A Tea Bowl from Japan – probably 16th century

The Momoyama period in Japanese history was hugely important for Japan and a time of great flourishing for Japanese art. In this short period (approximately the last quarter of the 16th century) three powerful leaders in quick succession succeeded in unifying Japan into a single nation. There was great interest among the elite in the rituals and accoutrements of the tea ceremony and strong characters led ceramics design in new directions, encouraging the development of new glazes and unusual forms and decorations. Two areas were at the centre of these developments – Seto and Mino. They lie roughly mid-way between Tokyo and Kyoto and, although they are in different prefectures, these pottery towns are actually only 15 km apart, separated by a range of hills. Seto has been a famous pottery town for centuries, producing the first glazed stoneware to be made in Japan in the 8th century and still a major ceramics centre now. The significance of Mino, however, was only discovered in 1930.

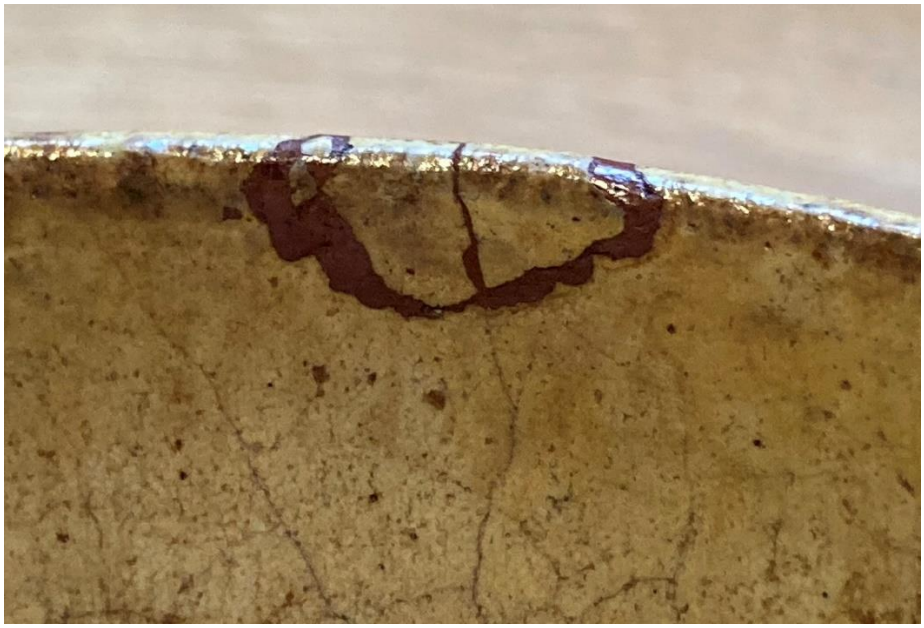
Before the Momoyama period, pottery from Seto had simple brown, green and yellowish glazes, made with ash as their primary ingredient, and little or no decoration. During the short period of the Momoyama the potters developed several completely new types of pottery, including the first white glaze in Japan – shino, which is still widely used by potters around the world today, and a type of pottery known as oribe which is noted for areas of bright green copper glaze, striking painted decoration and odd angular shapes.

At the time they were made, in the 16th century, these new types of pottery were all marketed as coming from Seto and since then that attribution had been accepted without question until 1930, when the potter Arakawa Toyozo was looking at a shino tea bowl. These bowls were fired on pads of fireclay and Arakawa noticed that a piece of clay pad was still attached to the tea bowl he was examining. Arakawa recognised that the clay used for the pad was not from the Seto area. He remembered many years before finding a small piece of Oribe pottery in the Mino area and started wondering if the shino tea bowl he was looking at was made at Mino rather than Seto. The following day he went to Mino and asked about sites of old kilns. At one site he found a piece of shino tea bowl just like the one he had been looking at. It is now accepted, as a result of his discovery and subsequent excavations, that the new types of pottery from the Momoyama were made at Mino and not Seto. It appears that the local rulers wanted to call it Seto ware because Seto had the reputation – an early example of the importance of brand! Following his discovery, Arakawa went on the rediscover the techniques for making shino glaze and he was the first potter ever to be designated a Living National Treasure by the Japanese government.

The tea bowl pictured at the top of this note was probably made at Mino in the 16th century, at the very beginning of the Momoyama period, or possibly just before the Momoyama. It has a yellowish ash glaze which runs down the side of the bowl in rivulets. The very bottom of the outside of the bowl and the foot were left unglazed. Looking at the unglazed portion it is clear that before glazing the bowl was dipped in a thin dark brown wash, probably containing clay with a high iron content. This iron-based wash will have contributed to the coloration of the glaze, particularly where the glaze is thin. The thinly glazed areas of this bowl are an attractive yellow colour and it is possible that bowls such as these were the precursor to a famous and very rare yellow-glazed pottery called Yellow Seto (though made at Mino).

