

# Raku Ceramics as a Metaphor for Tradition: Handmade Culture and the Dilemma of Modern Connoisseurship

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## Introduction

The Japanese literature on Raku ceramics has tended to focus on individual potters in the official Raku lineage, with particular emphasis on those men deemed extraordinary examples of the post-Enlightenment era ideal of the artist. The immediate social and cultural context for Raku production and consumption in different historical periods has been almost completely effaced, with the unfortunate result that we know next to nothing about how and why Raku actually survived four hundred years of tumultuous history. The simple conclusion that Raku ceramics have continued to be made and collected because of their innate beauty tells us nothing about the operation of tradition in either the past or the present. This essay therefore explores two fundamental characteristics of Raku ceramics—their handmade quality and their relationship with Kyoto—to better understand how the tradition is embedded in specific social and cultural contexts. It concludes by briefly critiquing the postwar connoisseurship of Raku ceramics and offering a speculative glimpse at the implications of this critique for the future of traditional forms of artistic production.

## Raku as “Handmade Culture”

Philip Fisher, a scholar of literature who has also turned his critical gaze on the objectification of art, is one of the most articulate commentators on the particularly fraught position occupied by works housed in modern museums. Art objects such as Raku ceramics “slip from one set of practices to another, from one social world and set of purposes to another” (Fisher, *Making and Effacing Art*, 1991). This essay takes a cue from Fisher by focusing on the shifting “social worlds” in which people produced, consumed, and valued Raku ceramics. The basic argument is that the simplicity of the historical narratives of Raku ceramics, like the seeming simplicity of how Raku ceramics are made, is a carefully crafted façade. The role of patrons

and consumers in the production process, the social and economic struggles of the potters and their competitors, the publication of unauthorized secret manuals and connoisseurship guides, and the gradual dissemination of the technique to workshops across the country all contributed to the development of the culture of Raku. Also key were the recurring attempts of the Raku potters and their close allies, the Sen tea masters, to justify their proprietorship over the practice of their particular arts. From the late sixteenth century to the present day, representatives of these traditions have been engaged in a constant process of writing and rewriting the boundaries of their own histories, defining what is and is not authentic practice, and editing the material and textual legacies that have formed the core body of culture passed from one generation to the next. Raku can be read as a metaphor for tradition because the carefully handcrafted quality of the ceramics reminds us of the “constructedness” of tradition itself.

To explore this metaphor a bit more fully, let us briefly review the process of Raku production. First the Raku potter forms a slab of thick clay into a rough cylinder, then allows it to dry to leather hardness. Next the potter scrapes and carves the walls of the bowl with an assortment of metal tools. The potter then glazes the tea bowl, using a solution containing a lead frit (a fluxing agent that lowers the melting temperature of the mix) and ground Kamo river stone. The potter then fires the piece in a small updraft kiln (*uchigama*), removing it with a pair of iron tongs when it glows red with heat.

The process of making Raku ware is well known among art historians and potters, but it is worth noting that in the sixteenth century, when this technique ostensibly originated, most potters in East Asia made ceramics not by hand-building but using a hand- or kick-wheel. The process of carving pieces individually by hand was time consuming. The wheel was a far more efficient means of using labor and resources to make cylindrical forms. It provided the potter with speed and control, and added structural integrity to the finished piece. Japanese potters had been using the wheel since the design was imported in prehistoric times. The small, indoor, updraft kiln was likewise technologically anachronistic considering the range of advanced kiln technologies that had also been imported from the continent. The small indoor kilns used for Raku could only take one piece per firing (some may have had room for several, at the most), making large-scale production impossible. Structurally, the resulting low temperature ceramics were weaker than their high temperature

counterparts and were not water-tight.

