

Marty Gross and the Mingei Film Archive

by Moyra Elliott

When a reputation developed around Canadian artist and filmmaker Marty Gross' enthusiasm for acquiring old film and audio on early 20th-century activities in East Asian village potteries (primarily in Japan, Korea, China, and Southeast Asia), the footage and recordings started to arrive by a variety of means from diverse sources. Some were gifted by the original filmmaker, some were found abandoned in attic trunks or on studio shelves, others lay neglected deep in

museum cupboards or in cabinets in German church archives, or languished in a rural New England barn. A Japanese local government office held three films about Onda in Kyushu, wrapped in furoshiki (Japanese wrapping textiles). The officials realized such careful treatment meant they were probably important, but had little idea what to do with them. Gross' friends in England spotted rare audio recordings as part of an auction lot from a defunct recording studio.





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1 Carrying sake bottles to a climbing kiln from *The Village Potters of Onda*, by Robert Sperry, 1963. 2 Masu Minagawa decorating Mashiko Sansui teapots. From *Mashiko Village Pottery*, 1937. 3 Carrying a large storage jar at the workshop of Kumagoro Sumi, Fukuoka, Japan, 1934. From *Bernard Leach Films Mashiko & Other Pottery Villages*, 1934.

Chance meetings in Japan resulted in former employees of a regional Folk-Crafts Museum directing current staff to long-forgotten boxes of films and sound recordings. A Bernard Leach film commentary turned up in a box of donated miscellaneous materials from a former educational film studio. Schools and colleges frequently discarded films, once videotape arrived, and these were collected wherever possible. Now videotape is a dead medium, while old films can be enhanced and given new life, digitally.

Often, Gross finds that those with old films cannot imagine what to do with their cache and are delighted, even relieved, to discover someone knowledgeable is interested to care for and restore these amateur and professional 8 mm, 16 mm, and 35 mm films. Each has its own provenance that entails negotiations, clearances, and permissions as well as the issue of age-induced fragility that usually requires cleaning and often repairing before any digital scanning can be undertaken. Sometimes it's a race against time as frangible, sometimes almost century-old film is passed across for ministrations. But this way, the intriguing narratives they convey can be viewed and appreciated by contemporary potters. And those entrusting what they had preserved understand that these old films will be cared for and seen.

Living and Working Within Culture

Gross' work preserving these historic films and recordings is well known now, so he is usually informed when old, possibly useful film is discovered. His interest began when, as a rather younger man, he sought a way out of a university course he was not enjoying. His desire was to make films and work with clay, not necessarily in that order. He already had a deep interest in Japanese art and culture and had read what was readily available at the time. These

consisted mainly of titles that presented pottery as either art or historical objects, but Leach's *A Potters Book* he found, "enchanting, not how-to and not art." It was, for him, about the engagement of making. He was determined to experience more by living and working within the culture rather than at school and made his first visit to Japan in 1970. Following an initial journey around the country, Gross spent some months in Tokoname, where he worked in a small ceramics workshop. There he labored five days a week and on the sixth day he had access to the wheels and taught himself to throw—no one was actually designated to instruct him, for all had their own tasks to complete. It was a typical Japanese apprenticeship situation for the times—learn by observing whatever was available while being useful and not getting in the way.

On returning to Canada, Gross started his own studio and embarked on developing a teaching center for children's art activities. During this period, he made his first film, a documentary on art and intellectually handicapped children, *As We Are*, which garnered favorable attention and won several prizes at the Oberhausen Film Festival in April 1975, and was invited to the London Film Festival that November.

Gross also returned to Japan that year, and over the summer worked as an apprentice again, this time in Okinawa. At the same time, he was preparing to make a film about the various activities he observed while visiting rural pottery workshops. After considering some in Okinawa, he went to Kyushu and found what he was seeking in Koishibara. On return to Canada with still images that would assist planning the film, he re-read Bernard Leach's *A Potter in Japan*, where the author mentioned making films while in Japan and Korea in 1934/35. Later, in England, following the opening of the London Film Festival, he headed straight for St. Ives.



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Making a Film and Creating an Archive

On this, his first visit to Leach's pottery, Gross hoped to discuss his plans for the making of the film on the village potteries and was curious about what Leach had chosen to film while there, some 40 years prior. He thought it could prove interesting to incorporate some Leach footage with his own contemporary imagery. He left with five cans of film. Gross tried various approaches, but decided eventually that Leach's early film did not mesh satisfactorily with the film he was making and *Potters at Work* was better without the insertion of old black-and-white footage. He copied Leach's films onto black-and-white internegative and returned to St. Ives a 1.6 cm (16 mm) print while the original Leach footage was placed into safe storage.

