

A Flair for Decoration: Jomon Pottery

By Nobuo Tsuji

The Japanese excel at decoration, a talent that may well trace its roots all the way back to the Jomon period (ca. 10000 BC–ca. 300 BC), one of the earliest stages in Japanese prehistory. The name “Jomon” refers to the impression made by rolling cords of twisted fibers on a clay surface.

The resulting pattern varies according to the thickness of the cord, the way it is twisted, and how much pressure is applied. This kind of decoration is so prevalent on the pottery produced during this time—starting from ca. 8000 BC—that the name is now used to designate the whole period, its people and their culture. Jomon pottery was often additionally decorated with stamped impressions of bamboo cuttings, plant stalks or shells, and coils of clay were frequently attached after a vessel was formed.

Jomon pottery continued to be made until sometime around 300 BC, when it began to be replaced by wheel-thrown Yayoi pottery. While the other tools and daily utensils, clothing and wooden wares used during the Jomon period have long since disappeared, the pottery remains to give us a fairly accurate picture of early Japanese life.

Jomon pottery is generally agreed to have progressed through six stages of development: incipient, earliest, early, middle, late and final. The large cooking and storage vessels common to all six stages show a propensity to decorate right from the beginning. A new feature introduced sometime around the end of the early stage was the application of highly decorative handles at the mouth and on

the body of the vessels. From this point on the decoration gradually becomes so elaborate that the vessel resembles nothing less than a sophisticated piece of abstract sculpture. Many vessels from the middle stage (around 3000 to 2000 BC), when this trend peaked, have been discovered in the mountainous region of central Japan.

Shown here is one of these middle stage vessels. This particular piece is covered with an incised basket-weave motif made with a pallet knife of some kind. The idea for the motif surely came from the woven baskets that were in use then, but its execution goes far beyond mere imitation.

The climate of Jomon Japan is believed to have been temperate. Eastern Japan, extending down from Hokkaido through central Honshu, was rich in resources which, we now know, made a highly sophisticated culture possible. The wares of the middle stage are almost too elaborately decorated to be functional. While they were probably used for ceremonial purposes, the very extravagance of their decoration suggests an affluent society.

By the late and final stage periods, however, the climate had cooled considerably, and life could no longer have been so easy. The pottery of this time is more subdued and functional, with decoration kept to a minimum, lacking its earlier vitality. ■

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A middle Jomon pot excavated from the Asahi shell mounds, collection of the University Museum, the University of Tokyo