



RAKU

THE BEAUTY OF IMPERFECTION

GERD LESTER



Figure 1 Chinese temmoku tea bowl. Private collection



Figure 2 Chojiro's red tea bowl *Kogetsu*.
Courtesy of the Gotoh Museum, Tokyo



Figure 3 Chojiro's red tea bowl *Yugue*.
Courtesy of the Gotoh Museum, Tokyo

RAKU HAS THE most fascinating history among the bewildering variety of Japanese ceramic wares. Originated in Kyoto by the son of a naturalised Korean tile-maker in the late sixteenth century, it gained the patronage of the totalitarian military commanders. Celebrated tea masters, devotees of the Zen cult, held it in high esteem for use in the tea ceremony as it exemplified the Buddhist doctrine of striving for mastery of the spirit over matter. The saga of Raku is like a fairy-tale of how some small lumps of clay, hand-formed and baked some centuries ago into tea bowls, are today so revered that they are counted among Japan's national treasures and given individual names.

All art is influenced, even motivated, by the political and social conditions of the times. Raku ware was no exception. In the political arena, Japan had been ravished since the middle of the fifteenth century by strife and bloody warfare between militant provincial *daimyo* (landed lords). Toward the latter part of the sixteenth century, three daring and cunning military men succeeded in unifying the country under their undisputed, autocratic rule. They were Oda Nobunaga (1534–1582), a young *daimyo*, his leading general



Figure 4 Jokei's black tea bowl *Ajuko*.
Courtesy of the Gotoh Museum, Tokyo



Figure 5 Donyu's black tea bowl *Sanba-So*.
Courtesy of the Gotoh Museum, Tokyo

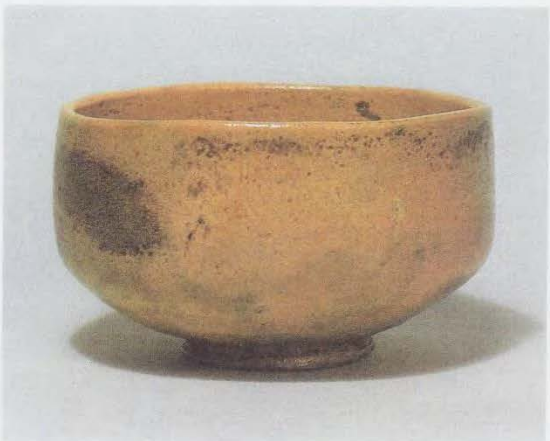


Figure 6 Donyu's yellow tea bowl *Yukinoshita*.
Courtesy of the Gotoh Museum, Tokyo



Figure 7 Chojiro's black tea bowl *Amadera*.
Courtesy of Tokyo National Museum



Figure 8 Chojiro's black tea bowl *Sen-sei*.
Courtesy of the Gotoh Museum, Tokyo

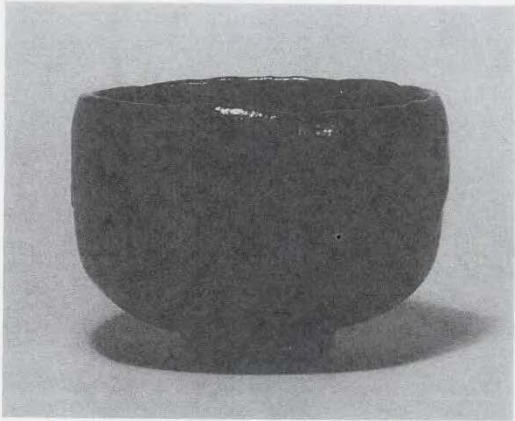


Figure 9 Ichinyu's black tea bowl *Wakamatsu*.
Courtesy of the Gotoh Museum, Tokyo



Figure 10 Sonyu's black tea bowl *Ayame*.
Courtesy of the Gotoh Museum, Tokyo

Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1537–1598), and Tokugawa Ieyasu (1534–1616), who in 1603 set himself up as the first shogun of the Tokugawa family that reigned until the Meiji Restoration in 1868.

