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**Mrazek & Pitelka/What's the Use of Art?**

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## Wrapping and Unwrapping Art

*Art cannot be a utilitarian act.*

Benedetto Croce (1866–1952)

*Art begins where function ends.*

Sir Herbert Read (1893–1968)

### Wrapping Art

Tea bowls, perhaps the most beloved objects in Japanese tea culture, are carefully wrapped to honor them and shield them from the everyday world.<sup>1</sup> A Raku tea bowl dating to the late sixteenth century, for example, might be stored within a pouch (often made of imported fabric) that both robes the piece in an appropriately dignified manner and protects it. The bowl in its pouch would be contained in turn within a handmade, fitted wooden box, the lid of which often bears a signed, calligraphic inscription on the underside recording the poetic name of the tea bowl, the maker or place of origin, and the pedigree of ownership. If the inscription was by a famous tea master, elite warrior, or other influential collector of tea ceramics, then the lid would be protected by a piece of paper and the box itself would be carefully wrapped in cloth or paper and then cosseted within yet another fitted box, which would of course bear another signed, calligraphic inscription on the lid. The bowl and its box within a box would then be robed in a knotted wrapping cloth (*furoshiki*) or fitted bag.

Raku tea bowls are usually displayed in museums or pictured in catalogues without their wrapping, as if our understanding derived entirely from the objects themselves. It is, however, these strata of value — a kind of stratigraphy of meaning deposited in sedimentary fashion through centuries of use, circulation, and objectification — that determine not only identification but the experience of encountering the bowls themselves. Each of these layers of wrapping adds to the historical narrative and value of the protected bowl. The significant precipice that separates the bowl from its layers of wrapping is,

however, rarely acknowledged by tea practitioners, collectors, or art historians. Any bowl could of course be substituted for the object originally intended to reside within. Connoisseurship of early Raku tea bowls in Japan is based on an outrageous fiction: that the stylistic categories that derive, in their totality, from the interwoven, intertextual field of box inscriptions provide reliable information about extant objects.

This intellectual divide between object and wrapping serves as a useful metaphor for the gap between modern art history's objectification of art works as autonomously knowable things of universal beauty and the more complex tale of the cultural context of their production and use. The layers of wrapping around a Japanese tea bowl are parallel to the layers of discourse and subsequent meaning heaped upon objects labeled "art." For centuries art world institutions have trained collectors, connoisseurs, and students of culture to believe that in order for something to be art it should be naturally and instinctively open to the interpretation and enjoyment of the educated museum visitor; only in the last decades of the twentieth century were the class-based and colonial underpinnings of this discourse questioned.

The contributors to *What's the Use of Art* attempt to wrap and unwrap the notion of the art object. In particular, this volume explores the roles of function, movement, and memory in the scholarly and popular constitution of art. Its aim is to complicate the limitations placed on cultural products as art or not-art by resituating things in cultural context. Although the ten case studies that follow all come from Asia, the themes of the volume extend beyond this one region of our increasingly interconnected yet still highly stratified world. Rather than narrate a history of Asian art, this book attempts to frame discussions of art in light of the globalization of European regimes of cultural value, the widespread and continuing plundering of objects from and by disenfranchised communities, and the unregulated circulation of art and information in the burgeoning global marketplace.

This volume thus builds upon a growing art historical, anthropological, and historical literature that argues that "art" is far from a natural category of human endeavor, but instead represents a historically specific idea and practice emerging in Europe from the Enlightenment and its aftermath. The notion of art had of course existed before then and in other parts of the world, but not with the specific characteristics that continue to frame discussions about culture today. The eighteenth century, in particular, witnessed the radical and unprecedented bifurcation of the artist, as the genius who produces things of beauty, from the skilled artisan or craftsman who produces useful objects.<sup>2</sup> Concomitant to this was a split in the understanding of the work produced.

The craft object came to be seen as mundane and meaningless. Although rarely articulated directly, usefulness was equated with a lack of artistic value. The art object, on the other hand, came to be understood as a work of autonomous power and “embodied meaning.”<sup>3</sup> The “metaphysical essence”<sup>4</sup> of true art was not dependent on historical or cultural factors but was self-contained and universal. Art objects could and should be collected in art museums precisely because their meaning lay not in their context, but in some inner essence. Conversely, objects that depended upon their functions or contexts for meaning did not belong in a museum and consequently did not qualify as art.<sup>5</sup>

The ten chapters that follow problematize this still prevalent notion by exploring the contexts — what one commentator has called the “lost worlds”<sup>6</sup> — of art works produced in different parts of Asia, with particular emphasis on Indonesia, Japan, and South Asia. These are worlds that are not usually reproduced in galleries or exhibitions, and thus it may seem that we attempt herein to reveal the authentic, historically and culturally appropriate apprehension of Asian art. Instead, these chapters will address the central question posed by the title of the book: what is the *use* of art? How were works that might be understood today as art objects experienced, handled, perceived, categorized, and conceptualized by the people who produced and used them? What do art historians, collectors, and museum goers miss when things are removed from their contexts? And more broadly, how have the ways of experiencing, thinking about, and handling art changed through history? Case studies from South, East, and Southeast Asia such as those collected here can help us to answer some of these questions because of these regions’ diverse experiences of colonialism and modernity, and perhaps more saliently, the urgent sense of practitioners and scholars that modern definitions of art are deeply inadequate when considering local forms of cultural production, such as Javanese *wayang* shadow puppet theater or the Japanese tea ceremony.

