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Rikyu's Innovations in the Japanese Tea Ceremony

“The mind of tea is precisely the mind of Zen. Whoever puts aside the mind of Zen does not have the mind of tea, and whoever does not know the flavor of Zen does not know the flavor of tea.” – The Record of Zen Tea written by Sen no Rikyu's grandson, Soton¹

The Significance of Wabi Taste

In 1588, the Japanese tea master Sen no Rikyu (1522-1591) designed a small wabi-style teahouse that still exists today (Figure 1 & 2). Set on the grounds of the Myokian temple, he meant for the ceremonies held there to be understated, personal, and deeply aesthetic. He is known to have appreciated black raku ware tea bowls, which suggest the void in Daoism and Zen Buddhism (Figure 3). What might have caused the almost nondescript earthy black bowl to become the epitome of high taste in the Japanese tradition? Why might small shed-like structures with minimal decoration become the perfect venue for a spiritual meeting? This paper will examine the evolution and significance of Rikyu's wabi taste.

The Road to Wabi Tea

Starting in the 8th century, Japanese priests traveled to China to pursue the study of Buddhism. Through ties with the Tang Dynasty and the Silk Road, tea was brought back to Japan from China. Records of tea in Japan begin in the 9th century under Emperor Saga's rule (785 – 842) in poems, however it was not popular until later during the 12th

¹ Theodore M. Ludwig, *Before Rikyū. Religious and Aesthetic Influences in the Early History of the Tea Ceremony in Monumenta Nipponica* Vol. 36.4 (1998), 368.

Century.² Influenced by the Song Dynasty, Priest Eisai introduced a new way of preparing it. One would scoop matcha green tea powder into a bowl and whisk in water with a bamboo whisk (Figure 4). Vendors served it as refreshments at tea stalls in front of temples and shrines and many paired tea with poetry and music gatherings (Figure 5). Starting in the mid 14th century, during the Momoyama Period, formal guidelines were set to create a more private environment while preparing and drinking tea.³ It slowly evolved with the influence of tea masters Murata Shuko, Takeno Joo, and Sen no Rikyu to the Zen Buddhist *wabi*-style *chanoyu*, meaning “hot water for tea”, or “tea ceremony”.

As mentioned in the previous paragraph, Murata Shuko (1423-1502) was born in Nara to a blind priest and was adopted by a merchant family in Kyoto. He is said to have started the development of *wabi-cha* style tea because he left behind the letter “Kokoro no fumi”, proposing that tea ceremonies are the Zen Buddhist way of advancing a human being’s spirit.⁴ He is known for the expression, “The moon not glimpsed through rifts and clouds holds no interest.”⁵ This comment indicates his belief that imperfection is what makes something alluring. During the Onin War in Japan (1467-1477), powerful families left their estates and lost their possessions, including tea utensils. Shuko changed the ways of the tea ceremony as a response to the social change caused by the war, and as a way of incorporating his Zen Buddhist religious beliefs. He replaced the Chinese *Chien*-ware with Japanese tea bowls and used fewer utensils. He preferred small, simple rooms

² <http://www.omotesenke.jp/english/list2/list2-1/list2-1-1/>, Accessed September 21, 2014

³ Nicole C. Rousmaniere, “Tea Ceremony Utensils & Ceramics.” *Japan's Golden Age: Momoyama*, edited by Money L. Hickman (New Haven: Yale University Press in Association with Sun & Star 1996 and Dallas Museum of Art, 1996), 203.

⁴ <http://www.omotesenke.jp/english/list2/list2-2/list2-2-2/>, Accessed September 21, 2014.

⁵ <http://education.asianart.org/explore-resources/background-information/muromachi-period-tea-1338-1573>, Accessed September 22, 2014.

to make the drinking experience quiet and hidden. He valued intellectual accomplishments more than wealth through his modest practice of tea.