Nobunaga was assassinated in 1582 and succeeded by Hideyoshi. A farmer's son, he had risen through the ranks from his lowly background to become the military dictator of Japan, a career unprecedented in the class-conscious society of that country. He was a flamboyant individual who gloried in demonstrating his newly won power in a display of his riches. Following the example of Nobunaga, he built grandiose castles as his residences. One in Kyoto, called Jurakutei, lent part of its name to the ceramic ware under discussion, whereas the entire period was called Momoyama after his monumental castle at that location. The great painters of the era decorated the insides of these architectural show-places with magnificent screens whose gold background illuminated the vast rooms. Daimyo, nobles and even members of the increasingly affluent merchant class were extravagantly entertained there. It was a time of great vitality and ebullient spirit, animated by the new political unity and the country's rapidly developing prosperity.



Figure 11 Ryonyu's black tea bowl. Anonymous gift to Charles B. Hoyt Collection. Courtesy of Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Hideyoshi was a man of complex personality, with very contradictory artistic tastes. Despite his love for ostentation and opulence, he was passionately drawn to the austere aestheticism of the highly revered tea ceremony (*cha-no-yu*). The drinking of tea was a custom introduced to Japan by Chinese Zen Buddhist monks. In their monastic life, they drank tea to keep awake during long hours of meditation. They also served tea to important visitors to the monastery and the preparation of the brew gradually became a prescribed ritual. Of the various forms, the one most frequently used was to pour hot water over powdered green tea in an open bowl and then whip the liquid with a split bamboo whisk into a creamy froth. Contact with Zen monks established the custom in the castles of the nobility, from where it spread to the wealthy and eventually to the general population. Through its philosophical, religious and artistic implications, the tea ceremony developed into a cult that had a profound impact on the ethical outlook and conduct of Japanese society.

The tea ceremony was usually held in a structure set apart from the main dwelling, emulating in its simplicity and purism a Zen monastery. A garden path with irregular stepping stones led to it. Its door was less than three feet high to force the guest to stoop low, leaving feelings of self-importance outside, and enter in a humble frame of mind. The room was small and of sophisticated plainness, constructed with woods of the finest quality and texture. Utensils such as tea bowls, tea caddies, water jars, the kettle and the brazier were chosen with the greatest care, and at times were precious antiques. The gatherings often brought together people of similar artistic tastes who would admire and discuss the aesthetic merits of the objects. The ceremony itself was conducted with great formality, in all-pervading calm. It created an atmosphere in which to forget the cares of the world, to concentrate on one's inner self and reflect upon the deeper meaning of life.

The tea masters who orchestrated and perpetuated the cult played a unique and influential role in the cultural life of Japan. Considered to have been the greatest, Sen-no-Rikyu (1522–1591) was the private tea master of Nobunaga. He codified the rituals as well as the implements of the tea ceremony. After Nobunaga's death, he entered the employ of Hideyoshi in the same capacity. Although he was patronised and befriended by Hideyoshi for years, the two men had a falling out, supposedly over criticism by Rikyu of one of Hideyoshi's garish tea retreats where everything, including utensils, was blazing with gold. An angered Hideyoshi condemned the tea master to death but accorded him the privilege to take his own life by *seppuku* (ritual suicide).

There is no question that Rikyu was the driving force behind the development of Raku ware. Since he was deeply steeped in Zen Buddhism, the ostentatious display of wealth by Hideyoshi and his aristocratic vassals had always been distasteful to him, and was totally contrary to the *wabi* concept of tea teachings. *Wabi* means poverty, though in this context not lack of possessions or food but a state of mind that voluntarily accepts an austere existence. As a meritorious way of life, Rikyu advocated man's return to and living in harmony with nature, finding beauty not in flawless artificiality but in the unpretentious, the inspired spontaneity of imperfection.

Until the end of the sixteenth century, the tea bowls most treasured for use in the tea ceremony were of Chinese origin from the Chien (Jian) kilns in Fukien (Fujian) province, produced in the Sung (Song, 960–1279) and Yuan (1271–1368) dynasties. Japanese Zen monks visiting Chinese monasteries during the Kamakura period (1185–1392) brought them back to Japan. Called *temmoku* after the Chinese locality, they found favour with the Japanese ruling classes owing to their elegant shape, their unusual black and mottled brown "hare's fur" glaze, and because Chinese ceramics were highly prized (Figure 1).

