

29. Ceramic Tea Caddy by Tomioka Tessai (A.D. 1837-1924)

Height: 12.0 cm. (4 3/4 in.)

Width: 5.5 cm. (2 1/4 in.)

Meiji-Showa period

Late 19th-early 20th century A.D.

Acquired in Japan

The small container for tea is of upright rectangular shape, of square section with irregular hand-built slab sides and base, and a short, slightly off-center neck that is concealed beneath the cylindrical cover. Painted in a dark greyish-blue pigment, one side is decorated with a scholar seated sedately in profile reading a book. The three remaining sides bear inscriptions: The scholar faces a seven-character inscription reading: *Cha kore nanpoo kaboku nari*, "Tea is a beautiful tree in the south." The third side bears a four-character phrase, *Kakka kassui*, "High heat, fresh water," and the fourth is roughly scratched with three characters bearing the signature *Tessai tsukuru*, "Made by Tessai." The three sides with the painted designs are all framed within underglaze-blue striated borders while wide liquidy-blue bands form a border around the incised characters on the fourth. The cover is decorated with vertical stripes that are striated and a tight swirl is painted on the top. The flat base is scored and reveals the dark grey ware.

Inner box with inscriptions:

"Tea container,"

"Clear fragrance, deep and remote,"

"Painted by Rama-kaku shujin,"

"Tetsu dojin."



The humble but utterly engaging tea caddy can be appreciated as a reflection of the extraordinary artist who created it, Tomioka Tessai (A.D.1836-1924). The seated scholar, painted with a sure and easy brush, can be seen as no less than a self-portrait of this devotee of classical literature—scholar, poet, painter, teacher, collector, bibliophile, sinologist, Shinto priest, traveller—with book in hand. As a painter, Tessai was drawn to classical subjects, even if his painterly style was unconventional. Historical, literary, contemporary, and religious figures, often eccentric, sometimes wild and humorous comprised his gallery (see this exhibition cat. no. 64). Tessai's mind and eye also drifted naturally to adherents of the world of *sencha*, or steeped tea, the fashionable tea-drinking custom from China and of which he was a staunch advocate. Like his circle of *bunjin* or literati models and contemporaries, Tessai was culturally a sinophile, finding values, inspiration, means and models in China. His writings opened a world of Chinese scholarship on tea to his compatriots in Japan. For example, his *Tessai Gifu fu*, "Tessai's Tea Records," was devoted to an explication of Chinese Yixing ceramics used in China and Japan in the service and consumption of *sencha* and is briefly characterized as ".....a connoisseurship study, the first of its kind, of assorted Chinese Yixing ware teapots...increasing access to original Chinese sources."¹

Tessai's paintings complimented his intellectual endeavors in celebrating the persons and paraphernalia of this rarefied world, as exemplified in a handscroll illustrating famous Yixing teapots, a section at the beginning of the scroll showing a casual tea gathering illustrated here (fig. 1). Tessai did more than one portrait of the paragon of this world of tea, Lu Yu (A.D. 733-804), the Tang dynasty master who wrote the first treatise devoted to tea, the *Chajing*, "The Classic of Tea," addressing all aspects of its cultivation and

preparation, and the wide range of paraphernalia necessary for its proper service, consumption and appreciation (fig. 2). The inscription on Tessai's tea caddy reading "Tea is a beautiful tree in the south" is actually a quote from Lu Yu's *Chajing*, which Tessai must have known well, while the four-line inscription is borrowed from Su Shi (A.D. 1033-1101), the great Song-dynasty literati whom Tessai embraced as his peerless soul mate. Tessai's early apprenticeship with the poet-painter-calligrapher-potter Otagaki Rengetsu (A.D.1791-1875) prepared him for writing on pots as she had employed him to copy her calligraphic compositions on the ceramics she made.² Tessai's painting of "A Gentleman Preparing Sencha Tea" presents this practice introduced from China in the 17th century as a refuge, here the figures nestled within an impossibly dark and chaotic nature (fig. 3). Tessai's sketchbooks, and the handscroll above, reveal the joyful sanctuary of interiors furnished with the accouterments of *sencha*, where *bunjin* would engage in an activity that allowed them to exercise their interests and expertise in works of art from China but also from Southeast Asia and Europe, while enjoying the delights of delectable steeped tea.

However, it was the Chinese wares, *kosometsuke* and *ko-akae*, and their successor, Shonzui, that had lingered long and strong in the minds of the Japanese since their import in the 17th century and which would particularly touch the hearts of Tessai and his circle. The spirit and persona of these Chinese wares, absorbed into the world of tea culture in Japan, reverberated through time and can still be felt there today. Tessai, who produced the present tea caddy some 200 years after the heyday of these Chinese imports, such as catalogue entry 23 here, was a receiver, picking up the vibrations, channeling the aesthetic through his own time, and into ours.

While the 17th-century Chinese wares had a significant impact, a more immediate stimulus for Tessai was Aoki Mokubei (d. A.D. 1833). In interests and accomplishments as a potter, a reverence for old Chinese wares, and involvement in the world of tea, Mokubei was like a spiritual father to Tessai. Mokubei's extensive knowledge about Chinese ceramics came in large part from the *Taoshuo*, the 18th century history of Chinese wares, which Mokubei found so important that he translated the book into Japanese, providing his own corrections to the text as he did so. However, it was in creations as a potter that spoke volumes. A pair of tea caddies decorated with a Chinese poem brushed by Mokubei were done in a style imitating the late Ming porcelains made for Japan, which were perhaps his most important models (fig. 4). Between the Shonzui ware that Mokubei was channeling here were Chinese pewter tea caddies of the Qing period that had also become most useful to the Japanese (fig. 5).

