

### **Late-Medieval Influence of the Tea Ceremony on the Pottery of Japan**

“The single greatest impetus to cultural innovation during the Momoyama period was the tea ceremony. The tea ceremony had matured into its most inventive and influential phase, creating a demand for ceramics that were now regarded as works of art” (Moes and Faulkner). “This pottery did not just burst forth from nowhere. It had its roots in the Kamakura and Muromachi periods”, during which times, the tea ceremony was evolving (Kuroda and Murayama). Without a doubt, the tea ceremony of late-medieval Japan was the driving force that took pottery production to new heights and subsequently had a vital influence on the appearance of modern Japanese ceramics.

The Momoyama period saw the peak of pottery production in Japan; thus, this period is hailed the golden age of Japanese ceramics. Regional kilns competed to meet the demands of powerful merchants who ordered tea wares to exact specifications. The wealthy merchant and tea master Sen no Rikyu, followed by his pupil, Furuta Oribe, exhibited great influence over the direction of pottery making during this time. Another of the tea ceremony’s famous adherents, Military Chieftain Toyotomi Hideyoshi, was also instrumental in bringing pottery to the forefront of high culture during the Momoyama period. Hideyoshi’s aggressive Korea campaign, commonly dubbed the “Pottery Wars” or “Tea Bowl Wars”, failed to expand the Japanese empire, but had a lasting impact in the realm of ceramics (Moes and Faulkner). Transplanted Korean potters brought ceramic innovations to Japan. Beginning in the Meiji era amidst modern industrialization, notable Japanese philosophers and eventually the Japanese government came to the rescue of Japan’s important historic pottery centers. As a result, traditional pottery production in Japan continues to flourish by popular demand.

First and importantly, we must examine the evolution of the tea ceremony in Japan as it relates to the development of tea ceramics. The Japanese had drunk tea since the eighth century. However, ceremonial tea drinking did not occur until 1191, when the Buddhist monk Eisai “brought the ritual of drinking matcha, in which powdered green tea is whisked with hot water, back to Japan from China” (Crueger and Itō). Over the next 100 years, Zen monks ritually drank tea to aid in prayer and meditation.

In 1338, under the protection of the new Ashikaga shogunate, Zen Buddhism and its inspired arts, including the tea ceremony, spread from the monasteries to society (Crueger and Itō). Thus, beginning in the Muromachi period, “tea was being drunk ritually and socially outside the monasteries”. Subsequently, “a new elite of the courtly and warrior aristocracy formed, demonstrating wealth and power in sumptuous tea gatherings, where large numbers assembled in luxurious rooms, using precious Chinese tea utensils in lacquer, porcelain and celadon” (Crueger and Itō). If not for the emergence of the tea ceremony in the fourteenth century, the development of pottery in Japan, as in other societies, would have progressed along the lines of storage vessels and simple household wares.

Throughout the Muromachi period, the vogue of the tea ceremony under Ashikaga rule compelled powerful merchants to purchase Chinese imported tea wares (*karamono*). However, following the Ōnin Civil War (1467-1477) and the Century of the Warring States (*sengoku-jida*), the Ashikaga shogunate lost its power to ambitious local feudal rulers (*daimyo*). Consequently, as new castle towns and markets developed, the merchant class gained increased social importance and freedom. Many merchants were adherents of the tea ceremony “or served their feudal lords as tea masters” (Crueger and Itō). Taking into account their newfound powers, these prestigious merchants and tea masters effectively changed the tea ceremony to one with a “simple and restrained aesthetic” (Crueger and Itō).

One of the major changes in the tea ceremony concerned the use of tea bowls or *chawan*. Because the expensive Chinese imports created a problem for the budget-conscious warrior class, merchants turned to Japan's own Seto pottery as a means to meet the warriors' high demand for tea ceramics. Cheaply produced in the Owari and Mino Provinces (Present-day Aichi and Gifu Prefectures, respectively), *setomono* became a popular alternative to *karamono*. Even while lacking the quality of Chinese porcelain, *setomono* seemed right for the time. Distinct from their Chinese counterparts, Seto tea bowls with their undulating rims and softer appearances evoked gentler, more intimate feelings when used. The characteristics of *setomono* significantly lent to another notable change in the tea ceremony, the *wabi*-aesthetic. *Wabi* relates to the concept of material deprivation, which "in the context of the tea ceremony, came to mean the rejection of luxury and a taste for the simple, the understated and the incomplete" (Cooper).