Takeno Joo (1502-1555) was the son of a wealthy leather merchant in Sakai. At an early age, he dedicated his time to renga linked-verse poetry, which is said to have impacted the way he shaped *chanoyu*. Joo studied under Zen priest Dairin Soto, which furthered his understanding of *ichimi*, the idea that tea and Zen are one.⁶ He simplified the tea ceremony even further than Shaku by reducing the multiple plates in one grand meal to the *kaiseki*, a meal of soup, rice, and two side dishes with vinegar and something broiled (Figure 6). From bamboo, Takeno Joo carved *chashaku* tea scoops and *futa-oki* lid rests and contributed plain wood into *chanoyu* (Figure 7).⁷ His innovations continued to simplify wabi-style tea ceremonies, as he passed his practices off to student Sen no Rikyu in 1540.⁸

Sen no Rikyu (1522-1591) was born to a Sakai merchant family (Figure 8). He advocated for the use of Korean, Southeast Asian wares and local wares. After studying under Takeno Joo, he polished the wabi-sabi tea ceremony encouraging “intimacy, simplicity, and quiet elegance.” Rousmaniere states, “the aesthetic quality of *sabi* encourages restraining in expression and cherishes the unaffected beauty associated with loneliness, poverty, and rusticity.”⁹ Sen no Rikyu served as a tea advisor for the Muromachi shogun Oda Nobunaga, who embraced the new style of tea. Later, he worked for Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1582-1591), the lord of Yamoto Koriyama, and they developed

⁶ <http://www.omotesenke.jp/english/list2/list2-2/list2-2-2/>, Accessed September 21, 2014.

⁷ <http://www.omotesenke.jp/english/list2/list2-2/list2-2-2/>, Accessed September 22, 2014.

⁸ Rousmaniere, *Japan's Golden Age: Momoyama*, 205.

⁹ Hickman, *Japan's Golden Age: Momoyama*, 205.

a close relationship.¹⁰ Rikyu was originally named Soeki, but Hideyoshi changed his name to surpass commoner status and raise him to *koji* status. Hideyoshi helped Rikyu obtain more power while while Rikyu helped Hideyoshi gain support from the people through tea ceremonies.¹¹ Although both men took part in a symbiotic relationship, Rikyu's taste for simple objects, human equality, and humility contradicted Hideyoshi's values of material wealth and his plan to take over Korea and China. Rikyu's peacefulness made Hideyoshi so angry that he eventually ordered Rikyu commit suicide in 1591.¹²

The Tea Ceremony Process

Rikyu speaks of the tea ceremony as a simple process: "It is enough if the dwelling one uses does not leak water and food served sufficed to stave off hunger. This is in accordance with the teaching of Buddha and is the essence of the tea ceremony. First we fetch the water and gather firewood. Then we boil the water and prepare the tea. After offering some to Buddha, we serve our guests. Finally we serve ourselves."¹³ He makes wabi tea seem quite simple, but it is a process of slow refinement, which can lead one to the simplest of ceremonies. There are four essential components of chanoyu: *wa* - harmony among humans and nature, *kei* - respect for everything, *si* - purity, and *jaku* -

¹⁰ <http://www.omotesenke.jp/english/list2/list2-2/list2-2-2/>, Accessed September 21, 2014.

¹¹ http://www.columbia.edu/itc/ealac/V3613/taian/sen_no_rikyu.html, Accessed September 19, 2014.

¹² Jay Hanes, Review of *Handmade Culture: Raku Potters, Patrons, and Tea Practitioners Education* by Morgan Pitelka in *Studies in Art* Vol. 49.1 No.1 (2007), 78.

¹³ Rousmaniere, *Japan's Golden Age: Momoyama*, 203.

tranquility. Drinking tea is the Zen Buddhist way of “purifying the soul by becoming one with nature.”¹⁴ Japanese Zen Monk Dogen stated, “Enlightenment is intimacy with all things.” I believe this applies to Zen tea because it was a very personal event.¹⁵ Tea ceremonies had more to them than making and drinking tea; the host and guests were supposed to forget the material world, become one with nature, and stay present for that moment alone, while cultivating a deeper relationship.¹⁶ The procedure of the tea ceremony was considered a very complex performance art; no ceremony was alike. The host had to consider the season, time of day, previous meetings, guests, and utensils while preparing for it.¹⁷

To start the ceremony, guests would go in through a gate, pass into a garden to the middle gate, and enter the garden of the teahouse; then they would wash their hands and mouths in a *tsukubai* cleansing basin. Rikyu purposely placed his basin in a position where the guest could see the ocean over the trees while cleansing themselves. This is where “he would suddenly realize the relationship between the scoop of water and the expansive bowl of the sea, between himself and the universe.”¹⁸ The guests would then bend down through the low teahouse entry door, representing humility (Figure 2). It is possible that it was built low to the ground so weapons couldn’t get into the house.¹⁹ The guests would view the room and pay special attention to the *tokonoma*, which was the

¹⁴ *Chanoyu: The Japanese Tea Ceremony in India International Centre Quarterly* Vol. 3 No. 2, (1976),159.

