

## Japanese dishes – 200 years old



By the 20<sup>th</sup> century the pottery made in the Japanese city of Seto was so ubiquitous in Japan that the term Setomono (i.e. Seto ware) became the common word for any type of pottery. However, ceramics experts tend to think of Seto as the source of high quality wares for tea ceremony connoisseurs, made there since the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Between the early elite teawares and the mass-produced modern pottery there was a period, roughly between 1780 and 1840, when the potters of Seto made solid inexpensive everyday dishes in pre-industrial workshops. These plates, sometimes referred to as Seto picture plates, had fluid painted decoration which is now valued for its artistic qualities.

The two plates shown above, 22 and 21 cm wide, were made in Seto at that time. Although they look quite similar they are fact different types of dish, made for different purposes. The dish on the left is completely flat apart from the narrow vertical rim around the edge. It was made to go beneath an oil lamp or candle (in a candle holder) to catch any drips which might fall, and is often called an oil plate. In earlier times such dishes would have been made of brass. At that time in Japan it was usual to surround a lamp with a shade made of paper stretched over a box-shaped frame, to prevent the flame from being blown out in a draft. This is called an andon and these plates are sometimes called andon-zara (andon dishes). In the middle of my plate there is a small blob of wax, presumably left from when it was actually used with a candle.

The dish on the right above gently curves up at the edge to a small out-turned rim. Traditionally this type are called stone plates, possibly because the stoneware body and glaze were very hard and robust. They are sometimes also called herring plates because they were used in the roadside inns on the Tokaido road, where herring stew was often served. The Tokaido road was the most important road in Japan at that time, running between Kyoto and Edo (now Tokyo) and it is probably best known in the west for the woodblock prints by the artist Hiroshige of 'The 53 stations of the Tokaido' showing the 53 official post stations on the road, offering food, lodging and stabling for horses. Over time these stone plates became common in homes in that part of Japan.

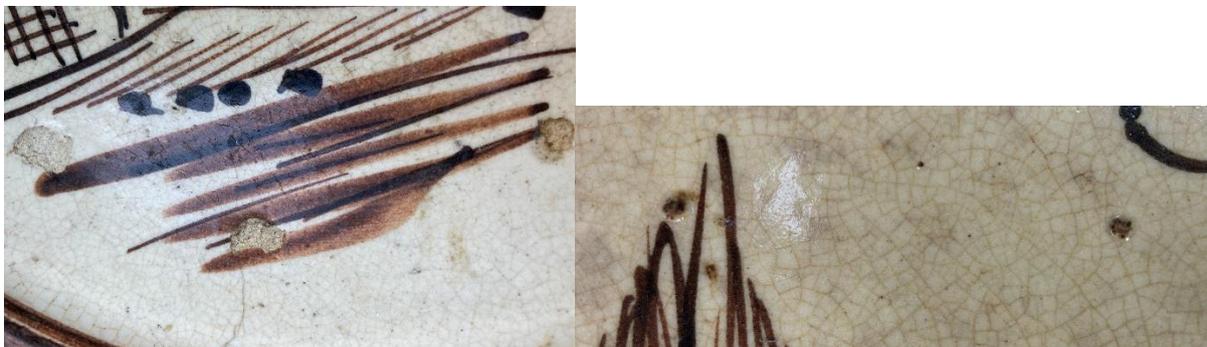
It is interesting to see that some museums have only a hazy idea of the distinction between these types of dish, calling oil plates stone plates and vice versa. To me the essential difference is that the

oil plates are completely flat – clearly it would be undesirable to stand an oil lamp on a dish that is curved, whereas a slightly bowl-like shape is helpful when eating food.

These dishes have a thin shino glaze and brushwork decoration made using a slip containing iron oxide – most likely using oni-ita, which is the Japanese term for a pigment using a naturally occurring mineral with a high iron content. Different shades of brown have been achieved on these plates by applying different thicknesses of iron pigment. These techniques were prefigured in earlier pottery from the Seto area. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century potters at Mino, near Seto, invented the shino glaze – the first Japanese glaze to get close to a white colour. They were also the first potters in Japan to use under-glaze brushwork decoration with an iron pigment, possibly inspired by Chinese cizhou ware. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the potteries in Kasahara, just a few kilometres from Seto, produced dishes quite similar to the stone plates. However, it was only late in the 18<sup>th</sup> century that the Seto potters started producing the stone plates and oil plates in quantity. My stone plate is a little unusual because, in contrast to oil plates, stone plates were commonly decorated using blue cobalt pigment as well as the brown.

The free and flowing decoration on oil plates and stone plates was greatly admired by the proponents of the Japanese folk art (mingei) movement in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Bernard Leach owned a stone plate and used pictures of it in his books as an example of good pottery. The most common designs, particularly on stone plates, are animals and plants, though landscapes are also found, as in my two dishes. Similar images can be seen in both my plates – ploughed fields, trees, a hut or shelter, fences and distant mountains or the sun and a bird. It is impressive to see how much evocative detail can be included on a plate that was clearly painted very quickly. Some of the freely flowing paintings of animals on such plates have been compared to Matisse drawings. Bernard Leach used to say that the designs on stone plates were painted by children, but I'm not aware of any evidence to support that claim.

In their time these plates were relatively low cost items produced in large quantities. Both of my plates have a ring of scars (nine on the stone plate and seven on the oil plate) on the upper surface, where spacers had been placed so that a whole stack of plates could be fired together. Although these scars mar the surface this was clearly considered a sacrifice worth making for the increased throughput in the kiln and the saving in fuel cost per plate. Looking at the paintings on the plates I might have thought they were contemporary products of the same pottery, but the stacking scars are much smaller and neater on the oil plate, suggesting a different type of spurred spacer was used.



*Stacking scars on my dishes: Left – stone plate, Right – oil plate*

There is a third category of Seto picture plate - the horse-eye or umanome plate (see below). This type of plate is a favourite of many folk art collections and was also used by Bernard Leach as an example of good pottery design. The horse-eye plate once owned by Bernard Leach came up for auction in 2013 and achieved a price of £1250 – presumably because of the Leach association. Although these dishes are often referred to as stone plates, they are quite different in various ways. They tend to be deeper than stone plates, with no lip, a broader footring and an uneven edge to the glaze on the underside. Despite the apparent high speed of production (or possibly because of it) the design of multiple ovals painted in iron pigment, which gives these dishes their name, always seems wonderfully balanced and dynamic and has a modern feel, despite being 200 years old. Although horse-eye dishes is the name they have acquired in Japan, these painted shapes have also been described as auspicious thunderclouds and as clam shells.



*Horse-eye dishes, 20 and 28 cm wide*

Possibly because of the modern feel of the horse-eye design, it has also inspired contemporary potters. Lisa Hammond has produced a range of pots with what she calls her horse-eye design – a circular mark made loosely using a stiff grass brush. There is a short video produced by Goldmark in which she talks about her horse-eye pots:

<https://www.goldmarkart.com/lisa-hammond-horse-eye-decoration>

After the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the production of oil plates, stone plates and horse-eye plates at Seto is said to have ended, or at least declined. Eventually oil lamps and candles would be replaced by electric lights, and industrial mass production of ceramics would out-compete smaller pottery workshops.

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