72.
A Poetic *Kosometsuke* Dish　　青花(古染付)詩紋梅紋瓷盤

Diameter: 19.7 cm. (7 3/4 in.)
Height: 3.8 cm. (1 1/2 in.)
Late Ming dynasty　　明晩期
Early 17th century A.D.

Reign mark: *Tianqi nianzhi*　　銘: 天啓年製

The porcelain saucer is sturdily potted of shallow form resting on a square-cut foot. A stout gnarled blossoming prunus tree rising from a spit of grassy earth beneath a sliver of the moon is painted in underglaze blue on the interior. The trunk, branches and blossoms are painted in a manner both swift and spontaneous, varied and complex. The lower trunk is executed in shades from lighter to darker blue wash while the branches range from outlined to thicker and thinner calligraphic strokes. The large blossoms emerging from the lower trunk are liquidy blue while the spikey upper branches are replete with buds and blossoms outlined in blue and small leaves dabbed on with single brush strokes. Several branches bend to the left, directing the eye to the line of nine characters with a tenth placed further to the left, as if in flight, like a bird or insect. The inscription 江南無所有聊贈一枝春 *Jiangnan wu suo you/liaozeng yizhi chun* reads "There's nothing much kin Jiangnan; so I send you this branch of spring." A single blue line is drawn beneath the lip of the saucer. Two hastily brushed plants decorate the exterior walls between pairs of double lines circling the foot and the mouth rim. The glaze is smooth and bright with minor chipping at the mouth. Dark iron spit-outs are visible on the base as well as an accumulation of kiln grit along the foot rim. The four-character reign mark is written on the base within a double circle and reads *Tianqi nianzhi*, "Made in the years of the Tianqi [reign period]" [A.D.1621-1627].

A flowering plum tree, a calligraphic execution of the subject, and an actual calligraphic inscription brushed beside it. The poetry of the piece rests in these combined features. The two-line inscription was taken from a poem written by Lu Kai, a Six Dynasties period poet and historian, active during the fifth century. Lu was assigned to a post in Jiangnan—where Nanjing, the center of political power and culture at the time was located. While there he composed a special poem for his friend Fan Ye, who was stationed in Chang'an in the north. It is especially poignant as Fan Ye, famed for compiling the *Hou Hanshu "History of the Later Han,"* was executed along with his family because of his involvement in a rebellion. Lu composed his verse when the plum trees were blossoming in the south but yet to bloom in the north. He sent his friend a bit of spring in the form of a poem.1

The dish was obviously designed by a literate individual and intended for one also. The Japanese who ordered the piece, or acquired it, would have brought it into a world where it would have been perfectly admired, that is into the coterie that supported the development of *kososmetsuke*, "old blue-decorated" ware, during the last decades of the Ming dynasty in China. In previous issues of *Kaikodo Journal* we pointed out some definitive characteristics of this ware and how specific Japanese tastes and requirements impacted its production. In an effort to increase their market abroad, the Jingdezhen potters of the late Ming responded to a foreign aesthetic, in most cases one alien to their own, one that championed the unusual and irregular, the surprising and unpredictable, the imperfect and unpolished, aware that appeared unapologetically inferior technically and brazenly unorthodox.

The present example, however, is a different breed of *kosometsuke*. A related dish in a Japanese collection has in place of the poem a nightingale sweeping towards the prunus and the single character *chun*, "spring," written off to the side as if to remind us what we are supposed to be thinking about (fig. 1). In this type of porcelain, the allure is based solely on the painted design, its subject matter and style of execution, both of which the Chinese themselves could endorse. The less than perfect treatment of foot and base, the awkward calligraphy of the mark, typical of Tianqi marked *kosometsuke*, and the shorthand brushing of unidentifiable foliage on the exterior walls, would make the wares unsuitable for the discerning Chinese. However, not everyone was among the elite and related types did enjoy domestic distribution as Jingdezhen served a wide and diverse market at home as well as abroad. Decoration similar to the present piece occurs on bowls and stemcups at Jingdezhen kiln sites, yet, interestingly and importantly, on vessel shapes, bowls and stemcups for example, that were not exported to Japan as part of the *kosometsuke* inventory (figs. 2-3). When the excavation of a less well-known kiln than Hutian at Jingdezhen, Ciqisan, was published, another bowl with this design was illustrated (fig. 4), and such prunus decorated vessels from the remains of city life in Chengdu in Sichuan province, provide some evidence of their domestic use (fig. 5).