The chapters that follow are diverse in method and content and certainly do not represent a single vision of art or a monolithic approach to studying Asia. Nonetheless, several interconnected themes emerge, though they resonate in different ways in each chapter. What follows is less a summary of the contents of the book than a preliminary exploration of how the book’s themes connect to issues in the fields of art history, anthropology, and Asian Studies broadly conceived. This represents one attempt to navigate these chapters by wrapping them in a layer of interpretation, inspiring readers, it is hoped, to engage with the chapters, the art they illuminate, and most importantly, the network of relationships and values that they introduce.

## Functions: Art and Agency

The epigraphs by Benedetto Croce, an influential Italian philosopher and scholar of Hegel from the early twentieth century, and Sir Herbert Read, one of the most prominent British art critics of the same period, are good examples of the hostility to consideration of function that was widespread in popular and scholarly discourse until relatively recently. Histories of art tended to focus on the autonomous power of objects and the details of the biographies of artists. It was only in the last several decades of the twentieth century that the field of art history began to grapple with the role of context in the production and consumption of art. Michael Baxandall, for example, in his pioneering *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy* (1972), expressed this purpose with the opening line of his introduction: “A fifteenth-century painting is the deposit of a social relationship.”<sup>7</sup> Baxandall used socio-economic terms such as “client” and “customer” rather than expressions that mask the production of art for money. Likewise, the artist and art critic John Berger, in his popular monograph and BBC program *Ways of Seeing* (1973), argued for a politicized, socioeconomically informed method of looking at and studying art.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps the most influential art historian to map a method of studying the social history of art was T. J. Clark, who in 1973 published *The Absolute Bourgeois: Artists and Politics in France, 1848-1851* and *Image of the People: Gustav Courbet and the Second French Republic, 1848-1851*. In the first chapter of *Image of the People*, Clark criticizes the connoisseurial method that dominated the field as “barren,” positing instead that art objects have transformative power that emerges from the positions of artists in society and their reactions to the world around them.<sup>9</sup>

In the study of Asia, scholars of religion and religious art were among the first to overcome the discursive boundaries of the art object by synthesizing approaches to religious practice with the traditional art historical interest in iconography. In her 1981 study *Darsan: Seeing the Divine Image in India*, for example, Diana Eck argues that art works associated with Hindu worship in India do not merely symbolize a deity as an object of devotion, but embody the god as a seeing entity. Worshippers attempt to “see” (*darsan*) the god during a *puja* or other ritual of worship and honor, but also hope to be seen by the deity, who is open-eyed and alert. The sacred image represents a notion of connectedness that defies Judeo-Christian notions of dualism; a statue of Krishna, for example, might be woken, bathed, dressed, presented with fruit and flowers, prayed to, and put to bed at night. Throughout this process, the statue is understood to be a seeing manifestation of the god, a small part of a universal

whole, not a simple symbol; synecdoche rather than metonymy. Many of the chapters in this volume address the agency of art. Robert DeCaroli, for example, in his chapter on figural representation in early South Asia, traces early attitudes toward statues of spirit deities. The agency of the image emerged, in part, from the Vedic understanding of ritual practices and objects as having cosmic effects through a process of real rather than metaphorical substitution. Priests become gods, sacrificers offer up themselves, and images of spirit deities “have the ability to look back.”

One of the most articulate commentators on the role of context and function in the study of art is Stanley O’Connor, who in a 1983 essay asked a series of questions that raise, in some ways, the key issues explored in this volume:

Is it possible that those who inhabit a world shaped by industrial technology, a literate, largely secular, world, reasoned about in very rigorous forms of logic, can come to the immediacies of experience demanded by art works in the same way as those whose lives have such an utterly different shape? . . . Are we encapsulated in cultures that are forever getting in the way when we encounter those things that matter deeply to others?<sup>10</sup>

After comparing Indonesian appreciation of ancient Southeast Asian ceramics with assumptions about value made by Western connoisseurs, O’Connor concludes that social customs rather than “an affective response to privileged objects” determine aesthetic attitudes.

