

R A K U

THE SPIRITUAL AESTHETIC

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1.0 | INTRODUCTION

Unlike conventional ceramic firing approaches, which may take several days to complete, Raku is a method where work is rapidly (often under an hour in duration) fired and removed from the kiln when glowing hot.

Raku has become popular amongst contemporary artists/potters internationally since it was introduced to the West in 1940s. Historically, Raku referred to the spiritual, religious, philosophical, ceremonial and functional characteristics of a specific style.

First developed in the city of Kyoto, Japan in the late Sixteenth Century during the Momoyama period (1573-1615), in its traditional form, Raku was used to produce ceramic ware for the tea ceremony.

The tradition of Raku in Japan was surrounded by cultural concern that strongly affected the end product. The aesthetic of original Raku is exemplified in the Zen concept of wabi-sabi: the idea of an intrinsic humble beauty and 'thusness' that transcends individual human intention. Raku ceramics supported the notion that the simplest object possesses great beauty and great significance.



FIGURE 1

The traditional Raku firing in Japan.

For four hundreds years, Japanese people have seen Raku as being both simultaneously utilitarian and aesthetic.

According to John Dickerson, any attempt to divorce the object from its practical purpose (for instance, by placing it in museum) is inevitably detrimental to both the bowl itself and to its appreciation. Such appreciation of the function of Raku ware is very important to the Japanese connoisseurs.

The current head of the Raku family in Japan, Raku Kichizaemon XV, believes that the tea bowl is a 'living thing' and should be handled and used continuously, indeed, has been able to reclaim several Raku tea bowls from museums, claiming the gallery case to be a 'dusty glass coffin'. In this sense, the Raku tradition in Japan is rooted in the beauty of utility, not in style or a specific technique or glaze.



FIGURE 2

The Tea Ceremony (chanoyu)

For contemporary non-Japanese artists/potters, Raku is a rapid firing ceramic process that is usually appreciated for its aesthetic, tactile, sensory qualities and non-functional, sculptural application. The 'non-functional' here stands in opposition to 'function' understood as that which is usable (utilitarian).

Non-Japanese/Western artists/potters such as Paul Soldner, Rick Hirsch, and Robert Pipenburg in the 50s and 60s encountered Raku and through their practices have developed alternative approaches that maybe said to give a variety of 'new' meanings and most agreed that indeed, an appraisal of their work indicates that superficially at least, contemporary (American) Raku has been distanced in terms of style, technique and purpose from its traditional form. This paper seeks to investigate the extend to which any residue of original, traditional Raku sensibilities have been passed down to non-Japanese artists/potters and still remain/resonate in/with the work of contemporary artists/potters and their practices.

In 2001 I had the opportunity to travel from my birthplace of Malaysia to study ceramics for an extended period in Japan. When I first encountered Raku in Japan, I was instructed in making tea bowls without using a mechanized pottery wheel - the traditional method of crafting tea bowls for the tea ceremony - that were then fast fired in a process unique to Raku. In many ways it was the opposite of what I had known of Raku in the Western context.

Before coming to Japan, I also learned the technique in a way that involved post-reduction in the firing process, and assumed it had been always practised in this way. Later, I discovered that post-reduction was never used in the old tradition of Raku; American potter Paul Soldner, firing in America, introduced this aspect of the process in the 1960s. It should not be assumed, however, that such changes in traditional Raku through culture and time diminish the significance of contemporary Raku. Rather contemporary Raku should be appreciated with respect to the impact of cultural interaction and different understanding towards Japanese culture.

My experience in Japan elicited a deep interest in exploring Japanese aesthetics. Although I was exposed to many other Japanese traditional techniques, the aesthetic of Raku and its tradition has always fascinated me. I noticed that after 400 years of continuous practice in Japan, Raku has been given a variety of 'meanings' and interpretations among contemporary artists/potters especially when it has been transferred to the West.

It is one art form that, I believe, has not suffered in its revival-rather it has been strengthened. The strengthening of Raku has involved beyond its technical context. To a certain extent, the spirit and philosophy of original Raku has somehow influenced the way of thinking in making of artworks by the contemporary artists/potters of non-Japanese and ultimately has become the main factor for attracting towards an appreciation.