The fact that potters began to make these hand-built, low-temperature, lead-glazed ceramics in the competitive marketplace of the sixteenth century and have continued to do so for more than four hundred years is remarkable and should not be assumed to be a natural process. We can identify two distinct rationales based on the particular needs and tastes of early modern tea practitioners. First, Raku tea bowls are pleasant to hold even when filled with hot liquid. Because they are less vitrified, low temperature ceramics conduct heat less efficiently than high temperature wares. Second, the very inefficiency of the hand-building and carving process forced the potter to constantly manipulate the bowl in his or her hands. This meant that the potter was unusually sensitive to how the bowl would fit and feel in the palm of a tea practitioner. Even today, many tea practitioners claim that Raku tea bowls produce the most pleasant tactile sensation of any tea ceramic. The rarefied aura created by Raku's handmade quality was one of the most important factors in its survival in the competitive ceramic marketplace of early modern Japan. The point of both of these characteristics is that they represent an opportunity for unusually close collaboration between the producer and the consumer, in other words the Raku potter and the tea practitioner who would use these ceramics in the context of the tea gathering. The close collaboration between these two groups not only in the production of Raku ceramics but also the production of narratives of tea and Raku history represents an unusually clear example of how tradition is made and maintained over time.

### **Local Culture: Raku and Kyoto**

In the typical narratives of Raku history that have dominated the secondary literature, the encounter between Chōjirō, the founder of the Raku lineage, and Sen no Rikyū, the founder of the Sen lineage(s), was providential, a titanic meeting between two *avant garde* geniuses who would change the face of tea, ceramics, and Japanese culture forever. This approach to understanding history does not pay particular attention to issues such as socioeconomic means or local geography, but recent research in archaeology indicates that the emergence of the Raku tradition in Kyoto was neither foreordained nor happenstance, but rather connected in complicated ways to the particular cultural landscape of the city at a key moment of social, economic, and political transition.

A host of archaeological evidence points to a surge of interest in low-temperature,

lead-glazed ceramics in Kyoto during the late sixteenth century. It appears that multiple low temperature kilns were collaborating with tea practitioner consumers of ceramics in the creation of new designs, some of which may have been used as templates or models for large-scale production at regional high temperature kilns such as those in Seto/Mino. While excavations of consumer sites elsewhere in Japan have also produced ample evidence that these early low-temperature, lead-glazed ceramics were circulating widely and perhaps even were being made outside of Kyoto, all signs indicate that it was only in the capital city that the technique took on a life of its own as a kind of niche ware with particular appeal for certain consumers of ceramics. Richard Wilson called attention to the role of the elite townspeople of Kyoto as designers in his 1991 study of Ogata Kenzan. It seems that a similar process occurred in the relationship between the Raku workshop and elite Kyoto tea practitioners, who acted as **designers**, as clients, and in some cases, as outright benefactors.

In the early to mid-seventeenth century, for example, the Raku potters survived particularly difficult times largely due to the patronage of two important Kyoto families: the Hon'ami, and the Ogata. Both were financially well-off, socially well-connected, and culturally sophisticated as only members of the Kyoto elite could be. Hon'ami Kōetsu, the now iconic “artist” known for his works in numerous media and genres, experimented with carving his own Raku tea bowls. His affection for Raku seems to have stemmed from the relative simplicity of the technique, on the one hand, and from the intimacy of the contact with the materials through the production process on the other. He set a precedent for later tea practitioners, including the influential leaders of the growing tea schools, of making tea bowls as physical vehicles for one's own sense of style, known in the idiom of tea as *suki* or taste. When the *iemoto* of the Sen schools began to mimic Kōetsu in the production of their own quirky tea bowls in the late seventeenth century, and with even more enthusiasm in the early eighteenth century, the success of the Raku lineage was virtually guaranteed. The Ogata or Kariganeya house provided a much more tangible form of support when they allowed the fourth generation head of the Raku house to adopt one of their sons as heir, and provided a parcel of land for the relocation of the Raku workshop.

The key to the long-term success of Raku (not just in Kyoto but eventually throughout Japan) was not the support of wealthy artisan and merchant houses,

however, but the fortunate fact that the city was home to the grandsons and disciples of Sen no Rikyū, the tea master whose followers would transform his title into a kind of talismanic brand name over the course of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Kyoto, as the site of Rikyū's most famous performances as tea master and aesthetic martyr, was inextricably linked to the very idea of the Sen style of tea, and tangentially, to the idea of Raku ceramics. Less than the authenticity of the relationship between Rikyū and Chōjirō, it was the value of the legend of their association as a kind of cultural capital that sustained the growing influence and fame of the Raku lineage of potters among the expanding legions of Sen school tea disciples.

