

A Love of Distortion

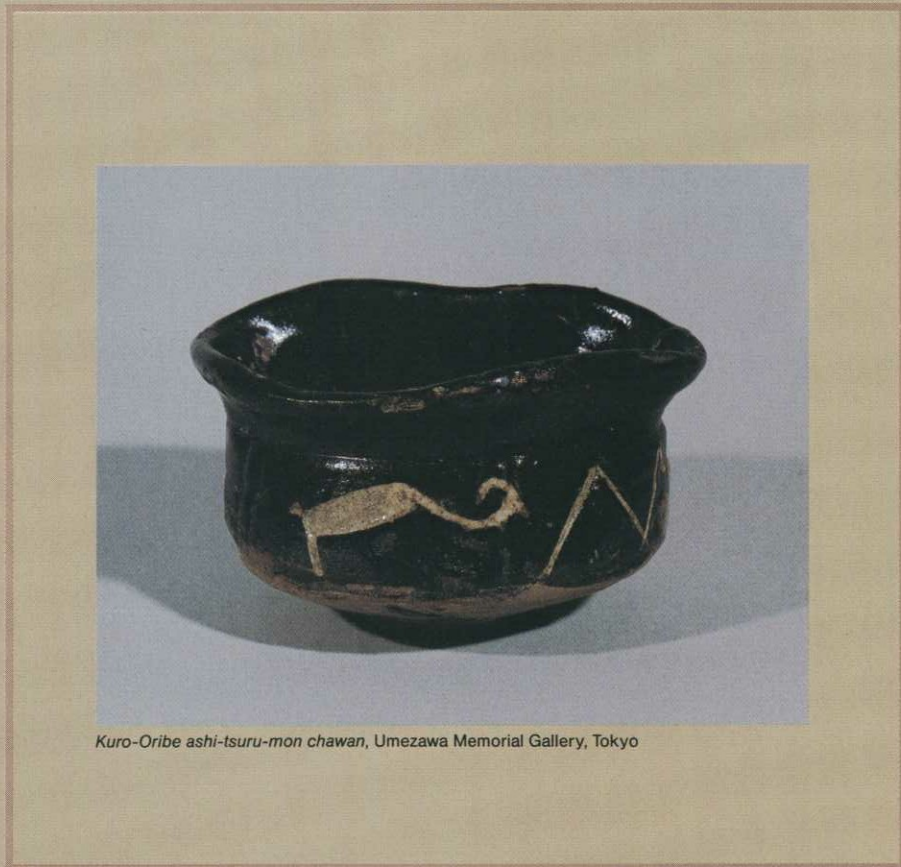
By Nobuo Tsuji

The misshapen cylindrical piece pictured here is a strange sort of vessel, warped as though inadequately fired and scarred as though having just barely survived a disastrous blaze. Yet this is a bona fide flower vase, unchanged from the day it was taken out of a potter's kiln nearly 300 years ago—and one of the most prized of tea ceremony utensils.

The earliest tea ceremony wares were delicate, highly sophisticated examples of the best Chinese ceramics. The Chinese of the Tang (618–907) through Sung (960–1279) periods were probably the world's most consummate potters, masters at transforming bland clay into jewel-like vessels. Greatly taken with the celadon, porcelain, and brownish-black *temmoku* teabowls and flower vases imported from China, the Japanese tried hard to mimic these wares. But somehow the local variety never quite attained the perfection of the Chinese originals, and the Chinese imports were prized as symbols of wealth and prestige.

At the beginning of the 16th century, however, a totally new kind of tea ceremony emerged that had only disdain for imported wares. This was the simple *wabi* tea ceremony developed by such masters as Takeno Jo'o (1502–1555) and Sen no Rikyu (1522–1591) from the wealthy merchant class. These tea masters found fresh appeal in the simple tableware used by the common people in the Korean Koryō period (918–1392) and the cheap, rude ceramics that had been manufactured for centuries in Bizen, Shigaraki, Tokoname, Iga, Tamba, and elsewhere throughout Japan.

Iga and Shigaraki vases are usually misshapen, often cracked, and frequently pocked where little stones in the clay have exploded in the extreme heat of the kiln. Their only glaze is an irregular coating of melted ash. In the eyes of the 16th-century tea masters, however, this very crudity and simplicity was a unique, unpretentious beauty. Rikyu even went



Kuro-Oribe *ashi-tsuru-mon chawan*, Umezawa Memorial Gallery, Tokyo

so far as to imitate the natural sobriety of the common people's wares with his Raku teabowls.

Rikyu was fortunate to have as his patron Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1536–1598), the most powerful figure in Japan at the time and a man who sought to command the peaks of cultural refinement. With Hideyoshi taking the lead, the *daimyo* of the land were quick to follow, and Rikyu's *wabi* tea ceremony soon became a mark of high distinction and sophistication.

The *daimyo* Furuta Oribe (1544–1615) was one of Rikyu's disciples and destined to create a distinctive style of tea ceremony wares all his own. Oribe went even further than Rikyu in the pursuit of the beauty of distortion, the Iga flower vase

described earlier being typical of his preference. The black teabowl shown here is another example of an Oribe-inspired piece. An extreme variation on Rikyu's Raku teabowl, it is even more distorted in shape and coated with a black glaze in which a crude motif of grasses and cranes has been scraped.

Crossing time and space, the Iga flower vase echoes the rustic qualities found in the *Informel* paintings of the 1950s, while the black bowl's design recalls the abstract paintings of the Russian painter Wassily Kandinsky (1866–1944). ■

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Iga mimitsuki hanaike, named *Karatachi*, Hatakeyama Collection, Tokyo