For some time, I wondered how contemporary non-Japanese artists/potters actually respond to aesthetic elements from foreign cultures. Having been brought up in the multi cultural society in Malaysia, I have had to accept and adapt to elements from other cultures. It is important to understand the 'meaning' behind every aesthetic element that is brought into our own culture. Raku artwork has to be appreciated together with the 'spirit' and philosophy that accompanies it.

1.1 RAKU - FROM HISTORY TO CONTEMPORARY

From the beginning of the fifteenth century, the practice of drinking tea had assumed an important role in the life of Japanese warrior leaders and the elites. At that time they began holding gatherings at which tea was prepared and drunk in a ritualized, performative fashion. Performative tea practice had gained popularity by the sixteenth century and potters developed the Raku technique to meet the demands of the tea practitioners for objects to be used in the tea ceremony (chanoyu). One of these potters, Sasaki Chojiro (1516-1595), a Korean migrant, was selected by the tea master Sen no Rikyu (1522-1591) from a group of ceramic tile producers to collaborate on the production of ultimate rustic, wabi, teabowls. Raku wares were

popular with a small group of tea practitioners in and around Kyoto, Japan's capital city at that time. The tea ceremony proved to be the vehicle that stimulated the highest level of attainment in many aspects of Japanese culture and Raku certainly owed its development and prestige to the cult of tea.



FIGURE 3

Chojiro's black Raku tea bowl named 'Koto', 16th Century, collection of Mr. Raku Kichizaemon XV, Japan.

In Japan Raku has been mainly restricted to the traditional forms of those articles used in the tea ceremony, primarily tea bowls, incense boxes and dishes.

Tea masters specified certain dictates in design and function in accordance with the Zen ideal for the tea bowl; the qualities admired were the unique, unrepeatable marks and imperfections imparted through hand forming and the consequent irregular, asymmetrical vessel forms. Japanese Raku was made in response to nature and natural forms.

The Raku tradition was transmitted to the West first through the lectures and writings of Bernard Leach (1887-1979) and later through the popularizing or 'fusing' efforts of artists/potters such as Paul Soldner (1921-2011). During the 1960s, Soldner adapted the Raku technique, modifying many aspects including style, process and even glaze formulae.



FIGURE 4

Paul Soldner, Pedestal piece, Raku.

Contemporary Raku can be described as encompassing five layers or groups. The first is the Kyoto Raku lineage, early exponents of the Raku process, which continues to operate the wealthiest and most powerful kiln in the Raku tradition. A second layer is made up of a handful of other traditional groups such as Ohi ceramics that operate Raku kilns and are accepted as having some legitimacy within the Japanese tea community.

Following that is a group of Raku potters who serve the less sophisticated ceramic consumer in Japan - the potters who make the cheaper, somewhat fake-looking Raku tea bowls that can be bought for a low price.

Then we have Western potters who are interested in the tea ceremony and Japanese traditions and make a version of Raku that is close to that which is made in Japan. Finally, we have the layer of Western potters who do a version of the so-called American/Soldner style of fusion Raku, which has much less in common, technically speaking, with Japanese Raku.

Raku is not merely a practical technique that involves fire, speed and performance. In the work of Rick Hirsch (one of the first Western/non Japanese potters use Raku in his practice) that was reviewed by David Jones had a strong symbolic and metaphoric resonance that in a way it parallels what happens in chanoyu.



FIGURE 5

Rick Hirsch, 'Mortar and Pestle', Raku

According to Jones, because Raku is always associated with the chanoyu or 'the way of tea', that it is informed by the Zen Buddhist and Taoist attitudes of life and implies an emphasis on a state of being or a state of mind that the words 'ceremony' or 'ritual' do not. He further explained.

He further explained that this refinement of a difficult translation of a foreign cultural concept, which has occurred in the West, is a process that has also informed Rick Hirsch's own recent thinking.

1.2 SPIRITUAL PHILOSOPHY IN RAKU TRADITION

In this section I will discuss the concept of wabi sabi, understood from the idea of spirit in aesthetic, while attempting to define them along with Buddhist concept. I consider these as the key elements that compose the "spiritual" meaning in Raku production. To do this I will focus on perhaps the most important of Japanese aesthetic concept – the wabi sabi; which consists of two words; wabi a concept of beauty found in austerity and simplicity; and sabi which also denotes a concept of beauty of antiquity. As defined in a most reliable Japanese English dictionary, wabi is "taste for the simple and quiet" and sabi is "patina" and "an antique look".

