

Individualism, Consumerism, Commercialism, Nationalism, and Pottery

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The process of making pottery starts with one key element: clay. A potter shapes the clay into the shape they desire. Creation may be with aids such as a potter's wheel or carving tools. The method of creation does not impact whether the product is pottery. The only things needed for it to be considered pottery are to be made from clay and hardened by heat. This heat may come from the sun or another source. One example from modern Japan that stands out is "Spiraling Vessel, Dizzy Shadings (Genun)" by Ogata Kamio. The tantalizing display of colors and curves draws the eye into circles and may make the viewer wonder if their own life or society is going in circles over and over again.¹ Japan has a long history of pottery production and analyzing its pottery can reflect its social development of the period in which the art was created. These creations have always mirrored or pushed the social development of Japan over the ages with critical moments during the Jōmon and Yayoi eras, again in the sixteenth century, the World Wars, and contemporary times.

The Jōmon era highlighted the functionality of pottery when it was first created. The products were a robust method for warming food in a more sedentary style, which led to the development of agriculture, showing the connection between pottery and society's development. Pottery has been in Japan since the incipient Jōmon period (c.a. 10,500-8000 BCE).² Historians have debated how this pottery was used during this period, and new techniques that allow individuals to analyze the lipids left behind in the pottery have given more insight into the Jōmon people's lifestyle. One study examined "charred surface deposits [which] were sampled from 101 Incipient Jōmon vessels from 13 sites, dating from 15,300–11,200 cal B.P."³ The results conclude that the pottery was mainly used to prepare aquatic resources.⁴ This conclusion is supported by other studies, such as one where 143 cooking vessels were analyzed with "clear evidence that pottery across this sequence was predominantly used for cooking marine and freshwater resources, with evidence for diversification in the range of aquatic products."⁵ This discovery allows

¹ Ogata Kamio, *Spiraling Vessel, Dizzy Shadings (Genun)*, marbled stoneware, 2005 (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art.) <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/73362?searchField=All&sortBy=Relevance&when=A.D.+1900-present&where=Japan&what=Ceramics&ft=japan+pottery&offset=20&rpp=20&pos=23>.

² Department of Asian Art, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, "Jomon Culture (ca. 10,500 – ca. 300 B.C.)," *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*. (2002), https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/jomo/hd_jomo.htm, Para. 4.

³ O. E. Craig, H. Saul, A. Lucquin, et al., "Earliest Evidence for the Use of Pottery," *Nature* 496 (2013): 351–54 at 351.

⁴ Craig, Saul, Lucquin, et al., "Earliest Evidence for the Use of Pottery," 353.

⁵ Alexandre Lucquin, Kevin Gibbs, Junzo Uchiyama, et al. "Ancient Lipids Document Continuity in the Use of Early Hunter-Gatherer Pottery through 9,000 Years of Japanese Prehistory." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, vol. 113 (2016): 3991–96.

historians to have new data to support or disprove their hypotheses around how the Jōmon people used pottery in their lives and how it relates to Japan's social and state development. Since Jōmon people used aquatic food sources for most of their diet and did not produce significant amounts of agriculture, they were more sedentary than other hunter and gather groups of the same period.⁶

This sedentary lifestyle from abundant aquatic food shaped an economic system for the different Jōmon tribes. This can be shown by analyzing where the clay used to make the pottery found at different sites was collected by the Jōmon people.⁷ Researchers analyzed 99 pottery shards from other excavation sites, and “94 shards were made from clays and tempers from the same ‘source.’”⁸ This connection supports the idea that the Jōmon people had a trading system for pottery and other goods. This economic system reveals the start of state development in Japan, but this did not create a social division of elites and workers.⁹ The lack of stable resources that led to an equalitarian society was still having a significant impact on the social and state guidance of the Jōmon people.¹⁰ The development of pottery has not been firmly understood. Its impacts on other aspects of society are up for debate. Still, pottery in the Jōmon era made people more sedentary due to the ability to preserve and collect aquatic food sources. This led to the development of agriculture during the Yayoi period when marine food sources were more difficult to collect and the foliage around the water was depleted. Pottery during the Jōmon era was typically made by women and was the first spark of women's expression, messages unheard by the masses.

