

Alain Vernis

I was invited to go to the Higher Morvan region, in order to discover the work of a potter. My apprehension was at a level with my curiosity. How would a city lover, born and bred in Rome, an amateur of bright colours, be able to look, see and be touched by an earthenware pot? All I knew of terracotta was peasant Italian crockery, with its blue droplets and green flowing streaks. Or that of the Etruscans, with its deep dull blackness born of those clay soils drained from the rivers gushing down the Appenines to the Tuscan sea. All I knew intuitively was that I liked earth. What is Rome indeed, but a city totally made of baked clay? Baked over and squashed in the heat of the sun, its ochre walls, tinged of rose and apricot, with a frothy festoon of white marble, are since the days of Antiquity, made of brick piled up in crusty and floury layers, like a real layered cake! What was I to do in these expanses of multitudinous stuffy green foliage, facing those blue and moist horizons? How would my usual perception react? I was ripe for this invitation to feel out of my depth. I went over to that gallic granite mount, which I knew to be poor and harsh, with great humility.

When I left after my visit to Alain Vernis, I felt even more humble than when I had arrived. I had felt intimidated by the modest atelier: just a regular room in a regular house. At first I looked a lot, without seeing anything. There were shelves, there were bowls indeed, and try-outs shaped like little wings or erect fingers, like tiny statuary standing close together. Notebooks, lists, formulas. It felt more like being with an archeologist in Mesopotamia than with a potter. At first, I did not sense the bowls. I needed to reach out to them. They espoused perfectly the palms of my hands, they were exquisitely soft to the touch and at times, they seemed soaked with light. I did not insist. I sensed we needed time between us. I let night invade the house. I talked a lot with Alain Vernis, about lots of things, but also about clay, about wood fired kilns, about glazings, textures and alchemy. I was no technician. Alain Vernis knew how to explain in simple terms. I learnt that originally, the word Raku referred not to a technique, but to a dynasty of Japanese potters: I noticed his irritation with the mercantile facility in the use of the word. I was miffed by his precision, his determination. His way is that of any authentic artist. He is inhabited by an irrepressible need to do. There is no premeditation: he starts from nothing; like being faced with an empty page. The necessity to find the right gesture. I realised that to achieve this thrust, this energy, he had to renounce, to empty himself, of all knowledge, of all attachments, of all conventions. I realised that an ascetic, retiring life, a solitary life away from the world, a life of silence, were not a pose, but a primordial demand, in order to face hesitations, dilemmas, discouragement, intransigence, the lengthy flow of time needed for maturation. A slow and hard earned preparation, to attain nothingness, a state close to a trance, where spirit and body can at last be balanced. Total availability. Only at this price will the created object be pure of everything which would not be itself. Then only can Alain Vernis very lightly form a bowl which will be the most natural thing in the world, molding it, not on the wheel, but with his fingers, from a ball of clay held within the conchlike space between his palms. The matter of the clay he chose is unlike anything else. It is each time unique, with delicate innards, made of streaks and invisible holes, hidden forces, oozing drops of water, mysterious tensions, pores and spongiousness. Once mixed then baked, it will have kept a trace of everything. Of the center of the earth, as well as of the surface plants reduced to ashes. Of darkness and fire. Of the earth's motions or of the nimbleness of human fingers. That clay will become the very skin and flesh of the indecipherable form of the bowl. The bowl will be the incarnation both of the natural universe and of the world of the spirit. Its presence will be a reminiscence, of time rescued, of time redeemed and made eternal. The bowl created by Alain Vernis has thus been transfigured and through its very abstraction, it makes the intemporal visible.

Later, when I folded back my antennae, I ceased indulging my high faluting fantasies and fondling the bowls, all the while asking questions. I went to bed in a deafening silence. I thought rightly that the bowls would not reveal their intimacy until the morrow, after all I had heard, had peeled the screens off my eyes and made my touch more sensitive in the unconscious toil of sleep. In the morning light, the bowls were diversely radiating and throbbing in alternate appearances and disappearances. Set aside from the others, each bowl sculpts the surrounding space or dissolves into it. Its fluid edges appear unfinished. Its lips tremble with sensuality. Its fragility and strength attract and invite contemplation. Like the marble of those Chinese "dream stones" which let the mind wander, it is a landscape whispering to me the names of ferns, the claws of birds, the sites of quarries, the shells or leaves amalgamated within. I can see crevices in its grain, furrows, packed

snow, wind squalls carrying petals away. I sense the infiltrated water surge and flow over. Oozing from within and flowing without. Infiltrating the earth, dilating and transpiring, gurgling and reappearing as pearls.

Its telluric nature speaks to me of its cosmic being. The whorls traced with a bird feather, the grooves, the grains of sand, the craters, the lava chunks, the filaments and shooting stars. The fine cracks, within and without, evoke the heaving of the earth crust, the skin on cooling milk, dry soil at the bottom of a drained lake. The world in fusion. Time in the process of being lived. The rosy cheeks of a baby and the wrinkles of the old. The most recent bowls compose a limpid symphony of white mother of pearl. Placed on a stave of crystal notes, they resonate between themselves, lustrous like grains of rice. A joyful and silent sonata. The bowls have spoken to me. They have unstrung the tiny musical keys making up the fragments of universal memory. They have delighted my day, invited me on a journey, opened the doors to a secret. The story of the bowls made by Alain Vernis is the story of Time Revisited.

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English translation by Eva Lothar