Wabi sabi is essentially a nature-based aesthetic paradigm that is central to Japanese culture. (pg 9) It is a notion of beauty that is linked to the chanoyu or the tea ceremony, and it is also associated with the Zen Buddhism. The tea masters, priests and monks who practised Zen were the first people in the Japanese tradition to become involved with the development of the philosophy of wabi sabi. Zen practitioners incorporated a sense of appreciation of these concepts and experiences into their life and for some time into their work and teaching.

Tea masters of the Momoyama period developed the simple custom of tea drinking into the tea ceremony by synthesizing other artistic activities such as architecture, garden design, crafts, painting and calligraphy, as well as through the cultivation of a religio-philosophical awareness transcending ordinary reality. This emphasis on spirituality has continued to be felt in many aspects of Japanese life and culture. It was this art that inspired the appreciation of wabi sabi as an aesthetic.

The inspiration for wabi sabi metaphysical, spiritual, and more principles came from ideas on simplicity, naturalness, harmony with nature and the acceptance of reality found within Zen, which is a philosophy that developed from Mahayana Buddhism (Koren 1994). According to Leonard Koren, one of the first author who introduced the concept of wabi sabi to the West, wabi sabi is essentially a nature-based aesthetic paradigm that is central to Japanese culture (Koren 1994). It is a notion of beauty that is linked with the traditional Japanese tea ceremony and also associated with Zen Buddhism. In Zen, essential knowledge must be transmitted from mind to mind, and not spoken or written, because its meaning would be both diminished and possibly be misunderstood.

Zen principles of simplicity, naturalness, harmony with nature and the acceptance of Zen's notion of reality, all found within the philosophy of wabi sabi, were synthesized by the Japanese and fully realized within the context of the tea ceremony (Koren 1994). Koren suggests wabi sabi as the "most conspicuous and characteristic feature of what we think of as traditional Japanese beauty", comparing its importance in Japanese aesthetics to the "Greek ideals of beauty and perfection in the West".

Traditional beauty in Japanese culture is composed of various experiences or states of beauty that range from 'lower levels' with elaborate ornamentation and vivid colour usage, to the 'higher levels' of a simple and subdued elegance that is known in Japanese as shibumi. The adjective form of the word shibumi, that is shibui, is a beauty that is represented by the notion of 'less is more'. This is a beauty that, in a simple word is characterized by the greatly reserved, astringent, sober and quiet. It is also a beauty that is in harmony with nature and it has a calming effect on the viewer. When the highest state of the whole beauty is achieved, it becomes wabi-sabi.

While a modern work of art is a finished result, wabi sabi is incomplete and imperfect.

We are forced to realize that it as a work in progress – not just a finished product for us to look at, but something that we can engage in ourselves. The concept of wabi sabi artwork often point to this process. Koren writes "corrosion and contamination make its expressive richer".

The art of wabi sabi is not flamboyant, colourful or spectacular but relatively quiet and assimilated into nature or circumstance. The wabi aesthetic is charged with philosophical and religious spiritual unique in the history of Japanese art. Central to the philosophy of wabi cha are notions of 'nothingness' deriving from Zen Buddhism and the 'isness' of Taoism. The notion symbolized by the term 'wabi' lay at the heart of Japanese medieval aesthetics and pervaded literary as well as theatrical fields such as waka (31 syllable poetry) renga (linked-verse poetry) and Noh theatre.

Wabi sabi was systemized and established as an aesthetic of Japan in the Meiji era (1868-1912) and the modern period, the post Meiji era to the present. (pg 49) But the word "wabi" and "sabi" first appeared in Heian period (794-1192) and had been used in Kamakura period (1192-1333) and the following period. Wabi sabi is composed of two words. "Wabi" originally meant the misery of living alone in nature and "Sabi" originally meant chill. In the 14th century the meaning evolved to more positive connotations. According to De Mente (2006), wabi derived from the Japanese verb wabu and the adjective is wabishii. (pg 33) Wabu literally meaning "to languish", represents a feeling of loneliness and its adjectival form, wabishii represents being lonely and comfortless.

According to De Mente, the notion of sabi is related to aspects of the Japanese philosophy of Shinto pertaining to the reverence of nature with its seasonal changes, and especially within the weathering and aging process. (pg 31) In comparison to wabi, sabi is more objective and it generally refers to material things. Put simply, wabi sabi can be understood as a way of thinking and living and it is a state of being which needs to be felt, to be evoked rather than to be explained.

