

American *Shino*: A Case Study of Cultural Borrowing in the World of Traditional Ceramics

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Abstract

Japanese pottery wares, the techniques used in producing them, and the aesthetic sensibility behind them have had a particularly strong influence on Western craft potters and their works over the past century or so. As evidence of this, a large number of Japanese loanwords have found their way into Western pottery jargon. This paper introduces some of the most widely employed of these terms and looks at their connotations and the cultural implications of their use. Particular attention is given to the glaze known as shino, its evolution into what is now commonly referred to as American shino, and the question of whether this contemporary glaze is or is not still recognizably dependent in any way on its Japanese roots.

Key words: ceramics, Japanese pottery, loanwords, *shino*, cultural borrowing

Introduction

Upon entering a bookstore in the West and gazing upon the offerings lined up on shelves devoted to pottery and ceramics books, one is likely to feel the cultural presence of Japan more than any other non-Western country. In some cases, Japanese words such as *raku* will announce themselves boldly in the book's title. In other cases, a look at the book's dust jacket or a flip through its pages will more gradually reveal a traceable Japanese cultural presence – either through the technical terms employed or the Japanese influence evidenced, sometimes subtly and other times obviously, in the photographs of the wares themselves. How has Japan's influence on the world of craft pottery come to be exerted to such a remarkable degree? A full response to this question is beyond the scope of this paper, but what follows is an attempt to explore the question in some limited ways and mainly from the perspective of the cultural dynamics involved. This paper also attempts to help fill in at least one partial piece of the overall puzzle by looking in detail at how a particular glaze, *shino*, found its way into the American

pottery mainstream, and what this implies about the process of cultural borrowing when it comes to advancing a craft.

Japanese Loanwords in Western Pottery

One way of roughly measuring the degree to which a particular profession or other in-group is being influenced by an outside culture is to look at how many loanwords from that culture have reached a level of common usage. That is to say, the foreign terms have become so commonly used that it is assumed that they are understood, and so they are not typically accompanied by a definition or explanatory remarks when they appear in texts. In the world of Western traditional potters and their aficionados, *shino* has definitely achieved this status in English, but there are a number of other glaze terms that have reached it as well. Before diving into *shino*, let's have a look at some of these other common loanwords.

The main component of *nuka*, a glaze which typically appears as milky white or cream-colored with a satiny texture, is traditionally derived from the ash of burnt rice grain hulls (also called *nuka* in Japanese). While the original non-glaze meaning of *nuka* is definitely not a loanword in English, as a glaze name in pottery contexts it clearly has reached common usage. Rice hull ash is over 90% silica, so potters in the West typically use pure silica (derived from powdered quartz or flint) as a substitute since rice hulls are not easily acquired outside of Asia, but the term *nuka* is still employed anyway¹. This serves as further proof that, in English, the term has generally become decoupled from its original agricultural connotations which it still evokes when used in Japanese contexts.

Tenmoku (alternate English spellings include *temmoku* and *temoku*), an iron-rich glaze that tends to produce deep brown or black colors that break reddish or amber on the edges, is another widely recognized glaze term originating from Japan. The story of this glaze serves as a good illustration of the complexity of cultural borrowing that is often evident in the historical evolution of traditional crafts like ceramics. In Japan, *tenmoku* received its name because wares with this glaze were used for tea at a temple on Tianmu Mountain in China during the Song dynasty, where visiting Japanese monks first encountered them in 1406. The *kanji* name of the mountain and the temple itself is 天目, which means *Heaven's Eye* in English, and is pronounced *tenmoku* in Japanese. So, while most Western potters

no doubt realize they are paying homage to Japanese traditions when using the term *tenmoku*, knowledgeable Japanese potters are likely cognizant of the Chinese roots of the glaze when they use the same term.

