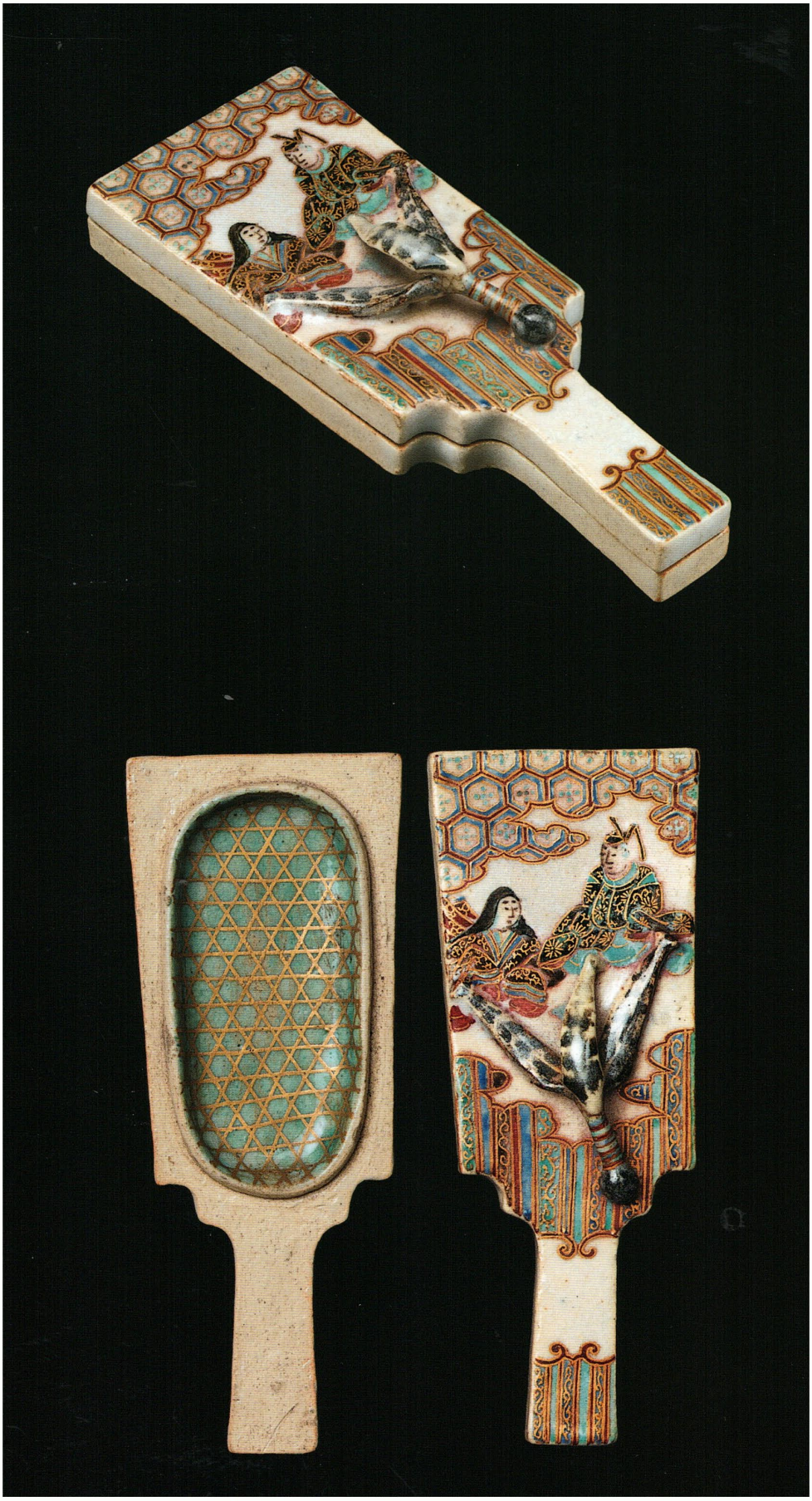

Nonomura Ninsei (active c. A.D. 1646-1690) 仁清色繪人物紋槌形瓷香合
Overglaze-Enamelled Incense Container (*Kogo*)

Length: 12.2 cm. (4 7/8 in.) 長 12.2 厘米
Width: 4.9 cm. (2 in.) 寬 4.9 厘米
Height: 2.7 cm. (7/8 in.) 高 2.7 厘米
Edo period 江戶
17th century A.D. 款：「仁清」

Inscribed: "Ninsei"

Exhibited and published: *Edo Zenki Tōji Meihoten*, "Exhibition of Famous Treasures of Early Edo Period," Goto Museum, Tokyo, 1961, no. 16.

