Tatsuzo Shimaoka was born near Tokyo of a family of ornamental braid makers. After visiting the Japanese Folk Crafts Museum at age 19, he decided to follow the mingei pottery tradition within the folk arts movement of his time. He studied at the Tokyo Institute of Technology and then served as an officer in Burma until his capture as a prisoner of war. Then from 1946-49, he apprenticed under Shoji Hamada, at the end of which he set up his studio next door to his teacher. Shimaoka said that Hamada taught him that his work was “not to be learned by intellect, but with the body.”

Hamada encouraged his student to develop his own technique, which he did by incorporating his family’s braiding craft along with ancient traditions. Shimaoka went on to develop the Jomon zogan style of pottery based on the 5,000-year-old Jomon rope process and the Korean Yi Dynasty technique of using white slip in decorations. He is also known for his salt glazes and for designing the noborigama kiln with separate chambers for various firing purposes.

Shimaoka’s philosophy was that his pottery was to be useful and humble, that is, “mingei” or a “craft of the people.” Martha W. Longenecker, founder of the Mingei International Museum in San Diego, said of her former teacher: “You can’t make beautiful things unless your character is also that.” Shimaoka frequently lectured in the U.S. and elsewhere and welcomed apprentices and visitors.

Shimaoka’s first exhibit was held in 1950 and his exhibitions went worldwide in the 1970s. He received the distinction of being designated the second “Living National Treasure” of Mashiko, and his work has been collected in museums in the U.S. and Europe, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and the Victoria and Albert Museum in London.