To Rikyu, these refined tea bowls, thrown to perfection on the potter's wheel, with their straight walls and tightly controlled glazes, were inconsistent with *wabi* philosophy. Instead, he envisioned rustic shapes a man could cradle in his palms to relish the feel of the weight, the undisguised marks left by the potter, the texture of the

baked clay, the sensuous flow of the glaze. These ideas were brought to life in Raku ware that played a significant role in his reform of the tea ceremony.

The actual originator of Raku was Cho-yu, popularly known as Chojiro, the son of the Korean tile-maker Ameya Ycisei and his Japanese wife who had settled in Kyoto, Japan's centre for crafts and arts. After his father's death, Chojiro carried on the family's industry and met Rikyu, who induced him to use his knowledge of forming and baking clay to make tea bowls for the tea ceremony. The two men became close friends and the tea master honoured Chojiro by granting him the right to the Sen Rikyu family name of Tanaka. After a design given him by Rikyu, Chojiro fashioned several black glazed cups for Nobunaga. In 1588 he was ordered by Hideyoshi to make him some tea bowls. The powerful dictator was so pleased with them that he bestowed on Chojiro a gold seal with the character *raku*, meaning enjoyment, derived from the name of his Kyoto palace Jurakutei. He monopolised the potter's output, and enormous prices were paid by rich daimyo competing for the few tea bowls that were available. They became symbols of recognition and status as Hideyoshi and his successors, who were known to shower loyal followers with expensive gifts, gave these intrinsically valueless objects as presents for special services. They usually carried the explicit stipulation that they were to be returned to the donor upon the recipient's demise.

Chojiro's son Jokei, a protégé of Hideyoshi, adopted Raku as the family's art and trade name. The ware thereafter became known as Raku-yaki and its traditional style was perpetuated by generation upon generation into the twentieth century. The gold seal was replaced in the early seventeenth century by ordinary seals, supposedly because it got lost, but in all probability because Hideyoshi had died, his pleasure palace Jurakutei had been destroyed, and the Raku family now had to bow and cater to new bosses, the Tokugawa shoguns. The new seals were made of wood, always with the "raku" ideograph, but with some variations in calligraphy. The head of each generation owned one seal that, upon his death, was broken into two parts and buried with him.

The genealogy of the Raku family until the end of the nineteenth century is:

- 1 Chojiro (died 1592)—son of Korean tile-maker
- 2 Jokei (died 1642)—son of Chojiro
- 3 Donyu (died 1656)—son of Jokei, also known as Nonko
- 4 Ichinyu (died 1696)—son of Donyu
- 5 Sonyu (died 1726)—pupil of Ichinyu, also known as Shusai Koho
- 6 Sanyu (died 1739)—adopted son of Sonyu
- 7 Chonyu (died 1769)—son or brother of Sanyu
- 8 Tokunyo (died 1775)—adopted son of Chonyu
- 9 Ryonyu (died 1835)—son of Tokunyo
- 10 Tanyu (died 1854)—son of Ryonyu
- 11 Keinyu (died 1893)—adopted son of Tanyu

This does not take into account the generations of this century, nor family branches that made ceramic wares under their own name.

Japanese potters carefully chose types of clay that would produce the desired properties in the finished objects. The clays near Kyoto at Okazaki and, not far away, at Shigaraki, where local kilns had potted granary storage jars since the fourteenth century, had ideal characteristics for the tea ceremony utensils. Heavy, coarse and of low conductivity, they had a high content of quartz particles. They could not be thrown on the potter's wheel but that was no obstacle for the makers of Raku-yaki. All their ware was hand-formed by age-old methods, each piece expressing the individuality of its creator. The clays from deposits near Kyoto blended into a paste that in firing brought the quartz particles to the surface, giving it added life. The vessels, mostly tea bowls, were light bodied, a delight to the eye and, a most important feature, pleasant to the touch of lips and hands. To drink tea, the bowl was held in both palms, brought to the mouth, three sips were taken, the rim was wiped where the lips had