The incense holder is made in the form of a *hagoita*, a traditional Japanese badminton battledore or racket. The cover is very finely enamelled with male and female courtiers garbed, coiffed and posed in a manner reviving centuries-past Fujiwara-period fashion as well as pictorial composition, known most popularly through *emakimono*, or handscrolls, representing the *Tales of Genji*. The figures are seated next to each other, the male raised above the female, he with his handsome updo and she with long, flowing, straight tresses. Their wide-sleeved voluminous *kimono* are multilayered, each layer a different color and the outer layer adorned in gold, the couple visible through what feels like an opening in a cloud. A floral, brocade-like diaper pattern above the figures and a decorative stripe pattern below were brushed on delicately in pale blue, turquoise, green, red and gold, the stripe pattern repeated on the grip of the racket. Black enamel is reserved for facial features and the hair of the figures. A shuttlecock form, composed of three grey feathers, is applied in relief to the top and serves as the grip or handle for lifting the lid. The interiors of the receptacle and lid have recessed oval depressions enameled with gold intersecting lines forming a hexagonal string pattern on a turquoise ground. The enamels are for the most part applied over a milky colorless glaze that is lightly crackled, whereas the shuttlecock appears to have been painted with enamel colors before the application of the glaze. The base of the holder has some evidence of lightly brushed clear glaze and an impressed seal reading "Ninsei." The light buff-colored, refined stoneware body has burned orange in the exposed areas.

The shape and decoration of this overglaze-enamelled *kogo*, "incense box," by the Picasso of later Japanese ceramics, Nonomura Ninsei (active c. 1646-1690), are both intriguing and revealing. The shape is that of a wooden paddle (*hagoita*), fashioned here with a shuttlecock in play, for badminton (j. *hadetsuki*). The wooden paddles were sometimes adorned with painted decoration, providing inspiration as the present *kogo* was created. The game was a favorite New Year's season pastime, especially among women of high society and the subject depicted by Japanese painters over the centuries (figs. 1-3). The seated couple here represents classic Japanese figures in traditional garb surrounded by stunning patterns that bring to mind Japanese textile design. The entire package, with the addition of further fair

Fig. 1: Kubo Shunman (A.D. 1757–1820), *Girl and a Hagoita*, from an album of woodblock prints, H. O. Havemeyer Collection, Metropolitan Museum of Art, after http://www.metmuseum.org/collection/the-collection-online/search/54045?enlarge=true

Fig. 2: Battledore and shuttlecock game; detail from an eightfold screen, mid-16th century A.D., Tokyo National Museum, after Yuzo Yamane, *Momoyama Genre Painting*, Heibonsha Survey of Japanese Art, vol. 17, New York and Tokyo, 1973, pl. 23, p. 32 (detail).

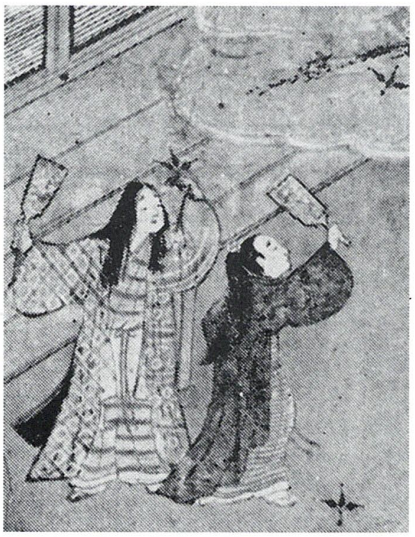

Fig. 3: Detail after fig. 2.

