

Open Letter to Bernard Leach, 1953 / Marguerite Friedlaender Wildenhain. Essay : 4 p. ; 28 x 22 cm. Marguerite Wildenhain papers, 1930-1982. Archives of American Art.

Open Letter to Bernhard Leach.

1953.

(Not only since the days of the International Conference at Dartington Hall, but) Ever since your first longer visit in the United States and your article in Craft Horizons, the voices that rose in indignation and in doubt as to the value of what you were preaching with the zeal and the fervor of a missionary, were so many and came from so many different sides of the world, that I think we should try to clear the situation with an open letter to you, Bernhard Leach.

Let me say first of all that no one doubts your integrity and your sincerity and <sup>the fact</sup> that you are trying your best to teach the highest standards of craftsmanship.

Still if that for which you stand and the way to arrive at that aim are based on a wrong and alien assumption, all the real effort that you are putting into the propagation of your aim, must necessarily be harmful. If the aim of your lectures is to narrow down to one way of life, one special manifestation of art, one century of one certain culture the manifold ways of the creative potters of the world, if your aim is to "save" our ~~our~~ 20th century by taking over the forms, the techniques, the way of life and the work methods of the Orientals of the 8th or 10th century or of contemporary rural population in Japan, -- it is obvious that we must reject that.

That you stress the importance of roots and tradition is understandable, but tradition is only good when it is alive, (that is when it needs no intellectuals to talk about integration of man and work,) when no one is even conscious of it and no one praises it; but in the minute that tradition is an artificial keeping-<sup>up</sup>-alive of forms that have no relation to a generation anymore, then let us have the courage to throw those overboard and honestly and plainly search for those forms that express what we feel, we believe and we think. Roots, of course are very wonderful to have, no one will doubt that, but if a country has not that one big single "taproot" as you call it, don't let us think that, because of that, it has no chance for a genuine and alive art expression of its own. (By the way no country has

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one taproot, not even England, what would it be without Roman, French, Norman, Saxon, Celtic, Irish, Scotch and other roots). Roots grow when one lives according to what is right for you, when your life is honest and your work related to it in the deepest sense, when one has a country with which one is closely connected and intimately bound, roots can never be seen (except when you pull man or tree out of his ground) but they are there all the same.

America has roots too, but it has many and they come from all over the world, from all races of the earth, from all classes of society--- that is its grand uniqueness, this growing together of thousand parts. ~~(It is the most exciting fact of this century, it shows that every man can live with every other fellow-man.)~~ A country like America cannot have just one expression, it forcibly must have as many forms of expression as total life has. ~~(It is like the ocean into which all rivers of the world flow, all seemingly losing their substance and forms, still we know that life has originated in the sea and not on the hill-tops, it is the primary substance out of which life grows.)~~ That is also America's beauty, its greatness and for nothing in the world (I say that as a European born American) would I want to see just one single form, one single way of thinking, ~~one single "tradition" grow on this continent. (No, let us admire that which is the essential trend of this American "experiment" on a scale of a 150 millions of inhabitants, each trying in his own way, as best he can, to solve a problem that he has chosen to attack: That is our tradition, the free choice of each.~~

~~We know what you think about American pottery: that is is hopeless.~~

~~But you cannot possibly honestly believe that the US craftsmen would grow roots by imitating Sung or Corcan pots or Chinawa textiles, be those as beautiful as they are. How could anything but the worst makeshift value grow out of a conscious imitating any form that is not related <sup>to</sup> the mind and soul of our generation, our country, our time? How can an American boy who drinks coffee and soft drinks make Japanese tea-cups based on the Japanese tea-ceremony, without becom-~~

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ing, at the best and esthete, at the worst an hypocritical fake? How can an American boy make traditional English slipware bowls, pitches and Toby-jugs that have absolutely nothing to do with what he thinks, nor likes, nor needs? How could he work by hand in the equivalent of one of those Japanese sweat-shops that you show in your slides for a salary that would scarcely keep him from starvings, making day after day by hand in a monotonous repetition ~~exercise~~ that which the machine could easily and much better produce.

No, if we want the crafts to remain alive and perhaps even to grow roots again

9 in our civilization, give them ~~plenty of~~ freedom, ~~plenty of~~ education, ~~plenty of~~ <sup>and</sup> good creative experimenting. Like the tree that will grow, man needs to find the earth open for growth, and not find from the very beginning his mind, ~~his heart,~~ his work, ~~his hand,~~ his life studded with restricted areas and tabus all around him.

Let us use the hands for what they were meant to be : the tools of a creative man, not just the repetitive instrument of unimaginative procedures.

10 That American Potters could make better pots, no American potter doubts, <sup>they are</sup> in the depth they are very humble <sup>and</sup> always willing to try, to learn and to try again.

But 11 For that we will need education, not restriction: open up everything that is available, show them <sup>all races of the world</sup> ~~all~~ the beautiful pots that ~~have been made~~, that all races of the world have developed, all techniques, all expressions, all ways of treating certain problems, show them ~~and~~ the different elements that have gone into the making of their own background, ~~but don't let us only praise the Chinese or the Japanese, there are excellent traditions much, much nearer to us than these~~ <sup>Chinese or Jap</sup> and of equal artistic quality and of as genuine inventiveness. We cannot and we ~~do not~~ want to make Orientals out of Americans, nor Buddhists out of Christians, let both and all be, they all have the same right and equal, <sup>and value</sup> though perhaps different values. Who has the right to say the one only was the chosen way of life? How terribly boring would life be if we all thought alike, made the same things, thought the same ideas and all looked alike. As in life, the main thing in art

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is the divine spark. To nip it in the student is to kill it in the man.