

● Research Report ●

Poet's Gaze, Potter's Touch: A 1705 Kenzan-Ware Dish with Landscape Décor

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Abstract

The Kyoto ceramics designer Ogata Kenzan (1663-1743) is particularly well known for dishes decorated with monochrome painting and calligraphic inscriptions, created shortly after he opened his first ceramics workshop in Narutaki, northwest of Kyoto, in 1699. The gestation of this synthesis of painting, poetry and pottery is nevertheless poorly understood. However, a 1705-dated work that came to light in Tokyo in 2015 clarifies both the technical and iconographic standards that Kenzan employed at the beginning of his career. This article will examine these aspects with special emphasis on the interplay between poetic inscription, painted theme, and ceramic vessel.

Literacy and leisure combined to revolutionize craft production in Edo-period Japan. Inspired by precedents in painting and lacquerware, and even more by the burgeoning illustrated book, from the mid-seventeenth century textile and ceramics makers began to systematically produce objects that quoted or otherwise referenced classical texts. Japanese waka poetry and noh drama are the primary sources, but Chinese poetry makes its debut in textiles in the 1660s, and by the opening of the next century Chinese verses appear on ceramic surfaces. The latter breakthrough was engineered by the Kyoto ceramics designer Ogata Kenzan (1663-1743), brother of the celebrated painter Ogata Kōrin (1658-1716). Before opening a ceramics workshop at Narutaki in the northwest hills of Kyoto in 1699, Kenzan had spent a decade immersed in studies of Chinese poetry and Ōbaku Zen Buddhism. His neighbor during this formative period was the master potter Nonomura

Ninsei (act. mid-17th c.), and the encounter led Kenzan to consider how the literati arts might be expressed in ceramics.

Kenzan's solution was to synthesize the clay vessel with painting. He created rectilinear dishes formed out of thin slabs of clay. He rendered their surfaces white by using clay slip, much in the way a painter would size a canvas. The flat interior of the vessels was decorated with monochrome painting and poetic inscriptions, with the addition of red seals. Motifs of scrolling clouds and floral clusters were added on the edges, which came to resemble the cloth borders of a hanging scroll. Firing was kept at low temperature to guarantee the integrity of the brushwork. This genre of Kenzan ware, called the *gasan* style after the Chinese expression for inscribed paintings, or *hua zan*, achieved remarkable popularity, and after a dozen years of production at Narutaki it came to be mass-produced at a second workshop, Shōgoin in east Kyoto, first under Kenzan himself and then under his adopted son and successor Ogata Ihachi (act. mid-18th c.).

Kenzan's *gasan* style is conventionally represented by a series of dishes that he made late in the Hōei era (1704-1711) together with his brother Kōrin. The most celebrated examples are a group of ten dishes in the collection of the Fujita Museum, Osaka. Here the painting is quick and abbreviated and the poetic excerpts are brief. A few surviving dishes from earlier in the Hōei, however, suggest a more elaborate, detailed prototype for the *gasan* style, but firm evidence has been wanting. In 2015, however, a long lost work in this mode bearing the date of 1705 (figs. 1, 2) came to light in Tokyo, and it permits a careful study of Kenzan's original concept. The shape of this particular piece is called *gakuzara*, which means dish in the shape of a plaque. These are square or rectangular dishes with low, everted walls. The shape ultimately derives from Chinese lacquerware dishes, and it appears in Chinese porcelains from Jingdezhen in the early sixteenth century.

The brushwork on the dish suggests an artist trained in the academic Kanō style, although the soft contours and texture strokes can be traced back to the Muromachi artist Sōami (d. 1525). While the inscriptions and signatures on the dish are unmistakably Kenzan's own, in this phase of his career he entrusted the actual painting to specialists; the probable painter is Watanabe Soshin, whose seal appears on another dish from the same period and who is named as a collaborator in a later Kenzan workshop manual



Figure 1. Square dish with landscape design in underglaze iron (front), by Ogata Kenzan (1663-1743). Lead-glazed earthenware, 29.5 × 29.5 × 4.7 cm. Private collection.

entitled *Tōki mippōsho* (National Diet Library, Tokyo; other collections). This may well be the same person as the versatile painter Watanabe Shikō (1683-1755), who occasionally worked in a Kōrin style but is best known for his Kanō-style painting, sometimes under the sponsorship of court aristocrat Konoe Iehirō (1667-1736).

