

Fall 2026 Arts of Asia Lecture Series

Unknown Makers, Lasting Beauty: Rethinking Fine Art Across Asia

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Beyond the Tea Bowl: Material Culture and the Environmental History of Edo-Period Kyoto

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This lecture explores how an environmental history perspective can transform our understanding of Japanese ceramics and tea culture in early modern Kyoto.

Question:

- What changes when we look at a tea bowl not only as a work of art, but also as the product of environmental resources, human labor, transportation systems, commercial networks, and patterns of consumption?

Themes of the Lecture

Clay

- Geological resources; sources of raw materials

Wood

- Fuel for kilns; deforestation; forest management and conservation

Water

- Transportation of materials and goods; urban infrastructure

Tea Culture

- Consumer demand; elite patronage and social networks

Museums and Objects

- What can a tea bowl tell us?
- How do museum objects preserve evidence of environmental history?
- What becomes visible when we move beyond aesthetics?

Key Dates and Chronology

- **1467-1477:** Ōnin War devastates Kyoto, destroying much of the city and contributing to the collapse of centralized political authority.
- **Late 1400s-1500s:** Kyoto slowly recovers through piecemeal rebuilding; tea culture, commerce, and artisan production continue despite political instability.
- **1573:** Oda Nobunaga ends the Muromachi shogunate; Kyoto becomes a center of renewed political competition.
- **1582:** Death of Oda Nobunaga at Honnōji in Kyoto.
- **1582-1598:** Toyotomi Hideyoshi sponsors major reconstruction projects that reshape Kyoto into an early modern capital.
- **1586-1587:** Construction of the **Jurakudai** palace complex in Kyoto, symbolizing Hideyoshi's authority and helping stimulate urban redevelopment.

- **1587:** Hideyoshi sponsors the famous **Kitano Grand Tea Gathering** in Kyoto, demonstrating the growing cultural and political importance of tea.
- **Late 1580s-1590s:** Hideyoshi reorganizes Kyoto's urban landscape through land surveys, street realignment, new residential districts, and the construction of the Odoi earthen embankment around the city.
- **1590s:** Development of temple districts such as Teramachi and Teranouchi, helping define the basic urban geography of early modern Kyoto.
- **1600:** Battle of Sekigahara.
- **1603:** Tokugawa Ieyasu establishes the Tokugawa shogunate.
- **1603-1868:** Edo Period (Tokugawa Period).
- **Early 1600s:** Relative peace encourages rapid urban growth, rebuilding, and renewed patronage of artisans, merchants, temples, and tea practitioners in Kyoto.
- **1615:** Fall of Osaka Castle and final destruction of the Toyotomi regime; prolonged political stability begins.
- **1615-1624:** Early Awataguchi ceramic production.
- **1619:** Hon'ami Kōetsu receives land at Takagamine and establishes an influential artistic and craft community north of Kyoto.
- **1620:** Tokugawa Kazuko enters the imperial court as consort of Emperor Go-Mizunoo, strengthening Tokugawa patronage of Kyoto's court culture.
- **Early-mid 1600s:** Production of Kyoto ceramics (Kyōyaki) expands as tea culture flourishes among warrior, courtly, and merchant patrons.
- **Mid-1600s:** Nonomura Ninsei and his studio develop highly refined enamel-decorated Kyoto ceramics associated with tea culture.
- **1663-1743:** Life of Ogata Kenzan, one of Kyoto's most celebrated ceramic artists.
- **1868:** Meiji Restoration; end of the Tokugawa shogunate and relocation of the imperial court to Tokyo.

Important People

- **Sen no Rikyū (1522-1591):** Tea master whose teachings shaped later tea culture and aesthetics.
- **Hon'ami Kōetsu (1558-1637):** Artist, calligrapher, ceramic patron, and cultural leader associated with Kyoto's artistic communities.
- **Nonomura Ninsei (active mid-seventeenth century):** Important Kyoto potter (and studio) known for technical excellence and colorful overglaze decoration.
- **Ogata Kenzan (1663-1743):** Potter, painter, and designer whose work helped define Kyoto ceramic culture.