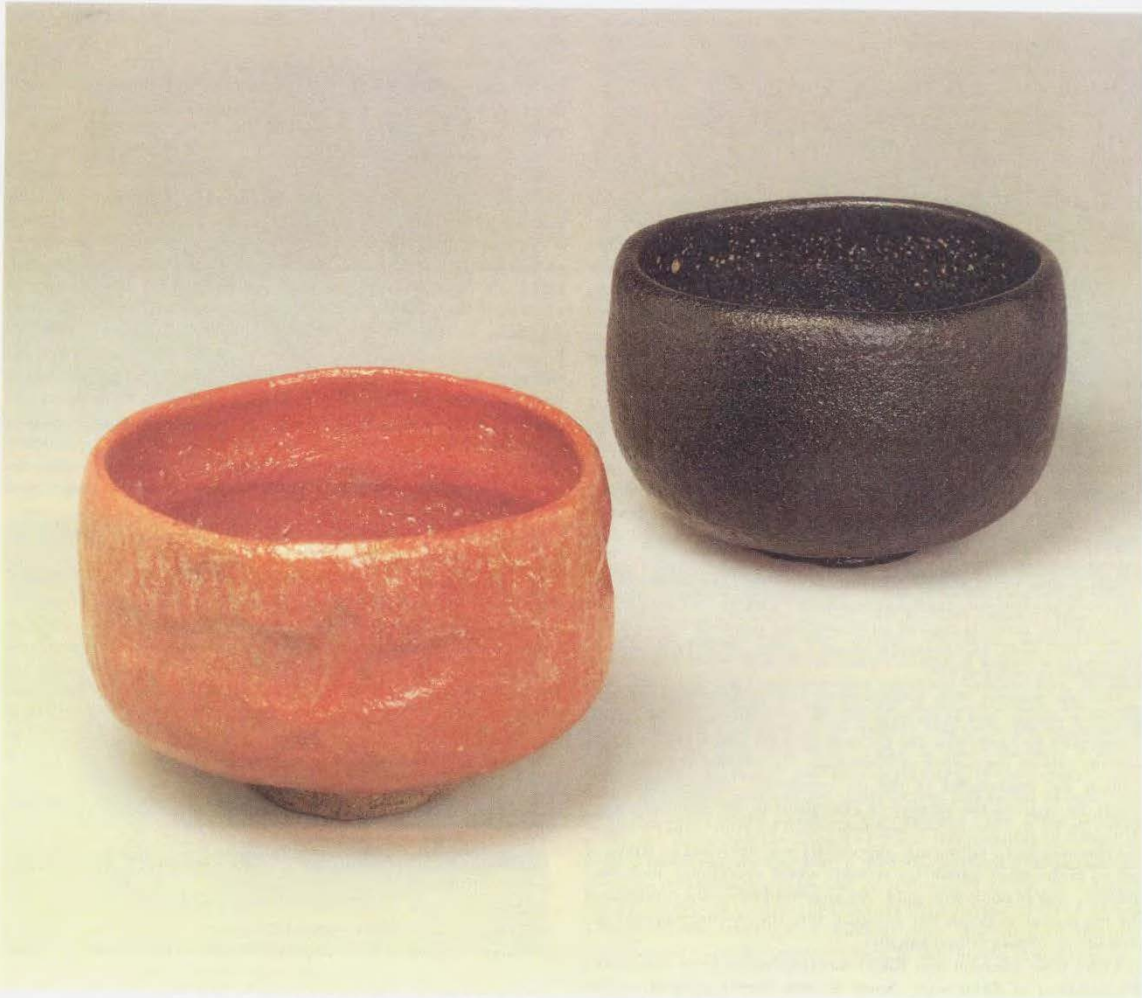


Figure 12 Chonyu's red tea bowl. Courtesy of Board of Trustees, Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Figure 13 Sonyu's black tea bowl. Courtesy of Board of Trustees, Victoria and Albert Museum, London

touched it, the bowl was turned slightly and passed to the next guest. Besides the deep bowls which—owing to their shape and the low conductivity of the material—kept the liquid warm and the hands cool, shallow conical bowls were used in summer when these characteristics were of lesser importance.

Raku-yaki was made by two methods. In one, the clay was rolled into pencil-thick ropes that were coiled one on top of the other to form the body of the object. It was then given the finishing touches by deft hands. Though traces of the rope might remain visible, they were regarded as marks left by the artist as evidence of his craftsmanship. The foot was formed separately from a coil of clay and luted to the body.

In the other method, a lump of clay was manipulated with the fingers and a bamboo spatula into the shape of a hollow vessel. The lower part of it was left massive, to be formed subsequently into the base, with the object turned upside-down. Finger-marks and the impression of the spatula were often still noticeable after firing, but only enhanced the artistic value of the object. It was not technical proficiency but “an unpretentious rusticity, an archaic imperfec-

tion”, to quote D.T. Suzuki, an eminent interpreter of Zen aesthetics, that appealed to adherents of that cult and its outgrowth, the tea ceremony.

