

**“Work, Beauty, and the Human Spirit: The Legacy of Brother Thomas
Bezanson.”**

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October 4, 2019

As a child, when I was naughty, my mother would sometimes threaten to kick me “all the way to Halifax.” Although I never dared to ask her exactly where Halifax was, I imagined that it must be a very, very, long way away. Later, after I grew older, I thought it must be an imaginary place, somewhere like Timbuktu. It was only once I was nearly grown that I discovered that both Halifax and Timbuktu were real places, and yes, both were quite far away from my home in suburban Denver. I did not expect that I would someday meet someone who was actually from Halifax, which I’m sure most of you know, is located in the Canadian province of Nova Scotia. That person from Halifax is the subject of my talk tonight, none other than Brother Thomas Bezanson.

I was intrigued to learn that Brother Thomas himself considered his hometown to be a rather “nowhere” place. Despite growing up with little encouragement to pursue art and no role models to speak of, Thomas had a natural attraction to beauty, and quickly developed a passionate drive to create it himself. He often wrote about the saving nature of beauty and its essential role in a healthy human spirit. Moreover, he saw art, science, beauty, and spirituality as all connected, or as a Buddhist might say, all part of the same One. For Thomas, Science was a way to attain Art, Art expressed Beauty, and Beauty led naturally to Spirituality. In more concrete

terms, he sought through his ceramics to 1) explore possibilities (Science), 2) to be well-crafted (Art), 3) to be aesthetically compelling (Beauty), and 4) to uplift the human soul (Spirituality).

Brother Thomas wasn't simply an artist. He once said, "I'm not doing art, I'm doing theology." Moreover, he was an engineer, a chemist a craftsman, and a philosopher. Unlike many artists, he was a meticulous record-keeper. His approach was similar to that of many ceramic artists I know in Japan. Far from the hippy-artists that the general public tends to associate with the pottery profession, Japanese potters are super-organized and intensely focused. Yet their ultimate goal is similar to that of Thomas: to capture what is beautiful, what is good, what is true. To unite and not divide.

Thomas greatly respected utilitarian ware potters such as those of the Mingei Movement – Hamada, Leach, Shimaoka, and others, but he didn't feel the need to follow them technically or methodologically. He had no desire to cast himself in a romanticized "Asian craftsman" mode. This is evident when one looks at Thomas' many tea bowls, some of which can be seen at the Pucker Gallery although none are part of the current exhibition. For a Japanese tea bowl maker, the first criterium is that a bowl must be easy to use in preparing and drinking *matcha* tea. I don't get the feeling that Thomas was particularly passionate about having his bowls actually used. He was more captured by the idea of the tea bowl – a vessel that was used communally by an intimate group of like-minded individuals who were dedicated aficionados of beauty, humanity, and spirituality. After all, the first Christians in Japan, arriving from Europe in the mid-sixteenth century, embraced the practice of sharing a bowl of tea, and the Jesuit Padres even advocated the establishment of tea rooms in their missions to serve *matcha* to visitors.

Brother Thomas also felt a connection through the tea bowl form to Zen Buddhism, which was intrinsic to the development of the tea bowl in Japan. Tea, and the bowls with which to drink it, were introduced to Japan from China at the end of the twelfth century as a way to prevent Zen followers from dozing off during early-morning meditation. Moreover, the practice of drinking tea from the same bowl was eerily reminiscent of the method of administering the sacraments in the Catholic Mass.

The intersections of spirituality and beauty fascinated Thomas, but he was also enthralled by language. He wrote a great deal, and he wrote with erudition and feeling. Although he was quiet and contemplative by nature, he felt a strong impetus to communicate with others, especially with those with whom he felt a kindred spirit. He was able to find the profound in simple things, things that stuck with him about life, work, and meaning. I think his ceramics were his highest form of communication, since they conveyed things that couldn't be spoken. I think they were also a form of prayer – or perhaps offerings to God and mankind – and for that reason he couldn't bear to keep anything that was flawed. In a way, he was the antithesis of the Japanese potter, who celebrated and even emphasized flaws, just so long as they were the right kind of flaws.

Of course, Thomas' glazes were never entirely controlled, only carefully calculated. He understood that the draft blowing through the kiln was akin to the Holy Spirit moving in the congregation; only God can predict what effect will result. Thus, we can consider his glazes to have been truly “inspired.”

It may come as a surprise to some, but Thomas' work was not universally loved and admired. Some have expressed that they thought his work “cold” or too grandiose. Some potters dislike the fact that, although he

made vessels, none of them were really made with function in mind. Some perhaps thought he was putting on airs by continuing to go by Brother Thomas even after he was no longer technically a monk. Some may have been jealous of his abilities, his recognition, and his success.

But such people were somehow unable to recognize that Thomas had a passion and a vision that was not beholden to preconceptions about what a ceramics creator should be or do. As an artist, he certainly did not take the easy way out. Porcelain clay is much more difficult to work with than stoneware clay, particularly in throwing large forms by hand. But porcelain provided a clean palate for his glaze surfaces, so he did it the hard way. In the same way, he was indefatigable in the creation of his endless array of glazes – why should one person need that many glazes?! A mottled glaze will fire differently every time anyway, so just choose a few that work well and use them to establish a signature style – that’s the approach of nearly every studio potter. But Thomas’ approach makes sense if one understands his pots as acts of worship to God and acts of service to his fellow human beings.

Although Brother Thomas was a devout Christian his entire life, in his writings one senses a spirit of openness, not dogmatism. He gives as much credence to Judaism and Zen Buddhism as to Catholicism. He celebrates and embraces what he perceives is truthful and pure, and therefore has no need to question the various names that may be applied to its source. His understanding of spirituality comes from engagement with the spiritual, not from dogmatism or blindly following a set of rules. He understood that the roads to spirituality and creativity both lead from the same Spring of Life.

I was not fortunate to get to know Thomas well, but I did have the opportunity to share a room with him on our trip to Japan in 2000. I found

him at that time to be a quiet and humble man. I rather wish now I had taken the opportunity to engage him more about the topic of ceramics, but we were in the midst of a busy trip and it was clear that he wanted to envelop himself in the experience of simply being in Japan. Japan was an important source of inspiration for Thomas in terms of inspiration for his work, and on that occasion, he was there for the opening of an exhibition of his work at the Green Gallery in Tokyo. I know it meant a lot to him to have his pieces admired and appreciated by people whose culture he himself had admired for many years.

Although Brother Thomas is generally known as a maker of vessel shapes, he did make objects that were not vessels. Perhaps his most original is his series that he referred to as “Eggs.” These pieces must have been extremely difficult to make and fire. He made his Eggs to celebrate the turn of the millennium, around the same time that we journeyed together to Japan. For him the egg represented hope and rebirth. The new book *Tales of Thomas* relates that although Brother Thomas destroyed nearly 90% of the pieces he made because of flaws that occurred during firing, every single Millennial Egg that he fired over a year-and-a-half period emerged from the kiln intact and perfect. Was that coincidence or divine Providence? Thomas might respond that ultimately it doesn’t really matter, so long as we are open to the miracles that happen around us every day. Though he himself is gone, the miracles that Brother Thomas wrought through his decades of working with clay remain to inspire us even now. I hope this little talk has helped you to see his work in a somewhat different light, and if not, you at least have had the opportunity to see a variety of images of his beautiful and inspiring ceramic artworks.