Jōmon pottery is some of the oldest examples known globally, so the artwork can be used to view the role of women in that society. The artwork had practical purposes but was still an expression of women's ideas and desires. Their designs started as “deep pottery cooking containers with pointed bottoms and rudimentary cord markings.”¹¹ With many inquiries around the Jōmon period, this cannot be proved, but it is assumed by most of the history community to be a fact.

⁶ Richard Pearson, “Debating Jomon Social Complexity.” *Asian Perspectives: Journal of Archeology for Asia & the Pacific* 46 (2007): 361–88 at 380.

⁷ Mark Hall, “Regional Craft Specialization in the Jomon Culture of Japan: Evidence from the Chemical Analyses of Atamadai Pottery,” *Journal of Island & Coastal Archaeology* 6 (2011): 98–114 at 99.

⁸ Hall, “Regional Craft Specialization in the Jomon Culture of Japan,” 109.

⁹ Pearson, “Debating Jomon Social Complexity,” 377.

¹⁰ Deborah S., Rogers, Omak Deshpande, and Marcus W. Feldman, “The Spread of Inequality,” *PLoS ONE* 6, no. 9 (September 2011): 1-10 at 1.

¹¹ Department of Asian Art, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, “Jomon Culture (ca. 10,500 – ca. 300 B.C.).”

Susanna Brooks, “Contemporary Japanese Women Potters and their Prehistoric Muses,” *Japanese Art Morikami Museum* (2014), <https://morikami.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/Contemporary-Japanese-Women-Potters-and-their-Prehistoric-Muses.pdf>.

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Pottery is a form of artistic expression and one that women have been involved in within Japan since the beginning of ceramic production.¹²

One such creation is the “Flame-rimmed” deep bowl (kaen doki), which is displayed in The Metropolitan Museum of Art.¹³ The pot’s rim has two handles on the sides and two loops on the front and back. The edge has complex cord creations, with the base being a more simplistic version of a rough cord.¹⁴ This creation was unlikely to be truly appreciated during the period as a form of self-expression for the female potter. The culture at the time likely only saw this pot as an end to a means for the spiritual ritual. It was not seen as the self-expression of the potter. This disconnect between the creation and the creator leads to a community-based society which was synonymous with Japan. Pottery continues to be a form of expression as time passes in Japan, such as during the Yayoi period when pottery started being used for more ritualistic purposes.

Shintoism started to rise during the Jōmon era, but pottery’s main job became ritualistic or artistic during the Yayoi period and beyond. The Yayoi period (300 BCE – 710 CE) also represents the beginning of Korean and Chinese influence on Japanese society. Korea’s influence is seen directly in the pottery created during the Yayoi Era.¹⁵ Yayoi pottery was made of fine-grained clay, which was only possible due to the new rice cultivation.¹⁶ The pottery had simple designs such as jars being symmetrical and shaped to highlight artistry.¹⁷ This may indicate a shift in early Japanese people’s “work” life. Jōmon potters were able to dedicate time to create complex cord ceramics, but Yayoi potters appear not to have time to dedicate to pottery.¹⁸ Women were believed to be potters in these periods and were the most impacted by the shift to farming.¹⁹ With less time for leisure activities, highly decorative pottery became a commodity and was “used as status symbols by local chiefs.”²⁰ This display highlights a shift in the use of pottery as it became more specialized for rituals and simpler for everyday purposes. The specialization into ritualization for pottery continued and developed into tea ceremonies, which exposes a more class-based society.

¹² Louise Cort, “Women in the Realm of Clay,” *Soaring Voices-Contemporary Japanese Women Ceramic Artists* (2007). https://www.academia.edu/18290215/Women_in_the_Realm_of_Clay.

