

Tea and Its Influence on Ceramics

The tea plant is native to southern China, where tea drinking originated nearly 5,000 years ago. Spread by Buddhist monks and adopted by the aristocracy, tea drinking became a social custom throughout China and Japan. Later, it spread to the Near East, Europe, and the rest of the world and was adopted by people of all social classes. As the number of people drinking tea grew, so did demand for ceramic tea ware.

Many cultures have created rituals to govern tea drinking. But perhaps the most elaborate tea ritual arose in Japan. By the fifteenth century, the tea ceremony was widely practiced by Japanese aristocracy and had given rise to a style of ceramics used specifically for tea.

Japanese tea masters measured the beauty of an outstanding tea bowl against specific aesthetic standards:

- physical qualities—The bowl should offer a variety of textures, such as irregular, smooth, contoured, impressed, glossy, or unglazed surfaces that offer a range of subtle tactile sensations.
- visual appearance—The way the bowl looks should match its physical characteristics; for example, if a bowl looks heavy then it should be heavy to lift, or if it appears delicate, it should feel light.
- outside form—The bowl's shape should fit comfortably in the palm of one's hand, and the foot should soundly support and balance it. The seasons of the year govern the shape of the tea bowl. Winter bowls have

higher walls that turn inward, while summer bowls are wide and shallow.

- rim—The rolling outline of a bowl's rim should suggest natural movement over stones, hills, or mountains.
- drinking point—Each bowl should have only one place on the lip to drink from. This should be opposite the "front" or decorated part of the bowl.
- interior form—A faint spiral relief that lets the tea flow gently into your mouth should be on the inside of the bowl. After you drink, the remaining tea should easily flow down the spiral to rest in a pool at the base.

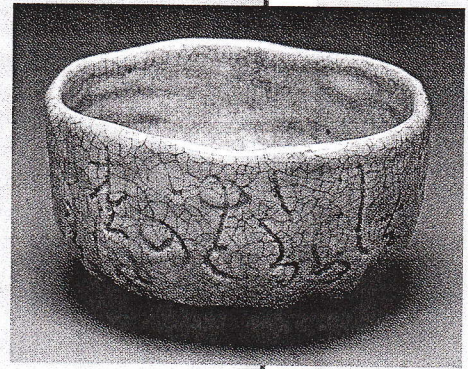


Fig. 3-11. Pinching is the oldest method of shaping clay and an excellent technique for developing your sense of touch (tactile sense).

Otagaki Rengetsu (1791–1875), *Tea Bowl*.

Glazed ceramic, 4¼" (10.8 cm) diameter.

Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design. Edgar J. Lownes Fund. Photo by Eric Gould.

- thermal factors—An ideal bowl should keep tea warm on the inside, without causing your hands to be uncomfortably hot on the outside.
- glaze qualities—The glaze application should vary in thickness and coverage and harmonize with the bowl form. Areas left unglazed should add to the textural qualities of the surface.
- color—The colors of the bowl depend on the time of year it is used. Winter bowls should be dark with shadowy shades, while summer bowls should be bright with glowing colors.