

### 23. Set of Five Polychrome Porcelain (*Ko-akae*) Dishes

Diameter of each: 20.1 cm. (7 7/8 in.)

Height of each: 3.2 cm. (1 1/4 in.)

Ming dynasty

Early 17th century A.D.

Acquired in Japan

Each shallow dish, formed with rounded sides rising to a slightly flared rim, is decorated with a pattern of three folding-fan motifs radiating from the center of each dish, one with a repeat pattern of florets, one a landscape with figures, and the third with a pair of birds in a riverine setting, the fans primarily in underglaze-blue with details and highlights in red, green and yellow overglaze enamels, the ribs of each in various multicolored combinations, the end of each fan in the form of a floret. Although the dishes are similarly decorated forming a matching set, the fans are slightly different from one another: the fans with floret patterns are of different tones of underglaze blue and the character of the multicolor enamel decoration; the bird-motif fans are comprised of a duck on a shore with marsh vegetation while another is swooping in to land; each of the landscape fans is decorated with a sketchily drawn scholar on a donkey with a servant on foot behind. The fans are separated from one another by a variety of colorful butterflies, one between each pair of fans. The rims are decorated with petal bands in underglaze blue and red and green enamels. On the underside are three groups of iron-red berry branches with stems outlined swiftly in black and infilled with green. The shallow foot of each dish has kiln grit adhering.



The word “ceremony” to describe tea gatherings in Japan conveys solemnity and sobriety. Under the authority of certain tea masters the rustic, austere, unpretentious, frugal and humble were embraced as central to the tea-drinking aesthetic. The character of the present set of dishes puts the world of Japanese tea in an alternate light, a light resulting from the impact of tea masters of different penchants, the complexity of the aesthetic, and even, to an outsider’s point of view, a self-contradictory nature within the world of tea. Despite prescribed ritual on the one hand; there is flexibility on the other. It is a world both so closed and yet so open as it can and does embrace extremes.

These kaleidoscopic, bright and lively wares would have sailed well with the master Furuta Oribe (A.D. 1544-1615) whose impact on the tea world was monumental.<sup>1</sup> A Chinese *ko-akae* dish of eccentric form, with sides bent purposefully inward, and the liveliest of color and design, is an obvious result of Oribe’s influence (fig. 1). In the present set of dishes the shapes are, to the contrary, quite regular and commonplace, but the decoration is the wild card that brings them to life within this world of eccentricities and surprises, the fans in groups of three appearing to rotate around central hubs, like pinwheels, providing a compelling kinetic dimension.

The folding fan was an invention of the Japanese, transmitted to China during the Song dynasty and the most popular type of fan in China during the Ming and Qing periods. The fan was a symbol of a genteel life, one of success and prosperity, of a scholar, of a woman of the nobility, but also warriors and performers were associated with fans. Fans had a social

significance; and importantly they carried symbolism in the motifs and designs adorning their surfaces.

It is fitting that the fan be returned to Japan both in the decoration and also the shapes of ceramics made especially for them. Opened and closed fans floating on the white porcelain of a cup (fig. 2), fan-shaped dishes (fig. 3), and a fan-shaped incense box are but a few of the numerous manifestations of the fan in these porcelains. An Oribe-style fan-shaped dish (fig. 5) and another of bolder design and with a massive handle (fig. 6) are the types of ceramic wares that the Chinese were likely given in some form as models. The floating blossom design on the fans here were based either on Japanese ceramic compositions or on a Japanese textile where such designs abounded (fig. 7).

The butterflies add further animation to the design as they flutter and float in the invisible air, lending also their symbolic value. Symbolizing, among other things, marital bliss, they reinforce the same symbolism as that conveyed by the paired ducks decorating one fan on each of the five dishes. Obviously treasured, the set was provided with a special box divided into five compartments where each dish had its own berth. The old label on the box is now practically worn away,

1. These late Ming polychrome porcelains made for Japan are known under various names: *ko-akae* (“old red decorated” ware), *Tenkei akae* (based on the production of a good number of these wares during the Tianqi, or Tenkei, reign period, some of them bearing Tianqi reign marks) and *Nankin akae* (due to the belief in Japan that the wares were decorated in Nanjing).



Fig. 1: *Ko-akae* dish with fan decoration, late Ming dynasty, early 17th century A.D., after *Kaikodo Journal*, vol. XXVIII, “Magnificent Obsessions,” Spring 2012, no. 65, p. 168.



Fig. 2: *Kosometsuke* tea bowl with design of opened and closed folding fans, late Ming dynasty, early 17th century A.D., after Kawahara Masahiko, *Kosometsuke*, vol. II, monochrome plates, Kyoto, 1977, no. 217, p. 57.