¹⁵ <http://oaks.nvg.org/dogen-quotations.html>

¹⁶ Rousmaniere, *Japan's Golden Age: Momoyama*, 204.

¹⁷ Rousmaniere, *Japan's Golden Age: Momoyama*, 203.

¹⁸ Richard A. Perry, *The Tea Bowl As A Meditative Device in Canadian Art Review* Vol. 3 No. 1 (1976), 31.

¹⁹ <http://sites.asiasociety.org/education/AsianArt/slideshow20.htm>, Accessed September 19, 2014.

hollowed out space in the wall where calligraphy, art and flowers were exhibited (Figure 1). The *tokonoma* was the most valued part of the teahouse and utensils. They would eat the *kaiseki* (small meal) with saki and sweets. Guests would drink the *koicha* thick tea from the same bowl, but first admire the color of the powder against the bowl, and then the features and history of the bowl. After that, they would drink the *usucha* thin tea from their own bowls and go through the same admiration process.

The tea ceremony was about emotional sharing. The host and guest were supposed to create a bond while “sharing tea, refined taste, and an exquisite appreciation of the moment.”²⁰ There is a transitory nature where the host and guest acknowledge that they must stay present and enjoy their time together.

Raku and the Importance of Zen

Before ceramics gained popularity as tea bowls, they were unglazed and used as storage and decorations. Tea rituals made ceramics more enticing to own when tea was brought from China to Japan and used at social gatherings. Sen no Rikyu encouraged potters to experiment with ceramics and create original tea bowls.²¹ Rikyu states, “The tea bowl occupies one of the key roles in the tea gathering because it contains the prepared tea itself, and because it is handled by the guest, thereby bridging the gap between the resident of the ‘tea hut’ and the visitor.”²² From this comment, the tea bowl took on the role as a unifier. In the 1570s, Rikyu was very impressed by artisan Chojiro, who made roof tiles and asked him to make tea ware specifically for tea ceremonies. He

²⁰ Rousmaniere, *Japan's Golden Age: Momoyama*, 204.

²¹ Rousmaniere, *Japan's Golden Age: Momoyama*, 203.

²² Hanes, Review of *Handmade Culture: Raku Potters, Patrons, and Tea Practitioners Education* by Morgan Pitelka, 77.

made Raku bowls from earthenware clay locally found in Kyoto (Figure 3). The pieces were meant to reflect the *wabi-sabi* aesthetic that appreciates the beauty of simplicity, rusticity, modesty, imperfection, impermanence, and incompleteness.²³ The Japanese word for tea bowl is *chawan*, meaning “embodiment of this aesthetic.”²⁴ Each bowl was molded by hand, not on a wheel so that it had its own personality and history and was thought to reflect the spirit of the artist.²⁵ Each bowl was never perfectly circular and had an inconsistent thickness of walls, but it was seen as beautiful through the *wabi* aesthetic.²⁶ After being formed, the bowls were painted with low fire black glaze made of ferrous rock from the Kamo River in Kyoto. They were placed in a kiln at 1100 degrees Celsius for a short period of time, and then taken out with tongs to cool in the open air. This process helped create walls that would insulate the tea and protect the hands of the holder. Artists mostly created black and red raku, but as previously stated, Rikyu preferred black raku because it represents the Daoist and Zen Buddhist void.

Calligrapher, designer, and ceramicist Honami Koetsu (1558-1637) created raku ware during the Momoyama Period. On his bowl “Fujisan”, or “Mount Fuji”, he paints what looks like the majestic Mount Fuji by using glazes with a simple blend of grey, brown, black, and white hues (Figure 9). Many have tried to recreate it, but the *wabi* aesthetic proves that the bowl is original, imperfect, and a creation of nature’s work.²⁷

²³ https://ntieva.unt.edu/download/teaching/Curr_resources/multi_culture/Japan/Aesthetics/Japanese%20Aesthetics_Wabi-Sabi_Tea%20Ceremony.pdf, Accessed September 19, 2014.