When the article was sculpted to the artist's satisfaction, the biscuit was covered with soft, thick glazes, often in several applications that left the colour of the first coat to glow through a subsequent one. There was no striving for evenness of flow as irregularity was respected as emulating one of nature's inherent characteristics. The predominant glazes were black and red, though not in those defined colours but in a range of subtle gradations. Especially with red, the type of material used in firing might transmute the colour to other tinges. Part of the glaze was at times scraped away or a splash of a contrasting colour added to form vague outlines that could be perceived as views of nature, plant or animal life. Connoisseurs studied this “scenery” with the same scrutiny they gave paintings and, imaginatively interpreting these surface patterns, coined poetic names for the objects. Occasionally, the glaze meandered half-way down the body with a wavy edge, leaving the lower part exposed. This was called “curtain formation” and added greatly to the item's



Figure 14 Kyomizu Rokubei's red tea bowl.
Private collection



Figure 15 Hon'ami Koetsu's black tea bowl. Courtesy of Board of Trustees, Victoria and Albert Museum, London

charm. It was seen as the artist's ability to blend his skill harmoniously with the earthy nature of his material.

Each Raku piece was individually fired, at low temperature, in a small kiln. The item was placed on a support inside a fire pot, surrounded by charcoal or another fuel kept hot by constantly blowing air onto it through a bellows. When after a few hours the glaze began to melt, the piece was cooled by immersing it in water. Marks of the tongs used to remove the object from the fire pot are frequently seen on Raku-yaki. Like other visible remainders of the work process, they increased respect for the object and its maker.

Of the various utensils used in the tea ceremony, tea bowls played the most active and important role. It is on them that the Raku potters concentrated their artistic efforts, producing vessels of sculptural beauty. Not beauty in the usual, eye-pleasing sense but the abstract beauty of deliberate artlessness, exuding strength and vitality. The illustrated tea bowls of the Raku masters, dating from the first to the ninth generation with the exception of the sixth and eighth, show how closely all adhered through two and a half centuries to the style conceived by Sen-no-Rikyu and interpreted by

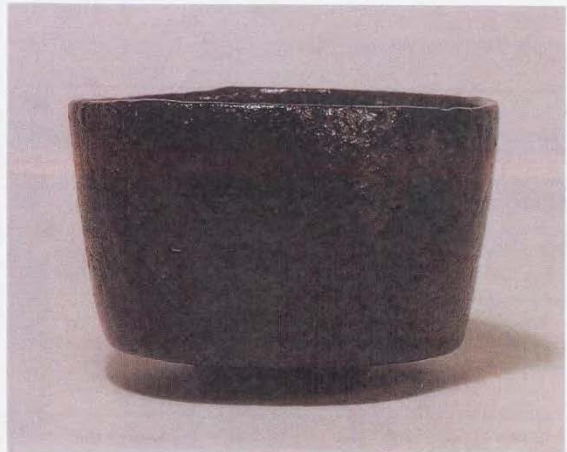


Figure 16 Hon'ami Koetsu's black tea bowl *Shichiri*.
Courtesy of the Gotoh Museum, Tokyo

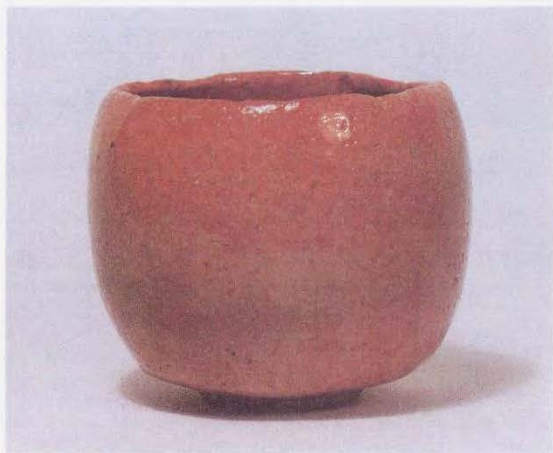


Figure 17 Hon'ami Koetsu's red tea bowl *Ju'ô*.
Courtesy of the Gotoh Museum, Tokyo