Wabi sabi received its artistic and philosophic value in the 16th century when Rikyu established wabi cha, a tea ceremony in a simple and austere manner. Rikyu did the wabi cha as the countermeasure to the trend of the tea ceremony of the 16th century, which was sponsored by the samurai lords and was completely tawdry. Since Rikyu was deeply steeped in Zen Buddhism, the ostentatious and pretentious display of wealth by Hideyoshi and his aristocratic vassals had always been distasteful to him and was totally contrary to the wabi concept of tea teaching. Wabi can also mean 'poverty', though in this context not lack of food or possession, but state of mind that voluntarily accepts an austere existence.

According to Lester (2006), as meritorious way of life, Rikyu advocated man's return to and living in harmony with nature and finding beauty not in flawless "artificialities" but in the unpretentious, the inspired spontaneity of imperfection. For Rikyu the refined tea bowls and thrown to perfection on the potters wheel and tightly controlled glaze were inconsistent with the concept of wabi. Instead, explained Lester, he envisioned rustic shapes a man could cradle in his palms to relish the feel of the weight, the undisguised marks left by the potter, the texture of the fired clay and the sensuous flow of the glaze. These ideas that were brought to life in Raku tradition that played a very significant role in his reform in the tea ceremony.

Apart from the concept of spirit/spiritual in the aesthetics that I have explained before, it is difficult to really define the meaning of spirit/spiritual in traditional Raku in Japan. Looking at its history, it is hard to describe how the different generations of Raku family, say Chojiro, Nonko, and Sanyu- understood the 'spirit' of Raku. To overcome this dilemma, I would rely on the writings of Raku Kichizaemon XV, the current head of the Raku family, who has written extensively about his perspective on the family tradition. Since he is the modern representative of his Raku family, his opinions carry a great deal of weight and certainly the closest things there is today to an "orthodox" Raku voice.

For Raku Kichizaemon XV, no tea bowl could be made other than with the same sort of clay and rock as his ancestor Chojiro had dug out of local beds 400 years ago. The tea bowl also could only be formed by the pinch-pot method, which Chojiro had evolved and it should not be shaped other than as a simple functional bowl. The criteria listed by Kichizaemon IV have made Raku exclusively to be associated with the tea ceremony.

According to Kichizaemon XV, Chojiro was not satisfied with the tea bowl as an "embodiment of simple and direct expression" but elevated it into a "manifestation of abstract spirituality". The concept of spiritual and artistic consciousness that was developed by Chojiro is still relevant and valid in the contemporary world. The piece is removed from the kiln while glowing hot has been the significance characteristic of Raku wares all over the world. The interaction of the technique and such spirit lead to the preserving of Raku tradition. The admiration for the work of the Raku family is manifold. The late potter and writer Daniel Rhodes, in his book Pottery Form, respectfully called Raku tea bowls "unassuming forms that represent the quintessence of Japanese sensibility." Rhodes honoured the Raku family and their genius for investing a simple object with an inner mystical spirit.

For more than 400 years the Raku family has preserved a unique ceramic tradition yet the issue of spirituality and artistic consciousness addressed by Chojiro are as valid as ever. For Kichizaemon XV, this tradition has not been a matter of recycling traditional forms but a "process of constant reinvigoration and invention". For him tradition is not simply something to be preserved and inherited but how we perceive the tradition and traditional techniques. It is our viewpoint that determines what we create and give rise within the realm of the traditional work to something completely new and fresh.

The issues brought up by Raku Kichizaemon XV on the inheritance of tradition are important in understanding not only Raku and the culture of tea in Japan, but as Pitelka said, the "apprehension of cultural change and continuity across a broad temporal and geographic spectrum". It is not understatement to claim that the Japanese culture that includes Raku tradition has survived by the bestowing of traditional technique through family legacies.

The lineage of Raku potters has remained basically unbroken for fifteen generations since Chojiro. Kichizaemon XV is seen on a transcendental path that awakens not only his own creative energies but also directly connects him with the cosmic essence of Chojiro's chawan or tea bowl.

Like I have described earlier on, the aesthetics of a Raku tea bowl is centered around the foundation of wabi and sabi. Wabi forms are quiet, simple, imperfect yet absolutely suitable for their function and accordance with nature, while sabi represents the quality of mellowing with age. To Kichizaemon IV, Raku bowls in their most aesthetic sense, must be judged and ultimately appreciate through use. The following aesthetic preferences are found in Dickerson's, *A Raku Handbook*.