O’Connor’s work encourages us to consider the interplay between local uses for art, which shift constantly in subtle ways, and the scholarly need for an object that is passively open to interpretation and ownership. For Jan Mrázek, writing in this volume on art history’s apprehension of *wayang*, or Javanese shadow puppet theater, lack of attention to the use of an art work results in, and is analogous to, effacement of the diverse ways of experiencing *wayang* in everyday life. In an insightful hermeneutic reversal, Mrázek objectifies two powerful, modern technologies of seeing — television and art history — to answer the question “What’s the use of art?” Art history’s insistence on the formal beauty and autonomous value of objectified art, like modern television’s telescopic and seemingly authentic vision of *wayang* performances, “annihilates experienced physical distance and place.” The resulting objects are static, while the *wayang* that Mrázek invokes is vibrantly alive and thus resistant to imprisonment in a display case or on the pages of a textbook. Kaja McGowan’s chapter on Balinese monuments and shrines points to another structural problem in art history’s (and the art market’s) insistence on uni-

versal and therefore transferable beauty: a culture's most valuable art works might not be easily removed from the place of their manufacture and use. In Bali, ephemeral sculptures "hold meanings as sheer potential," and the deposit boxes in shrines that will eventually contain them are built less to last than to serve as vehicles for "ascending souls and descending deities." Removing the works in the deposit boxes, like aestheticizing *wayang* puppets outside of the context of their use in performances, emerges in these chapters as a particularly disturbing kind of destruction.

Louise Cort's chapter on unglazed earthenware in Japan raises the specter of a very different sort of destruction, namely the disappearance of an art form that is not recognized (or easily objectified) by the modern epistemology of art. Because the unglazed earthenware vessel's meaning emerges from its function, it has none of the nonfunctional characteristics of an art object: "The very traits of porosity, redness, fragility, and brevity of lifespan that keep earthenware outside the commercial art market constitute its significance and suitability to its defined ritual role." More is at stake here than the absence of a particular tradition from museum displays or textbook narratives. Cort estimates that the production methods she encountered in the 1970s, which had already faded considerably from the activity of previous decades, are now "lost practices."

The chapters in this volume by Richard Davis and Janet Hoskins can be fruitfully read alongside Cort's piece to see how successful commodification of a ritual object can lead to very different outcomes and even benefits, of a sort, for the production community. Davis's chapter examines wedding chamber paintings from Madhubani, India, and their successful reinvention as folk art. Changes in the signification of art works of course resulted in changing status and means for artists, and some Madhubani painters acquired national status. Janet Hoskins' chapter on a textile producer in Sumba, Indonesia, represents a particularly sharp contrast with Cort's narrative of a fading tradition, instead illuminating "new ways in which the occult powers of cloth are realized in the modern world of commerce." Hoskins, citing Alfred Gell, reminds us that "an object is art on the basis of what it does, not what it is," an argument she pursues in a vivid sketch of Marta Mete, widow of the last local raja and an active cloth producer, and the community that surrounds her. She narrates Marta's entrepreneurial activities and the whispered accusations of witchcraft they inspire, revealing a close connection between art and Sumbanese ambivalence about changes in commerce and gender roles. In late twentieth-century Japan, social transformations blunted the efficacy of unglazed ceramics as agents of social interaction, while in late twentieth-century Sumba, ob-

jects such as Marta's crab-decorated sarungs continued to "embody complex intentionalities and mediate social agency."

### Movements: Plunder, Circulation, and Recontextualization

The role of movement in what Igor Kopytoff called the "social lives" of art objects is another theme in this volume. Like art's instrumentality, the complicated travels by which objects came to reside within museums and private collections in the great cities of Europe and North America are still often ignored in the modern discourse about art. In fact, the development of colonial power and connoisseurial knowledge, both of which are built upon the practice of discrimination, are closely linked. The authority of the European artist or critic to differentiate between good and bad art was not unconnected to his power to objectify and appropriate cultural materials by relocating them to the metropole. Richard Davis explores this theme in the context of Indian art in his 1997 book *Lives of Indian Images*. He is particularly interested in the implications of contextual shifts for interpretation and value. Museums such as the British Museum or the National Gallery in Washington, D.C., highlight the (ostensibly) embedded aesthetic qualities of a work, while a different set of criteria is considered more important in the ritual context of a temple: "iconographic correctness, completeness, ritual animation, and divine presence."<sup>11</sup> Davis explains how in the early medieval period, images were seized by rival kings during war, an appropriation of both the political capital and the sacred significance of the material culture of a conquered people. Hindu images were also targeted for destruction by some Muslim conquerors who recognized the political significance of temples and their images. Attempts by Hindu elites to restore or return removed or destroyed images likewise resulted in a profound recontextualization: "particular icons . . . gained a status still greater than they had enjoyed previously."<sup>12</sup> With the arrival of the British in South Asia, a new episode in the lives of Indian "art objects" emerged as colonial adventurers, conquerors, and collectors began amassing collections of beautiful and exotic Indian things and shipping them back to England. In his conclusion, Davis argues that the details in the "lives" of Indian images amount to changes in identity. Rather than focus only on the circumstances surrounding the "birth" of an image, we can profitably consider the object's encounters with different communities of viewers and users who bring new interpretive lenses — new types of wrapping — to bear on its value.