Moving into the Momoyama period, "it was Sen no Rikyu, tea master to both Oda Nobunaga and Toyotomi Hideyoshi, who greatly influenced the development of the tea ceremony. Sen no Rikyu added the concept of *sabi* (the appreciation of used, worn, and even visibly repaired objects) to the *wabi* aesthetic". He commissioned several artisan-potters to produce for his personal taste, suitable wares for the new *wabi-cha* style tea ceremony. Notably, the pottery produced at Sen no Rikyu's behest was the archetypal black *Raku chawan*, created by Chōjirō, head of the Raku family in Kyoto (Kuroda and Murayama).

Sen no Rikyu summed up the essence of *sadō*, (the tea ceremony) in four concepts, "harmony, respect, purity and tranquility". His refinement of the tea ceremony also set firm rules for its setting and its procedure, "which today are the basis of the three great tea schools, Ura Senke, Omote Senke and Mushanokōji Senke" (Crueger and Itō). Rikyu's changes also included a reduction in size of the tearoom and the replacement of ostentatious

décor and utensils with modest ones. Additionally, his new *wabi-cha* tea ceremony “required a number of specific ceramic items, each of distinctive form” (Cooper).

In light of Sen no Rikyu’s philosophies, tea masters placed great importance on selecting fine ceramic tea wares. As a result, artisan-potters gained an elevated status in society and their tea vessels became so highly regarded that “samurai would often select a valuable piece as reward for service” (Cooper). Around this time, Mino’s distinguished *setomono* changed significantly at the behest of prominent tea masters. Furuta Oribe, a cherished pupil of Sen no Rikyu, is credited for the most significant development at the Mino kilns, *Oribe-yaki*.

Following Sen no Rikyu’s death in 1591, Furuta Oribe became the indisputable master of the tea ceremony. Oribe, an accomplished general of the strife-torn Momoyama period, incorporated the rustic spirit of the provincial warrior in his pottery design (Kuroda and Murayama). While Sen no Rikyu’s tastes had instilled a meditative, inward focus expressed by the use of his trademark black tea bowls, Furuta Oribe’s tastes favored tea wares that were “robust, generous, vigorous, and distorted in shape”. Moreover, “to the simple philosophy of drinking tea that Rikyu had taught”, the men of Oribe’s time, “added the pleasures of companionable eating and drinking”.

Thus, in addition to customary tea utensils, new ceramic accompaniments such as serving dishes and sake sets became necessary (Kuroda and Murayama). To produce these things, Oribe commissioned the Mino kilns. *Oribe-yaki* was so fresh and appealing that soon Karatsu, Agano, and Takatori pottery centers all began producing tea wares governed by Oribe’s taste. The burst of creativity exhibited in *Oribe-yaki* answered the demand for new exciting tea wares. At the same time, Oribe’s designs were inspired by a larger cultural renaissance that took place during the Momoyama period. During this cultural renaissance, Japan’s Military Chieftain Toyotomi Hideyoshi, who had succeeded in reunifying Japan after

Oda Nobunaga's demise, promulgated his fanaticism of the tea ceremony in ways that forever changed the realm of ceramics.

Hideyoshi's devotion to the tea ceremony compelled his generals to use their resources to foster pottery production throughout Japan. Ultimately, the lives of Korean potters were affected in the process. In an attempt to distract his forces from rebelling against him, Hideyoshi "sent his armies off on a seemingly foolish venture, the proposed conquest of China by way of Korea". The first invasion of Korea in 1592 failed. The second invasion, "dispatched in 1597 was making little headway when Hideyoshi died of natural causes in Japan, in 1598, where-upon his generals abandoned the attempted conquest and returned to their respective fiefs" (Moes and Faulkner).

"Subsequently dubbed the Pottery Wars or Tea Bowl Wars", Hideyoshi's "invasions of Korea had little lasting impact on Japan except in the realm of ceramics" (Moes and Faulkner). Many of Hideyoshi's feudal lords who played a part in the invasions, abducted whole villages of Korean potters and forced them to work in Japan. Most Koreans settled in Kyushu where they established numerous pottery centers that produced new tea wares suited to Japanese tastes. These transplanted Koreans brought a massive influx of new technical skills and kiln technologies that permanently changed the course of Japanese ceramics (Moes and Faulkner).

