

TEA BOWLS - A USER'S PERSPECTIVE

Tea ceramics live in relation to the historical, physical and spiritual context of tea events. In isolation, although they may be works of art in their own right, they are only things.

Because absolutely nothing is placed in a tea room except those things which are necessary and appropriate for the occasion, each item is seen as having special significance. Things used in a tea room are those appropriate for the occasion and not necessarily works of art. During one of my first lessons, I was having trouble with my hands and my teacher commented, "I'll get your shovels working yet." Ten years later, when leaving for Japan, I made tea for her and placed a small shovel in the alcove with a flower on the blade.

A tea event involves the creation of an artificial world into which guests enter and participate. Ideally, every sight, sound, smell and taste is controlled in order to create a complete world divorced from the problems and cares of everyday life. A host takes great care in the creation of this world and guests enter with heightened sensitivity. Objects that would be little or not at all noticed in other contexts take on a special life when seen in the tea room.

Suggestions rather than statements are preferred. If one has been flower viewing, an empty vase may be displayed. A bud suggesting the life force that creates is preferred to a full blown flower which is already near death. A Zen scroll of one or two words that leads a guest to contemplate the eternal is ideal for the alcove.

Modern tea is practiced in many forms. Tea may be solitary meditation or natural simplicity, but it is also good food, and fellowship, a meeting of the minds of host and guest in a context where man, season and nature are one.. A tea event may be a party or, in the case of demonstrations and some other events, pure theater with a display of exquisite items.

For many years after tea came to Japan from China, fine Chinese ceramics, bronzes, and temmoku bowls were used almost exclusively. The people who practiced tea were mostly the very wealthy who could afford to compete with each other for the prestige of owning the most desirable equipment.

This tradition of using Chinese ceramics is still a part of tea. It is necessary to have bronzes and antique Chinese temmoku bowls in order to properly perform the most formal procedures and a host may choose to use fine Chinese style ceramics for even the most ordinary procedures.

In the 15th and 16th centuries there was an intellectual rebellion against the expense and pretense of tea as it was practiced and tea became more of a contemplative exercise based to a large extent on Zen. It was at this time that Korean tea bowls began to be used.

There is a saying that "Zen and Tea are one taste." The taste of Zen is wabi which is a term that can not really be defined, but it is a feeling of naturalness, rightness, loved

and cared for age, a feeling of the eternal. Real wabi is natural with no pretenses so when one deliberately tries to create wabi, it often fails. Wabi is the reflection of a state of mind, a view of the world. Divorced from a genuine mind, wabi tea is no more than empty show.

It was only when the wabi aesthetic evolved from poetry that native Japanese pottery such as Bizen and Shigaraki came to the attention of tea masters, Raku was developed and a heightened appreciation of the aesthetic which we see in today's wabi style pottery came into being.

It seems that every potter wants to make tea bowls and although some are very good, many are not. Too many people who try to make tea bowls lack either the necessary mastery of their medium or an understanding of what they are trying to create.

This is an extreme example, but I had a middle age man come to me with his tea bowls and proudly ask for my criticism. He had had three pottery lessons and obviously could not keep clay centered on the wheel. That was the least of his problems - - - but he had tea bowls.

On a higher level, I have seen bowls for sale in a fine gallery that specializes in ceramics. These bowls had price tags in the hundreds, and they were unusable (yes, they sold, almost immediately). Pitiful for use in the tea room, but really fine examples of the potter's art.

Nothing is static and there is much room for creativity in the design of pottery for tea. Unfortunately, in order to innovate a potter must have some knowledge of how and why things are used. For this reason, most potters who create tea equipment have at least some knowledge of the tea ceremony.

As an example of an innovation: the ordinary Japanese tiles made to go under an iron brazier are often much the same and after a time become somewhat boring. A friend created and gave me a tile in a new form that will be a delight to use, a pleasant surprise for every guest.

The concept of what constitutes ceramics suitable for tea has expanded over the years and developed to cater to many different tastes and traditions of which wabi is only one.

An example of a different taste is the plethora of inexpensive tea bowls produced in the Kyoto area, thousands upon thousands, all the same bowl, except for the different (often decal) decorations. Cheap, easy to use, a bowl can be chosen that exactly fits the theme of any occasion. These bowls, purchased and appreciated for the pictures, are collected and loved by many, but as ceramics they are without soul, without spirit or individuality.

Ivan McMeekin described an ideal for ceramics used in a tea room when he said, "--- the making of utensils can be an art." Tea ceramics are utensils fulfilling specific functions. Fine utensils are those that are raised to the level of art but their importance is as functional utensils.

