

Tea and the Revolution of Color

—Western Porcelain and Japan—

By Okabe Masayuki



Plate 1: Félix Bracquemond, "Service Rousseau," 1866 - 1875, Dimension: H 2.5 cm x D 25.0 cm, cake stand: H 8.0 cm x D 22.0 cm, The Louis C. Tiffany Garden Museum, Matsue Japan

In 1891 printmaker Félix Bracquemond (1833-1904) published a book in Paris. It was titled *A Propos Manufactures Nationales de Ceramique et de Tapiserir*, and at sixty-seven pages it was more of a pamphlet. As the title indicates, it was a proposal to the French government, and the volume is of considerable significance.

Bracquemond was originally a printmaker. In the mid-nineteenth century, France witnessed an advance in the quality of copper-plate etching. Until that time, copper-plate etching had been devoted mainly to the reproduction of drawings and illustrations for

books, and there were large numbers of artists with superior technique in such skills as line engraving, but one would still call them plate engravers rather than print artists. They simply engraved the plates according to the rough sketches drawn by the artists. There was a great demand for prints, and there were few printmakers who conceived designs from rough sketches independently. However, accompanying the technical progress of the copper-plate printing of etchings and aquatints, there appeared artists who were unlike earlier artisans who produced prints as an avocation or who contracted with artists to produce prints

and instead specialized in producing prints from start to finish. One such print artist who promoted making prints artistic was the print artist Auguste Delâtre. Bracquemond learned printing on his own, but it was through close association with Delâtre and the art critics Baudelaire and Philippe Burty that he devoted efforts to the promotion of a new artistic form of printing.

Bracquemond's connection with porcelain (faïence) came later, at the beginning of the 1860s when he was in his late twenties. At the invitation of Joseph-Théodore Deck, owner of a porcelain studio, he began working at porcelain painting. Among the artists

who worked as china painters for Deck were the young Pierre-Auguste Renoir and Félix Buhot. Deck certainly possessed a discerning eye for talent. On the translucent whiteness of porcelain, the beautiful tints of the painters' brush were even more impressive. There can be little doubt that the artists thought of porcelain painting less as a job than as an opportunity to create freely.

During this period, similar to what was occurring in printing, the artistic values of porcelain in the West were also changing. Developing rapidly in different areas of Europe, beginning with Delft ware in the 17th century, and continuing in the 18th century at the Worcester kilns, Meissen kilns and Augarten kilns, what made porcelain so appealing was the design painted on it. This delicate, brilliant decorativeness lent color to the Baroque and Rococo culture of the courts, becoming an element in the life space of the people. However, until the middle of the 19th century, within the decorative arts in general – including porcelain, glassware, silverware, furniture and tapestry – the strong individuality of the makers and artistic expression in general were still obscured by the uniform decorative style of the kiln or studio. During the 19th century, in contrast with painting – which developed through incorporating the new changes within society and where the artist's individuality and aesthetics developed magnificently, resulting in the appearance of one art movement after another – porcelain continued to be perceived as a form of decorative art by craftsman limited to life at court and belonging to the previous century. Painting was seen as a pure art form called "high art," while porcelain remained little more than a decorative art referred to as "low art."

Through his creative experience, Bracquemond was convinced that the decorative arts, including porcelain and printmaking, had to be made more artistic. He especially wanted to introduce a new perspective to the painting of porcelain, in which the patterns and designs of flowers had become fixed.

In 1859 (some sources say 1856), Bracquemond discovered among mate-



Plate 2: Katsushika Hokusai, *Hokusai Manga*, 1814-1874,
The Louis C. Tiffany Garden Museum, Matsue Japan

rials at the home of his friend the printmaker Delàtre a volume of *Hokusai Manga*. Japan had just opened to the West, and Japanese culture and art were not well known. Within this context, it was Bracquemond who first took note of what was known in Japan as *Hokusai Manga*. The work later came to be known as "Hokusai Sketches" in the West, and it became a virtual textbook of Japanese art. *Hokusai Manga* – the first volume was published in 1814 and the fifteenth and final volume was completed in 1878 after Hokusai's death – was a compilation of techniques and designs intended for beginning painters. The word *manga* was chosen by Hokusai and it meant pictures which are freely drawn and connected together. It was published in book form, consisting of black and light red, two-color *ukiyo-e* prints, filled with various animals and plants and members of various social classes in every pose and with every expression imaginable: a veritable treasure-house of images. These volumes became significant textbooks for young artists in Japan.

