

## Essay

**Toni Warburton focuses on themes of spring and summer in Japanese 17<sup>th</sup> Edo period ceramics in her response to the ceramics in the exhibition *Seasons* at the Art Gallery of NSW in 2003.**

First published as *Seasons exhibition of Japanese Ceramics*. Pottery in Australia 43/1 Apr 2004; p24  
(Adapted from Toni Warburton's floor talk in 2003 at the Art Gallery of NSW and revised June 2013)

Some remarkable Japanese ceramics from the seventeenth century Edo period, including Ko Kutani and Nabeshima ware and work by the artist potters Ninsei and Kenzan were showcased in the exhibition, *Seasons The Beauty of Transience in Japanese Art* held at the Art Gallery of NSW last year. This discussion is adapted from my floor talk about the ceramics in the spring /summer phase of the exhibition. It begins and concludes with a line of twelve square dishes by Ogata Kenzan, that functioned metaphorically and physically as the spine of the exhibition. Located in the center of the central gallery, and the most recent of the ceramics included, they eloquently invoked the notion of transience, an important theme in the screens, kimonos, lacquer work and ceramics displayed.

Six of the dishes frame spring and summer motifs, another six are upturned like tablets to reveal poems in calligraphy from Kenzan's brush. This sequence was later to be reversed for the second half of the exhibition depicting autumn and winter. The poems are from a book compiled by the Poet Tako in the 12<sup>th</sup> Century. Although not a specific poem from the back of the dishes, this translation of a poem from Tako's book sets the mood.

*Spring has come before the years turning*

*Should I speak now of the old year, or call this the new year?*

There is often ambivalence about when a seasonal event is actually celebrated in Japan because the lunar and the solar calendars are slightly different. Kenzan's dish for January

depicts the warbler and the willow sprouting when upturned, the design for December depicts plum blossom flowering at the end of winter.

Kenzan's talents as a calligrapher and his interest in poetry inspire us to cross a bridge into the literature gallery to admire the fluid calligraphy and concise images on scrolls and screens. On a folding screen, we look down into the rooms of a pavilion where aristocrats in voluminous kimonos are brought ceramic incense containers of varied shapes on lacquered trays. The connoisseurship of a particular type of incense is at stake in this scene from *The Tales of Genji*.

Typical of the ornate textiles of the Momoyama and Edo periods, a Kimono embroidered in gold brocade and vibrant colours has bright green sprouting pine motifs bursting forth from a dark background to signify the beginning of spring. Following the season of spring we cross the bridge to the ceramics gallery to admire the same auspicious spiky pine motif painted in green and red enamel on a large jar glazed in glossy black by Ninsei. Shaped like a small caddy for powdered green tea that you could hold in the palm of your hand, this handsome jar has been enlarged for painting. The base is left exposed and raw like the ground of the bank of a river, a 'borrowed view' from below.

Born into a family of jar makers at Tamba, potters of large rustic vessels with austere wood fired surfaces, Ninsei was also an apprentice and studied at Seto and developed his skill as a painter in enamels on ceramics. His designs were informed by the beautiful embroidered textiles of the day. Ceramic decorators in enamels referred to the 'brocade style' and the 'gold brocade style'.

Ninsei distinguished himself with glossy black and brilliant white glazes that he used as grounds for enamels in bright reds and greens and later combined with gold leaf. A

second jar is even more like lacquer ware in the manner of the gold leaf being sprinkled onto the surface. Ninsei was a master potter on every level as well as a monk. His work was sought after by tea masters and for use in temple rituals

The drama of Ninsei's rich enamel colours and robust forms, contrasts with a cool white porcelain dish of Nabeshima ware, painted in under glaze cobalt blue (gossu). A zigzag design depicts a ramp crossing a stream through reeds, a motif that also occurs on kimonos. Drops and lines of gold lacquer repairs at the rim of the bowl speak of its value.

As we move from spring to summer we encounter an Edo period luncheon box. A wonderful stacked composition of oblong trays in black lacquer ornamented with gold and silver linear motifs of nets and flowing water to cool the eye at a summer picnic. Perhaps like the picnic that Kenzan's brother the painter Ogata Korin attended with a group of artist chums on the banks of the Samo River. It amused the sophisticated Kyoto townsmen to play urban opulence against the rustic restraint of tea taste, to apply gold leaf to the simple earthenware vessels of Shinto ritual. Korin wrapped his picnic fare in banana leaves that had been lined with a thin layer of gold leaf, consumed his lunch and tossed the gilded leaves nonchalantly into the river to glisten and drift like carp.

An exquisite black lacquer saddle inlaid with hydrangeas in mother of pearl belonged to the Nabeshima clan and is a key to the refinement of the porcelain produced in the kilns established by this samurai warrior clan. They employed Korean potters and a family of decorators to make ware for the exclusive use of the clan or for gifts. It was not until the Meiji restoration in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century that Nabeshima ware was exported from Japan. A complete set of five dishes is finely painted with a design of a gnarled pine in under glaze blue with details in green enamel and Kikieamon red. Adapted from a pattern book, the design is so well known by the decorators, that on each dish we perceive variations of the

kind that occur in nature, a branch shifts, a clump of pine needles sprouts from a different place.