When creating bowls that are *utensils raised to the level of art*, it is the great tea bowls of the past that are the bench marks, the standards, against which modern bowls are judged.

Look at a shelf of Japanese Raku tea bowls. At first glance, they are all almost the same as they have been for the last 400 years.

On closer examination, some are excellent and most ordinary. It is to be able to make the excellent that is the reason for Japanese potters spending most of a lifetime working to produce the perfect bowl. It is skill and practice along with the spirit of the potter that makes the subtle shade of difference between a good bowl and a great bowl.

When looking at traditional tea bowls, tea people are not looking for the new and different; they are looking for subtle differences between bowls that at first glance often appear to be the same.

Every tea person that I know values bowls that have something different, a subtle glaze, something that guests will enjoy. I was given a tea bowl with a glaze that is unusual. I asked the potter what it was and he said, "Shino gone wrong." It may have gone wrong, but how wonderful for a chawan.

Wood fired chawan often have a uniqueness imparted by fire that tends to be on the Wabi side, quiet, humble, and unassuming with the play of fire giving the unpredictability of nature. It is these qualities that are appreciated by tea people.

The citation of China's 'patron saint of potters' is worth considering in relation to wabi tea bowls:

"Knowing the secret ways of the winds and the rains, he penetrated deep among the slumbering rock and learned their histories. He became intimate with cosmic affairs and was able to assist the divine process of decay and rebirth. He took the rocks and pounded them; using subtle mixtures, he formed the vessels and works of beauty from loaves of plastic clay. With precision he learned to blow upon the flames and transmuted his fragments of hillside into fragile bowls for the delight and use of man."

"**Delight and use**," the very essence of ceramics for tea. Use is of primary importance, but items are chosen for the delight of one's guests while a great tea bowl has the feeling of nature in the hands of man.

Ceramics are the tea person's tools and the choice of tea bowl follows the same simple rule as for choosing any tool, "*it must work.*"

Perhaps the following will help illustrate my point.

Q. What is a tea bowl?

A. A bowl from which to drink tea.

Q. If a tea bowl's function is to hold tea, and it does, isn't it a tea bowl?

A. A tea bowl is much more than just a bowl to drink from.

Tea bowls are of many types and from different traditions. Although all bowls are highly valued, it is the wabi tea aesthetic shown in the use of Korean style bowls that is purely Japanese.

A wabi aesthetic can be difficult to create because the wabi aesthetic, based on Shinto and Zen, has been internalized by very few outside of Japan, thus people who try to work within that aesthetic are often stepping outside of their normal range of understanding. There is a tendency to work with the intellect rather than freely from the heart.

It must be remembered that except for shops and museums, tea bowls are seldom displayed. As beautiful as they may be, tea bowls are private things and should ideally be seen in context. If a tea person wants to show a bowl, it will almost always be in the context of a tea event of some type when the bowl comes alive as part of a unified whole.

Tea bowls come in many forms: summer bowls, winter bowls, formal bowls, informal bowls, bowls for koicha (thick tea), bowls for usucha (thin tea), decorated bowls, wabi bowls, etc. Each has its purpose and the choice of a bowl for a tea event takes into consideration everything from tradition, the purpose of the event, season, weather and taste of the guest to connotations and the items with which it is to blend. History is important. Many bowls have stories that go with them and the story is told when the bowl is used.

When judging a bowl, consideration must be given to the functions which a bowl performs as well as its history and appeal to the senses.

A tea bowl in a tea room must *quietly* blend with everything else to make a seamless whole. If a host decides to use a different tea bowl at the last minute, it may be necessary to change other things so that everything will work together.

Variation within a tea bowl is necessary to keep from boredom. In most cases, that variation should be subtle and can come from the glaze, the texture, the form of the bowl, or any combination of these, but anything "in your face wild" will usually not work.

The entire bowl should be interesting without "dead" places.

Any decoration should be with restraint and genuine purpose.

A tea bowl's shape must be pleasing to the eye. The bowl may be irregular, but there must be a balance, a naturalness without appearing to be forced..

Pick up a good bowl and feel it in your hands. There is a rightness to the feel of it, not just the shape that fits the hands, but the texture and if there is a glaze the warmth or coolness of the glaze. One can close ones eyes and enjoy the bowl through touch alone. In fact, one often does just that. When filled with tea, the feel of the bowl changes, but is just as enjoyable while its color compliments the tea.

Remember that a tea bowl is inspected and appreciated from a distance of inches. As the viewer's mind wanders within the bowl, the relationship between object and user is intimate in a way that it can never be when looking at something in a display cabinet. A subtlety that would be lost when viewed from a distance can be almost overpowering in a tea room.