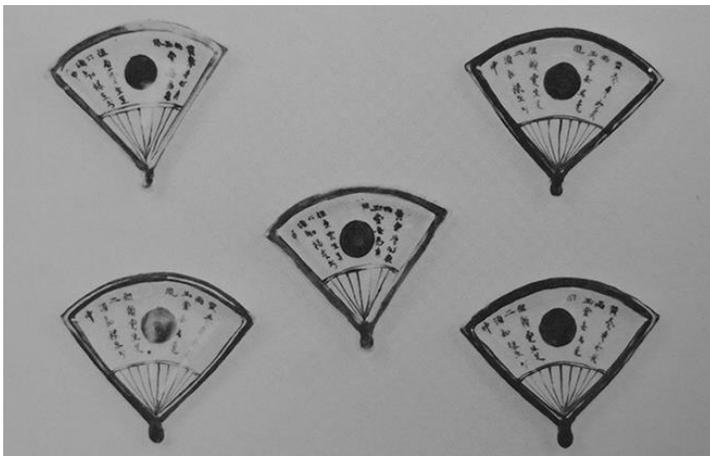


Fig. 3: Set of five *kosometsuke* fan-shape dishes, late Ming dynasty, early 17th century A.D., after Kawahara Masahiko, *Kosometsuke*, vol. II, monochrome plates, Kyoto, 1977, fig. 752, p. 200.

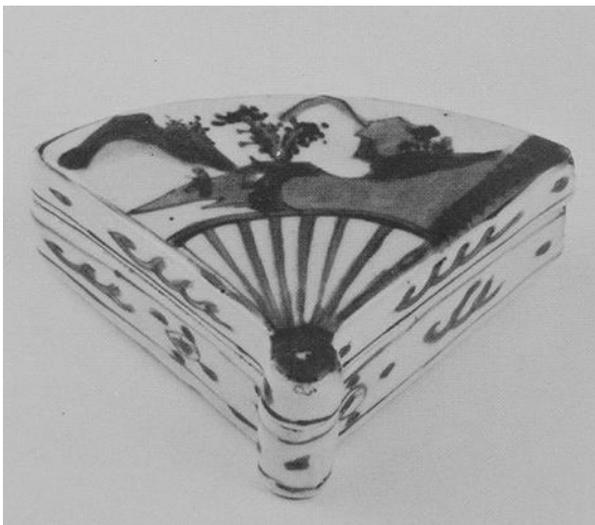


Fig. 4: *Kosometsuke* fan-shaped incense box, late Ming dynasty, early 17th century A.D., after Kawahara Masahiko, *Kosometsuke*, vol. II, monochrome plates, Kyoto, 1977, fig. 46, p. 14.

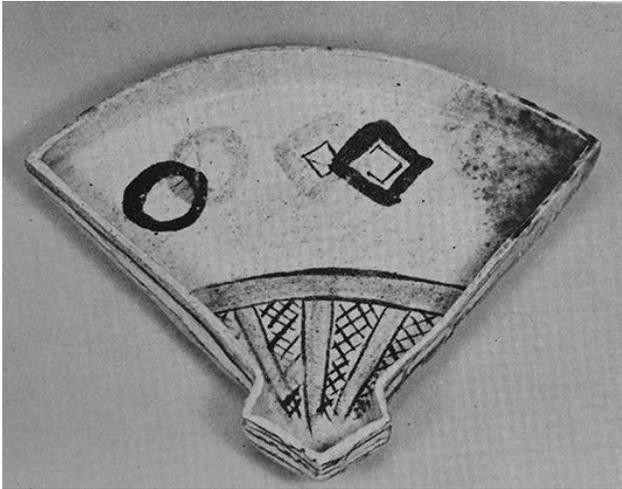


Fig. 5: Oribe-style fan-shaped dish, late Momoyama-early Edo period, early 17th century A.D., after Ryoichi Fujioka, *Shino and Oribe Ceramics*, Tokyo, New York, and San Francisco, 1977, fig. 143.



Fig. 6: Oribe-style fan-shaped dish with handle, Momoyama period, early 17th century, Ohmatsu Art Museum, Gifu, after Miyeko Murase, ed., *Turning Point: Oribe and the Arts of Sixteenth Century Japan*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 2003, pl. 65, p. 145.

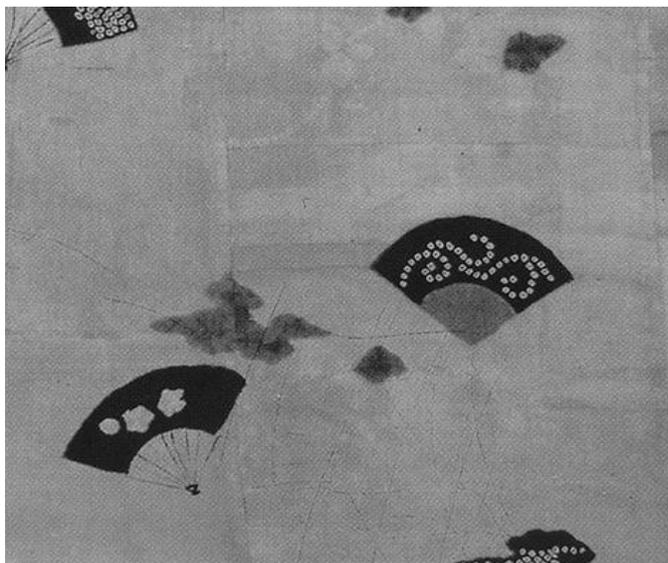


Fig. 7: Detail of a Momoyama-period textile from a 20th-century two-panel textile from a National Museum of Japanese History, Sakura, after Miyeko Murase, ed., *Turning Point: Oribe and the Arts of Sixteenth Century Japan*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 2003, pl. 172, p. 349.