A similar process occurred in the 1860 looting of objects from the Summer Palace of the Qing emperor. James Hevia's chapter in this volume ex-



amines this event and the biographies of the looted objects as they traveled from China to Europe. More than any other chapter, his demonstrates “just how heavily mediated and ideologically saturated were the practices associated with plunder and circulation.” He also makes clear that the movement of art out of Asia is not necessarily a simple process of decontextualization; rather, looters, auctioneers, and new owners can be interpreted as new communities of users who recontextualize the works in distinct ways. He brings the biography of these art works full circle by looking at the recent trend of private repatriation of objects identified by auction houses as having “Imperial Sale” provenances. McGowan’s chapter also raises the issue of circularity, though in the very different context of local Balinese reactions to looting. “As the pillaging of shrines continues unabated, it is possible to discern ever-shifting codes of connoisseurship and criticism as a global market must, often unwittingly, accept Balinese ancestral adaptations to repeated loss. In a perverse way, looters, like tricksters, are forcing the Balinese to strengthen their beliefs while continually seeking new strategies for shrine construction.” The chapters by Hevia and McGowan illustrate that foregrounding colonial and postcolonial contexts need not replicate Orientalist notions of passive, victimized Asian cultures or active, empowered “Western” collectors.

Circulation and recontextualization are also primary themes in Cynthea Bogel’s piece on objects brought back to Japan from China by the Buddhist monk Kūkai in the ninth century. This chapter details the varied transformations in meaning that Buddhist works underwent in their transmission from China to Japan, including “a treasured icon or object, a major or inclusive ritual form (locus or agency), a topography of conceptual modes of thought, the source of prestige and legitimacy, a form of religious inheritance, a cultural sign, or the basis for artistic innovation and copies.” One possible reading of her work is that Buddhism itself must be re-evaluated not as a purely textual tradition or a teacher-centered movement, but as a set of religious practices anchored to an active, transportable body of material culture. Even texts become art works with a particularly powerful materiality, such as the *Catalogue* (*mokuroku*) and its copies that are today housed, like many of these objects, in a temple. “The practitioner, viewer, or reader is simultaneously an actor and spectator as the *Catalogue* changes in successive readings, in part because the imported items have a life outside the text. Meaning can be bent in many ways, depending on its frame. The isolation of many *Catalogue* items from individual use or ritual deployment by the temples that now own them, in order to preserve them, does not silence their history even as it alters their meaning, precisely because of their multivalent power and historical significance.”

## Memories: Art, Nostalgia, and the Nation

Art works — both when displayed in local or national museums and when removed to distant collections — frequently provoke feelings of nostalgia among viewers, ostensibly for aesthetic reasons but perhaps more accurately because they seem naturally to fit into narratives of glorious pasts contrasted to impure or dissatisfactory presents. These mythohistories, or what Marilyn Ivy has referred to as phantasms of modernity (“the strangeness of that which is most familiar”<sup>13</sup>), incorporate art works as nonfunctional and immobile objects, static points on a map of the past rather than active entities swimming in a stream of events and meanings. Cultural products that have been objectified and robbed of context prompt people to “remember” what they should already know about their collective past, so that a museum’s Esoteric Buddhist statue, for example, lacking any explanation of its role in ritual, becomes a reminder of the “timeless” Japanese love of undecorated wood. As Stefan Tanaka remarks, “Just as the museum is historical but displays artifacts as if it is presenting history, thereby occluding its historicity, the nation-state has managed to replace its historicity with various objects that present the chronology of a national history as if it is natural.”<sup>14</sup>

Ashley Thompson examines the nation’s museumification of its past — “the protection of the heritage as investment for the future” — as manifested historically in the Cambodian king’s creation and preservation of royal statuary as embodied *dharmā*. Art functions not only as a political tool of the monarch, in Thompson’s analysis, but also as a vehicle for the dissemination of the particular religious and political world view of the king. The implications for conventional art historical approaches to mapping changes in Angkorian statuary are significant: “each period style had always in some way been a portrait of the reigning king.” Thompson then applies these insights to contemporary Cambodia, where “[t]he ancient statue is a site of memory in contemporary Cambodia, a remainder or a return, a quid pro quo, something here — but whose being somehow escapes us — in the place of something else which is no longer.” She reads conflicts between Thailand and Cambodia over access to Angkor Wat as struggles over political power and identity formation: “[W]hat form will the modern nation take?” Thompson’s conclusion is unsettling but global in its significance. “Recent events may not be reassuring, but they do continue to ensure an important role for art.”

