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Salem Maritime National Historic Site
Salem, Massachusetts

Pickled Fish and Salted Provisions

Historical Musings from Salem Maritime NHS



The Tale of Two Imaris

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Japanese Imari is a generic term applied to a variety of porcelains that were shipped from the Kyushu island port of Imari. The oldest and most common of these designs is the traditional blue and white wares. Later on, Japanese potters added more colors as overglaze enamels to develop the busy decorations universally recognized as Japanese Imari. Chinese porcelain manufacturers later copied this design in order to take advantage of the seemingly endless demand for this ware. Hence, we have Japanese and Chinese Imari.

Ri Sampei and the Invention of Porcelain in Korea

Japanese potters learned how to manufacture porcelain in the 1500s as a result of their country's repeated invasions of Korea. Korea, in turn, had learned the techniques of porcelain production in the 1100s from the assumed originators, the Chinese. According to legend, a Korean potter named *Ri Sampei* (1579-1665) is credited with finding the kaolin clay necessary for the porcelain production in the village of Arita (on the same island as Imari) in the first quarter of the 17th century and establishing Japan's porcelain industry. This clay had a high iron content, making it suitable for the high firing temperatures intrinsic to porcelain production.

Porcelain in Japan

Shortly after Sampei's discovery, two unrelated events occurred that allowed the fledgling Japanese porcelain industry to take hold. First, Chinese porcelain production ceased in 1645 as a result of the civil wars fought between supporters of the Ming dynasty (1368-1644) and the invading Manchus, who would establish the Qing Dynasty (1644-1912). Second, the drinking of tea, chocolate, and coffee became more popular and widespread. This led to an increased demand of the porcelain cups and saucers. Japanese potters now had both the niche and the demand for their product.

Styles of Imari

Korean potters and Chinese decorative styles of the Ming Dynasty influenced the earliest pieces of Japanese porcelain. The oldest of these is the traditional blue handpainted underglaze decoration, a favorite of both the Chinese and Japanese consumers. Several decades later, potters added red and gold underglaze enamels to develop what is known as the traditional Imari palette. By the 18th century, Japanese potters added black and green overglaze enamels to appeal to the tastes of their European consumers, who preferred the polychrome decorations to cover the whole front of the piece. This decorative style is called *nishiki-Imari*, meaning "brocade" and the color combination of blue, iron red, green, black and gold is called "wucai" (Chinese five-color).

Protected by the Saga fief, the Arita area remained the center for porcelain production in Japan until shortly before 1800. The earliest pieces of Japanese Imari, otherwise known as “Shoki-Imari,” were made for local consumers. By the middle of the 17th century, the Dutch East India Company was exporting “Ko-Imari” (with the overglaze enamel decorations) to Europe. Other merchants soon followed.

The End of Imari Importation

Although initially very successful, the Japanese porcelain manufacturers soon found they could not keep up with European demand for their products. Their lack of expertise and high production costs cut into the profits of the Dutch East India Company and other merchants. Eventually, with the cessation of China’s civil war around 1700 AD, the European merchants resumed their relationship with Chinese porcelain manufacturers. The potters were quick to copy the popular polychrome Imari design and with their superior manufacturing and decorating techniques easily met the demands of the European consumers and generated enormous profits for the merchants. When comparing the products of the two countries, those from China generally have less polychrome enamel decoration than their Japanese counterparts.

By 1757, the Dutch East India Company was no longer importing Imari porcelain to Europe. Japanese porcelain production finally spread to other parts of the country and other styles were emerging. Contemporaneously, Imari was steadily decreasing in popularity. The Chinese porcelain *Famille Rose*, known for its overglaze pink and carmine enamels and other porcelain wares from both Japan and China replaced it. Approximately 100 years later Imari porcelain became more available to American consumers after Commodore Matthew Perry opened trade relations between the United States and Japan in the mid-1800s.

Japanese Imari is still made today in the Arita area and almost exclusively for Japanese consumers. Antique pieces of both Japanese and Chinese Imari are sought after as collectors’ items and can still command a high price at auction.

Salem Maritime NHS has several pieces of Imari in its collection. A reconstructed saucer is on display in the Narbonne House, sherds of which were recovered archeologically from the back yard. An 18th century Chinese Imari platter is exhibited in the Derby House kitchen.

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