

A Meeting of Worlds: Masterpieces of the Karamono Tradition

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By Marian Ang | Sep 28, 2023

The expression *karamono*, the Japanese term for imported Chinese wares, speaks of the lofty position these works of art held for many centuries in Japanese culture, and the reverence with which they were treated as they were passed down between generations.

The origin of *karamono* began with the burgeoning popularity of Chinese tea drinking during the Tang dynasty (618-907). Connoisseurs began to develop an appreciation of the ceramic vessels which held the tea, and the most admired kilns that produced them began to gain renown. Ritual tea drinking reached Japan with the Japanese monk Eichu, who, upon returning from a lengthy stay in Chang'an (then the capital city of China, now known as Xi'an) in 815, served tea to Emperor Saga (r. 809-23). Amongst the exclusive circles of the Japanese elite classes the pastime became wildly popular – tea was regularly consumed at Buddhist temples, important court functions, as well as special gatherings for poetry recitals or music performances.



The Kamakura period (1185-1333) saw the emergence of the tea ceremony in Japan, where powdered and whipped matcha tea was ritually consumed by participants. This development has been credited to the Japanese priest Eisai (1141-1215), who had travelled to China twice in the late 12th century. Crucially, Eisai also returned to Japan with black-glazed Jian ware tea bowls, which he had discovered at Chan Buddhist monasteries on Tianmushan, a mountain in Lin'an County west of Hangzhou, a region where some of the world's finest teas grow. These rustic black bowls, thickly potted from cheap dark clay, came from the Jian kilns in northern Fujian province and were neither delicate nor refined. But their humble black glazes held an earthy spiritual appeal. The Japanese called them *tenmoku* (the Japanese

pronunciation of *Tianmu*), and these bowls became the vessels of choice for Zen Buddhist temples, where tea was consumed to concentrate the mind and bring the drinker closer to his goal of enlightenment.



Kendo Yano, Eighteenth Abbot of the Daikomyo-ji Temple, with a Southern Song dynasty 'yuteki tenmoku' tea bowl supported on a 15th century cinnabar lacquer stand.

From the collection of the Zen Buddhist Daikomyo-ji Temple in Kyoto, which is deaccessioning pieces from its collection for the first time since it was founded in 1339, comes an exceptionally rare large heirloom black-glazed *yuteki* ("oil spots") *tenmoku* tea bowl from the Southern Song dynasty, distinguished by its exquisite dappled black glaze, metallic blue "hare's fur" streaks, and shimmering "oil spot" marks. Achieved by manipulating body and glaze compositions, kiln temperatures, and interrupting the cooling process at the precise moment, the Jian potters' experiments created dazzling results that drew particular praise from the Song Emperor Huizong (r. 1100-26) in his *Treatise on Tea*. This work is accompanied by a cinnabar lacquer stand from the Ming dynasty. Tea ceremonies have formed a key part of the temple's everyday practices since the 14th century. Revered and respected for its long history, the temple's successive abbots have devoted themselves to missionary work, the enlightenment of living beings (*shujo saido*), and sharing awareness of Buddhist culture, and the temple's Jian bowls were brought out for use when they welcomed monks visiting from other temples for Zen Buddhist events.



An exceptionally rare and large heirloom black-glazed 'yuteki tenmoku' tea bowl, Southern Song dynasty and a cinnabar lacquer 'floral' bowl stand, Ming dynasty, early 15th century | Estimate: 3,000,000 - 5,000,000 HKD



A Southern Song dynasty 'yuteki tenmoku' tea bowl and a 15th century cinnabar lacquer stand in the Daikomyo-ji Temple.

From the 12th century onwards, Chinese ceramics were also used in secular settings by noble households in Japan and became an indispensable part of elite social life. Ownership of important Chinese goods was an important signifier of wealth and social status, and noble families built special guest halls within their homes to house these treasures. The Ashikaga shoguns, the feudal military rulers of Japan during the Muromachi period (1333-1573), were major patrons of the arts and believed that assembling impressive collections of paintings, calligraphy and finely crafted objects were, in the words of John T. Carpenter, curator of Japanese art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, "a privilege and obligation of those who ruled." Records detail lavish imperial gifts dispatched to the shogunate from China, including from the Yongle Emperor (r. 1403-24) and the Xuande Emperor (r. 1426-35), the latter sending "forty gold-decorated bowls, complete with stands" in 1433.



An extremely rare and important gilt-decorated black-glazed Dingyao tea bowl, Northern Song dynasty | Estimate: 10,000,000 - 15,000,000 HKD

One especially rare treasure coming to Sotheby's this autumn in *Karamono: Heirlooms of Chinese Art from Medieval Japan* is an extremely important gilt-decorated black-glazed Dingyao tea bowl from the Northern Song dynasty. Described as “rare as black swans” during their own epoch, today fewer than a dozen examples exist in the West and Japan, whilst China only has shards excavated from the Ding kiln site at Quyangxian. An outstanding example of extravagant Song sophistication, the fine white ceramic body of the Ding kilns (a highly sought-after object in itself) is covered in its entirety by a thick inky black glaze, with gilded flourishes whose presence is now traced by a delicate layer of white shadows. It was an exceptionally unusual creative process, a maverick statement of artistic expression that pushed the medium to its limits. This present bowl has been listed as an “Important Art Object” (*jūyō bijutsuhin*) in Japan.

The term *karamono* eventually grew beyond Jian tea bowls for *chado* (tea ceremonies), to cover Jingdezhen polychrome porcelains, paintings, calligraphies, incense burners, water vessels, flower vases, lacquer bowl stands, and assorted metal items that might accompany other Japanese cultural activities such as *kodo* (incense culture) and *kado* (flower arranging). Displays of treasured *karamono*

became increasingly grand, but were always centred around the “three sacred objects” that nodded to Buddhist practices: an incense burner, flower vase and candle holder arranged in front of a hanging scroll.



A rare and large Longquan celadon 'kinuta' vase, Southern Song dynasty | Estimate:
2,000,000 - 3,000,000 HKD



A Southern Song dynasty Longquan celadon 'kinuta' vase in the Daikomyo-ji Temple.

One such treasure is a rare and large Longquan celadon *kinuta* (“mallet-shaped”) vase, Southern Song dynasty, which was passed down in Japan since medieval times, and thereafter kept in the collection of the Daikomyo-ji temple where it was placed in front of a hanging calligraphy scroll. Vases of this type have been highly sought after in Japan since the Kamakura period, with kinuta vases of this large size being particularly rare. Several scholars believe its unusual shape was introduced to China as a glass vase or bottle from the Islamic west, possibly Iran, and the Huizong Emperor reportedly owned a collection of imported glass, according to the *Yi Jian Zhi* by the Song dynasty scholar-official Hong Mai. Two closely related examples have been designated as “Japan's National Treasure” and “Important Cultural Property” respectively. The proceeds from the sale of these treasures will be spent on building a replacement for the two-hundred year old residence hall in the Daikomyo-ji Temple, whose aged structure is vulnerable to earthquakes.



About the Author

Marian Ang is a Hong Kong-based art writer and researcher, and a regular Sotheby's contributor.