

Distinguished Guests,

Thank you very much for inviting me to this exhibition on Shoji Hamada, a superb potter who had great achievement in the field of pottery both in Japan and in the United Kingdom. It is well known in Japan that he was one of the first recipients of the Living National Treasure award. I am indeed grateful that this exhibition will provide an opportunity for many, including myself, to look afresh at his life and work.

As not few of us remember, his connection to the UK began with his friendship with his fellow potter Bernard Leach. They built the first climbing kiln in the Western world and established the Leach Pottery in St Ives, Cornwall. However, Ditchling was also a very influential place in Hamada's life as a potter.

During his stay in the UK, Hamada visited Ditchling several times and interacted with many talented craftsmen and artists. Hamada experienced simple and healthy rural life here, as well as beautiful countryside in East Sussex, where there was an artist colony influenced by the Arts and Crafts Movement. This experience had a profound influence on his decision to establish a workshop in Mashiko, Tochigi Prefecture, which became the centre of his artistic activities after his return to Japan from the UK in 1924. His creativity and insights about pottery reached new heights there.

Mashiko also played an important role in the Mingei Movement, which aimed to get back to the simpler and more humane values of handcrafted daily necessities that were being forgotten in the course of the rapid industrialisation under way in Japan at the time. As Hamada gained an international reputation with his inspired creations, Mashiko developed into the most prominent pottery centre in Japan, attracting many distinguished artisans who produced some truly wonderful works.

In his later years, Hamada said about his life: "I found my way as a potter in Kyoto, started in the UK and grew up in Mashiko."

The cordial ties Hamada established with the UK are a source of inspiration to us even today as we see burgeoning interaction between Japanese and British potters as well as between the main centres of artistic excellence in our two countries.

I hope that this exhibition will provide an opportunity for many people to enjoy Hamada's breathtaking artistry and to get a sense of the spirit that drove him, thereby helping to strengthen the ties of friendship that have linked our two countries and peoples.

Thank you very much indeed.