

## 20. Set of Five Underglaze-Blue Decorated (*Kosometsuke*) Porcelain Dishes

Diameter of each: 14.4 cm. (5 3/4 in.)

Height of each: 2.5 cm. (1 in.)

Ming dynasty

Early 17th century A.D.

Acquired in Japan

Each small shallow dish has low rounded walls rising to an octafoil barbed rim edged with an underglaze brown dressing. The flat interior surfaces are decorated each with a single thick gnarled tree bearing five prunus blossoms, four viewed from above, one from the side, with two birds swooping above, the placement of these decorative elements varying only slightly from piece to piece. The decoration was painted with cobalt, in outline with some additional detailing, and then reserved on a speckled ground that was produced by blowing the cobalt pigment onto the surface through a bamboo tube while the motifs were protected, or “reserved,” by a wax coating. An apocryphal six-character mark reading *Da Ming Chenghua nianzhi*, “Made in the Chenghua era of the Great Ming,” is hastily written in underglaze blue on the bases of four of the dishes, each encircled by a single blue line drawn near the foot, and on one of the dishes the character *fu*, “happiness” or “good fortune,” is written in double-line strokes within a double-line square border. Kiln grit and sand adhere to the low foot and pinholes mark the glaze on the base of each dish.



A fair number of known *kosometsuke* or “old blue-decorated” porcelains produced in China for Japanese clients during the Tianqi (1621-1627) and Chongzhen (1628-1644) reign eras are decorated in the unusual technique exemplified here, called *fukizumi*, “blown ink,” in Japan, in contrast to the usual method in which the background was painted with cobalt (fig. 1). The example in figure 1 has the usual kiln grit on the foot as well as an illegible mark on its base, typical of this type of ware, along with the frequently seen apocryphal early Ming reign-era marks (fig. 2). On the present set of dishes the cobalt was blown through a slender bamboo tube to produce an irregular speckled ground. Since the motifs were reserved by way of a waxresist applied to the surface to protect the desired shapes from the cobalt, the birds, tree trunks and branches appear white. Among the porcelains exemplifying this technique is a set of five with flowering trees against a speckled ground (fig. 3) and a dish with a rabbit against the speckled blue of a night sky (fig. 4). Flicking a brush loaded with the cobalt pigment might have been the technique to achieve the irregular, uncontrolled spattering on pieces such as the rabbit-shaped dish illustrated here (fig. 5).

According to literary records, Chinese painters invented the blown-ink technique perhaps as early as the 10th century A.D., and the name *fukizumi*, “blown ink,” was adopted for the ceramic technique. Blowing ink onto silk or paper could produce a number of results: flurries of snow, a sense of wind rushing through a landscape, a star-filled sky, and an added dynamism to a scene. It was used to some extent by Yuan period painters but did not become a fashionable technique until it was applied to ceramics in the early 17th century. In porcelain décor, it provided night skies for the “Moon Rabbit” and the blossoming plum.

Sets of dishes for service of food during a tea ceremony gathering were produced in multiples of five and a group of five would be the smallest set possible. The flowering prunus or plum was a harbinger of spring, making the present set of dishes perfectly suited for a late winter tea ceremony. The apocryphal early Ming period reign marks associated the

wares with China's revered past, a bonus in the minds of the Japanese. The great regularity of the shapes of these five dishes along with the brown dressings to protect the rims from chipping are features which exhibit an evolving aesthetic, from the rawness of *kosometsuke* to the polish of Shonzui—a more technically perfect ware for the Japanese, the name taken from inscribed pieces. This evolution was inspired by the evolving tea taste aesthetic in Japan. In fact, the set of five dishes in figure 2 are categorized as Shonzui at the Idemitsu Museum. The roughness of the feet of the present dishes, with accumulations of kiln grit, and the prominent pits in the glazes of the bases, however, keeps these dishes within the *kosometsuke* family.



Detail: Base with apocryphal mark.



Detail: Base with "fu" mark.



Fig. 1: *Kosometsuke* dish with plum branch and bird reserved in white against a painted cobalt ground, *fu* on base, Ming dynasty, early 17th century A.D., Idemitsu Museum of Arts, after *Kosometsuke to Shonzui*, Tokyo, 2013, pl. 21, p. 30 (right).



Fig. 2: Base of figure 1, after *Kosometsuke to Shonzui*, Tokyo, 2013, pl. 21, p. 30 (left).



Fig. 3: Set of five underglaze-blue decorated porcelain dishes with flowering trees against blown-cobalt blue grounds, Ming dynasty, early 17th century A.D., Idemitsu Museum of Arts, after *Kosometsuke to Shonzui*, Tokyo, 2013, pl. 18, p. 57.



Fig. 4: *Kosometsuke* dish with rabbit against a blown-cobalt ground, Ming dynasty, early 17th century A.D., Asian Art Museum, San Francisco, after Julia B. Curtis, with contributions from Stephen Little and Mary Ann Rogers, *Trade Taste & Transformation: Jingdezhen Porcelain for Japan, 1620-1645*. New York, 2005. pl. 95, p. 114.

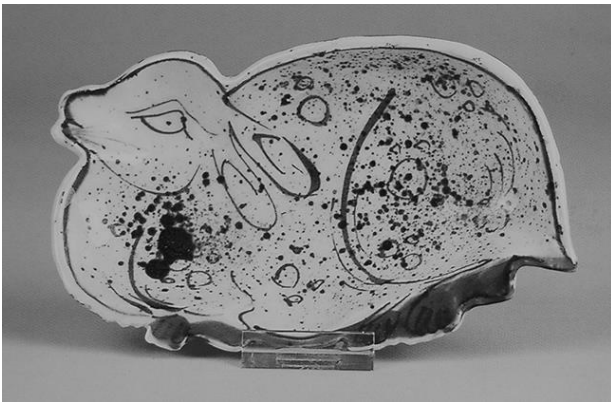


Fig. 5: *Kosometsuke* dish in the shape of a rabbit with blown cobalt, Ming dynasty, early 17th century A.D., private collection, after Julia B. Curtis, with contributions from Stephen Little and Mary Ann Rogers, *Trade Taste & Transformation: Jingdezhen Porcelain for Japan, 1620-1645*. New York, 2005, pl. 27, p. 57.