

Kutani Ware: World-Famous Pottery

By Toshioka Kosen

CENTURIES ago, small quantities of gold were discovered in Kutani, a part of Kaga City, Ishikawa Prefecture. The local Daishoji Domain daimyo (feudal lord), Maeda Toshiharu, invited an expert goldsmith called Goto Saijiro from the Shibata Domain in Echigo, Niigata, to develop the gold mine. While he was working on the mine, a clay suitable for making pottery was discovered.

Nagasaki was the only place in Japan where trade was permitted at that time. Having a strong interest in arts and crafts, the Kaga Domain, the main domain of Daishoji, opened a purchasing office in Nagasaki to satisfy the demand for artistic collectors' items from abroad, including pottery made in Europe and Persia. Beautiful Imari ware (also called Arita ware) was made near Nagasaki, and the feudal lord of Daishoji had wanted to produce similar pottery in his own domain. The domain

authorities sent a man named Tamura Gonzaemon, along with the goldsmith Goto to Saga, which was known as a center of ceramic production, and had them study pottery-making techniques. Later, they brought back potters from Karatsu, another pottery manufacturing area near Imari, and built the first Kutani kiln in 1655, exactly 350 years ago. This was the beginning of the *Ko-Kutani* (Old Kutani) style. The problem, though, was that Tokugawa Shogunate suspected that some potters were from the Korean peninsula. The Shogunate's policy of the time was to keep foreign influences out of Japan. Kaga officials did not want the Shogunate "meddling" in the domain's business, so in 1692 it destroyed the two climbing kilns in Kutani. The kilns operated for only 37 years, and the pottery produced during the time is now called Ko-Kutani.

About 120 years later, in 1805, two town officials of Kanazawa went to Kyoto to invite an expert potter to the Kanazawa region. The potter, Aoki Mokubei, constructed his kiln in Utatsuyama, Kanazawa, and established what became a large-scale pottery workshop in those days.

This was the revival of Kutani ware, and pottery made in the workshop is called *Mokubei*.

Although Mokubei favored a more artistic type of ceramic, such as the red glazed *Gosuakae*, his patron asked him to make dinnerware for daily use, so he decided to follow his own aesthetic sensibilities, and returned to Kyoto. One of his disciples, Honda Sadakichi, remained behind and continued production, but after Kanazawa Castle was destroyed by fire in 1808, the domain's financial situation deteriorated badly and ownership of the kiln was transferred into private hands. The production workshop started by Mokubei shut down in 1818, and Sadakichi moved to nearby Komatsu.

In 1823, Toyota Denemon, a wealthy merchant of Daishoji (the present Kaga City), put up money to construct a new kiln

Yoshidaya style



Photos: Kutaniyaki Art Museum
Akae Kutani style (right)



Ko-Kutani style (left)



in Kutani again. The location was inconvenient, though, and the production base was moved to the Yamashiro Onsen area. In the early days, the ware featured yellow coloring in the spaces between the illustrated areas. This was the distinctive *Yoshidaya* style. Around 1830, at a time when Chinese aesthetic sensibilities were quite the rage, a new style with red and gold dual color designs was introduced by a master craftsman, Iidaya Hachiroemon. This new genre became known as the *Akae Kutani* style, or the *Iidaya* style.

Later, in 1865, Eiraku Zengoro of Kyoto, who used the name of Wazen, brought his family and craftsmen to Yamashiro. He established the *Eiraku* style, which featured a red coating and a decorative gold pattern, but the Daishoji Domain fell into severe financial straits, making it difficult to obtain enough gold leaf for the decorative patterns, and Eiraku returned to Kyoto. After the Meiji Restoration of 1868, Japan eagerly imported goods from other countries. A master potter from Terai (the present Nomi City) called Shoza, began using Western pigment to decorate his pottery with highly ornamental colored illustrations. This became yet another Kutani ware style, the *Shoza* style.

I have traced the evolution of Kutani styles, from the

Ko-Kutani to the Mokubei, Yoshidaya, Iidaya, Eiraku and Shoza styles, six genres taking us up to the present. Kutani ware is now generally divided into two types – Ao Kutani and Akae Kutani. Ao Kutani uses Japanese pigment for the five Kutani colors or *Kutani gosai*: green, dark blue, yellow, purple and red.

Most modern Kutani ware is Ao Kutani decorated with the distinctive enamel colors. Some pieces, rather than being decorated with colored enamel, though, are covered with a colored glaze. Two important examples of such glazes are *seiji tenmoku-yu* and *shinsha-yu*.

I hope this overview of the 350-year history of Kutani ware has been interesting. **JS**

Toshioka Kosen is a fourth-generation potter of the Kutani-Kosen kiln and an associate member of the Japan Fine Arts Exhibition.