BOOK REVIEW

Handmade Culture: Raku Potters, Patrons, and Tea Practitioners


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Raku pottery shares its origin with chanoyu, the Japanese Tea Ceremony, a cultural tradition that is the material basis of the wabi aesthetic system instilling a sense of simplicity and rusticity as well as being a popular art form and ritual practice unique to the Japanese culture. Handmade Culture: Raku Potters, Patrons, and Tea Practitioners provides a cultural and historical account of the origin and reconceptualization of raku pottery, contextualizing it for contemporary understanding. In many ways, the tea bowl, or chawan, is the embodiment of this aesthetic. Pitelka demonstrates a deep understanding of the hand-hewn chawan, which he explains is quite unlike ceramic objects created by a similar firing technique popular today.

Morgan Pitelka, scholar of Asian Studies and himself a potter, draws conclusions from ethnography and historical documents to provide a fascinating and informative account of the birth and growth of raku and the continued development of chanoyu in Handmade Culture. The craft of the raku tea bowl emerged from the aesthetic union of material culture and ritual practice in Japan over 400 years ago. A new aesthetic for the way of tea, chado, developed alongside the inception of the raku tea bowl.

The late 16th-century origin of raku and the systematic organization of the tea ritual is traced to a significant tea master, Sen no Rikyu (1522-1591). As described by Plutschow (2003), “for him [Rikyu], a warm-hearted hospitality is the most important thing far surpassing any rare delicacy” (p.182). Rikyu collaborated with Sasaki Chojiro (1516-1592), a Japanese-Korean potter, in developing a particular kind of tea bowl as the preferred tool for preparing and serving matcha, a powdered green tea for the ritual. Pitelka recognizes this significance by stating:

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. (p. 16)

Rikyu preferred the raku tea bowl because for him it most embodied wabi aesthetic qualities.

The wabi system objectified in a raku tea bowl was further developed as a result of the relationship between Rikyu and his patron, Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1536-1598), the most powerful warlord of Japan at the time. Rikyu’s preference for simple objects and austere tearooms challenged Hideyoshi’s ostentatious taste based on aggressive aggrandizement and economic acquisition. Rikyu emphasized human equality and humility through the tea ritual. His aesthetic choices also implied his opposition to Hideyoshi’s plans to invade Korea and China (Plutschow, 2003). As a student of the tea ritual, Hideyoshi was humiliated by Rikyu’s art form and anti-war sentiment with its understated symbolic gestures of purity and tranquility. The warlord ordered the tea master to death by his own hand.

Raku as a traditional low temperature ceramic form originates from collaboration between Chojiro, a clay tile maker also employed by Hideyoshi, and Rikyu. In Handmade Culture, Pitelka provides a critique of the myth and history of cultural invention and reinvention before raku pottery was popularized in the West a half century ago. He presents and discusses family lineage of the traditional iemoto arts of raku and chanoyu. This account of Japanese cultural property demonstrates how both were shaped by social and political tides through early modernity. Traditional medieval guilds such as those of raku pottery, chanoyu, Noh theatre, flower arranging, calligraphy, and martial arts were passed through generations of sons and grandsons, and continue to be highly revered today. Pitelka analyzes and discusses the histories written and rewritten to justify positions of power and authority. He begins his analysis by acknowledging his own influences from his father, also a potter, and his mother, an academic historian. Pitelka demonstrates the mutability of culture in maintaining form and integrity from the origin of raku through the advent of modernist individualism and nationalism.

In his book, Pitelka focuses on three elements in the raku tradition: the material culture, the discursive elements, and the prevalent symbols. Tea utensils, texts, and the iconic figures such as Rikyu and Chojiro provide a perspective on the ever-changing system of cultural practice. Through an examination of relationships between people and objects, Pitelka provides an understanding of traditional Japanese culture itself. He begins by exploring the central myths and the histories of raku. The developments point to a single kiln in Kyoto operated by Chojiro and
his apprentices. After Rikyu’s death, his grandson and great grandsons established three tea schools and continued patronage of Chojiro’s kiln in the early 17th century at the beginning of the cultural renaissance of Japan.

The popularity of tea practice increased, and multiple kilns appeared in and near Kyoto by the mid-17th century. Competition developed, and the son of an apprentice to Chojiro wrote a genealogy that traced himself back to the original household that associated with Rikyu. This potter, Nonko, reinvented himself as the patriarch of raku and claimed a lineage back to Chojiro, thus controlling history and the connoisseur-driven market. In the 18th century, the three tea schools founded by Rikyu’s heirs organized into *iemoto*, institutions that maintained tight control over practice through a hierarchical structure. The *iemoto*, according to Pitelka, “had the power to institutionalize aesthetic preferences—in other words, technologies, of seeing and handling art—in a process that transformed cultural production in Japan” (p. 10). Developments continued through the mid-19th century that popularized tea practice with the samurai warriors until the Tokugawa government collapsed, and Japan reopened its doors to the world and modernity. One tea school, Urasenke, reinvented its schooling, modernized, and adapted to the new sociopolitical environment. Pitelka concludes that raku ceramics reveal multiple meanings of thinking about “art” and create a challenge for collectors, educators, and museums to consider the complexities of aesthetic systems, connoisseurship, and patronage.

My personal experiences with the tea ritual began about 20 years ago when I taught a unit on raku pottery to high school students. I naively explored the relationship between raku and chanoyu. Since then, I have offered a university level course and have provided numerous tea ritual and raku pottery-firing demonstrations. I have often wondered about the misrepresentations of content that I may have offered and the cultural misunderstandings that my students take with them, particularly as outsiders. Because I continue to study the cultural phenomenon of chado, teach raku pottery and chanoyu, and produce bowls for tea, I appreciate Pitelka’s comprehensive study of the material object in the context of practice, connoisseurship, and cross-cultural representation.

*Handmade Culture: Raku Potters, Patrons, and Tea Practitioners* is an important, comprehensive, and cohesive study of raku pottery. Pitelka’s book has merit and importance for contemporary understandings based on mythohistories, the assumptions that shape perceptions and appreciations. *Handmade Culture* demonstrates the value of deconstructing contexts of material culture through an analysis of institutionalized instruction, connoisseurship, and transmission of a cultural form as chanoyu shifts from a Japanese tradition to invite a global audience.
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References