Wood fired bowls often show something of the action of the fire. It is these bowls that are closest to nature and most likely to be wabi in feeling. Sometimes there is a kiln accident and a bowl will warp in the kiln. This can be beautiful and, if so, is highly valued because it shows the action of the elements unique beyond the capacity of man.

A bowl should be neither light nor heavy.

The shape of the bowl and materials from which it is made should be designed for its use. Shallow bowls are often used for thin tea in summer because one wants the heat to dissipate. Tall bowls are used during the winter to hold the heat. Sides shaped to make tea flow easily to the mouth and the interior shaped so that the tea whisk can work freely. A bowl can give a feeling of warmth in winter cold and of coolness in summer heat.

The flow of tea is particularly important when drinking thick tea. A bowl with a lip curved too far inward forces the head of a person drinking from the bowl to tilt backwards at an uncomfortable angle.

The inside of a tea bowl does not need to be perfectly smooth or regular, but nothing inside the bowl should catch a tine of the tea whisk or hold a pocket of tea powder so that it does not mix evenly with the rest of the tea.. There should be no unpleasant sounds when tea is whisked.

Both outside and inside must be such that the chakin (the cloth with which a bowl is dried) can be used without catching on the bowl. Remember that the cloth moves over a bowl from left to right so if facets are cut into the exterior of a bowl they must be cut in such a manner that the cloth will slip over them without catching.

A bowl begins with the choice of clay from which it is made. Be aware of the smell of a bowl and the heat transmitted by the clay body.

A bowl should appear to be made effortlessly, to have formed naturally without artifice.

I was in a workshop the other day and spotted an ordinary serving dish. It stood out because there was nothing about it to stand out. I commented that it was formed without thinking and the potter agreed. He said that he was in a hurry to complete an order and just threw as fast as he could giving it no thought. In my opinion, that was wabi naturalness.

A tea bowl should be pleasing to the lips.

Any undulations of the rim should be "natural," fitting the entire concept of the bowl and not make it difficult to drink from the bowl.

If there is a drip line, it is certain to receive special attention when the bowl is used. The drip line may be the difference between a good and an exceptional bowl.

Bowls may be placed on highly polished lacquer which is easily scratched so the bottom of the foot should be smooth.

The foot should be high enough so that the bowl may be easily picked up.

The foot rim must slide pleasantly over the fingers as the bowl is wiped and be formed so that there is no danger of one's fingers losing their hold on the bowl or being cut by a sharp edge.

Many bowls need to be reworked after firing if only to smooth the edge of the foot. Any reworking should appear to be natural. A drip of glaze that has been half ground off jars because it is not natural.

In some styles of tea bowls, a bit of the clay is exposed so the basic material from which the bowls are made can be enjoyed.

The foot of a wabi bowl should be interesting because each guest will turn the bowl over and closely examine the foot and, if it is visible, the exposed clay. It is the foot that often shows a bit of the spirit of the creator and can be the most interesting part of a bowl.

Most bowls will have a defined front either deliberately created by the potter or by the fire. Be careful here as tea is drunk from the side opposite the front. However, if a bowl is asymmetrical, one drinks from whatever side is safe and is not the front.

The potter's mark is traditionally placed on the curve at the outside of the foot rim on the back side of the bowl. It is important to remember this when loading a wood fire kiln.

Black raku is often used for koicha (the formal thick tea) which is the most contemplative of the teas. Black raku fits the mood as well as holding heat so the last guest to drink from the bowl will not receive cold tea. Black also compliments the

colour of the film of tea which is left in the bowl.

A few bowls such as the red raku set lined with gold and silver are used only for specific occasions, maybe only once a year, and some bowls are designed for use only during a short season but most bowls are more versatile. Bowls for thin tea are usually more seasonal while, with a few exceptions, the same bowls are used for thick tea during both summer and winter seasons.

There are bowls which are just light and fun; after all, a tea event is meant to be enjoyable. When a bowl is suitable for use depends on its shape, material, glaze and decoration as well as the specific occasion.

Because tea is seasonal, making a bowl with a pictorial decoration such as cherry blossoms may severely limit the time of year during which a piece will be felt to be usable.

Many quiet and simple wood fired bowls are suitable for the koicha (thick tea) service while bowls with a more decorative glaze or decorated bowls would usually be used for the usucha (thin tea) service.

Bowls of temmoku shape are formal and they are used on special stands. Their use is limited because they are normally used only for special procedures and antique Chinese bowls are required for most tea events where a temmoku bowl is used. Although new temmoku bowls are used for two procedures, their primary use is for practice. Note: To a tea person the term temmoku indicates first the shape of a tea bowl and secondly a glaze.