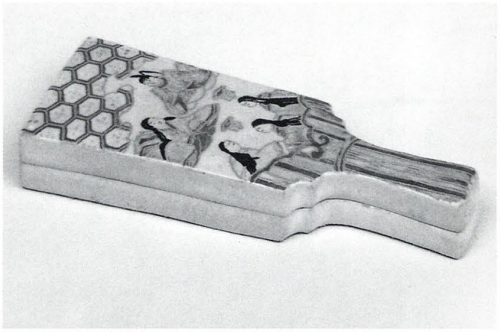

Fig. 4: *Kogo*, overglaze-enamelled stoneware, Nonomura Ninsei (active c. A.D. 1646-1694), after *Exhibition of Nonomura Ninsei*, Ishikawa Prefectural Museum of Art and MOA Museum of Art, Ishikawa, 1992, pl. 70, p. 69.

Fig. 5: The inscribed base of a *kogo* from the Omuro kiln site, Kyoto, 17th century A.D., after *Exhibition of Nonomura Ninsei*, Ishikawa Prefectural Museum of Art and MOA Museum of Art, Ishikawa, 1992, p. 113.

damsels but the absence of the shuttlecock, is repeated in another *kogo* fashioned by Ninsei (fig. 4).

The small boxes, along with numerous others in a variety of inventive shapes created by Ninsei, were crafted by the artist from a refined stoneware clay that fired light buff in color and is characterized by a relatively soft feeling. How strikingly different, technically and aesthetically, from traditional overglaze enamel decoration where the pigments were painted over the glazes of high-fired, vitrified white porcelain. In one small ceramic Ninsei brought together features of indigenous cultural interest and fashion within a context of technical and artistic innovation and creativity. Ninsei absorbed the subjects, designs and aesthetics of textiles, lacqueware, and various tea-culture accoutrements that graced the world around him, along with inspiration from paintings celebrating Japanese life, and translated them into a ceramic language that would be spoken by Kyoto potters thereafter.

Ninsei created his name by combining the first syllable of the name of the temple, Ninna-ji in the Omuro area of northwestern Kyoto where he set up a kiln, and the first syllable of his given name, Seiemon. Kiln-site remains include *hagoita*-shaped incense containers, including a seal-impressed base of one illustrated here (fig. 5);

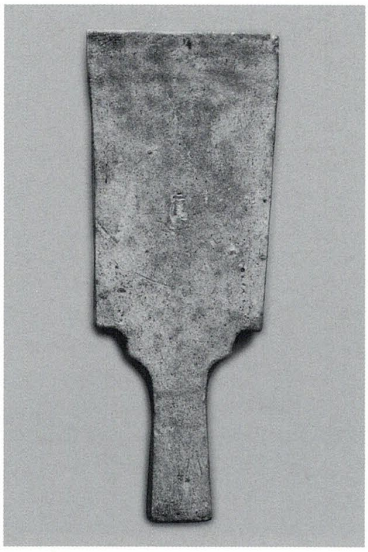

Fig. 6: The base of the *kogo* cat. no. 23.

shown here also is the base of the present *kogo* (figs. 6-7). A "Ninsei" seal, however, is not proof that he himself produced the marked piece, given the size of his workshop and the number of assistants employed—the operation was expanded over several decades—but the marks are at least Ninsei's imprimatur upon the objects. What is important is that Ninsei stepped out of the line of anonymous potters and decorators and proclaimed himself an "artist," a creator, through his seals.

Fig. 7: Detail of fig. 6, seal reading "Ninsei."

The beginning of Ninsei's activity in Kyoto coincided with the death of the tea master Kobori Enshu (1579-1647), the tea savant who was responsible for broadening the world of tea, making it more catholic, deeming acceptable all variety of implements, accoutrements, and adornments including even novelties from Europe. The world of tea he opened up embraced the extremes of rusticity and refinement. Ninsei's ceramic *oeuvre* was also comprehensive and inclusive from rustic Korean and Seto-style teabowls to his dazzling tea leaf jars of monumental size to tiny jewel-like objets and containers such as the present *kogo*, each and every one an elegant solution in its own right.