In 1866 Bracquemond created a set

of porcelain service with his own designs painted on them. Commissioned to design and sell a set of porcelain ware by the glassware and porcelain artist François-Eugène Rousseau, who he had met while working at the Sevres factory, Bracquemond produced a large faience service which came to be sold as "Service Rousseau." (Plate 1) Bracquemond based his designs for this service on his own prints of motifs copied from *Hokusai Manga* and the artist Utagawa Hiroshige's *ukiyo-e*. This was seen as an innovation within Western porcelain. The novelty was partially a result of Hokusai's talents in producing the images found in *Hokusai Manga* (Plate 2), but it also resulted from Bracquemond's taking those designs and combining them with Western-style porcelain.

At the home of Delàtre, Bracquemond became acquainted with the art critic Pilippe Burty who was later to become well-known as an enthusiastic admirer of Japanese art. The occasion for their developing a close friendship was *Hokusai Manga*, and they were among the earliest affi-



Plate 3: Meissen, "Dish with Flower and Bird Design", about 1740, Dimension: H 3.2 cm x D 21.5 cm, The Louis C. Tiffany Garden Museum, Matsue Japan

cionados of *japonisme*.

Burty's daughter married the American importer-exporter David Haviland who established a factory at Limoges. Through Burty, Bracquemond met Charles Haviland and developed a friendship, and in 1873 Haviland invited his friend to serve as artistic advisor to his company. Here began Bracquemond's involvement in the production of porcelain. While there he studied Japanese art and design and originated the technique of *barbotine*, reminiscent of *makie*, gold and silver lacquer work. Bracquemond's *A Propos Manufactures Nationales de Ceramique et de Tapiserier* (1891) was the result of the work he had dedicated half of his lifetime to.

From the 17th century onward, people in the West praised and admired Japanese and Chinese ceramics. In the 18th century, the Meissen kilns, which were built under the auspices of Augustus III of Saxony, produced ceramics with Oriental motifs. As a typical instance, the pottery created at Meissen was produced according to

Eastern techniques, and moreover, the patterns were direct imitations of Japan's *Kakiemon* style. (Plate 3) It was as if the intent was to create a clone of the original. However, the artists of the *japonisme* school including Bracquemond, through introducing designs from *ukiyo-e* to ceramics and applying the perceived qualities of *makie* to ceramics, while strongly influenced by Japanese art, effectively blended Japanese aestheticism and traditional Western technique, creating an entirely new art and raising the artistic level of decorative art and printmaking. What raised the level of printmaking artistically was none other than Japanese *ukiyo-e*.

The fondness for Western ceramics is thought to be closely connected to the introduction of the custom of enjoying tea. From the 15th to the 16th centuries, coffee as a drink introduced from abroad was exceedingly popular in such places as London, Paris and Vienna. It was introduced to Europe from the nearest foreign culture, that of

the Osmanli Turks. However, approximately one hundred years later, from the 17th to the 18th centuries, the preference of Europeans changed dramatically due to the appearance of teas from China and Japan. England, for example, changed entirely from a coffee-imbibing nation to a nation devoted to tea.

It was not only the flavor of the tea that astonished Europeans who visited Japan and earned their accolades, but also the tea ceremony and the transformation of tea into an aesthetic and ritual form within daily life. It was "tea" which made a unified representation of beauty in daily living including tea implements and ceramics. The impeccable whiteness of Eastern ceramics made the coloring of painted designs stand out, and more than anything else made the color of tea more aesthetically pleasing. The flowers, birds and scenery painted on Oriental ceramics caused a rediscovery of the beauty of nature. The beauty of the white undercoating showed the beauty of blank space,

showing Westerners a sophistication of ornamental composition. It can be said that the aesthetic consciousness represented in small Oriental ceramic pieces was transformed into the sophisticated taste and formalism of Rococo. The introduction of the custom of drinking tea may even have greatly changed the Western table and the decor of interior living spaces. And a sophistication of aesthetic sensibility was created. It is of great interest that this influence, more than how it was reflected on Western ceramic ware, was felt in the customs of everyday life and on the spiritual aesthetic sensibility. **JJTI**

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