The size of tea bowls varies. Traditional bowls are made to traditional measurements and some are about 15 cm wide, but most bowls are smaller and bowls of many sizes are used. Small bowls are necessary for procedures where things needed for a tea ceremony are carried in a small box.

A bowl holds enough tea for one to five guests while leaving the bowl about $\frac{1}{3}$ to $\frac{3}{4}$ empty. Whatever the size, a bowl must "fit" ones hands and be suitable for whisking tea.

Potters often make tea bowls for pleasure, but it is also necessary to make a living. I have been asked why so few Australian bowls are sold to tea people. Why sometimes very good bowls will not sell. Aside from the more or less technical aspects of what makes a bowl 'work,' there are several reasons for this.

The way that tea is usually taught encourages students not to deviate from accepted norms until they are thoroughly trained. This has a tendency to stifle individual experimentation and a trust in one's own instincts. Once trained, a tea person should "break out" and show some originality.

Japanese bowls, even not so very good bowls, are certain to be in the "correct" form and so appeal to those who are not yet certain of their own understanding.

If selling to an Australian market, it must be remembered that the market is limited and most who practice tea in Australia are ordinary middle class budgeting their money carefully.

There is the idea that tea people will pay almost any price for tea equipment. This is largely a misconception. It is true that good things are expensive and those recognized as the very best are for millionaires and museums. However, it is only collectors or the rare tea person who finds a piece that is particularly loved who will pay an unreasonable price.

Tea people pay for and try to use quality, but tea teaches frugality. Even in Japan, only investment quality pieces sell for very high prices. Aside from snobbery, an ordinary tea bowl is in reality worth no more than a rice bowl of equivalent quality.

The ideal is that the monetary value of tea things is immaterial and should not be a consideration. in the evaluation of "suitability." This attitude toward the monetary value of tea things is shown by an old tea master who, on being asked how much a tea bowl was worth, replied, "I am a tea man, not a merchant." Guests should appreciate things used at a tea event because of the thought and effort that that has gone into their selection by the host as well as the effort, the spirits, of the creators of the items.

However, people are human and when spending a lot of money for a tea bowl, there is resale value to consider. A Japanese 'name' with a signed box (the box is the provenance) will have a resale value and one may make a profit when the potter dies. No name, little resale value.

Tea is not a museum piece, but a living thing that changes to meet the needs of each new generation. More women than men now make tea and they often prefer smaller, more delicate things than those that were in vogue when tea was practiced almost exclusively by men so some things are getting smaller and more feminine to suit a woman's size and taste.

The equipment that is used for a tea event not only changes with the event but expresses a tea person's philosophy. Although tea teaches a traditional philosophy that seemingly makes tea people all over the world members of a specific subculture, one can not expect a Zen priest to see life in the same way as a Christian housewife or for us to see the world as our great grand parents saw the world. As tea moves from time to time, culture to culture, and subculture to subculture, the equipment chosen for a tea event (if honest and not a mere copy of the traditional) changes to express the reality of person, time and place.

Sometimes we forget that all things were innovations when they were first created.

Those bowls that we usually class as wabi style tea bowls were originally just peasant ware from Korea and later from Japan then modified by the taste of the tea masters.

The old boys broke new ground, developed a new aesthetic and did something unique to their time. We should not be afraid to do the same as long as the essential spirit of tea is not violated.

To go back to the beginning, A tea bowl is just a bowl from which to drink tea. I have several bowls that were not made as tea bowls. There is one by Ann Geroe that I have had for many years, ox blood - copper red, just a bowl, but a pleasure to use with a semi formal setting. There is another, shallow bowl painted with water skippers across the inside that was made as part of an American table setting - delightful to use on a hot summer day.

The test of any item for use in the tea room is that it must work. A piece must work both aesthetically and technically as a tool. Although size is important because of balance with other items, the restricted space on tatami mats and ease of use, a piece need not be traditional in shape or glaze, but the basic traditional shapes have proven themselves over centuries so it is difficult to find new shapes that work as well.

In addition to its physical properties, there is something eternal about a great bowl.. A fine tea bowl is an idea created in the mind of the user, a spiritual thing, a communication transcending time and unifying the elements, an emotion in a piece of pottery.

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Ivan McMeekin quoted from the article **A Potters Angle** in *Ceramics Art and Perception*, issue 3, 1991, Page 82

Citation of China's patron saint of potters quoted by Ivan McMeekin from *Early Ming Wares of Ching-te chien* by A. D. Brankston

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