

Two bowls from Korea – probably 16th century



In the late 15th century in Japan more people started to drink tea and new philosophies of tea-drinking developed. In particular, Murato Shuko introduced wabi principles to the tea ceremony, which were based on austerity and simplicity. The fancy Chinese teawares that used to be used by the ruling classes no longer seemed appropriate, and early in the 16th century Japanese tea drinkers started to search for more austere ceramics. One place they looked for these teawares was Korea and several types of Korean bowl were imported to Japan for this purpose. The first reference to using Korean teabowls in Japan for the tea ceremony has been found in a tea diary dating from 1537.

One of the best known types of Korean bowl brought to Japan was one which the Japanese called ido, which is the Japanese word for a well. No-one is quite sure why this term was used, but the most likely explanation is that these bowls were deep. It seems that connoisseurs of Japanese teawares like nothing better than to divide wares into many categories with often only small, and disputed, distinctions between them. Some writers use the term ido quite broadly while others limit it to a very distinct type of bowl with a characteristic goblet shape and tall narrow foot.

The two Korean bowls in the picture are of this general type, but they don't quite match the narrower definition of ido bowls. They are 16 cm and 17 cm wide at the rim. This may seem to you rather big to drink tea out of, but you need to remember that they were drinking powdered tea which would be whisked in the bowl with hot water, so there needs to be room to do the whisking.

There has been some speculation about what these bowls would have been used for in Korea, which had almost no tea-drinking tradition at the time. They are frequently referred to as common rice bowls, but it has been argued that the small high feet make these rather impractical as everyday

bowls. It is also said that remains of these bowl types are very rarely found by archaeologists in Korea, suggesting that they were not 'common'. One possibility is that they were only used by the ruling classes and government officials. Alternatively, it has been suggested that they were votary vessels (i.e. used for making religious offerings).

These two bowls differ in several ways. The one on the left in the image is lower and wider, with a shorter foot ring, and its glaze, which is more unevenly applied, has a bluer tone. It also has four glaze scars inside at the bottom (see photo below) which indicates that it was fired as part of a stack of similar bowls, each separated by four wads of clay. Interestingly, the Fitzwilliam museum in Cambridge has a shard of bowl from a kiln site in Korea which has a very similar foot ring with the wads of clay still attached (see photo below).



Left image: Interior of bowl on left in main image above, showing firing scars. Right image: Fragment of Korean pottery from the 15th or 16th century, held by the Fitzwilliam museum, Cambridge.

The bowl on the right in the image at the head of this note has a more uniform glaze, with a thinner foot ring and no firing scars inside. The glaze on this bowl goes right to the bottom of the foot ring and at a couple of points around the foot ring very near the bottom it looks as if some fine sand has stuck in the glaze, suggesting that the bowl was fired on a bed of sand.

The Fitzwilliam museum review of their sherds states that the bowls with the bluer glaze, and stacked firing, date from the 15th or 16th century and were made mainly for the ruling class and for government offices. The bowls such as those on the right, with the greyer glaze, fired separately on sandy supports, were made later, some time during the 16th century, and were also made for use in government offices. If correct, these attributions would explain why such bowls are not found more widely in Korean excavations.

One of the most famous tea bowls in the world is a Korean ido tea bowl. It is called the Kizaemon ido (see photo on next page) and it is currently held by the Daitoku-ji temple in Kyoto. The story goes that it was originally owned by a wealthy Osaka merchant called Kizaemon who fell into great poverty and sold all his possessions except for this tea bowl. It was designated a Japanese National Treasure in 1951, one of only eight tea bowls to have that accolade. I have seen speculations online about how much it would sell for if it was ever put up for sale – the opinions range from tens of millions of dollars to hundreds of millions of dollars. Such is the crazy world of high-end tea wares.



The Kizaemon ido

You might think that this bowl is a very rough old object to be valued so highly, but in the aesthetics of tea ware the signs of age and wear add value to it. The darkening and staining of the glaze reflect centuries of use for drinking tea. The rough irregularities give the bowl a chance uniqueness and characterful features that a more 'perfect' bowl would not have. The Japanese art critic and philosopher Soetsu Yanagi, author of 'The Unknown Craftsman' which was translated by Bernard Leach, wrote at length about this teabowl – his disappointment when he first saw it and then his growing understanding of its beauty.

The foot ring of the Kizaemon bowl bowl is an interesting shape, with a wider point half way up – this is the 'bamboo node' foot ring shape which characterises the most prized ido tea bowls. Another valued feature which is less easy to see in this picture is the crawling of the glaze near the foot, creating a so-called 'sharkskin' effect. One of my bowls also shows a bit of this effect:



A few years ago I went to Kyoto and I actually visited the Daitoku-ji temple. I hadn't heard of the Kizaemon ido at the time, but then I would not have been able to see it even if I had, as it is not put on display. The abbot of the temple has supposedly said that if the whole temple (which is made of wood) were to burn down and the Kizaemon ido were saved then they would be able to rebuild the temple from the proceeds of selling the bowl.

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