A suitable tea bowl, or the chawan, should have the quality of keshiki, a slight dampness that remains during and right after use. The material used to create chawan is porous and poor conductor of heat. Its slight roughness-zangurishita, produce a soft sensation to the touch. The sound the chawan conducts is dull and natural due to its crackle glaze and porous composition. Its form should include slight irregularities that offer tactile and visual 'happening'.

The visual aesthetic is a direct relationship between what the chawan appears to be and what qualities it actually has. It means if it appears heavy it should be heavy. A chawan should feel comfortable when held in the palm of the hands and when tilted for drinking. The undulating lip contains five to seven hills or waves, known as gaku. A drinking point is placed posite the front of the chawan.

opposite the front of the chawan. The inside of the bowl contains a spiral cha-damari, or tea pool representing the depressions in rock that collect rainwater.

In Japanese ceramics particularly within the Raku tradition, the idea of 'spirit' plays a crucial role in explaining artistic beauty. The beauty of Raku work and tradition lies in its 'spirit'. Raku should not be seen as merely a ceramic technique that has been passed on for more than 400 years. Beside the complex technical parts of Raku, it is important to underline that if technique is not linked to an exact idea, or what Claudia Sugliano terms as an 'interior preparation', it may appear satisfactory but it will always remain superficial. In this context I will explain the idea of 'spirit' on the basis of Japanese aesthetics and review concepts of 'spirit' in the Western context.

The intimate and spiritual aspect of the tradition of Raku is the most complex. This aspect forces an intimacy with the Raku tradition and its philosophy that lies in the Zen culture and wabi sabi, "a lifesyle, an aesthetic ideal and a way of thinking that covers every aspect of existence itself". The tea bowls created by Rikyu and Chojiro as a collaborative venture for the tea ceremony was designed to suit the highly sophisticated spirit of wabi. It was developed on the two Zen aesthetic foundations of wabi and sabi that has been explained in this chapter. The hand-formed Raku bowl increases the potential for sculpting and allows the spirit of the maker to express through the finished work with particular directness and intimacy.

Raku pottery is fired in such a way to leave the object appearing irregular and rough, its colours simple and muted, typically shades of brown and cream. The glaze that is applied on Raku pottery fades and loses its lustre over time and rather than attempting to retain the colours and polished sheen of its initial firing, eventually transforms into an entirely new set of objects. The elements of Raku pottery described above participate in both irregularity and the simple beauty.

In this, Raku pottery and other utensils used in the tea ceremony become expressive elements that draw the sensitivity of the participants heart thus inviting the participants to look beyond the objects that they used in the tea ceremony and towards an aesthetic that encapsulates the unlimited potential for an objective feeling to reveal.

The concept of wabi sabi is different from the Western concept of beauty that is/was always intended as something 'big', 'monumental' and 'long lasting'. While seen as a philosophy in the Western world, the concept of aesthetic in Japan, in this scope, wabi sabi, is seen as an integral part of daily life. Thus, the concept of wabi sabi is a question of not seeking or pursuing the perfect or materialistic result but instead, the beauty of imperfection and the balance to be found in the imperfection that lies behind it.

Contemporary artists/potters can create works with highly technical quality, but they are not necessarily understand its fundamental and inexorable element, which is the spirituality. Raku encapsulates a centuries old tradition of spiritual and materiality, creativity and dexterity, rites and customs.

Raku wares invented by Chojiro reflect more directly than any other kind of ceramics the ideals of Wabi cha, the form of tea ceremony based on the aesthetic of wabi advocated by Rikyu. To understand the aesthetic of Raku ware for the tea ceremony, first we have to look into the concept of Wabi Sabi. However, in order to have the appreciation on the concept of wabi sabi, one may need cognitive ability, open and flexible mind as well as spiritual maturity.

The beauty and aesthetic of ancient Raku were based on symbolic reference to chanoyu. Chanoyu or the tea ceremony was a reflection of the Zen philosophy and teaching of Rikyu. According to Okakura, the old sixteenth century Raku tea bowl may be considered crude to the Western people, but in the eyes of an early Japanese elites, the same bowl would be considered a rare work of art to be treasured through use and valued above a large grant of land as a reward for victory.

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