The Museum of Oriental Ceramics, Osaka, Japan

By Margaret White

Those with a yen for East Asian ceramics could easily devote a couple of hours browsing the Museum of Oriental Ceramics in Osaka. Relatively modest outwardly, this museum was purpose-built in 1982 by the city of Osaka. Step inside and view what many regard as one of the best oriental ceramic collections in the world. The museum’s mission is to collect, study, conserve, exhibit and interpret Asian ceramics, primarily from China and Korea but also from Japan, Vietnam and Persia. Osaka was Japan’s original merchant city with a long history of international trade and is thus a logical home for the museum. The collection now has approximately 6,000 pieces based around the original Ataka Collection donation. From China, the Han, Song, Yuan and Ming dynasties are represented and from Korea, works from the Silla, Goryeo and Joseon dynasties can be found. The museum also holds Japanese ceramics from the Nara to Edo periods to the mingei folk art movement of the 20th century.

I enjoyed exploring the current Korean celadon exhibition, Sparkles of Jade – Goryeo Celadon (12th century). The colour of celadon evoked “the radiance of jade and the clarity of water”. Between the eighth and 12th centuries, traders and envoys travelled to Korea to admire and acquire celadon pottery with the bluish-tinged glaze known as bisack or kingfisher colour and the wholly Korean invention of inlaying. This celadon was particularly sought after by the Persians who believed that celadon dishes would break or change colour should poisoned food be served from them.

The exhibition was organised into various sections including tea bowls, dishes, ewers, covered boxes, water droppers and incense burners. I noticed small ‘guy ropes’ anchoring certain pieces to platforms and later discovered these platforms were shock-absorbing, to earthquake-proof these special pieces. Of course, this is Japan where there are frequent earth tremors.

Two celadon plaques skilfully inlaid with a delicate design of six cranes (cranes are the symbolic bird of Korea, representing longevity, happiness and good fortune) had me intrigued as to their function. Some suggest the plaques were used to face buildings, but I am not convinced. A restrained and elegant celadon ewer shaped as a bamboo sprout had a carved and incised design. In contrast, a large, cream-coloured iron glaze jar (not in the Goryeo exhibits) but from the later Joseon dynasty (second half of the 17th century) was decorated in an artistically freehand style of a tiger among clouds.

Examples from the permanent collection are rotated and highlighted every few months. Two of those I particularly admired were Japanese, both probably made for export. The first was a pair of evocative white porcelain figures of sumo wrestlers from the Edo period (circa 1680s), decorated with overglaze enamels and gilt. The other was a large dish from Arita in the Ko-Kutani style, sporting a bold palette of rich, deep greens and blues, also from the Edo period (1640-1650s). Such wares demonstrated the painters’ inventiveness as no two examples were the same.

The museum also houses a wonderful collection of snuff bottles. 150 of the 1,200 late Qing dynasty snuff bottles exhibited were donated by Oki Shoichiro. These small artistic gems were crafted in a huge variety of materials including metal, coral, agate and glass, reflecting the Chinese love of working on a miniature scale.

The beauty of the exhibits and the care with which they are displayed makes for a fascinating and highly enjoyable visit. Spending time here gives some clues as to why traders came from around the world to find these sought-after pieces as art as well as functional wares.

Margaret White is convenor of the Ceramic Study Group of The Asian Arts Society of Australia and welcomes the opportunity to view and learn about ceramic collections worldwide.

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