The keris, a kind of ceremonial dagger, plays many functions in Balinese society. Lene Pedersen’s chapter in this volume looks at one type, the heirloom keris, noting that “as it is passed on through generations and centuries, [it]

can become a ‘history object.’ Such an object not only represents; it is conflated with the ancestors and both embodies and generates collective history and identity.” Like the objects Kūkai brought back from China, the keris in Pedersen’s narrative is connected to the accumulation of authority over time. She focuses on the history of kingly appropriation of the keris as a symbol of royal power, and the recent reiteration of this practice during Megawati Sukarnoputri’s assumption of the presidency of Indonesia after the fall of Suharto. Pedersen demonstrates that the power of the keris — a ritual object that stands in for both memories of past kingly authority and the hope for stable government in the future — derives not from any modern notion of material authenticity but rather from how people behave toward it. Megawati’s ceremonial use of the keris and the resulting acceptance in the community of both the keris and Megawati produces a kind of circular legitimacy. The object is authentic because it is used: “Drawn upon once again to activate, legitimate, and infuse local hierarchy and state power, the events also infused the keris with renewed life.”

The strangeness of the familiar can also emerge in particularly transformative contexts, as in the Balinese commemorative shrines, funerary monuments, and posthumous stone statues analyzed by McGowan, works that become meaningful through ritual activation. These architectural and sculptural objects function both as sites of remembering and as intersections through which spiritual and sacrificial movement takes place. McGowan reminds us that constructions such as shrines “are not isolable structures, but serve as points of familial contact between worlds, repositories or way stations on proliferating cyclical journeys.”

Bogel’s analysis of the material culture brought back from China by Kūkai contrasts sharply with the heterogeneous practices described by McGowan, emphasizing instead the institutional utility of memorialization as a form of historical preservation with legitimating effects. “Sectarian Shingon Esoteric scholars are engaged in historical preservation to an extreme. By this I mean that the very idea of an Esoteric history began with Kūkai and his disciples and continued (with increasing intensity) through generations of Shingon priests. The maintenance of Esoteric history is critical to their purpose.” This in turn bears comparison with Hevia’s invocation of the 1997 “Never Forget National Humiliation” monument erected by the Communist government in China on the occasion of the recession of Hong Kong. There, the looting of the Summer Palace is memorialized as an appeal to strengthen the national body against further encroachments. “[T]he representations of lost objects rest near drawings of the destroyed architecture of the past, reminding a new

generation of the humiliations that accompany technological and economic ‘backwardness.’” And so we return, with memories of art in objectified form leading almost inexorably back to a naturalized chronology of the nation.

These are not simply historical issues of interest to scholars, but contemporary problems that resonate in discussions of global differentials in power and the morality of the international art market. Jan Mrázek’s comments on the activities of the French author, critic, and “collector” André Malraux in Southeast Asia are particularly instructive as an ending to this preliminary wrapping and unwrapping of art. I will quote from him at length to remind us of the histories and contexts that are all too often forgotten or hidden but that the study of multiple histories will help us to remember:

Much of Southeast Asian art that we see in museums has come there in the way described by Malraux in the *Royal Way*. It was in some manner “rescued” from its place and often cut out from a larger whole, in a process often sanctioned by the “civilized world” and in the name of art and Man. . . . And of course, the “rescuing” of Southeast Asian art — from widespread cutting of sculpture at Angkor to fulfill the orders of the aesthetically oriented rich of this world, to stealing heirlooms and ancestral figures in Indonesia — continues on a large scale today. The moral argument that this amounts to “saving” art objects from the difficult world and their irresponsible owners who cannot appreciate them anyway is still popular with collectors and museums.

## Unwrapping Art

To conclude, I would like to animate some of the themes touched upon above by comparing the historiographical and connoisseurial treatment of two Japanese tea bowls that have lived quite different social lives since the Meiji Restoration of 1868 transformed cultural production in Japan. One bowl is in a private collection in Japan, where it has served as one of the icons of art historical and connoisseurial discourse about tea ceramics for more than a century, based considerably on its profusion of wrapping. The second bowl was sold to a Western collector named Charles Lang Freer in the late nineteenth century and was taken to Washington, D.C., where it lost its wrapping and has rested in storage for most of the twentieth century. The difference in value between these two works is revealing. One is officially included in the prestigious canon of objects recognized as masterpieces by the Japanese government, while the other is mostly unknown inside and outside of Japan.

ŌGURO, DESIGNATED AN IMPORTANT  
CULTURAL PROPERTY (*JŪYŌ BUNKAZAI*)

Perhaps the most famous Raku ceramic in Japan is a black tea bowl named Ōguro, which translates literally as “big black.” The bowl is fairly small, easily held in the cupped hand of a tea practitioner at 8.5 centimeters (3.35 inches) in height and 11.5 centimeters (4.53 inches) in width at the rim. The shape is that of a half-cylinder, with slightly concave walls that are not quite symmetrical and an uneven lip. The glaze that covers the entire piece (except for a small area on the bottom of the foot-ring) has the appearance of black, weathered iron, with a slight patina of rust and occasional bumps and craters. The hip of the bowl curves softly to the rough and highly textured foot-ring. The clay, visible on one quarter of the foot-ring, is a deep, sonorous red, indicating a high iron content. Particularly notable is the complete lack of the decorative flamboyance common in other “rustic” tea ceramics such as yellow Seto wares, black Seto wares, Shino wares, Oribe wares, and imported Korean wares. Ōguro seems to represent an example of reverse *horror vacui*, with the decorative deficit functioning as an intentional aesthetic statement.

