

## 22. A Rare Overglaze-Enamelled *Ko-akae* Square Sake Bottle

Height: 19.2 cm. (7 3/4 in.)

Width: 2.2 cm. (3 in.)

Ming dynasty

Early 17th century A.D.

Acquired in Japan

The square bottle is slab built with slightly splayed flat sides rising to the shoulder centered by the short, wheel-thrown cylindrical neck with flared rim encircled by underglaze cobalt-blue lines. The intriguing streamers, also in cobalt, radiate from the neck, extend over the shoulder and end in points above the figural groups on each side. On one side two ladies seated on garden stools are being served tea, one with a cup in hand and the attendant standing between them holding a teapot. On the opposite side is another group of three, the ladies here on a stroll, while pairs of figures decorate the two remaining sides, a gracious female figure in each conversing with an attendant. The figures are produced primarily in underglaze-blue with one or two figures wearing an article of clothing in cheerful iron red. All the scenes are above small patches of foliage in green and red enamel sprouting from yellow rockwork outlined in black above a saw-tooth band in underglaze blue at the base. The edges of the sides of the bottle and the shoulder are emphasized with green enamel between black outlines. Glaze has flaked from the edges where the slabs come together, typical of this ware. The square base, glazed white with a very slight greenish tint, is enclosed by a flat unglazed foot where the relatively impure body, also typical of the ware, is exposed. The glaze throughout is thickly applied and has a bright surface. The mouthrim displays a traditional gold lacquer repair.



Another bottle, in a Japanese collection, is so similar in each and every feature to the present that one assumes they were made side by side (fig. 1). Only one other square bottle has come to light with figural design but that is decorated with a single large figure on each side in rather disparate landscape settings and is quite removed in subject and effect from the two above (fig. 2). These pieces, however, are all the result of an extraordinary phenomenon that occurred in the production and history of Chinese ceramics in the early 17th century. Although responding to the needs and demands of a foreign market was not unprecedented, towards the end of the Ming dynasty Chinese potters produced a line of wares that was truly off the charts for them, diametrically opposed to the standards, aesthetics, and values that had been bred in the bone. The catalyst for these wares was provided solely by the Japanese, and particularly tea aficionados whose predecessors had looked to China for wares, purchased them, used them, and treasured them over the years, over the centuries.

During the economic uncertainty and social strife of the late Ming period in China, the home market was greatly diminished, reaching a point when Jingdezhen enterprises were desperate for channels through which to funnel their wares and at that time every effort was made to appeal to foreign clientele who might fill the void, and fill the void they did. A confluence of circumstances, then, resulted in the unique wares produced by the Chinese under the spell of Japanese taste and wishes. The underglaze-blue decorated porcelain is known in the West by its Japanese name, *kosometsuke*, “old blue-decorated” ware, and the ware with overglaze-enamel painting *ko-akae*, “old red-decorated” ware, based on the use of red in the palette, the present vessel being a very rare and wonderful example of the latter.

This bottle has all of the naturalness, irregularity, and imperfections that tea masters in Japan so valued in the wares chosen for use in their tea ceremony activities. The rather thick walls and sturdy posture of the bottle along with a fragile glaze that allowed for peeling away at sharp corners and edges, along with casually yet expressively applied enamels, were cornerstones of this exceptional ware. However, at the core of its attractiveness to the Japanese, what warmed them to it, and to *kosometsuke* as well, was very simply its charm. One thinks of the tea ceremony in Japan as being conducted by men of elegance, grace, and taste, with demeanors serious and uncompromising. It seems an anomaly that they would advocate and embrace objects and utensils of not only unassuming simplicity but, at times, wares almost aggressively rough, rugged, and consciously disheveled, and also imbued with a singular, unsophisticated charm. But they did.

Here, sedate female figures with their attendants are primarily drawn, detailed and in some cases—five of the figures—completed in underglaze-blue pigment with a contrasting orangey-red enamel on the robe of one of the female figures, on the undergarment of another, and on the garb of one of the attendants and the pantaloons of another. The green and yellow, along with red and joined with black pigment that bring the foliage and earthy outcroppings below each figural group into view is produced in usual *ko-akae* fashion and also typically presented in a naïve, abbreviated manner, simply suggesting a pleasant environment for the figures. The borders are delightful in their straightforwardness and simplicity, also a hallmark of this type of ware. That one scene depicts a casual service of tea is also intriguing and a most appropriate choice of subject for a vessel such as the present.

Tea might have been at the heart and core of the tea ceremony but the crafting of a perfect environment was a foremost consideration and the presentation and consumption of comestibles and further drink completed the ritual. The bottle here would have been used for pouring sake during a *kaiseki* meal associated with a tea service and its shape Qabased on liquor bottles originally fashioned in Europe for ease and economy in storing and transport. The square liquor bottles produced by the Chinese during the 16th century were inspired by these Western models and provided the Japanese with prototypes closer to home. However, when passing through the lens of Japanese vision and taste, and then through the hands of the Chinese potter, the source is hardly recognizable or apparent.



Alternate View



Detail: View of opposite side of bottle.

Fig. 1: Overglaze-enamelled *ko-aka-e* square sake bottle, Ming dynasty, early 17th century A.D., after Kawahara Masahiko, *Kosometsuke*, vol. II, Kyoto, 1977, no. 409, p. 108.



Fig. 2: Overglaze-enamelled *ko-aka-e* square sake bottle, Ming dynasty, early 17th century A.D., after *Kosometsuke to Shonzui ten*, Tokyo, 1981, fig. 126. p. 81.