Actually, the Japanese-derived pottery terms that have achieved the status of widely recognized loanwords in English publications about traditional ceramics are not limited to just a few glazes. Perhaps the most often encountered of these other terms is *raku*, originally a specific style of tea wares produced by a particular family of Kyoto potters since the 15th century but now in the West commonly referring to a technique employed for a range of bold decorative styles. This *raku* technique has become wildly popular outside of Japan over the last several decades, perhaps because the comparatively low firing temperature makes the process accessible even to beginners and amateur potters who do not have regular access to high-fire kilns². The impressive number of pottery books published in English since the beginning of this century that include the word *raku* in their titles [see, for example, *Raku: A Practical Approach* (Branfman (2001), *Fired Up with Raku: Over 300 Raku Recipes* (Poulton, 2007); and *500 Raku: Bold Explorations of a Dynamic Ceramics Technique* (Hemachandra and Romberg, 2011)] attests to publishers' expectation of familiarity with this term even across a general readership. Moreover, just as is the case with *shino*, the popularity of *raku* has led to a proliferation of new connotations for the term in English that diverge greatly from what traditional use of the word in Japanese contexts tends to denote.

Additionally, terms for certain types of tableware such as *chawan*, *yunomi*, *tokkuri*, and *guinomi* are also commonly used, likely because simple English translations of them (tea bowl, teacup, flask, and small cup, respectively) fail to convey sufficient information about the typical shapes, sizes and usage of these vessels (see Figure 1 for an example of a *chawan*, and Figure 2 for a *yunomi*). Turning to kiln design, it is now common to come across the term *anagama* in English publications. It's interesting to note that, while certain other types of kilns, such as the *noborigama* (a long multi-chambered climbing kiln), arguably had a greater impact on the history of Japanese ceramics, those terms are not as widely recognized as *anagama* and so they are more likely to be accompanied by definitions when they appear in English texts³. The reason that the term *anagama* and its design are more widely known and replicated outside of Japan is likely due to the fact that this kiln can be fired by a solitary potter or small team, thereby

making it more practical for adoption abroad since it is amenable to the lifestyle of contemporary potters who tend to work independently. The larger-scaled *noborigama*, in comparison, typically requires a larger team to fire it since it was developed within the Japanese group-oriented tradition of whole families and entire villages being devoted to the craft and working cooperatively.

Also, some Japanese loanwords for specific decorative techniques have found their way into English pottery jargon. One particularly interesting example of this is *hakame*, which refers to brushing a slip onto a pot with a brush that is coarse enough to allow the brushstrokes to remain visible after firing. This technique actually first appeared in Korea before the 15th century. The local clays available to Korean potters at the time tended to fire dark (due to their iron-rich composition), and so white slips were frequently used to lighten the range of possible colors. But white slips are prone to lift off pots before firing, and so Korean potters used the *hakame* technique to help ensure adherence. It was then adopted by Japanese potters who found the naturalness of the brushstrokes themselves to be attractive, regardless of the coloration effects that the slips may provide (Rogers, 2003). So Western potters now use a Japanese loanword to refer to a decorative pottery technique that actually originated in Korea⁴.

Tenmoku, a glaze, and *hakame*, a technique, are prominent examples of a fairly common trend: namely, historical developments in ceramics that originated on the Asian continent finding their way to the West via Japanese nomenclature. Most Japanese potters are surely aware of the indebtedness of their traditions to other Asian cultures, especially China and Korea. But the power of naming and labelling is strong, so in the West *tenmoku* is generally thought of as a Japanese glaze and *hakame* is generally portrayed as a Japanese technique. To be clear, considering them to be Japanese isn't entirely inaccurate since both have been used by Japanese potters for hundreds of years. But the fact they have reached the West via Japanese terms rather than Chinese or Korean ones suggests that over the years Japan has apparently been more influential than its Asian neighbors when it comes to broadcasting its ceramic traditions to the West.