¹³ Anonymous, “Flame-rimmed” Deep Bowl (Kaen Doki), Ceramics, ca. 3500-2500 B.C., The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/44905>.

¹⁴ “Flame-rimmed” Deep Bowl (Kaen Doki), Ceramics, ca. 3500-2500 B.C.

¹⁵ Richard Pearson, “Ceramic Treasures of Japan,” *Archaeology* vol. 43, no. 6 (1990): 62–65 at 64.

¹⁶ Department of Asian Art, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, “Yayoi Culture (ca. 300 B.C. – 300 A.D.),” *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History* (2002), https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/yayo/hd_yayo.htm, Para. 1.

¹⁷ Department of Asian Art, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, “Yayoi Culture (ca. 300 B.C. – 300 A.D.),” Para. 2.

¹⁸ Craig, Saul, Lucquin, et al., “Earliest Evidence for the Use of Pottery,” 353.

¹⁹ Kay Vandette, “New Study Reveals That Farmers Have Less Free Time Than Hunter-Gatherers,” Earth.com, <https://www.earth.com/news/farmers-less-free-time-hunter-gatherers/>.

²⁰ Pearson, “Ceramic Treasures of Japan,” 64.

Elites participated in these ceremonies with highly decorated pottery that started as being imported from Korea and China.

Tea ceremonies were a ritual activity the elite performed to highlight their wealth and social power in society, revealing that pottery continued to be a marker of social status and not just an everyday household object. The tea ceremony emerged in the 1500s and “was an elite artistic pursuit that provided a forum for the rulers of Japan.”²¹ This started with practitioners using and appraising ancient pottery from Japan, Korea, and China.²² One of these creations used in these rituals is the *Tea Bowl with “Hare’s Fur” Glaze*, made by a Chinese potter during the 12th century.²³ The tea bowl has a simple design with nothing to stand out as an artistic signature highlighting the piece’s practicality, but the age during the period it was used made it a symbol of status.²⁴ Eventually, the desire for status led to new creations being crafted in the Wabi aesthetic.²⁵ This shift in artistic reaction for consumer purchase reveals the first signs of consumerism and individualism impacting Japanese culture and social practices. This shift to individualism is also present in pottery made for the tea ceremonies because it was the first time individual artists such as Nonomura Ninsei and Ogata Kenzan began to sign their work.

Signing one’s work signifies a connection from the artist to the art piece, which was not present in pottery until this period. This strengthened Japan’s emphasis on individualism more than communalism. Nonomura Ninsei was the first potter to sign his work, and he created art in contrast to the Wabi style, which was the set style of his time.²⁶ Ninsei’s two actions transformed the pottery landscape to be more individual. Tea master Kanamori Sōwa popularized Ninsei’s work in tea ceremonies.²⁷ Ogata Kenzan took the techniques of Ninsei and made them his own.²⁸ Kenzan treated his pottery as a canvas for his paintings which led to his distinctly unique style.²⁹ This highly creative individual still felt the impact of consumerism and communalism, which was changing Japan’s society.

Kenzan’s pottery career has three distinct stages that mimic Japan’s social development. He started his career with unique pottery that he crafted by hand, but after his pottery was famous

²¹ Anna Willmann, “The Japanese Tea Ceremony,” *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2011. https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/jtea/hd_jtea.htm. Para 3.

²²Willmann, “The Japanese Tea Ceremony,” Para 3.

²³ Anonymous, *Tea Bowls with “Hare’s Fur” Glaze*, stoneware with iron glaze, 12th century (New York. The Metropolitan Museum of Art), <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/42455>.

²⁴ Anonymous, *Tea Bowls with “Hare’s Fur” Glaze*.

²⁵ Willmann, “The Japanese Tea Ceremony,” Para 3.

²⁶ Willmann, “The Japanese Tea Ceremony,” Para. 9.

²⁷ Willmann, “The Japanese Tea Ceremony,” Para. 9.

²⁸Willmann, “The Japanese Tea Ceremony,” Para. 10.