The spread of Raku occurred along two paths in the eighteenth century in particular. First, the tea schools themselves began to establish standards for both instruction in the procedures of tea and in the consumption and collection of tea utensils. The tastes of the patriarch of the school (the *iemoto*) became norms to be reproduced by followers throughout the organization. Because the story of Rikyū's patronage of Chōjirō was by this point part of the standard Rikyū hagiography, Sen tea masters ritualistically commissioned ceramics from the Raku workshop for their own use and for their disciples, and also made their own eccentric but totemic pieces in the fashion established by Hon'ami Kōetsu. Concomitant to this, Raku entered the thriving world of eighteenth-century Japanese books, with the workshop appearing in guidebooks to Kyoto, the famous tea bowls of the past in connoisseurial and copybook guides, and the technique itself receiving a thorough explanatory treatment in a comprehensive technical guide printed and widely distributed in 1736. By the end of the eighteenth century, as a result of both a widespread growth in demand for Raku ceramics from *iemoto* tea practitioners and the availability of reliable knowledge about the types of ceramics and production techniques among potters and ceramic hobbyists, Raku kilns sprouted up across the archipelago. Raku studios and kilns could be found in the palatial gardens of warlords, in the back yards of restaurateurs, in the studies of monks and in the workshops of already successful professional potters. In the course of two centuries, Raku had grown from a localized niche ware to a national tradition.

### **Modernity and Connoisseurship**

The dissemination of the Raku technique and name across the Japanese archipelago in the eighteenth century did not, however, protect the tradition from the vagaries

of cultural change. With the fall in 1868 of the Tokugawa shogunate and the status system that maintained it, the foundations of support for the tea schools collapsed. The Sen tea schools, as well as the various artistic workshops they patronized, had to reinvent themselves to survive the deluge of imported, post-Enlightenment notions about cultural value and artistic beauty. The result is a particularly dangerous bifurcation in traditional arts such as tea ceramics that continues to haunt makers, unfortunately, to the present day.

To put the problem very simply, Raku had traditionally been understood as a community endeavor made by a family of potters and a host of different tea practitioners who literally stepped into the studio to try their hand at making pots. Reproduction, or the production of copies of famous pieces from previous generations, was the most common method for making new pots, and thus the close association between individual artists and individual objects was essentially nonexistent. Instead, it was the *suki* or taste of those being copied and those involved in the making (both potters and tea practitioner consumers) that gave a pot, or a series of pots, value. Chōjirō and Rikyū were valued not as autonomous actors creating art in an aesthetic vacuum, but as forefathers to be literally and figuratively worshipped as members of a familial and *iemoto* community that included deceased ancestors.

According to post-Enlightenment ideas about art, however, value could only be found in the artistic production of individuals who diverged from the trends of the day to innovate and make new beauty through a metaphysical creative process. Real artists were cutting-edge geniuses who did not respond to the instrumental needs of consumers or collectors but instead followed an inner artistic voice on the artistic journey of godlike creation. Raku ceramics had to be completely reconceptualized, at least on the academic and museum stage. In the more private and intimate world of tea, older notions of value survived, though often in muted and mutated forms.

This bifurcation is most clearly seen in the connoisseurship of Raku ceramics, a field that is plagued by logical fallacies and a fundamental denial of the details of the history of the tradition. Raku ceramics are primarily judged on the basis of inscriptions on the protective wooden and lacquered boxes that house them in private tea collections and in modern museum storage facilities. The famous tea bowl attributed to Chōjirō, “Ōguro,” for example, has box inscriptions by Sen Sōsa

IV, Kōshin (1613-1672) and his heir Sen Sōsa V, Zuiryūsai (1660-1701). Both inscriptions record that Rikyū was the original owner of the tea bowl. Compare this to an unnamed tea bowl, similar in shape, size, and design to Ōguro, in the collection of the Freer Gallery. It has, through the course of its turn-of-the-century journey into a modern American museum of Asian Arts, lost its boxes and inscriptions, and thus is thought by contemporary connoisseurs of Raku ceramics to have no value. In 1987, Raku Kichizaemon XV himself commented that “The base of this bowl does not have the Chōjirō touch.”

