



## Sections

### I - The origins and the development of Imari porcelain

China gave birth and developed one of the most technologically advanced forms of ceramic, white, hard-bodied porcelain. The porcelain making technique was then introduced into the Korean Peninsula. Not possessing this technique, up until the end of the 16th century Japan imported porcelains from China. In 1592 to 1598, when Japan sent troops into the Korean Peninsula the Nabeshima forces, led by the lord of the Saga domain in Kyushu, returned back to Kyushu with Korean potters in tow. In the 1610s, these potters succeeded to produce the very first Japanese porcelain in the Arita region of Hizen Province. Hizen porcelain was shipped from the nearby port of Imari to the entire Japanese archipelago, and for this reason Hizen porcelain came to be commonly known as 'Imari'.

Although the Korean potters who helped initiated Hizen porcelain production were only familiar with white undecorated porcelain that was produced in their home country, Japanese domestic demand was for Chinese blue and white wares made in Jingdezhen, and for this reason Hizen kilns from the very beginning fired porcelains with underglaze cobalt-blue designs.

In 1644, civil unrest in China reduced the level of export of Chinese porcelain drastically. Seizing advantage of this trade opportunity, Hizen wares soon dominated the Japanese porcelain market, and eventually started to be exported to Southeast Asia from 1647 onwards. As a result of expanded production, Hizen porcelain underwent a significant shift in production around the 1650s, ostensibly switching from Korean influenced methods to Chinese-based techniques.

The most significant technological change in this period was the introduction of overglaze polychrome enameling techniques from China around 1647, making it possible to produce beautifully coloured porcelains. Starting in the 1650s, Nabeshima ware replaced Chinese porcelain as annual tributary gifts to the Shogun from the Nabeshima family. Nabeshima porcelain fired from 1690s to 1720s is thought to represent the pinnacle of Japanese porcelain refinement, and was made largely in response to the tastes of Shogun.

## II - Porcelain for the Japanese aristocracy and the European courts

The Tokugawa Shogun was the highest authority in Japan during the Edo period. The Nabeshima family, lords of the Saga domain in Hizen Province, presented annual tribute goods (kenjō-hin) consisting of Nabeshima porcelains for dining, the finest produced in the domain, to the Shogun to ensure a stable relationship and help maintain the autonomy of their domain. Reflecting the Japanese culinary customs of the period, the Shogun would have eaten with chopsticks from dishes that most commonly took the form of small wooden bowls placed on small individual trays with legs.

Around the same period, the Dutch East India Company placed orders with Hizen potters to create porcelains that could complement the lifestyles of the kings of Europe. Contrary to Japanese customs, Europeans used knives when eating, which made the flat dish with a flaring rim the most efficient form of vessel. Bowls were also employed to hold fruits and sweets. In addition, different concepts of space and rooms used in Europe and Japan created the need for different styles of porcelains. One of the most dramatic examples is the armature set composed of five large jars and vases covered with sumptuous decorations to visually decorate European palaces. Europeans decorated their rooms with symmetrically arranged sets of large jars and vases, and affluent rulers sought after splendidly decorated jars and ornamented vases. Japanese houses, to the contrary, were traditionally built of wood and had quite low ceilings, thus there was no custom in Japan of displaying large objects inside a home. The deeply rooted Japanese aesthetic of *ma*, which implies absence of space, or spatial tension rather than emptiness, coupled with an appreciation for asymmetry (called at the time *kabuku*) were aesthetic qualities that came to the fore during this period.

Different uses of space and aesthetics in the east and in the west are clearly reflected on Hizen porcelain designs. Europeans preferred the ceramic surfaces filled with colour and motifs, while the Japanese preferred to leave ample amounts of white ground surrounding asymmetrically placed designs.

## III - Imari masterpieces for the European market

To help supplement the dramatic reduction of Chinese porcelain available for the export market after 1644, Hizen porcelains began to be produced for export to European markets from 1658. The Dutch placed orders for porcelains that catered to the demands of contemporary Europeans.

Hizen porcelain was made in a wide range of forms for export, from tableware ranging from vessels for coffee, tea, chocolate and liquor, seasoning containers, to stationery items, furnishings, and even medical equipment. Among the range of vessels produced, tableware and seasoning containers were fired in the greatest volume. Dishes were made in the greatest number, with large dishes representing the classic export item of this period. A contemporary document records that the largest Hizen porcelain dish measured 40-50 cm in diameter. Unlike the Japanese custom, Europeans used volume to measure vessels. Therefore, a half size vessel refers to a dish measuring 30 cm in diameter. Designs on Hizen porcelains bound for export were in general substantially different from patterns adorning wares made for the Japanese domestic market. Quite a number of patterns were created specifically for the European market, including the flower vase design.

The Kakiemon style, popular in the 1670s-1690s, was supplanted by the Kinrande ('brocade') style, which became prevailing style in the 1690-1730s. The Kinrande style ushered in new combinations of overglaze polychrome enamels. The new style can be broadly classified into two groups; one type employs the two colour-palette of red and gold mostly over underglaze cobalt-blue. The other type utilises a five or six colour-palette that includes green, yellow, blue and purple with the red and gold. The latter type was more refined and expensive.

Large jars and vases furnished the palaces and halls of the aristocratic families of Europe. Large jars with a total height of 60cm including the lid were made for an export by the end of 17th century. These types of large jars were not made for the Japanese domestic market in the same period. The porcelain kiln size obviously restricted the height of the jar that could be fired. As the demand for larger jars grew from the European market, Arita potters adapted the kiln shapes and were able to fire vessels as large as 90 cm in total height by the first half of the 18th century.

#### IV - European ceramics imitate the Imari originals

It was not until 17th century that the first white hard porcelain was successfully fired in Europe. Since the 16th century Europeans had been importing and greatly valued porcelains fired in the Jingdezhen kilns in China. East Asian porcelain of high quality was distributed throughout Europe and proved a stimulus for European potters and artisans.

Potters in Delft, Holland produced a soft paste ceramic that derived inspiration from Chinese and Hizen porcelains.

The Kakiemon style produced from the 1670s to the 1690s garnered a significant reputation in Europe. Johann Friedrich Böttger succeeded in firing a type of hard paste porcelain in 1709 under the patronage of Augustus the Strong, Elector of Saxony. Augustus the Strong's Meissen kilns skillfully copied Kakiemon style porcelains in the following decades.

Porcelain making techniques were introduced quickly into the Meissen kilns and then spread to the other areas of Europe. Porcelain production became widespread by the latter half of the 18th century. This period directly coincided with the cessation of export of Imari ware to Europe. Chinese porcelain continued to be imported to Europe but also stopped by the end of the 18th century. This was a beginning of the new era with new varieties of porcelain, which made reference to East Asian prototypes, and yet created new European generated designs.