²⁹ Willmann, “The Japanese Tea Ceremony,” Para. 10.

and used in tea ceremonies it was mass-produced by a team.³⁰ This outcome is not exclusive to Kenzan. Richard Wilson notes, “Pottery production is [...] an incremental and corporate enterprise, one that tends to obliterate the personal mark.”³¹ Even as Japan became more commercial-based than before, individualism was still towered over by the communal nature of Japan in art. Kenzan’s pottery shifted to mass-production to sell more pottery so that every elite could get Kenzan pottery for their tea ceremonies. This changed Kenzan’s ceramics to more ordinary than extraordinary, but that did not limit his success. It did lead to controversy later when historians attempted to determine what was made by Kenzan himself and what was made by others.³² This focus on consumerism led to Kenzan losing himself, forcing Japanese pottery to leave behind much of its culture and heritage to fit into modern society. Once Kenzan received this acclaim and monetary gain from his pottery, he abandoned his corporate creations and moved to the mountains to create pottery, but the impact on pottery creation and society was still present.³³ This is evident during the World Wars when clay was shifted away from pottery to create weapons.

Japan shifted to be more nationalistic, with commercial and consumer influences still present, which shaped its participation in the World Wars. The pottery made during this period reflects this. Japan sided with the British during the First World War and received colonial holdings in China, which allowed Japan to expand its railways and control more trade in China.³⁴ This power led to a sense of nationalism for Japanese citizens, and officials saw Japan as a leader in the global landscape. Economic growth followed this global perception of success. This shift led to pottery created after this time to represent Japanese culture and its language. A tea bowl created by Hamada Shōji around 1935 in Japan represents this passion.³⁵ The creation is a small bowl made of clay with what is likely a Kanji character on it.³⁶ A country’s language represents a part of its culture, and showcasing the language in pottery shows pride in one’s nation and culture.³⁷ It is also possible the artist did not consider the Kanji a representation of their country but with the rampant nationalism present in Japan during this era is not unreasonable to assume this may have

³⁰ Richard L. Wilson, Ogata Kenzan, and 尾形, 乾山(1663-1743), *The Art of Ogata Kenzan: Persona and Production in Japanese Ceramics* (New York: Weatherhill, 1991), 13.

³¹ Wilson, Kenzan, and 尾形, 乾山, *The Art of Ogata Kenzan*, 15.

³² Wilson, Kenzan, and 尾形, 乾山, *The Art of Ogata Kenzan*, 13.

³³ Wilson, Kenzan, and 尾形, 乾山, *The Art of Ogata Kenzan*, 13.

³⁴ Brett Walker, *A Concise History of Japan* (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 221.

³⁵ Hamada Shōji, *Tea Bowl*, stoneware, ca. 1935, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/490736?searchField=All&sortBy=Relevance&when=A.D.+1900-present&where=Japan&what=Pottery&ao=on&ft=* &offset=0 &rpp=80&pos=70.

³⁶ Shōji, *Tea Bowl*.

³⁷ Kenny Smith, “How Culture and Biology Interact to Shape Language and the Language Faculty,” *Topics in Cognitive Science* 12, no. 2 (April 2020): 690–712 at 692.

had some impact. Almost seven years after Shōji created their tea bowl, Japan entered the Second World War with the Axis Powers.

Near the end of the war, metal and other raw materials needed to make weapons were in limited supply, leading to “crude, porcelain-encased fragmentation explosives” being produced in massive quantities.³⁸ Kilns, ovens once used for making pottery, were jarringly shifted into making these bombs.³⁹ This shift from exports to explosives enforces the social shift in Japan of nationalism over consumerism, but both sides had an impact. Japan took this form of artistic expression and turned it into a device to protect the country. The irony is that the artistic nature of the clay came back after the war when these ceramics returned to the arts.⁴⁰ After World War Two, Japan had to rebuild and find itself again as a nation, and the potters created art to support or contrast the nation’s values.