Both Mokubei and Tessai imprinted, however, their own artistic personalities upon their work. Tessai, a painter more than he was a potter, felt the freedom to take the style to an extreme, as he had in fact been doing in his painting. In comparison to the late Ming wares and to those of Mokubei, Tessai's imperfections were more imperfect, the boldness bolder, the roughness rougher. And all of this from an individual of great intellectual capacity and curiosity (fig. 6).

1. For an insightful study of this world of *sencha*, see Patricia J. Graham, *Tea of the Sages: The Art of Sencha*, Honolulu, 1998, and for Tessai in particular, see pp. 172-173. The author notes that Tessai's study of Yixing is ".....a connoisseurship study, the first of its kind, of assorted Chinese Yixing ware teapots...increasing access to original Chinese sources."

2. Paul Berry and Michiyo Morioka, *Literati Modern: Bunjinga from Late Edo to Twentieth-Century Japan*, Honolulu, 2008, p. 305.



Fig. 1: Tomioka Tessai, "Tea Pots by Famous Potters from Yixing," d. A.D. 1870, handscroll, ink and color on paper, Idemitsu Museum of Arts, Tokyo, after *Tessai: Commemorating the 90th Year of the Death of the Artist*, Idemitsu Museum of Arts, Tokyo, 2014, pl. 7.



Fig. 2: Tomioka Tessai, "The Tea Master Lu Yu Classifying Water for Tea," hanging scroll, ink and light color on paper, Idemitsu Museum of Arts, Tokyo, after *Tessai: Commemorating the 90th Year of the Death of the Artist*, Idemitsu Museum of Arts, Tokyo, 2014, pl. 10.

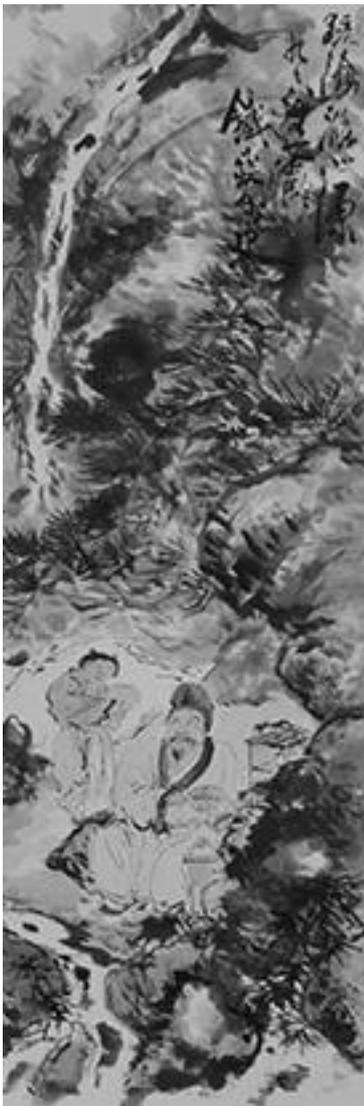


Fig. 3: Tomioka Tessai, "Nobleman Preparing Sencha Tea," hanging scroll, ink and light color on paper, Idemitsu Museum of Arts, Tokyo, after *Tessai: Commemorating the 90th Year of the Death of the Artist*, Idemitsu Museum of Arts, Tokyo, 2014, pl. 11.



Fig. 4: Aoki Mokubei (A.D. 1767-1833), pair of underglaze-blue decorated tea caddies, Japanese collection after *Nihon tōji zenshū*, vol. 29 (*Eisen, Mokubei*), Tokyo, 1978, pl. 31.

Fig. 5: Chinese pewter tea caddy, Qing dynasty, Flagstaff House Museum of Tea Ware (Hong Kong Museum of Art), after *Ancient Chinese Tea Wares*, Hong Kong, 1994, pl. 100, p. 239 (upper left).

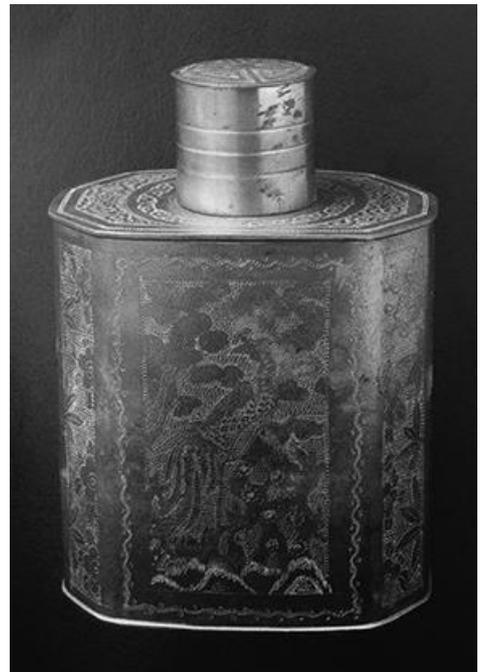


Fig. 6: Tessai in his studio, after Tessai: Commemorating the 90th year of the Death of the Artist, after Tessai: *Commemorating the 90th Year of the Death of the Artist*, Idemits Museum of Arts, Tokyo, 2014, pl. 11.

