mr. Weinmayr, how did it come to be that you, as a German, began selling handcrafts to Japanese customers?

EW: In the mid 1980s I visited Japan for the first time as part of a philosophy research project. The time here expanded my world so tremendously that I decided to take an offer to work at the University in Kyoto as an academic official. I quickly found out, however, that my interests were too varied for such a post. So I went out on my own and opened my little office, specializing in the transfer of art and culture between Europe and Japan.

CM: What convinced you back then to stay in Japan? I imagine that starting a life here is anything but easy.

EW: (Laughs) I think that if I had had an answer to that question, I would have probably gone immediately back to Europe. Perhaps it's precisely because of my search for the cause of my fascination that I'm still here. I haven't completely figured it out yet, in any case.

CM: Could one say that yours is a story about a longing that has yet to be fulfilled?

EW: No, that sounds too sentimental to me. It's my interests and the open questions that won't let me go. Nevertheless, I've recently been finding that my German roots and where I come from is more and more important to me. That's evident in the fact that I've been much more present in Europe and America in the last months and years than, say, five years ago.

CM: How did you manage, as a foreigner, to sell high-level Japanese handcrafts to Japanese customers. How did you build up that trust?

EW: I did it by working in a way that distinguishes itself from what happens in a typical Japanese gallery. Most Japanese galleries do very short exhibitions and work with many, many artists. I only work with a selected few and make my selections according to strict criteria. That makes my gallery very interesting for a lot of Japanese customers.

CM: That also seems to be the case for Europeans and people from other parts of the world, who have been buying from you more and more as time goes by.

EW: The artists I work with have to have both feet firmly planted in the Japanese tradition. And yet they have to create objects that work in our time. That means that their works are accepted both in Japan and abroad. I'm not interested in pieces which only have a market in Japan—for example because the artist is famous here—or that only sell abroad, because they somehow activate a subconscious sense of the exotic. For me it's a mark of the quality of my work when collectors in both Europe and Japan are enthusiastic about what I exhibit.

CM: Mr. Weinmayr, I've noticed that you seem to mix and polarize the terms art and handcraft in a way that I don't fully understand...

EW: The division between handcraft and art is a historical one that originated in Europe. It's been imported into Japan in the meanwhile. It's very difficult for me to classify the artists or craftsmen, with whom I work, into just one category. I prefer to speak of applied arts rather than "arts and crafts". What one currently finds in Europe under the term arts and crafts comes nowhere close to the quality and the level that the term implies in Japan and especially in my gallery.

CM: And in the meantime you've been "exporting" German artists to Japan. Do you use evaluate them in the same way?

EW: Yes, exactly in the same way. I represent several German artists in Japan. Unfortunately it's only a few at present. On one hand, I rarely find artists who create works of sufficient quality and, on the other hand, the artist also has to be working in an area and creating works that the Japanese can fall in love with. If I put together an exhibition then it should naturally include people and works that will generate excitement in Japan.

CM: Would you define your program as a sort of Japanese-oriented meta-aesthetic that is internationally marketable?

EW: My program projects an aesthetic that is both strictly in keeping with Japanese tradition and, at the same time, modern. To put it in an extreme way, an artist that I represent could just as well live in Europe, America, South Africa or anywhere on earth, assuming his aesthetics fulfil my selection criteria. In reality, eighty percent of my artists are Japanese. In my experience, at a certain level, cultural boundaries and differences become unimportant. The interesting thing is that it happens often enough that a European says, "Wow, these lines and this form are so modern!" and a Japanese person looks at the same piece and says, "This is a beautiful piece. It really shows that our traditions are alive."

CM: Mr. Weinmayr, given your demands, I imagine that it's quite difficult to find artists who you want to represent...?

EW: I don't find many. I've been in Japan now for fifteen years and I constantly keep my eyes open. I seek artists in various disciplines: lacquer ware, ceramics, bamboo weaving, fabric weaving and fabric dyeing, metalwork. I often find people through recommendations. The artists I find are mainly craftsmen who create their works piece by piece by themselves. Individual pieces or in small series. When they create their pieces they have to feel and think as artists, however. They have to work within the Japanese tradition and use traditional craft techniques and, at the same time, achieve a modern standard and a modern aesthetic.

CM: What criteria do you use to select individual pieces?

EW: There are indeed a few artists from whom I can buy almost everything with my eyes closed. With others I have to be more selective. The piece has to be functional, it should be something one uses in one's everyday life. At the same time, the piece has to be so finely crafted that it would be convincing as a museum's piece.

CM: A very interesting paradox. Some of the lacquer ware artists that became famous through their work with you have gone on to sell a lot of their pieces to museums. When their works end up in a museum's display case as so-called "representative applied art of our age," where then is your demand that the pieces be used?

EW: It's a contradiction that I face every day. On one hand I'm pleased when museums show interest in the works of my artists; on the other, it means of course that such a piece gets more or less frozen. Every artist creates his works with someone in mind who will later make use of them. For a lot of pieces, their being used is part of the concept. Some lacquer ware artists, for example, use variously-coloured lacquer layers so that a piece gets the desired patina through use. The unique lustre that comes from such use, the changes that the material undergoes, that's what makes a piece whole and complete. I can offer you some peace of mind, however: even though a lot of pieces end up in museums, most of them are bought by people in Europe, America and Japan who use them in their everyday lives. For a lot of them, it's a unique luxury to work with such beautiful objects and to have them around day in and day out.

CM: Mr. Weinmayr, you've written two books about Japanese applied arts. One is about lacquer ware, the other about the dyeing master Yoshioka...

EW: As in all the industrialized nations, there are more and more people in Japan who want to express themselves through art or a craft. One consequence of this drive towards self-expression is that there are fewer and fewer people who want to learn the old handcraft techniques from the bottom up. It's sometimes a process that takes five or ten years and the only way to learn a lot of the complicated techniques is to assist and work patiently alongside a master. This knowledge and craft can't be learned from books or some sort of school of applied arts. I find it very important to

document as much as possible and make a record of what is still extant in certain traditions. I did that with my two books.

CM: That sounds like a cultural-anthropological research endeavour...

EW: I've understood the term "document" quite broadly. When I speak with people, we usually have known each other for years. Behind every craftsman is the special way that they handle their materials, a perspective on life and the world. Most of the ceramicists with whom I work are also gourmets who cook for themselves and therefore have a special relationship, for example, with the bowls that they create. It plays an important role to explore an artist's lifestyle and way of thinking. That's why I enjoy it so much to collect, to investigate and to document. And I think that interests other people as well.

CM: And what's your next project?

EW: My next book is about a Japanese lathe master and his very special relationship with wood.

CM: Mr. Weinmayr, you studied philosophy. You work in Japan with craftsmen and artists. Is there something in your personal development that connects all these things together?

EW: Whether I work as a teacher at a university or simply as a gallerist, there's never been an inner contradiction. A lot of what I learn from the artists I connect with things that concerned me earlier when I was working in philosophy. I came to Japan because I wanted to learn as much as possible about the Japanese way of thinking and way of life. I've discovered that I learn a lot more about Japan through my work with craftsmen and artists than I ever could in all the country's libraries combined.

CM: Mr. Weinmayr, I thank you for your time.

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