Important Places

- **Kyoto:** Japan's imperial capital and a major center for artistic production, consumption, and trade.
- **Uji:** South of Kyoto; one of Japan's most important tea-producing regions.
- **Awataguchi:** A district in eastern Kyoto associated with early ceramic production.
- **Takagamine:** Site of Hon'ami Kōetsu's artisanal community north of Kyoto.
- **Omuro / Ninnaji:** Area associated with Nonomura Ninsei's ceramic production.
- **Kamo River and Katsura River:** Important waterways supporting transportation, urban growth, and resource movement.

Key Concepts and Vocabulary

- **Material Culture:** The study of objects as evidence for human activities, values, and social relationships.
- **Environmental History:** The study of interactions between humans and the natural world over time.
- **Chanoyu:** The preparation and sharing of matcha (powdered green tea) according to established traditions and procedures.
- **Chawan:** Tea bowl. The most important vessel used in the preparation and consumption of matcha.
- **Matcha:** Powdered green tea made from *Camellia sinensis*.
- **Wabi:** An aesthetic associated with simplicity, restraint, imperfection, and humility.
- **Kyōyaki:** Ceramics produced in and around Kyoto.
- **Anagama:** Single-chamber wood-fired kiln.
- **Noborigama:** Multi-chamber climbing kiln built on a slope and fired with wood.
- **Toriawase:** The selection and arrangement of objects used in a tea gathering.
- **Meibutsu:** A famous or celebrated object, especially a tea utensil.

Questions for Further Thought

1. How does a tea bowl connect distant landscapes to urban consumers?
2. What natural resources were necessary to produce a single ceramic vessel?
3. How did tea culture shape patterns of resource use in early modern Japan?
4. How does environmental history challenge traditional approaches to art history?
5. What stories can museum objects tell that written documents cannot?

Suggested Reading

- Corbett, Rebecca. "Crafting Identity as a Tea Practitioner in Early Modern Japan: Ōtagaki Rengetsu and Tagami Kikusha." *U.S.-Japan Women's Journal* 47, 2014.
- Corbett, Rebecca. *Cultivating Femininity: Women and Tea Culture in Edo and Meiji Japan*. University of Hawai'i Press, 2018.
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- Johes, Meghan. *Path of the Teabowl*. Alfred Ceramic Art Museum, 2026.
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- Rousmaniere, Nicole Coolidge. *Vessels of Influence: China and the Birth of Porcelain in Medieval and Early Modern Japan*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2012.
- Shirane, Haruo. *Japan and the Culture of the Four Seasons: Nature, Literature, and the Arts*. Columbia University Press, 2012.
- Stavros, Matthew. *Kyoto: An Urban History of Japan's Premodern Capital*. University of Hawai'i Press, 2014.
- Surak, Kristin. *Making Tea, Making Japan: Cultural Nationalism in Practice*. Stanford University Press, 2012.
- Totman, Conrad. *The Green Archipelago: Forestry in Preindustrial Japan*. University of California Press, 1989.
- Wilson, Richard L. *The Art of Ogata Kenzan: Persona and Production in Japanese Ceramics*. Weatherhill, 1991.

Additional Resources

Films

- *Rikyu* (dir. Teshigahara Hiroshi, 1989) - A dramatization of the life of Sen no Rikyū and his relationship with Toyotomi Hideyoshi.
- *Death of a Tea Master* (dir. Kumai Kei, 1989) - Based on Inoue Yasushi's novel about tea politics in the sixteenth century.
- *Every Day a Good Day (Nichinichi Kore Kōjitsu)*, 2018) - A contemporary film about learning tea ceremony as a lifelong practice.

Anime

- *Holmes of Kyoto (Kyoto Teramachi Sanjō no Holmes)*, 2018) - Includes episodes touching on tea ceremony and traditional arts.

Manga

- *Hyōuge Mono* by Yamada Yoshihiro - A graphic novel series exploring a fictional version of late medieval and early modern warrior tea culture. Also an anime!
- *Ocha Nigosu (A Bad Boy Drinks Tea!)* by Nishimori Hiroyuki - A humorous series centered on a high-school tea club.
- *Watashi wa Rikyū ("I Am Rikyū")* - Historical manga focused on Sen no Rikyū and the development of tea culture, with a modern fantasy twist.
- *Sadon Desu* - Contemporary manga focused on tea practice and tea-club culture.