During late Momoyama period, "these Korean potters introduced two new types of kilns to Japan", the *waridakegama* and *noborigama*, "constituting the first major advances in kiln design and construction since earlier Korean immigrants had introduced the *anagama* in the fourth/fifth centuries" (Moes and Faulkner). The *noborigama* was quickly adopted by other Japanese pottery centers including those of Mino and Owari Provinces. These innovative Korean kilns churned out tea wares at an unprecedented rate. As a result, fine pottery became accessible to all and competition among regional kilns rose to the extent that the late

Momoyama period saw the peak of pottery production in Japan. Thus, this period is hailed the golden age of Japanese ceramics.

Later, under Tokugawa rule, the Edo period saw Japan enter what was to become more than 200 years of seclusion, during which time, the tea ceremony continued to drive pottery production across the land. Yet, during the first decade of the Meiji era, a massive influx of western culture followed by tireless efforts to imitate it saw the Japanese temporarily disavow their own cultural heritage. “In their eagerness to modernize, the Japanese lost their appreciation for many of the traditions from which their culture had developed” (Harada, Minami, Kitamura, Yagihashi, and Ōtaka 12-36). Suddenly, “traditional artists and craftsmen found little market for their work; many had no choice but to become laborers in factories”; fortunately however, “by the second decade of the Meiji era, a reaction set in” (Moes and Faulkner).

Recognizing the need to preserve Japan’s cultural heritage, Meiji philosopher Okakura Kakuzō, followed later by Yanagi Sōetsu, became a staunch advocate of Japan’s artistic traditions, including the tea ceremony. In their respective times and ways, both men inspired profound adherence to and recognition of Japan’s distinctive arts. Expanding on their efforts, leaders, movements and organizations including Japan’s own government, came to help the Japanese “reconsider their short-lived disregard for their traditional culture” (Harada, Minami, Kitamura, Yagihashi, and Ōtaka). In one inspired example, potter Arakawa Toyozō (1894-1985) discovered the remains of a Momoyama-period Mino kiln in 1930. By studying his findings, “Arakawa reinvented classic Mino ceramic styles of the late sixteenth century. The revival he began continues today” (Moes and Faulkner).

Furthermore, beginning in the 1950’s, the Japanese government put into effect, the “Law for Protection of Cultural Properties”. Under the law’s pretences, selected artisan-craftsmen, important cultural objects and ideas, as well as historically important sites are

financed, protected and promoted. Owing to this modern appreciation and sponsorship, Japan's ancient pottery centers continue to flourish. Today, contemporary artisans employing time-honored methods at these historic pottery centers, create to meet popular *universal* demands for Japanese pottery. Still immensely popular all across Japan are ceramics for the tea ceremony. The qualities observed in the monumental tea wares of late-medieval Japan remain prevalent in the wares created by current artisan-potters, both in the traditional sense of design and in the avant-garde.

Indeed, the tea ceremony of late-medieval Japan was the driving force that took pottery production to new heights and subsequently had a vital influence on the appearance of modern Japanese ceramics. The evolution of the tea ceremony in Japan from the Kamakura period up through the Momoyama period saw its burgeoning popularity amidst cultural renaissances and political changes. Tea masters Sen no Rikyu and Furuta Oribe forever changed the face of pottery along with the tea ceremony, into the familiar forms recognized today. Hideyoshi's fanaticism saw to the expansion of pottery centers throughout Japan and the advent of new Korean kiln technologies. From the golden age of pottery, through times of threatening industrialization and into Japan's respective modern age, the tea ceremony and the ceramics it inspires have always engaged Japanese audiences. Moreover, these glorious aspects of Japan's traditional culture flourish today and receive appreciation at unprecedented universal levels.

## Works Cited

Cooper, Emmanuel. ***Ten Thousand Years of Pottery***. 4th. University of Pennsylvania Press. Philadelphia, PA. 2000. 77-80. Print.

Crueger, Wulf, and Saeko Itō. ***Modern Japanese Ceramics***. Lark Books (NC), 2007. 14-15. Print.

Harada, Hiroshi, Kunio Minami, Tetsuro Kitamura, Shin Yagihashi, and Mikio Ōtaka. ***Living National Treasures of Japan***. 1st ed. Tokyo: Committee of the Exhibition of Living National Treasures of Japan, 1982. 12-36. Print.

Kuroda, Ryōji and Takeshi Murayama. ***Classic Stoneware of Japan: Shino and Oribe***. Kodansha-Int'l Tokyo, 2002. 12-13 Print.

Moes, Robert. ***Quiet Beauty: Fifty Centuries of Japanese Folk Ceramics from the Montgomery Collection***. 1st. Alexandria, VA: Art Services International, 2003. 62. Print.