²⁴ Hanes, Review of *Handmade Culture: Raku Potters, Patrons, and Tea Practitioners Education* by Morgan Pitelka, 77.

²⁵ Rousmaniere, *Japan's Golden Age: Momoyama*, 203.

²⁶ <http://www.acsforum.org/symposium2011/papers/handa.pdf>, Accessed September 19, 2014.

²⁷ Richard A. Perry, *The Tea Bowl As A Meditative Device*, 159.

Raku ware tea utensils from the Momoyama Period are some of the most expensive and desirable pieces of art today in Japan, as they represent the Zen Buddhist *wabi* aesthetic that makes the tea ceremony valued.

Conclusion

Zen Buddhist tea ceremonies were developed and formalized by the greatest tea masters known to Japan: Murata Shuko, Tokano Joo, and Sen no Rikyu. The tea ceremony as a whole became a multi-media art form with the use of gardens, the teahouse, calligraphy and art over the *tokonoma*, the unique raku bowls, the matcha tea, and the *wabi-sabi* aesthetic encompassing the whole performance. Tea ceremonies are perhaps the most important cultural art form in Japanese history.



Figure 1
Oldest remaining tearoom designed by Sen no Rikyu, Taian teahouse
Tokonoma on right

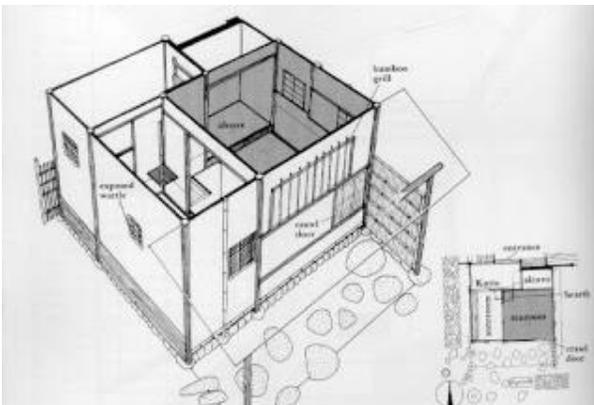


Figure 2
Taian Teahouse Layout



Figure 3
Black Raku Tea bowl called “Kamuro” made by Chojiro, owned by Rikyu



Figure 4
Matcha Tea and Bamboo Whisk



Figure 5
Public Tea Venders

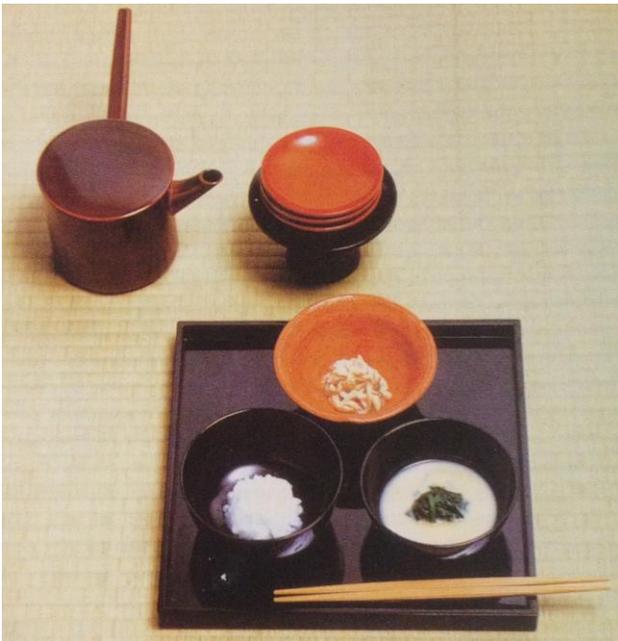


Figure 6
Kaiseki - meal of soup, rice, and two side dishes with vinegar and something broiled



Figure 7
Tea Scoop carved by Takeno Joo



Figure 8
Sen no Rikyu painted by Hasegawa Tohaku



Figure 9
Raku Bowl called "Fujisan" ("Mount Fuji") made by Honami Koetsu

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