The construction of the tea bowl is also unusual when considered in the broader context of East Asian ceramic production of the sixteenth century. The potter did not throw this piece on a wheel, but hand-built and hand-carved it.<sup>15</sup> The potter formed a thick slab of clay into a rough bowl shape, allowed it to dry to leather hardness, then scraped and carved the walls of the bowl with an assortment of metal tools.<sup>16</sup> The potter deliberately left the walls and base of the bowl fairly thick to provide structural integrity. Next, the potter glazed the tea bowl, using a solution containing a lead frit (a fluxing agent that lowers the melting temperature of the mix) and ground Kamo River stone.<sup>17</sup> The potter fired the piece, most likely in an indoor kiln (*uchigama*) with a single chamber, fueled with charcoal and capable of holding only one or two tea bowls at a time.<sup>18</sup> A tea bowl fired in such a kiln is referred to as “low temperature,” because it has not been subjected to temperatures roughly exceeding 1000 degrees centigrade (1832 degrees Fahrenheit). The fired clay is porous and rough, and the glaze is only partially vitrified.<sup>19</sup> When the glaze on the tea bowl was molten, making it glow red with heat, the potter removed it from the kiln using a pair of iron tongs and allowed it to cool rapidly in the open air or in an isolation chamber. Many black Raku tea bowls bear tong marks on the interior and/or exterior of the main wall.<sup>20</sup>

So Ōguro appears to have been made entirely by hand and fired in a simple updraft kiln at low temperature. This mode of production was less efficient

than making pots using a potter's wheel and firing them to high temperature in a large climbing kiln, but it seems that the resulting wares fulfilled two particular needs in the community of tea practitioners. First, bowls like Ōguro were pleasant to hold even when containing hot liquid. Because they are less vitrified, low temperature ceramics conduct less heat than high temperature wares. Second, the very inefficiency of the hand-building and hand-carving process forced the potter to constantly manipulate the bowl in his hands. This meant that the potter was unusually sensitive to how the bowl would fit and feel in the palms of a tea practitioner. Even today, many tea practitioners claim that Raku tea bowls produce the most pleasant tactile sensation of any tea ceramic.

What is most impressive about Ōguro, however, is the pedigree inscribed in its layers of wrapping. The inscription on the lid of its innermost, lacquered box is attributed to the iconic tea master Sen no Rikyū's great grandson and the founder of the Omotesenke school of tea, Sen Kōshin Sōsa (1613–1672). He wrote the following: “Ōguro. Owned by Rikyū. Transmitted through Shōan, Sōtan, and Gotō Shōsai to Sōsa, (cipher).”<sup>21</sup> In other words, Rikyū passed Ōguro to his adopted son Sen Shōan (1546–1614), who then passed it to his son Sen Sōtan (1578–1658). Sōtan in turn gave, or perhaps sold, the bowl to his wealthy disciple Gotō Shōsai (d. 1680), who in turn passed it on to Kōshin. Kōshin's cipher (*kaō*: a stylized signature) on this inscription appears to be authentic. Kōshin's tea diaries, which are reliable and were only recently made public, record Gotō Shōsai's owning and using of Ōguro, which suggests that the box inscription is legitimate. The lacquered inner box is protected by a second wooden box that encloses it. The inscription on the lid, attributed on the basis of its calligraphy to Kōshin's adopted son Sen Sōsa V. Zuiryūsai (1660–1701), is modest and less informative, reading only “Rikyū Ōguro tea bowl,” with no cipher or signature.<sup>22</sup> These inscriptions, of course, lend Ōguro its value and authority in the field of Japanese tea ceramics. But how do we know that the tea bowl I have described is the bowl about which these comments were written?

#### FREER OBJECT F1902.52

The Freer Gallery of Art in the Smithsonian Institution has more than two thousand examples of East Asian ceramics in its collection, not including shards. More than nine hundred of these are attributed to Japanese manufacture; the majority were acquired by the museum's founder, Detroit-based industrialist Charles Lang Freer (1854–1919). Freer formed his collection of

Japanese ceramics in a period spanning four decades, both during his own travels to Japan in 1895, 1907, 1909, and 1910, and through the offices of dealers in Japan, Boston, New York, and Paris. By taking advantage of the social, economic, and cultural trends of the Meiji period (1868–1912), during which pre-Meiji arts and crafts were sold at remarkably low prices, and by making use of the significant monetary resources at his disposal, Freer was able to acquire one of the most extensive collections of Asian art in the Western world. By the turn of the century, Freer’s collection was large enough to cause him worry about its future. In 1902 the historian Charles Moore suggested that Freer consider contributing his collection to the Smithsonian Institution, and within two years Freer had decided in favor of the donation. After two additional years of negotiation, which included the personal intervention of President Theodore Roosevelt in favor of accepting Freer’s gift, the Smithsonian regents approved the proposed donation to the growing complex on the National Mall. Freer’s collection was to have its own building connected to the National Museum (“the Washington Building,” as Freer modestly referred to the future Freer Gallery of Art), a site it has occupied since opening to the public in May of 1923.<sup>23</sup>

One of these pieces, Freer object 1902.52, is a black tea bowl attributed by its vendor to Chōjirō. Freer purchased the bowl for \$70 in 1902 from the dealer Bunkio Matsuki,<sup>24</sup> who “insists that it is a genuine specimen of Chojiro’s work.”<sup>25</sup> The walls of this low cylindrical bowl are fairly straight and regular, and the glaze is thick and evenly applied. The bowl appears well-used, with red, rust-like patina reminiscent of that found on Ōguro, as well as black lacquer repairs that have turned brown with age.