Often in ceramics history, there are intrigues and debates about where and how certain pieces were made. A wine ewer with smoky blue under glaze blue on the arched handle is also decorated with polychrome peony flowers in the style known as *Ko Kutani* or Old Kutani. Was *Kutani* ware all made and exported from Arita? Porcelain clay has been found in a gold mine in Kanazawa, a princely state and centre of gold leaf production in North West Japan. *Could Ko Kutani ware have been produced entirely in Kanazawa, or were porcelain blanks sent there for decorating only?*

The wonderful polychrome palette of *Ko Kutani* reminds me of British 19<sup>th</sup> century Minton ware and the opulent glazes used by 17<sup>th</sup> Century French potter, Bernard Palissey on his 'rustic basins'. However the *Ko Kutani* glazes seem even richer, more opulent: green, aubergene purple, under glaze cobalt blue (gossu), Persian turquoise blue imported by the Dutch East India Company, yellow and small touches of Kikieamon blood red.

Technically and stylistically both eclectic and idiosyncratic, the Kutani colours are not exactly enamels and, except for the cobalt, not under glaze. They are closer to Japanese raku glazes mixed with seaweed gum and masterfully painted onto glazed white porcelain which increases the brilliance of the colour. The precision, clarity and control characteristic of an enamel melt are forsaken for the remarkable depth and translucency of ceramic glaze pigment and its corresponding boldness of design. A Kimono lavishly embroidered in purple, green, pale yellow with shibori tie die patterns echoes the painterly fluidity of Kutani decoration

Kenzan and Korin were born into a wealthy Kyoto family. Their father was a money lender and they had the income to set themselves up to practice the arts and crafts. Without

having to do large production runs, they had the freedom to explore their own ideas. A series of fires in Kyoto had promoted a demand for textiles in a hurry. This demand had an impact on the boldness of the designs and the paste resist and stenciling techniques that were employed.

A light summer kimono is stencil printed with festive garlands of ribbons and flowers and an image of a tub of water placed outside to reflect the stars and. Crisp outlines, solid matt colours and the fine woven texture of the fine ramie fabric combine to create a mood of an embodied moment on a summer evening.

Ogata Korin was a member of the Rimpa School of painting. Rimpa artists specialized in the decorative painting of objects: the design and execution of beautiful motifs for textiles, lacquer ware and ceramics. This was a time when Japan was closed to the west. Many industries were established and there was a demand for ceramics for temple rituals, for tea ceremony and for everyday use.

Kenzan originally set himself up as a scholarly recluse. He went and lived in the mountains outside Kyoto and mediated and practiced Zen. He befriended Ninsei and when Kenzan and his brother Korin were working in Kyoto, Korin worked with Kenzan to paint textiles and ceramics.

Ninsei is the first Japanese potter to be considered an independent artist potter. Ninsei wrote down his recipes and techniques in a notebook. He presented this book to Kenzan in 1699. Kenzan wrote his own notes in red ink, incorporated the notes of Makubai a potter employed by Kenzan who was expert in the low temperature technique of Raku and in a third section wrote down his own techniques. Kenzan's twelve dishes of the seasons are dated 1702 a time when Ninsei, Kenzan and Korin all worked in Kyoto. As an urban potter, Kenzan did not necessarily make his own pots but had access to blanks. He could

buy his pigments in the market. When he lost his own kiln he then had his work fired by kiln masters.

Recent research about Kenzan by Richard L. Wilson, a scholar, potter and archeologist sheds new light on Bernard Leach's relationship to the tradition. Wilson's translation of the two pottery manuals that Kenzan wrote in 1717 has brought new knowledge to the authenticity and context of Kenzan's work.

In a Ninsei piece the decoration in enamel colours is beaded up onto the surface which is very rich and layered, like embroidery on woven, died and painted textiles. When we return to the Kenzan plates we can see that there is something altogether different going on. Whilst Kenzan's approach was eclectic like Ninsei and the Ko Kutani painters, he is drawing on different aesthetic contexts to create a new synthesis. The dishes are like sheets of paper used for writing poetic dedications. They are also like small wooden dishes used in the kaiseki meal in which seasonal food is served as part of the tea ceremony. There are design allusions to paper, to calligraphy and poetry, to tea ceremony and to the cycles of nature. The stamped blue and white borders on the sides of the plates are adapted from Delft ware exported via Nagasaki by the Dutch East India Company.

A master calligrapher, Kenzan experimented to get a pigment for calligraphy on ceramic that would retain its blackness after firing. His recipe of crude cobalt containing manganese and iron and iron scale mixed with seaweed glue for fluid application was closer to a recipe for sumi calligraphy ink than a traditional ceramic pigment.

Kenzan said that the biggest contribution that his kilns made was the white slip. He obtained the clay for it from a china clay used to whiten paper. Kenzan loved the staining

of the paste resist, stencil printed textiles and the absorbent papers used by the painters of the Rimpa School to create delicate washes. He didn't like the way that enamel colours sat on the glaze surface so he painted them onto the white chalky ground and then applied a low temperature clear glaze so as to integrate the surface and the design. He devised a fragile aesthetic nuance. His light, immediate gestures, ephemeral, yet fired and permanently locked into the ceramic material are ciphers of moments in 1702.

In the late 1960s, as a young student, I saw photographs of Kenzan's work in a book borrowed from Manly Library. His work alerted me to this magical paradox of transient subject and permanent, yet fragile object and inspired me to work with painted ceramics. On Kenzan's twelve tangible square plates, the transience of the sounds of poems and birdsong and the colours and perfumes of flowers signify the cycles of the seasons and inspire continual renewal.

© Toni Warburton 2013

### ***References***

Wilson, Richard L. *The Art of Ogata Kenzan: Persona and Production in Japanese Ceramics*, published by Weatheral, New York Tokyo 1991

Wilson, Richard L. *The Potter's Brush, The Kenzan Style in Japanese Ceramics*, published Merrell to accompany the exhibition at the Freer Gallery of Art, Arthur M. Sackler Gallery Smithsonian Institute, Washington 2001