On this dish the painted composition—arguably the most “painterly” example in all of Kenzan ceramics—is a composite of scenes from the venerated Chinese landscape theme “Eight Views of the Xiao and Xiang



Figure 2. Detail of verso inscribed “Fusō Hōei kinoto-tori aki hachigatsu Yōshū Kenzan Tōin Shinsei zō” (Made in the northwest hills of Kyoto in the autumn, eighth month of 1705 by Hermit Potter Shinsei of Yōshū province).

Rivers” (Japanese: Shōshō hakkei). These imaginary scenes of rivers and valleys in what is now Hunan province, southern China, were first painted in the eleventh century, and the early works were passed down with several sets of poems on the theme. Xiao-Xiang paintings enjoyed enormous cachet in Japan and were produced there from no later than the fourteenth century. It was probably in the second half of the 1500s that the individual scenes were combined into a single composition by masters like Sōami. Typically the pictorial elements were concentrated at the right and left extremes of a folding screen pair, with a void in the middle. From the sixteenth century this approach was taken into the repertory of the Kanō school, presumably under the leadership of Motonobu (1476-1559). The Yale University Art Gallery owns one of these Eight Views composites bearing a Motonobu seal (2001.56.1).

The arrangement on the Kenzan-ware dish is descended from this concept. Fitting the eight themes into the base of a dish is no small feat, but

at least seven of the scenes—or parts of those scenes—can be identified on the dish (fig. 3). The one missing vignette is “Autumn Moon Over Lake Dongting,” a vista traditionally seen from a tower, specifically the fabled Yueyang tower on Lake Dongting, also in Hunan province. The absence of a tower in the dish can be understood upon reading the poem that Kenzan inscribed in the upper part of the composition:

南北千行鴈 To the north and south, a thousand lines of geese,
 東西萬里秋 To the east and west, ten thousand leagues of autumn.
 情濃惟眷酒 With emotions high, thoughts can only turn to wine:
 脚倦怯登樓 With wobbly legs, hesitant to ascend the tower.
 雲嶺迷人望 Distant views blurred by cloud-draped summits,
 風帆挂客愁 Every lament hung out on windblown sails.
 水流山不斷 The flowing waters and mountains are inseparable:
 誰得普天遊 Who gets to roam under these heavens?
 (original poem by Pu Yangchuan 濮陽傳 [dates unknown], as inscribed in vol. 5 of the Ming poetry anthology *Yuanji huofa* 圓機活法 [Japanese, *Enki kappō*], late 16th-early 17th c.)



Figure 3. Xiao and Xiang themes on the 1705 dish.

With this versified view from a tower, painting a tower into the scene would be redundant: the eighth view becomes the gaze of the viewer. Kenzan’s

approach has both popular and classical dimensions. A vast but wine-blurred scene unfolding before the beholder's eyes was appropriate for gatherings where alcohol was the social lubricant. On the other hand, the painting and poetry combine to evoke venerated literati ideals, specifically the tower as a site for philosophical or historical musings. Since Xiao-Xiang poetry and pictures had permeated Japanese print culture in the decades just prior to Kenzan's debut, such traditional associations were readily accessible.

The Kenzan dish has been handed down with a matching box whose inscription suggests that it was once the property of the Ōuchi family of Sendai domain, centered in what is now Miyagi prefecture. This presumably was the Ōuchi family of retainers that received a stipend of 1,390 *koku* from the Sendai-based Date clan (the former homesite of the Ōuchi, occupied from 1740 until the Meiji period, is presently on the grounds of the Nishikori Primary School in Tome City). Identity notwithstanding, the collector had exquisite taste. In superb condition, and showing the combined arts of painting, poetry, and calligraphy, the dish is the premier manifestation of the formative years of Japan's greatest ceramic designer.

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