Although the bowl is similar in construction and modeling to famous tea bowls attributed to Chōjiro such as Ōguro, it has been the source of conflicting opinions. Edward Sylvester Morse, who advised Freer on his ceramics and helped him decide which objects to include in the Smithsonian gift and which to give away or sell, commented to Freer early on that he was “doubtful about its genuineness.”<sup>26</sup> Later, he remarked, “Raku? Yes, it may be an unsigned piece of no consequence.” In 1957, the ceramic scholar Koyama Fujio observed “Chojiro, first [head of the] Raku [workshop].” In 1984, a tea practitioner and connoisseur remarked that “the sculptural treatment of the base and foot is not like other Chojiro bowls I have handled. The rim is thin, whereas the base is thick. Could this be the work of Sokei, Jokei, or even Nonko?” In 1987, Raku Kichizaemon XV commented:

A group of bowls of this sort exists for which precise identification is very difficult since it depends upon clarification of the identities of the various

people working at the Raku workshop during its formative years. These bowls may be “of the Chōjirō era” — or they may be completely separate from the orthodox Raku lineage. . . . The base of this bowl does not have the Chōjirō touch.

The bowl (which like all pieces in the Freer collection cannot be lent to other museums) is not included in the canon of Chōjirō bowls recognized by the community of tea practitioners.

The gap between these two pieces, then, exposes one major rupture in the connoisseurial epistemology of modern Japan. The primary distinction between Ōguro and Freer object F1902.52 is not stylistic or material, but contextual: one is protected by its wrapping while the other has lost its boxes. The claim that Ōguro is a product of Chōjirō made for the tea master Sen no Rikyū rests entirely on the narrative of the box inscriptions. As Kichizaemon acknowledged in his comments and as recent archaeological evidence has demonstrated, Chōjirō was only one of a number of potters producing Raku ceramics in the late sixteenth century.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, commissioning, producing, and distributing reproductions (*utsushi*) of tea ceramics was quite common in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Japan.<sup>28</sup> What evidence, then, links this bowl called “Ōguro” to its box inscription?

The collector of Raku ceramics, of course, would argue that anyone who has examined enough authentic Chōjirō pieces could instantly recognize what Kichizaemon calls “the Chōjirō touch.” The very notion of the intuitive connoisseurship of Raku ceramics, however, is a product of post-Enlightenment notions of art adopted in Japan in the late nineteenth century. Connoisseurs of this period constructed a discernible, individualistic Chōjirō style through study of objects identified as Chōjirō products by their box inscriptions. The logic is thus entirely circular; objects lacking boxes tend not to display “the Chōjirō touch” because the very definition of Chōjirō’s style emerges from study of objects wrapped in powerful but not necessarily reliable attributions. Without considering the context of the production and consumption of Raku ceramics, and particularly the way in which they functioned both as bearers of symbolic meaning and as vessels used for drinking tea, our assumptions about their beauty, value, and meaning as “art objects” are at the very least not the last word. Rather, the differential treatment of these works indicates that the very truth and authenticity of these objects as art, which tends to be taken for granted, can in fact be changed or even lost.



## Notes

1. Several anthropologists have previously employed the metaphor of wrapping to analyze Japan, and these texts have influenced my own attempts to grapple with the shifting meanings of Japanese material culture. In the introductory essay to the anthology *Unwrapping Japan: Society and Culture in Anthropological Perspective*, ed. Eyal Ben-Ari, Brian Moeran, and James Valentine (University of Hawai‘i Press, 1990), Moeran argues that the notion of “wrapping” can be thought of as a euphemism for discourse on the one hand and as a pun on “rapping” on the other. Moeran and the other authors in the volume contend that wrapping helps us to understand how cultures present themselves for internal and outside consumption. This concept is complicated by Joy Hendry (who was also a contributor to *Unwrapping Japan*) in her *Wrapping Culture: Politeness, Presentation and Power in Japan and Other Societies* (Clarendon Press, 1993). She argues that wrapping represents “basic underlying principles” of refinement that reproduce certain structures of power and social systems in the culture and communication of everyday life (171). Louise Allison Cort also foregrounds the role of the box and other forms of wrapping in “Looking at White Dew,” *The Studio Potter* 10, vol. 2 (1985).

