

A Japanese Black Raku tea bowl, made around 1800



These photos show opposite sides of the same tea bowl (9cm tall), made in Kyoto around the year 1800. It is a type of pottery known as Black Raku. You are probably familiar with raku pottery as made in the West, with smoke effects resulting from plunging the red-hot pot into sawdust or some other combustible material. That technique, developed in the US in the 1950s, was inspired by Japanese Raku pottery, which is made in a different way.

The Japanese Raku pottery was first made in the sixteenth century, specifically to provide tea bowls and other utensils for the tea ceremony. At the time new forms of the tea ceremony were being developed, strongly influenced by Zen Buddhism, the significance of chance effects and the ideas behind wabi-sabi. The most important tea master, Sen no Rikyu, wanted tea wares which reflected these austere principles and commissioned a Kyoto potter, Chojiro, to make them. The resultant tea bowls were hand-moulded, not wheel thrown like all other pots at that time, and fired at relatively low temperatures, producing a soft porous body.

The Japanese Raku potter makes a tea bowl by shaping a round slab of clay with the palms of his hands into a tea bowl form. In doing this his hands take the same position as a tea drinker would, ensuring that the bowl will sit well in the hands when used. Once formed the bowl is left for several days to stiffen and then it is carved into its final shape using iron or bamboo spatulas and scrapers. This carving process removes about 70% of the clay.

Black Raku pottery uses a glaze made from stones found in rivers in the Kyoto area. The pots are fired in a small kiln heated using charcoal and a bellows. The kiln contains a saggar just large enough for one tea bowl, so the tea bowls are fired one at a time, each one in turn being placed into the hot kiln. The temperature in the kiln is quite high (maybe between 1150 and 1400°C), but the tea bowl only stays in the kiln for a short time before being removed and allowed to cool in the air, so the heat-work in the clay is less than these

temperatures might imply. When I tap my tea bowl it has the dull note of a porous earthenware body, not the bright ring of stoneware or porcelain.

It is interesting to speculate where Chojiro got the idea to take the tea bowls out of the kiln while red hot, allowing them to cool quickly in the air. At around the same time, the potters at Mino in Japan discovered that when they removed test pieces of stoneware from a hot kiln and cooled them quickly, these test pieces had a much deeper, blacker glaze than pots with the same glaze which had cooled in the kiln, presumably because some crystallisation was occurring in the slow-cooled glaze. This led them to develop a ware, now called Black Seto, where some pots were removed from a large kiln while red hot, in order to obtain a really black glaze. The sophisticated residents of the capital, Kyoto, were the main market for the Mino potters and it is possible that Chojiro, working in Kyoto, got to hear about this new technique and tried using it for his glazes.

In later years these sort of tea bowls were made by several potting families in Japan, but the original family, indirectly descended from Chojiro, has continued to make them. In later generations they actually took the family name Raku, and currently the head of the Raku family is the 15th generation since Chojiro, with the Raku master in each generation developing his own distinctive style. Tea bowls made by the Raku family have a stamp or 'seal' with the Japanese character 'Raku', assigned to Chojiro by the Japanese Emperor in the 16th century. Although these stamps are all essentially the same character, each generation's seal has subtle differences in detailed shape, which allow it to be used to identify the potter. The seal on my tea bowl shows that it was made by Ryonyu, the ninth generation Raku master, between 1788 and 1812.

Connoisseurs of tea bowls place great significance on the 'landscape' of the bowl; the shape and profile of the rim and the glaze patterns around the sides of the bowl. You can see in the pictures above that the glaze is thicker near the rim and this thicker zone of glaze has spread down the sides of the bowl in an attractive and irregular 'curtain' effect. You may also be able to see that there are grooves and indentations in the surface of the bowl. This is a distinctive feature of Ryonyu's style, and he is particularly known for his dynamic and innovative use of the spatula used for trimming the bowl.

In the right hand photograph you can see that the thicker region of glaze has run more in one position, all the way down the side of the bowl. At the rim, at the position of the glaze run, there is a short crack running down from the rim. This is almost certainly a firing crack caused by uneven heating, which would also have caused the glaze run at that point. It is probably only because of this crack that the tea bowl sold for a price within my range.

In Japan, the speed of the raku firing process prompted the idea of Raku parties. These were social occasions where guests were given biscuit-fired pots to decorate and could then watch their pots being fired and see the results before the end of the party. In 1911 a young Bernard Leach was invited to a Raku party. He was enthralled by the transformation of the pots in the fire and his life was changed forever as he decided to become a potter.

A few years ago I went on a course with Shozo Michikawa at West Dean. Shozo is not a Raku potter but as an exercise during the course he got us all to make a teabowl in the Raku way

– i.e. hand moulded and shaped by scraping lots of clay off. Of course, we couldn't fire them the Japanese Raku way. Interestingly my teabowl also developed a firing crack in the rim, which I used to practice my kintsugi skills on (kintsugi is the Japanese art of repairing cracked pottery and highlighting the repairs with gold or other metals – this repair uses brass, not gold!).



Kevin Akhurst, November 2020