As the nation recovered from the devastation of the war, potters reclaimed their clay and started creating to protest the hyper-growth of Japan, which was damaging the environment. After Japan’s surrender in 1945, the United States occupied the nation and began reforms. Many of Japan’s citizens welcomed the U.S., who saved them from the militarized state.⁴¹ About thirteen years after Japan’s surrender, Yagi Kazuno created an unglazed flower vessel (*yakishime kaki*).⁴² The act of leaving the piece unglazed connects it to the earth and the environment.⁴³ This connection to the earth contrasts the rampant push for Japan to industrialize and become a global leader through economic growth. Not only is the piece unglazed it also has holes in the vessel to hold flowers.⁴⁴ This container highlights that a shift is needed in Japan to cultivate and not abuse the environment. This change happened with Japan actively protecting its environment since the 1970s, twelve years after Kanzuno created his ceramic.⁴⁵ The connection of pottery to the environment is still present in many contemporary potters’ creations. Three modern artists who support this idea are Yoshimi Futamura, Machiko Ogawa, and Kimiyo Mishima, with their words

³⁸Eric Mills, “Pieces of the Past,” *Naval History* vol. 32, no. 6 (2018): 64, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&a9h&AN=134867474&site=ehost-live>, Para 2.

³⁹ Mills, “Pieces of the Past.” Para. 2

⁴⁰ Mills, “Pieces of the Past.” Para. 3

⁴¹ Walker, *A Concise History of Japan*, 262.

⁴² Yagi Kazuo, *Unglazed Flower Vessel (Yakishime Kaki)*, unglazed stoneware, ca. 1958, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/724741?searchField=All&sortBy=Relevance&when=A.D.+1900present&where=Japan&ft=Japan+pottery+modern&offset=0&pp=80&pos=19>.

⁴³ Kazuo, *Unglazed Flower Vessel (Yakishime Kaki)*.

⁴⁴ Kazuo, *Unglazed Flower Vessel (Yakishime Kaki)*.

⁴⁵ Writers of Japan National Tourism Organization, “Nature and Environmental Protection,” JNTO, Japan National Tourism Organization, <https://education.jnto.go.jp/en/why-japan/natural-environment/>.

representing nature through trees or ice or the litter covering the earth.⁴⁶ Pottery in the modern day is being used as a form of protest and reminding the world of the value of the earth. The pottery creation in Japan has mirrored the social development of Japan except for in a few key moments when the potters try to push change.

Pottery has been a hallmark of Japan since around 10,500 BCE and has pushed and supported the social development of Japan from the Jōmon era (c. 10,500 BCE) to the modern-day (twenty-first century). During the Jōmon period, pottery was used more practically, with lipids present on the ceramics indicating they were used to process aquatic life leading to a more sedentary lifestyle. The potters during this period are likely to have been women highlighting that this maybe the first artifact of female expression in Japan. Pottery became less complex in the Yayoi era due to increased time being spent by women to help develop agriculture, however, ceramics started to become a sign of status. Pottery as a sign of status reached new heights during the sixteenth century with tea ceremonies and the prestige in having old and new pottery creations for one's rituals. Kenzan's artistic journey reveals the hyper-focus on consumerism, with his style being mass-produced by other potters but still marked as made by him, leading to confusion for current art historians. Pottery became a representation of nationalism and protection of one's country during the World Wars, with Kanji being represented and the kilns used to craft ceramic bombs. Contemporary potters pushed and supported Japan's movement to protect and appreciate nature.

⁴⁶ Yoshimi Futamura, *Rebirth*, stoneware, 2018, La Patinoire Royale – galerie Valérie Bach, <https://ocula.com/artists/yoshimi-futamura/>; Machiko Ogawa, Unglazed multi-fired porcelain with glass, 2014, Joan B. Mirviss, <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/machiko-ogawa-sanyu-haban-torn-sculpture-with-sparkling-glass>; Kimiyo Mishima, *Newspaper*, printed ceramics, 2020, Taka Ishii Gallery, <https://ocula.com/artists/kimiyo-mishima/>.

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