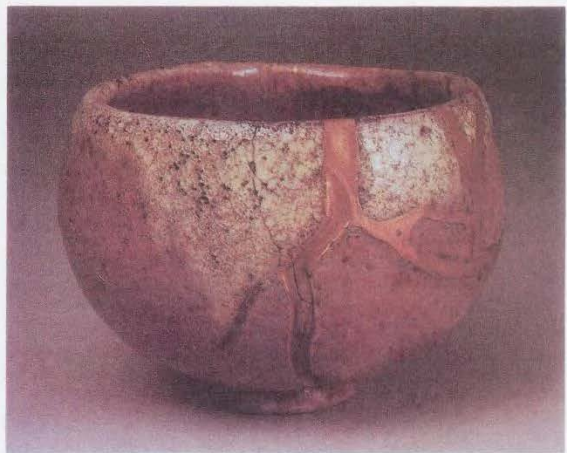


Figure 18 Hon'ami Koetsu's red tea bowl *Seppo*.
Courtesy of the Hatakeyama Collection, Tokyo

Chojiro with profound understanding for balancing function and form. Some of them, especially the black ones, will appear very much alike to the untrained eye. Not so to Japanese connoisseurs. Through life-long study they learned to appreciate subtle differences of materials, glazes and even accidental mishaps incurred during firing. The latter were held in such high regard that at times they were purposely induced to add distinction to the object.

Chojiro's black tea bowl (Figure 7) called *Amadera* (a Buddhist convent) was so named by Sen-no-Sota, a grandson of Sen-no-Rikyu. Its shape and tonality reflect the aesthetic dictates of the tea master and established the classical standard for Raku-yaki tea bowls. Chojiro's *Sen-sei* (Figure 8) translates into Many Voices. It possibly earned that name as the black glaze is highlighted by sparkling quartz crystals, each one like a voice coming out of the dark. His red bowl called *Kogetsu*, Moon Reflected in Lake, has in firing softened in tone toward a beige hue covered by a finely crackled dark network (Figure 2). Only a very imaginative soul could have envisioned in the glaze the scene befitting the name, but the tea cult and everything connected with it evoked deep emotional feelings in its followers. The same artist's red tea bowl's name *Yugure* or Evening (Figure 3) is easier to understand. Its colour transmutations can readily be likened to the time of the day when the sun descends beyond the horizon and its red glow lightens only part of the sky.

Jokei is represented by a black bowl (Figure 4) called *Ajuko*, which stands for Wanton Woman. The black glaze with a brown undertone has a bright red spot, caused by the burst of a bubble in firing. It adds an interesting touch and undoubtedly is the reason for the name.

Donyu or Nonko is ranked as one of the outstanding Raku masters. He is famed for the depth of his glossy black glaze, often ending in a flow of wavy "curtain formation" lines. His tea bowl *Sanba-So* or Felicitous Dance (Figure 5) shows these typical characteristics. His artistic versatility is seen in the yellow bowl known as *Yukinoshita* with its strong yet relaxed lines (Figure 6). The subtle green tint shimmering through the glaze and a large scorch mark enhance the appeal.

Ichinyu's black bowl *Wakamatsu* (Figure 9), meaning Young Pine, is similar in form and the "curtain formation" effect to the *Sanba-So* bowl of his father Donyu, but lacks its strength. Neither the brownish black glaze nor its wavy ending have the sure-handed conviction so evident in his father's work.

Sonyu's black bowl *Ayame* or Iris (Figure 10) follows the tradition of his predecessors. It complies with the demands of the tea cult devotees to observe, without significant changes, the principles and customs initiated centuries ago. Less rigid in form, standing on a lower foot and covered with a softer glaze appears his black bowl (Figure 13), shown together with one by Chonyu. This impressive red bowl (Figure 12) is covered with a thin glaze fitting the body like a tight, transparent glove. A broad band of spatula marks around the sides adds to the ease and pleasure when holding the cup.

