

# The Elusive Tea bowl

by Jeff Shapiro

What is the validity of being an American working in America making a form that is essentially Japanese? Why is there such interest, almost a need, for so many American potters to make tea bowls? What makes a tea bowl a tea bowl and sets it apart from other forms?

I do make tea bowls now, and I have spent a long time wrestling with the question of why I should make them. Up until recently I would make bowls and occasionally the clay, forming process and firing would fit the tea bowl format and I would be satisfied, but it was hit and miss to arrive at the occasional successful tea bowl. Sometimes it was my Japanese wife Hinako who would help with the selection process.

Historically, the tea bowl has been a symbol for the aesthetic that pervades the tea ceremony. Tea bowls are in a realm of their own. There are many technical and aesthetic conditions to be met, including a key characteristic of a tea bowl that is especially important to connoisseurs: the foot of the bowl.

To address these conditions, I changed the clay I was using to a much more open body. This greatly affected the throwing and, more so, the trimming of the form. I work the clay as loosely as possible and trim very loosely. That allows the forms to be more sculptural. I also began using a limited palette of slip and glaze. Up to that point, I was working solely with natural ash deposit in a wood-fired kiln. I



Tea bowl, 5 in. (13 cm)  
in height, wood fired with  
shino and oribe glazes, 2006.





## TEA CEREMONY

In the early stages of tea ceremony, Japanese tea masters went to Korea and selected rice bowls that had particular character and aesthetics that lent themselves to tea ceremony. These were not made with the intention of being used in tea ceremony, but they happened to embody all the necessary aspects of a great tea bowl.

Technically, tea bowls as vessels need to be certain sizes. They need to be contoured—to show the powdered green tea, to allow it to be whisked and to catch the froth that is left in the bottom of the bowl to settle in the center—but there are exceptions. Just as I think I have a grasp on the parameters of what constitutes a good bowl, I see a truly great tea bowl that challenges my previous perception.

Good tea bowls (*ma cha jawan*), like good sake cups (*guinomi*), need to be imbued with character. Clay character or *tsuchi aji* is difficult enough to define. Character for tea bowls is even more difficult to define. It is inherent. It exists within the form, within the clay and surface. It is not something that can be taught intellectually. It can be seen in how the maker chooses to carve or trim the foot, which is as important to the tea bowl composition as any other aspect of the form.

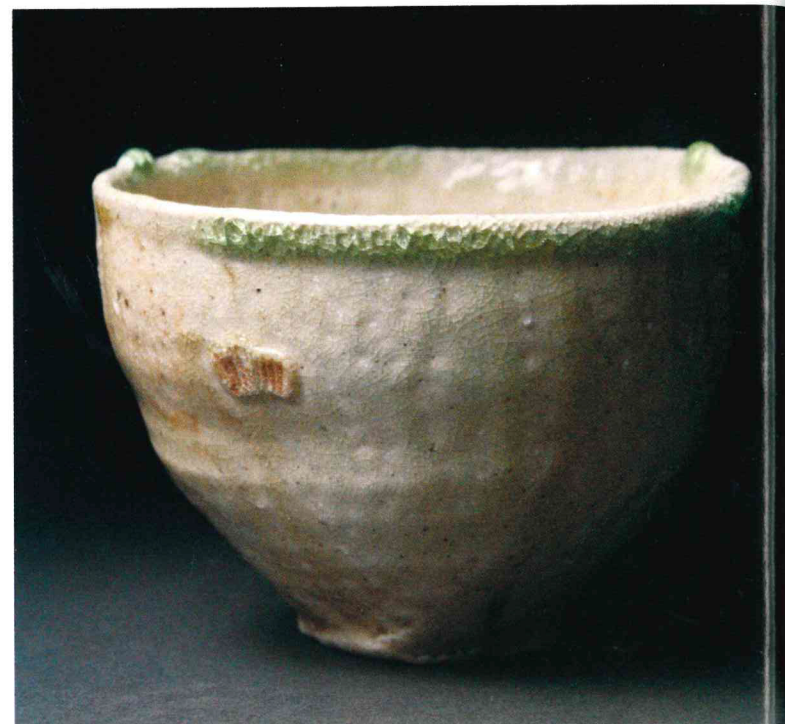
In traditional tea ceremony, the guest would remove any jewelry that may possibly knock against the bowl. After drinking and subsequently sucking out the remaining foam, the bowl is turned upside down, held in both hands, elbows on knees, never raising the bowl more than a few inches off the tatami mat floor. In this way, the foot may be viewed and appreciated fully.



Tea bowl, 4½ in. (11 cm) in height, wood fired with shino and oribe glaze, 2007; by Jeff Shapiro, Accord, New York.



Foot of a tea bowl, 4½ in. (11 cm) in height, wood fired with oribe glaze, 2007.



Tea bowl, 3½ in. (9 cm) in height, wood fired with natural ash deposit, 2007.

now approach making and surface decoration as abstract painting on three-dimensional form.

