

# The Unique Qualities of Ceramics in Japan: A Comparison with China

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### Profile

Atsushi Imai was born in Tokyo in 1961 and earned his Masters in the History of Art from the Faculty of Letters, Tokyo University. His past positions at the Tokyo National Museum and Agency for Cultural Affairs are as follows: Ceramics Section, Decorative Arts Division, Tokyo National Museum (TNM); Chinese Arts Section, East Asia Division, TNM; Senior Researcher, East Asia Division, TNM; Senior Manager, Northeast Asia Section, TNM; Curator, Collections Section, Collections Management Division, TNM; Senior Manager, Special Exhibitions Section, Programs Planning Division, TNM; Senior Manager, Regular Exhibitions Section, Exhibitions Division, TNM; Senior Manager, East Asian Section, Research Division, TNM; Supervisor, Education Division, TNM; and Senior Cultural Properties Specialist, Art/Curation Division, Agency for Cultural Affairs.

As a specialist of the history of East Asian ceramics, Atsushi Imai has curated a number of exhibitions including *JIXIANG: Auspicious Motifs in Chinese Art* (1998) and *SOMETSUKE: The Flourishing of Underglaze Blue Porcelain Ware in Asia* (2009). His books and academic articles include: *Chinese Ceramics, Vol. 4: CELADONS*, Heibonsha, 1997; "Ma Huang Ban: The Celadon Teacup Handed down East to Japan." *Dong Fang Bo Wu*, Vol. 3, 1999; and "Design of Chinese Ceramics and Their Hidden Meanings." *Toyo Toji* (Oriental Ceramics), Vol. 29, 2000.

Almost all the fundamental technologies used in ceramic production, including kilns, potter's wheels and glazes, were introduced to Japan from China via Korea. The import of Chinese ceramics also thrived from the Heian period onwards. These were highly prized in Japan and they had a huge influence on Japanese ceramic design. However, Japanese ceramics are not simply copies of their Chinese counterparts.

From the Song dynasty, China was ruled by cultured scholar-bureaucrats, with the emperor at the apex. The social and cultural strata were essentially congruent and there was a clear division between the cultural accomplishments of these scholar-bureaucrats (poetry, calligraphy and painting) and the decorative arts produced by craftsmen. Ceramics produced at official kilns for the imperial court were considered to be the best. There was a shared concept of ideal beauty, with production technology progressing in one direction and standards and specifications strictly followed. This left little room for individual artistic expression. These characteristics are clearly on display in the development from the primitive celadon of the Shang dynasty (Fig. 1) to the celadon produced at the official kilns of the Southern Song dynasty. They are also prominent in the increasing refinement and complexity of the painting techniques used at the official kilns of the Ming and Qing dynasties (Fig. 2).

In contrast, culture in Japan from the Kamakura period was more pluralistic, with the cultural elite comprised of members of the warrior class, aristocrats, and even townspeople who had grown rich through commerce and industry. Cultural strata were not clearly demarcated, with the division between fine arts and decorative arts also vague.

Raku tea bowls were created by the potter Chojiro based on the ideas of the tea mas-

ter Sen no Rikyu. Chojiro eschewed the potter's wheel in favour of sculpting by hand, with the bowls then fired in small indoor kilns. The roots of this technology trace back to the three-color glaze ceramics produced in Fujian in southern China, but Chojiro stripped away all the decorative and contrived aspects to create his Raku bowls (Fig. 3). Donyu, a third-generation Raku family potter, then made some bold changes. His Raku tea bowls were lighter, brighter and imbued with a novel decorativeness (Fig. 4). In other words, in Raku tea bowls there is no binary opposition between contrived and random, plain or decorated, or between traditional and avant-garde.

Ogata Kenzan was born in Kyoto as the third son of a rich merchant. He was also the older brother of the painter Korin. One of Kenzan's representative works is a square plate featuring a painting by Korin (Fig. 5). These collaborative items are more for appreciation than practical use. They are more akin to paintings in ceramic form than vessels decorated with pictures. With them, Kenzan created a new style of ceramic art. The Rinpa school incorporated flat depictions and a sense of decorativeness into their paintings, so these could be classed as a type of decorative art. At the same time, Kenzan's ceramics could be described as a type of painting. Put simply, Kenzan's art flourished in the region between the Western and Chinese classifications of "fine art" and "decorative art."

Hon'ami Koetsu turned tea bowl production into a sublime form of individual artist expression. He ignored convention to freely create bowls for connoisseurs to enjoy (Fig. 6). This poses a question about whether the relation between Koetsu and the Raku family is a hierarchical one between amateur and professional, artist and craftsman. Tea bowl makers like the Raku family were protecting the standards of tea bowls rather than any particular form. As a calligrapher from a family of sword connoisseurs, meanwhile, Koetsu was keenly interested in the form of tea bowls and he studied this topic deeply. As such, it would be a mistake to simply suppose that Koetsu's tea bowls are held in such high regard because they are the free-wheeling work of an amateur.

I believe the difference between Chinese and Japanese ceramics is not a matter of superiority and inferiority. If Chinese culture can be likened to a pyramid with its clearly delineated strata, then Japanese culture can perhaps be likened to a Möbius strip, where artistic achievements emerge from the front, the back, and from the interplay between the two. While sitting alongside China and learning from its hugely powerful and universal culture, Japan has developed the wisdom to retain its own identity without slavishly copying its larger neighbour.

Moreover, the Japanese and Chinese people view and appreciate Chinese ceramics in a different way. Japanese people consider the activities of both official and private kilns when trying to capture the spirit of each age. One may ask whether there can be an objective and absolute idea about culture. One may also say the views and ideas of the Japanese people about Japanese art are not absolute either.