A Snapshot of Japanese Ceramics

Japanese Ceramics

Ceramics can be broadly classified as earthenware, stoneware, and porcelain. Japan is unusual in the world in that low-technology ceramics continue to be produced alongside high-technology wares in equal measure.

Prehistoric Jomon period ceramics are classified as earthenware, namely low-tech porous vessels that are fired to 800 degrees centigrade. Raku ware, *dobin*, and other contemporary ceramics are also classified as earthenware (*doki*).

Stoneware, the heart of Japanese ceramic heritage, refers to high-fired ceramics that are semi-vitreous (hold liquid) and are fired from a range of 1100-1300 degrees Celsius in a kiln. Japan rather unusually further separates stoneware into further categories as well.

Lastly, porcelain is a high-technology ware that needs specific materials and advanced kiln technology to make the vessels fully vitrified. The temperatures need to be sustained at approximately 1230 degrees or slightly higher and fired in a linked chamber climbing kiln.

Porcelain kilns, unlike stoneware kilns, are resource-dependent. They require copious amounts of red pine to stoke the high temperature, large climbing kilns, as well and a steady supply of water to transport the materials, process the porcelain stone, and ship out the finished products. They also need mountainsides with the right angles to place the kilns, and most importantly, they need access to porcelain stone. Porcelain is made from 3 ingredients, kaolin, petuntse, and feldspar in a particular ratio. While China discovered this formula in the Tang period and Korea in the Goryeo period, Japan only discovered the source material in the early 1600s. Still, that was earlier than Europe, which discovered porcelain manufacturing in the early 18th century at what was to become the Meissen kilns.

Ceramics in Kyushu: A History of International Exchange

Japanese ceramics has been heavily influenced by inter-cultural dialogue and exchange, and its history can be broadly categorized into four significant technological waves. The first was during the Yayoi period when high-fired ceramics found their way to Northwestern Kyushu from the Korean peninsula. The second wave was during the Heian period when more advanced technologies, including glazes, were once again introduced from the continent. The third wave, possibly the most compelling, took place during the early modern period to the early Tokugawa period (late 16th-early 17th century) when Japan was busy reinventing itself through three military rulers, two painful invasions of the Korean Peninsula, and redistribution of land, regulations, protocols and wealth. The fourth was during the early Meiji era when new international markets and technologies became available to Japan for the first time.

Northwest Kyushu, particularly the present-day regions of Saga, Nagasaki, and Fukuoka was an area that prominently benefitted from the 1st, 3rd, and 4th waves.

Chin Jukan XV

The ceramic master Chin Jukan XV is the living embodiment of this technological transfer that has been used to great effect. His kiln in Kagoshima can also be traced back to the same origins from the aftermath of Hideyoshi's invasions of the Korean Peninsula, but under the Satsuma clan, it followed a different trajectory during the Edo period. Chin Jukan the XIII, XIV, and XV have reinvented their style of Satsuma ware that reflect its Korean origins and Edo period style. Currently, under Chin Jukan XV's careful guidance, he preserves the past while creating meticulously crafted stoneware that is truly beautiful.

Earlier this year, Asia Society Japan had the privilege of hosting the screening of "Chawanya no Hanashi – 400 nen no Tabibito," a documentary celebrating the legacy of the Chin Jukan family, symbolizing the cultural bonds between the two nations.

Karatsu

Karatsu, located in Saga, is ground zero for a new style of stoneware coming over to Kyushu in the wake of Hideyoshi's invasions of the Korean Peninsula. The Nakazato family of potters in Karatsu trace their ancestors to these origins in the late 16th century when the Karatsu kilns flourished making Korean-style stoneware ceramics for daily use and tea gatherings. More recently, the Nakazatos such as Nakazato Hanako, have diversified and are creating their own styles to suit contemporary dining and lifestyles.

Arita

Arita in the Saga domain was at the epicenter of porcelain production in Japan from the 1610s until the 19th century when it was forced to share its porcelain crown with the Seto-Mino area kilns and other smaller porcelain kilns set up throughout Japan.

Intriguingly, Izumiyama in Arita, where the first porcelain stone was discovered, was found to contain all three necessary ingredients but at varying ratios. This meant that the stone had to go through a long variegation process and needed to be carefully mined to avoid excessive iron, which would mar the desired white body for the ware. Initially, Arita area kilns made simple porcelain wares for internal use and some early export to SE Asia. However, in 1636, when Deshima Island was created to contain Westerners in nearby Nagasaki, the Nabeshima clan, daimyo of Saga domain, ramped up and placed the porcelain production in Arita under domain control. In 1637 the domain required licenses (fuda) for all aspects of the porcelain industry and set up control gates to regulate access to Arita. The Nabeshima, who were made co-magistrates for this government-controlled sole international port of Nagasaki, were clearly trying to compete with international markets and export their porcelain from Nagasaki.

The domain arranged Arita into inner and outer sections. The Inner restricted section (Uchiyama) housed the Imaizumi Imaemon workshop that created decorated porcelain for exclusive, domestic use by the daimyo and shogun. The outer kilns (Sotoyama) were less controlled. The Kakiemon kilns flourished under the Sakaida Kakeimon family in the Sotoyama creating at one point the style that Queen Mary II of Holland and England made popular with bright overglaze colours that took Europe by storm from 1660-90s. The 18th century saw a reduction in high-level exports and an increased focus on domestic use. The Imaemon family began to specialize in Nabeshima ware, works that were never for sale in the Edo periods and destined only for Shogunal and Daimyo use, while the Kakiemon kilns continued to be inventive mostly for the domestic markets.

Meiji to the Present

With the Meiji era and the rise of international expositions, Arita once again found fame internationally. Spurred by their success at the Vienna world expositions, the first such event in which the Meiji Government officially participated, prominent ceramic producers of Arita formed the first organized companies that produced porcelain. These companies that originally rose to the fore and are still located in the Uchiyama of Arita, namely Koransha and Fukagawa Seiji.

Their tradition continues, as many brilliant potters are working with porcelain in both the uchiyama and sotoyama areas to this day. Shomura Ken and his son Hisashi are one example of excellence in pottering and mastery of glaze coloration.

Kyushu Ceramic Museum

The Kyushu Ceramic Museum was created by Saga Prefecture and the archaeologist professor Ohashi Koji. It is currently directed by the charismatic art historian Suzuta Yukio. It is the preeminent ceramic museum in Japan and is located between the Uchiyama and Sotoyama areas of Arita.