1. Thanks are due to Kazuko Kameda for providing the information on the inscription and the historical circumstances recounted here. The same inscription appears on the dishes in a set of *ko-aka-e*, overglazed enameled wares published in *The Peony Pavilion Collection: Chinese Tea Ceramics for Japan (c. 1580-1650)*, Christie's, London, 12 June 1989, no. 317, p. 76. The catalogue notes that the dishes would be "Appropriate for a late winter or early spring tea party, when the blossoming plum would cheer chilled tea drinkers with a prospect of the approaching warmth of spring, and the emergence of new blossoms." The translation provided for the lines of the poems is "Nothing special from Jiangnan, so I send you only a present of a branch of Spring." p. 76.

Fig. 1: *Kosometsuke* dish with plum blossom décor, nightingale in flight, and the character *chun*, "spring," late Ming dynasty, early 17th century A.D., Tokyo National Museum, after Kawahara Masahiko, *Kosometsuke*, vol. II, monochrome plates, Kyoto, 1977, pl. 645, p. 163.

Fig. 2: Underglaze-blue decorated porcelain bowl with prunus tree design, late Ming dynasty, excavated at Hutian, Jingdezhen, Jiangxi, after *Hutian Kiln Site in Jingdezhen* (Report on excavations from 1988 to 1999), vol. II, Beijing, 2007, color plate 169:5.

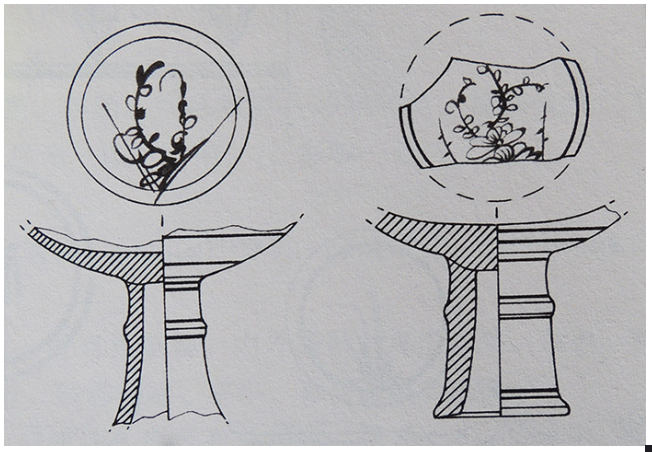

Fig. 3: Underglaze-blue decorated porcelain stemcups with prunus tree design, late Ming dynasty, excavated at Hutian, Jingdezhen, Jiangxi, after *Hutian Kiln Site in Jingdezhen* (Report on excavations from 1988 to 1999), vol. I, Beijing, 2007, fig. 323:6-7, 371 (drawing).

Fig. 4: Shard of an underglaze-blue decorated porcelain bowl with prunus tree design, late Ming dynasty, excavated at Ciqishan, Jingdezhen, Jiangxi, after *Wenwu*, 2007:3, pl, 29, p. 24.

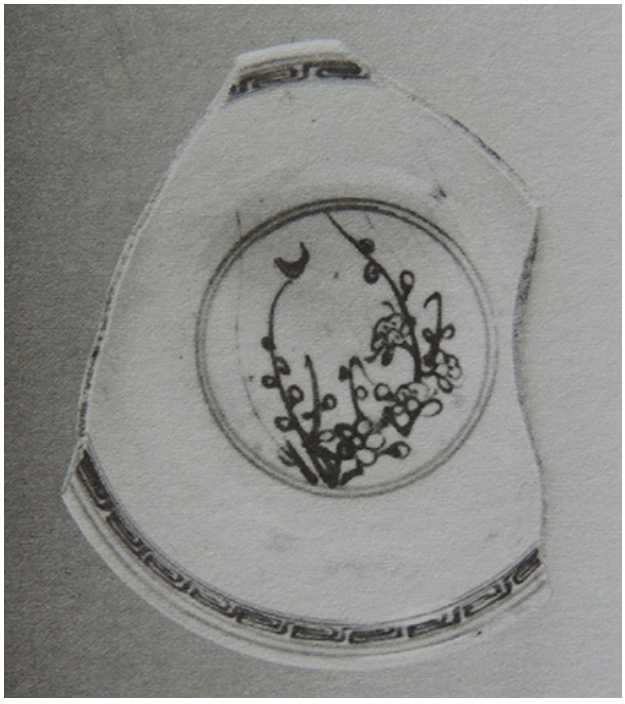

Fig. 5: Underglaze-blue decorated porcelain bowl with prunus tree design, late Ming dynasty, found at Xiadongdajia, Chengdu, Sichuan province, after *Wenwu*, 2011:7, fig. 7, p. 25.