The assumption behind both of these attributions seems to be that 1) the many and diverse tea bowls attributed to Chōjirō over the years can be read by a connoisseur to reveal the “Chōjirō touch”; and 2) that the bowl in the box is the object to which the inscription originally referred. Both assumptions are fallacious because only box inscriptions tell us which bowls might have been made by Chōjirō, and there is as of yet no reliable evidence proving a connection between any Chōjirō-attributed tea bowl and the box in which it currently resides.

The collector of tea ceramics, of course, would argue that anyone who has examined enough authentic Chōjirō pieces could instantly recognize what Kichizaemon calls “the Chōjirō touch.” However, the very notion of the intuitive connoisseurship of ceramics is a product of post-Enlightenment notions of art adopted in Japan in the late nineteenth century. Connoisseurs of this period constructed a discernible, individualistic Chōjirō style through study of objects identified as Chōjirō products by their box inscriptions. The logic is thus entirely circular; objects lacking boxes tend not to display “the Chōjirō touch” because the very definition of Chōjirō’s style emerges from study of objects wrapped in powerful but not necessarily reliable attributions. Without considering the context of the production and consumption of Raku ceramics, and particularly the way in which they functioned both as bearers of symbolic meaning and as vessels used for drinking tea, our assumptions about their beauty, value, and meaning as “art objects” prove to be untenable.

## Conclusion

This essay concludes with a prescriptive attempt to morph a series of observations about the history of Raku into a set of suggestions for the survival of traditional craft in the twenty-first century. First, the post-Enlightenment focus on artists as individuals—which continues to dominate the world of traditional Japanese

arts in the system of gallery shows, juried exhibitions, and accolades from the government—threatens the vibrancy and potential for growth of the traditional arts in the future. The maintenance of tradition, after all, takes a tremendous amount of effort, and is almost always a community effort that occurs over time rather than in the course of a single individual's lifetime. Awards and recognition should go to communities, villages, or families over periods of decades, not to the individual who either denies the importance of the community or who acts as a kind of spokesperson for the group.

Second, the dilemma of the identity of the potter, metalworker, or other maker of traditional utensils as EITHER an artist OR a craftsman needs to be resolved openly rather than split into a kind of two-headed creative hydra. Many potters who have inherited a tradition of craft production have created two personas, in the style of Bruce Wayne and Batman, who approach their work in completely different fashion. They might make *wabi*-style tea bowls in the family studio, but venture into a contemporary studio in the hills to produce modern sculpture framed by a rhetoric of artistic individuality and exploration of the creative ego. This Jekyll and Hyde split does not, by my estimation, successfully reconcile the diverse strands that feed into the tapestry of their tradition.

Lastly, post-Enlightenment notions of the artist as an autonomous actor have unfortunately forced makers of traditional arts to feel uneasy about their relationships with consumers. Real artists, we are supposed to think, do not take directions from buyers, and certainly do not engage in a collaborative process of design and even execution because such a synthesis of social and cultural practices would obviate the very notion of what art is supposed to mean. The case of the Raku workshop's close collaboration with the Sen tea masters and other consumers makes it clear that the relationship between maker and buyer, producer and consumer, and artist and collector should be collaborative rather than purely financial. How, for example, could the Kyoto community of makers, consumers, and those tangentially involved in the tradition, collaborate in their endeavors to reinject a local culture of Kyoto into Raku and the other arts of tea?

The history of Raku ceramics suggests that tradition is handmade, the result of diverse groups of makers, users, competitors, critics, and copyists rather than the product of one artistic endeavor. Much as a Raku potter carves each tea bowl by

hand according to the design or desires of a collaborating tea practitioner, adjusting the feel and weight of the cylinder according to the particular rituals of the tea ceremony, so too the communities involved in the production, protection, and perpetuation of tradition must flexibly shape their work through relationships with each other and with their immediate locale.

**NOTE**

For specific references and images, please see Morgan Pitelka, *Handmade Culture: Raku Potters, Patrons, and Tea Practitioners in Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005).