2. Larry Shiner, *The Invention of Art: A Cultural History* (The University of Chicago Press, 2001).

3. Arthur Danto, *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History* (Princeton University Press, 1997).

4. Shiner, *The Invention of Art*, 225.

5. I do not emphasize the role of the museum in this historical process as a straw man for the anthology, and certainly do not intend to single out curators for criticism. Like institutions such as universities, libraries, and opera houses, museums are imperfect. The complex pressures that constrain many museums might include profit-minded and number-conscious administrators, politicized boards and oversight committees, mission statements that demand both enlightenment and entertainment for increasingly diverse populations of visitors, and collections of objects with contested histories and complicated needs. More important than these limitations, though, is the way in which innovative curators, exhibition designers, and collectors increasingly strive to challenge the very definitions of art that have dominated the field for so long. This book is possible, in part, because of their efforts.

6. Philip Fisher, following Heidegger, discusses this notion in *Making and Effacing Art: Modern American Art in a Culture of Museums* (Oxford University Press, 1991), 10.

7. Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy: A Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style* (Oxford University Press, 1972, 1988), 1.

8. See, for example, Berger's essay “Frederick Antal: A Personal Tribute,” *Burlington Magazine* 96/617 (1954): 259–260.

9. T. J. Clark, *Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the 1848 Revolution* (Princeton University Press, 1973), 12–13.

10. Stanley J. O'Connor, “Art Critics, Connoisseurs, and Collectors in the South-

east Asian Rain Forest: A Study in Cross-Cultural Art Theory,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 14, vol. 2 (September 1983): 400–401.

11. Richard H. Davis, *Lives of Indian Images* (Princeton University Press, 1997), 23.

12. Davis, *Lives of Indian Images*, 115.

13. Marilyn Ivy, *Discourses of the Vanishing: Modernity, Phantasm, Japan* (The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 23.

14. Stefan Tanaka, *New Times in Modern Japan* (Princeton University Press, 2004), 169.

15. Hand-building and hand-carving of the walls and base is seen on some tea bowls from the Seto/Mino kilns in the early seventeenth century, perhaps extending back into the late sixteenth century. Black Seto tea bowls, in particular, tend to show marks of scraping and carving. Such tea bowls were either thrown entirely on the wheel or coiled and then thrown on a flat base. Alteration through carving or scraping took place after the piece was removed from the wheel. See Louise Allison Cort, *Seto and Mino Ceramics* (Smithsonian Institution, 1992), 89–90; and Itō Yoshiaki, “Momoyama jidai ni okeru futatsu no kuro: kuro Raku to Setu guro ni tsuite,” *MUSEUM* 520 (7, 1994): 4–19.

16. See Richard Wilson, *Inside Japanese Ceramics: A Primer of Materials, Techniques, and Traditions* (Weatherhill, 1995), 56–58, for a description and illustrations of this process.

17. See Raku Kichizaemon, “Rakuyaki no gihō,” *Raku chawan no 400 nen—dentō tosōzō* (Suntory Bijutsukan, Heisei 10), 54–55. Also, Wilson, *Inside Japanese Ceramics*, 131–132.

18. Today two types of kilns are found in the Raku workshop: those used to fire red Raku ceramics and those used to fire black Raku ceramics. The latter have a bellows, which increases the temperature of the firing and results in the glossy, shiny quality of black Raku glazes. It is not known when this innovation occurred. See the sketch of a black Raku kiln in Hayashiya Seizō, Akanuma Taka, and Raku Kichizaemon, *Raku: A Dynasty of Japanese Ceramists* (Maison de la Culture du Japon a Paris, 1997).

19. Such ceramics are referred to as *nanshitsu* or “soft quality” in Japanese, but I prefer the term “low temperature.” Vitrification refers to the chemical transformation that occurs when a substance melts, reaching a liquid state like that of glass, at high temperature.

20. Black Seto tea bowls were also removed from the kiln when red-hot using tongs, to ensure that the iron in solution in the glaze did not crystallize and turn brown. See Wilson, *Inside Japanese Ceramics*, 160–161.

21. Raku Bijutsukan, *Chōjirō* (Raku Bijutsukan, 1988), 10.

22. Raku Bijutsukan, *Chōjirō*, 10.

23. See Thomas Lawton and Linda Merrill, *Freer: A Legacy of Art* (Freer Gallery, 1993).

24. Voucher no. 20, March 1902, Freer Papers.

25. Folder sheet, F1902.52, Freer Gallery of Art.

26. This and the following comments come from the folder sheet for object F1902.52, Freer Gallery of Art.

27. See chapter one of Morgan Pitelka, *Handmade Culture: Raku Potters, Patrons, and Tea Practitioners in Japan* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2005) for more information.

28. Morgan Pitelka, "Back to the Fundamentals: 'Reproducing' Rikyū and Chōjirō in Japanese Tea Culture," in *The Culture of Copying in Japan: Critical and Historical Perspectives*, ed. Rupert Cox (Routledge, 2007).