Gross' Mingei Film Archive began from that point as films were heard about or acquired via various means, but it took many years before he generated clear ideas around what to do with them. He simply looked after the films because he thought these vulnerable materials deserved preservation, had value, and would hold significance for the clay community while acknowledging his own fascination for imagery of people making things. We can be grateful that Canadian buildings tend to have capacious basements with even temperatures year round.

Asking Questions and Making Enhancements

As the digital era came about, Gross began to see how the films could be enhanced and rendered accessible to contemporary viewers. There are more than 50 hours of film in Gross' collection of approximately 40 films. They contain traces of the potters' lives and record traditional practices no longer employed.

Most of the films were initially silent and although he began to trial making commentaries, he found them unsatisfactory. The solution turned out to be quite simple, as he learned when, intending to take notes on one of the old films, he met with a pottery owner who had a connection to the places depicted in the film, then listened as they watched the film together. During the film, the potter recalled and spoke about his great-grandfather and grandparents working in that pottery. After this experience, Gross determined that in the future he'd only talk with people who had connections of some sort with the films' locations and processes.

Gross' technique is to ask questions of (often quite elderly) potters who worked and were filmed when young, or if those with firsthand experience cannot be found, then he interviews historians or other experts as they watch the old films. The difficult part is the editing, as the speakers are rarely polished professionals and careful culling and translations must be made for the subtitles. It also means that sometimes the same film can have two quite different commentaries from people involved.

One example of this happened in 2008, when Gross visited Warren MacKenzie in Stillwater, Minnesota. They sat together for a full day viewing, many times, the digitized film of *The Leach Pottery, 1952*, while MacKenzie's recollections of his days at St. Ives were recorded for future editing. At the visit's conclusion, almost as an aside, MacKenzie mentioned that he himself had also made a 1.6 cm (16 mm) film when there in 1950. Gross jumped and learned that this film had barely been shown and was in pristine condition. MacKenzie's film became an extra feature on the DVD



4 Stirring clay in settling tanks. From *Onda*, 1954. 5 Loading the Dai Sei Gama climbing kiln. From *Mashiko Village Pottery*, 1937. 6 Throwing a jar on a hand-turned wheel. From *Hamada Shoji in Mashiko*, 1950. 7 Wrapping platters by Shoji Hamada for shipping to Tokyo. From *How to Wrap a Pot*, *Mashiko*, 1970, edited from the outtakes from *The Art of the Potter* by David Outerbridge and Sidney Reichman.

and borrowers may choose between his or Leach's commentary. There is also now a version in Japanese.

Perhaps one of the most remarkable tales resulted when Gross visited Korea to meet with cultural agencies hoping to locate films of interest. He was aware of Korea's importance to the development of the Mingei movement's theoretical underpinning. While the various sources had nothing suitable to offer, he learned about a 1925 film made by a Benedictine priest called *In the Land of the Morning Calm*, which had a very few brief scenes of pottery making. On viewing, they were so short that Gross could not envisage what might be done. Then, about a year later, he was informed by the Korean Film Archive that they had traced and retrieved the original four hours of 35 mm film from a church archive in Germany. While the Korean Film Archive's staff archivist, with no ceramic experience, had little idea about how to make it into a comprehensible narrative, Gross was happy to show him and the resultant, captivating film offers the entire venerable process of Onggi pottery making.

Marty Gross' Mingei Archive of film, still images, and sound recordings has preserved invaluable material around a significant area of our histories. Eventually Gross hopes to launch a fully searchable database allowing access to all of the archive contents, and on current calculations that is just two or three years away. This access

will contribute much toward an understanding of the Mingei ideals around perceiving the origins of beauty within ordinary and humble, traditional objects of daily use.

Marty Gross divides his time between North America (Toronto, Canada) and Japan. He studied pottery making in Japan in the 1970s and then began film making in 1974 in Toronto and continued later in Japan. He has produced and directed films (As We Are, Potters At Work, The Lovers' Exile), restored archival films on Japanese arts and crafts, and produced documentaries and published books on the history of Japanese cinema. He currently consults for producers and publishers on Japanese film. His company, Marty Gross Film Productions, manages the world's most comprehensive website devoted to DVDs on Japanese cultural and historical subjects. Learn more at www.martygrossfilms.com.

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