

The Kyushu Ceramic Museum

By Patricia Bjaaland Welch

If you loved the Asian Civilisation Museum's recent *China Mania!* exhibition, try to arrange a stopover in Nagasaki, Japan, hire a taxi for five hours (approx US\$150) or take the JR train to Arita and visit the rich porcelain wonderland there. You will not only encounter a community that has been dedicated to the production of porcelain since the early 1600s (when it rose in fame owing to the European mania for Asian porcelain), but will also have the opportunity to visit the wonderful Kyushu Ceramic Museum.

The museum is located at the top of a small hill at Tosyaku Otsu, off Route 35, not far from the Arita College of Ceramics. It is open Tues-Sun 9:00 am to 5:00 pm (closed December 29-31) and admission is free unless there is a special exhibition. When I visited last autumn, the hills were a blaze of colour, clearly inspiring the gold and copper hues that so often decorate the local porcelains.

Begin in the lower exhibition hall with the Shibata Collection, 1,000+ pieces of Arita porcelain primarily from the Edo Period (1603-1867), meticulously arranged in chronological order in knee-to-ceiling-high wall cases. For porcelain lovers, to walk amongst these cases is akin to being in paradise. All these beautiful pieces, produced at the request of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) to fill their ships when Ming Dynasty China suddenly banned private trade in an effort to concentrate wealth in the court, are there



We often forget the multiple uses of porcelain; porcelain is not tableware alone as the museum reminds us with its exquisite porcelain door pulls, a cabinet-size porcelain clock, and the prettiest porcelain toilet fixtures this author has ever had the pleasure of using



Showcase after showcase displays the chronology and development of Arita porcelain. Here you see a selection of Aritaware from 1830-1840

for collectors and connoisseurs to examine, alongside their predecessors and successors. Such an opportunity to study these porcelains in depth is a rare gift, as few museums have such complete and extensive collections.

Upstairs, Exhibit Room Number 3 introduces visitors to the ancient ceramics produced in Kyushu's kilns, such as *Kogaratsu* made in Hizen Province, early Imari, and other porcelains produced in the *Kakiemon* style or at the Nabeshima clan kiln. This is the only room in which photographs are not allowed.

Another room details the history of ceramics across Asia and includes such details as maps of ancient trade routes, VOC trade ports, displays of the various types of kilns and kiln furniture, and drawers of representative shards.

Porcelain production in Japan dates back to the 17th century when kaolin was discovered in Arita at Izumiyama. From the Arita kilns, it passed through the port of Nagasaki, via the Dutch trading post built on the artificial island of Dejima, which can be visited on the same trip. Today, it is no longer an island, but is located alongside the port, easily reached on foot or by trolley.

Meticulously restored and well-signposted in English and Dutch, it is a popular tourist destination, open daily from 8:00 am to 6:00 pm year-round (admission: ¥510). The Dutch had a monopoly on European trade with Japan until 1854.

Two annual events attract thousands of porcelain visitors to Arita each year – the Arita Bowl Festival, held in late November and a springtime Ceramic Bazaar, held late April to early May. In addition, all roads in and out of Arita house dozens of small, exquisite ceramic studios and there is the greatest shopping mall of Arita ceramics in the world, the Arita Toji no Sato Plaza, located by the Hasami-Arita interchange (a 20-minute walk from the JR Arita Station). Every shop I visited provided expert packaging.



This amazing large porcelain platter from the decade 1830-40 showcases scenes depicting the production of porcelain in Arita, from the digging of kaolin from the surroundings to the loading of finished wares onto foreign ships to be sent abroad

Patricia Bjaaland Welch admits to indulging in two pieces of reproduction Aritaware: a miniature reproduction of one of its oldest patterns (the *Gelbe Löwe* pattern), and an Edo-period sculpture of a seated tiger.

All photos by the author