The most comprehensive book on Seto and Mino pottery in English has a photograph of a very similar bowl, also with a running ash glaze over a thin iron-based wash and an unglazed portion at the foot. One significant difference between my bowl and the one in the book is that on my bowl, where the glaze is thicker, it is an olive yellow colour, whereas the one in the book (in the collection of the Freer Gallery in Washington) is an amber yellow. This is probably due to differences in the firing conditions for the two bowls – more oxidising conditions would produce a more amber colour, more reducing conditions a greener colour. On the Freer Gallery bowl the running ash glaze has produced a dark welt where the glaze ends on the outside and a similar feature can be seen on my bowl.

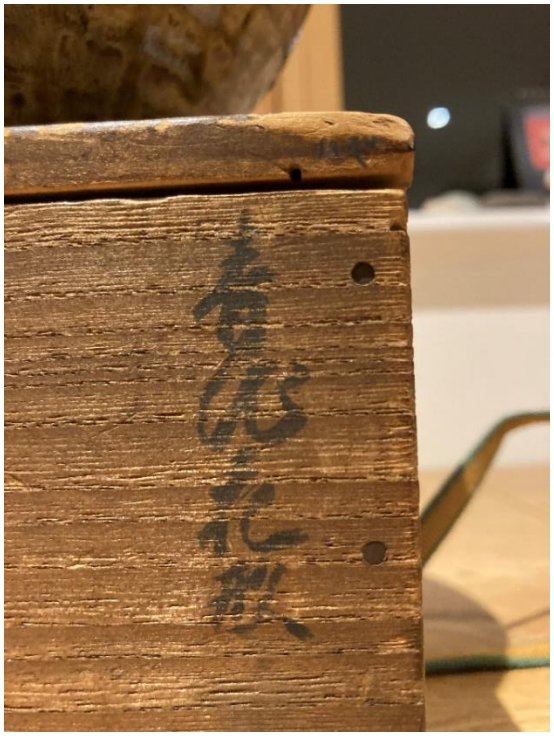
At one point on the rim of my bowl there is a small, neatly made, repair. The auctioneer described this repair as kintsugi, which is a Japanese technique for repairing ceramics, where the repair is highlighted in a precious metal such as gold. There is no precious metal highlighting this repair, so it can't really be called kintsugi, but the appearance and colour of the repair material suggests to me that it was made in the same way as kintsugi, using the Japanese lacquer called urushi, but without the gold layer on top. I have been told that such urushi repairs (called urushi naoshi in Japanese) are quite common.



You may have noticed that I have said that my tea bowl was 'probably' made in the 16th century. Apart from the uncertainty that there usually is when dating old pottery, there is a particular issue with pottery in Momoyama styles. In the 19th century in Japan there was a renewed interest in the Momoyama period and a number of potters made pieces in imitation of the old styles. There is nothing in my tea bowl that gives it away as a 19th century piece, so I'm hoping that it is original!

My tea bowl came, as so many Japanese ceramics do, with a wooden box specifically made for it, probably made from paulownia wood, which is very light. Such boxes are considered important in Japan and usually have calligraphy on them – possibly written by the potter himself. In Japan an accompanying original box can add hugely to the value of the pot it contains. When western museums and collectors first began taking serious interest in Japanese ceramics, early in the 20th century, there are tales of them treating these boxes as packaging and throwing them away, thus greatly reducing the value of their acquisitions. My box shows some signs of age and wear, but I don't suppose that it dates from when the pot was made. It has some calligraphy and also a stamped seal (see next page for photos). The inscription is a very stylised drawing of three Japanese characters. My Japanese friends tell me that the middle character appears to be 'flower', but the other two are difficult to decipher. It seems likely that the inscription is a person's name, a bit like a signature in English, written in a distinctive way to be recognisable and unique, not intended to be readable as individual characters. If this is the case, then it is likely that the red stamped character on the paper label is the same person's personal seal or 'hanko'. Again, the main purpose of these seals is uniqueness, not to be read for any meaning.

If the inscription and seal refer to a person, the question remains - who? I expect we will never know the name of the individual. It is possible that it is the name of the person who made the tea bowl, but it could also be the name of a collector who owned the bowl. Collectors of tea-wares commonly inscribed the boxes these wares were stored in. I suppose it is a bit like the old fashioned habit of putting an 'ex libris' label inside your books - especially useful if you are going to lend them to your friends.



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