Ronyu's thickly potted, unevenly glazed black bowl (Figure 11) has as its dominant feature splashes of ochre in the shape of Mount Fuji. This type of spontaneous, almost casual decoration represents the highest ideals of tea ceremony aesthetics. The bowl is in the Charles B. Hoyt Collection at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, but a very similar bowl is in the same museum's Morse Collection of Japanese Pottery. It is one of over five thousand specimens in that collection of Japanese ceramics, assembled, classified and catalogued by a single individual, Edward Sylvester Morse. An outstanding scholar of many interests, he went to Japan in 1877 as a teacher at the Imperial University in Tokyo. Fascinated by Japanese culture, so different from his New England background, Morse turned his scientific mind to researching Japanese crafts and art. Ceramics occupied his special attention. His monumental collection of Japanese pottery is housed in forty large showcases, and represents an invaluable source of information on Japanese ceramics.

Raku tea bowls were most highly regarded by devotees of the tea

cult, and in great demand. Consequently, many potters not belonging to the Raku clan applied their skill to fashion bowls of similar appearance. Foremost among them was Kyomizu Rokubei, a distinguished ceramist who lived from 1737 to 1799. The hand-formed, spatula marked, orange-red coloured tea bowl decorated with a white cherry blossom and a black maple leaf (Figure 14) could easily have emerged from the kiln of one of the Raku masters. On the side opposite the leaves, somewhat below the rim, are underglaze, incised with a broad point, four large characters, translating as East Mountain Tea Society. On the base, the bowl bears the impressed seal of Sei within a hexagon, an ideogram created for Rokubei by a Buddhist priest. Sei is the alternative pronunciation of Kyo, an abbreviation of Kyomizu, his name as well as that of the site near Kyoto where Rokubei established his kilns.

Like calligraphy, painting and composing poetry, the making of ceramics was considered a cultural accomplishment and practised by many upper class lovers of art. The simple way of turning out Raku type ware attracted many artistic, non-professional potters. As the objects were hand-formed, no potter's wheel was needed. Kilns were small, less than two feet in either direction, and could be placed in any outdoor setting. Firing and glazing were accomplished at low temperature within a relatively short time.

An amateur potter ranking among the greatest makers of Raku ware, though not a member of the Raku family, was Hon'ami Koetsu (1558-1637). Family trained in his youth in connoisseurship of swords, he grew up to become one of the most versatile and celebrated artists of his period, renowned for his calligraphy, painting and lacquerware. For his achievements in the field of the arts, he was granted in 1615 by the shogun Tokugawa Iyeyasu a piece of land northwest of Kyoto, where he founded an artists' colony. Among Koetsu's many friends was the daimyo Furuta Oribe (1544-1615), a pupil of Sen-no-Rikyu, who not only became a famous tea master himself but also inspired a very distinctive style of ceramics named after him. Other intimates of Koetsu were the second and third generation Raku masters, Jokei and Donyu (Nonko). They and the tea master Oribe undoubtedly influenced him to apply his artistic genius to making ceramics. In his late fifties, with initial guidance from the Raku masters who also supplied him with clay, he started to make tea bowls in the Raku manner. They show his deep understanding of the tea masters' principles and are peerless examples of Raku-yaki.

Examples of Koetsu's work are seen in the black tea bowl (Figure 15) with the sharply defined, almost cylindrical profile, relieved by a smooth, slightly undulating mouth rim, sitting on a narrow base. The black glaze is scraped away in patches to add richness in tone and texture. Another black tea bowl of similar shape (Figure 16) is perched on a somewhat higher base, again with scraped patches. After drinking the tea, tea ceremony guests would turn the empty bowl over to examine and admire the base and the graceful swirl of its inner circle. The bowl is named *Shichiri* after one of its owners.

The red tea bowl called *Ju'o* (Ten Kings of Hell) is of globular form on a short foot, with the rim of the mouth sloping gently inward, the entire body covered with a soft reddish glaze (Figure 17). Another red tea bowl known as *Seppo* (Snow Peak) is one of Koetsu's undisputed ceramic masterpieces (Figure 18). Its delicately rounded body resting on a firm foot, its undulating mouth rim, and especially its striking orange-red glaze with intermittent white tinged, black speckled areas and thickened flow lines resembling tree trunks, demonstrate his superb craftsmanship. It bears the unmistakable mark of an artist who creates to express himself and the new, unconventional spirit of the time.

The tea ceremony with its progressive tea masters was the spring board for Raku-yaki. Blending philosophical and utilitarian concepts, the Raku potters and men of talent emulating their style endowed their creations with new spiritual vibrancy and artistic perception that exerted an enduring influence on Japanese ceramics. It made the world aware that beauty can take on many images, including that of imperfection.