I give a lot of attention and consideration to the foot. For me, looking at the foot, quickly carved with areas partially covered with glaze, is like looking at an abstract painting. It has taken me over 30 years to get to the point where I feel that my recent tea bowl forms are formidable objects that fit within the tea ceremony but also stand on their own as works of art.

In Japan there are many great potters and many great tea bowls; wood-fired bowls from Bizen or Shigaraki, as well as Shino and Oribe styles to name a few. And then there are the Momoyama (16th century) and Muromachi (15th century) period tea bowls that are asymmetric, full of character and so gutsy they could walk into a bar room brawl and clear the place out! Japanese potters have an innate way of understanding tea because they have grown up with it. It is a part of their cultural fabric. But, for Americans, it is different. We do not have tea ceremony as part of our historical background and reference.

In 2006 there was a symposium in Boston that was connected with a wonderful cross-generational exhibition at Lacoste Gallery in Concord, Massachusetts. Isezaki Koichiro; the son of Living National Treasure Isezaki Jun, gave a demonstration on handforming a tea bowl. One young student/potter in the audience was taking notes and bent upon leaving the symposium with the exact method of making the perfect tea bowl. I explained that I have come to believe that, in fact, it is easy to make a facsimile of a tea bowl, something that appears

to be a tea bowl, but that does not take into consideration all the aspects that a great tea bowl should possess. I said that it is fairly easy to make a tea bowl that is perhaps 50%, 80% or even 98% close to that perfect state, but that those differences in percentage don't really matter because it is only the last 2% that makes the difference of it being a great tea bowl or not. The student in the audience then came over with his notebook and demanded to know how to complete the last 2%! Of course, this is the portion that is intuitive, not an intellectual or pragmatic means to an end.

Another experience I had years ago expresses this sentiment quite well. While visiting with a friend in the Mino valley, his teacher, Toyoba Seiya san told us that we could rise early the next morning and walk to the studio of his master, and Living National Treasure, Arakawa Toyozo. This was a rare opportunity, so the next morning we walked to his studio and saw the anagama tunnel kiln and water wheel, as well as the studio where Arakawa san made his famous tea bowls. Satisfied and satiated with images and inspiration, we started on our way out the dirt road (we were under strict orders to waste no time—we needed to get back to work). As we were leaving, Arakawa san's daughter stepped onto the veranda and beckoned, "Don't rush off. If you wait a few minutes, my father will have tea with you!" This was not in our plan, and we were not to delay, but after four customary, but difficult, offers and refusals, we could not resist the opportunity to have tea with a Living National Treasure.

Arakawa san met us at the teahouse, and we enjoyed conversation about which side of the mountain the trees for wood firing should

be cut from, and spoke about clay deposits. Suddenly, we realized that it had become quite late and that there would be hell to pay for our tardiness. We decided, regretfully, to head back. We excused ourselves and were in the middle of saying goodbye when two men in suits came around the corner of the house. One of the fellows said, "Wow! You guys are so lucky. We are producing the definitive book on Arakawa san's life and work. He isn't throwing on the wheel anymore, but for the book, we have asked him to come back into the studio and make tea bowls. Since you are here, you are both welcome to join us!" What could we do? This was certainly an opportunity not to be missed. We looked at each other and agreed. We could not turn this down. So, off we went to the studio.

I had been looking at Arakawa san's tea bowls since I arrived in Japan. They were an enigma and they were gorgeous. As Arakawa san put the stick in the hole and began to spin the wheel, it was obvious that this wheel had been used for many years. It was lopsided, undulating up and down as it turned. Arakawa san was in perfect sync, his head moving up and down in harmony with the wheel. My own head started moving up and down as I watched. I was only a few feet from this Living National Treasure as he was about to make one of his magnificent tea bowls, and I was determined to learn the steps in making a truly great tea bowl. He patted the lump of clay down on the wheel, wet his hands, centered the clay, and as he stuck his fingers in the middle of the mound, I was ready to take note; step one, step two, etc. He stuck in his thumbs and made some simple gesture with his hands—and stopped the wheel. It was a tea bowl! Wait a minute, I thought. I must have blinked or been distracted. Getting even closer to Arakawa san, I was all the more determined to catch the different steps in the making of the next tea bowl, but to my astonishment, the same thing happened. He went right from step one to step ten, with no steps in between!

It was a mini epiphany that making a truly great tea bowl was not a pure technical exercise, but rather an exercise in harmony.

In the end I believe there is no one way to make the "perfect" tea bowl. Trial and error through constant practice, coupled with serious critical evaluation is a good place to begin—and drinking lots of powdered tea can't hurt either!

*the author Jeff Shapiro lives in upstate New York. He will be leading two trips for ceramics; one to Australia in November 2008 and one to Japan in October 2009. For more information, visit [www.jeffshapiroceramics.com](http://www.jeffshapiroceramics.com).*