There are a number of historical reasons we can point to in an attempt to answer why the West tends to view much of what it familiarly knows about Asian pottery traditions through a Japanese lens. No doubt among the most prominent of

them is the productive long-term friendship that formed between two extremely influential potters – Shoji Hamada of Japan and Bernard Leach of England.

The Japanese Cultural Conduit: Hamada, Leach, and Yanagi

If you were to ask typical Japanese people to name some well-known pottery areas (and styles) in Japan, they are likely to mention historically important locales such as Bizen, Arita, Mino, and Hagi among others. If you asked Western potters the same question, however, the most common answer would likely be Mashiko. Before the 20th century, this small town in Tochigi prefecture about 100 km northeast of Tokyo was a relatively minor pottery area on the wane. But then when Shoji Hamada (1894-1978) set up his workshop there in the late 1920s, Mashiko underwent a transformation into one of the major loci of Japan's folkcraft revival which was burgeoning at the time, known as the *mingei* movement. One of Japan's most influential artists of the 20th century, Hamada in 1955 was the first craftsman to be awarded the official designation of Living National Treasure by the Japanese government. He was not only a master of his craft, but also a pivotal force in promoting Japanese pottery and the aesthetic sensibility that animates it to audiences abroad. Other potters, even some non-Japanese ones, who were attracted to Hamada's wares and the *mingei* movement flocked to Mashiko and established their own kilns, turning Mashiko into a sort of modern-era mecca of craft pottery. Mashiko now has over 300 active potteries (Mansfield, 2014), and the town continues to be a popular pilgrimage site for Western potters inspired by the Japanese approach as well as international fans of Japanese craft pottery in general⁵.

Philosopher and art critic Soetsu Yanagi (1889-1961), who in 1936 founded the Japanese Folk Crafts Museum in Tokyo and was the editor of Japan's premier crafts journal (*Kogei*) for twenty years, was the primary originator and voice of the *mingei* movement. A prolific writer, Yanagi's beliefs are best distilled in his influential book *The Unknown Craftsman* (posthumously translated into English in 1972 by Bernard Leach). In brief, Yanagi's *mingei* theory, with its idealization of preindustrial sensibilities, can be seen as a counter to the rapid industrialization that Japan was undergoing, and it thus has some clear parallels in England's Arts and Crafts Movement spearheaded by John Ruskin and William Morris roughly a generation earlier. Yanagi's notion of *beauty* entailed that a truly beautiful object is one that can be perceived as pleasing by its beholder without any reference to

intellectual analyses or other such preconceptions, and that the creators of these objects tend to be craftspeople who unassumingly have mastered the ability to surrender themselves to the creative process so that they serve as a vehicle for nature to express itself. In his view, objects able to emanate this pure form of beauty tend to be handcrafted, inexpensive, inherently functional, and intended for everyday use. Ideally, they are made by anonymous craftspeople with a lack of artistic self-consciousness so that they come across as “born, not made” since their utilitarian perfection leads their users to simply view them as naturally essential parts of daily life (Yanagi, 1972).

Yanagi befriended Bernard Leach (1887-1979), who was raised in both Hong Kong and Japan, and it was through Yanagi that Hamada and Leach met each other. After earning art degrees in London as a young man, Leach returned to Japan where he originally gave lectures (attended by Yanagi) on Western art. But while living in Japan he became increasingly seduced by Japanese crafts, and starting in about 1911 he began making pots himself (Leach, 2011). In 1919 he met a young Hamada who had not yet established his kiln in Mashiko, and the following year Hamada accompanied Leach back to England where they spent several years together setting up Leach’s now legendary pottery at St. Ives in Cornwall⁶. Those years together cemented a lifelong friendship, and three decades later they found themselves, along with Yanagi, on a tour of America conducting influential seminars demonstrating Japanese craft pottery accompanied by Yanagi’s lectures on the philosophical and aesthetic theories supporting it. This tour promoting an aspect of traditional Japanese culture in the same year that the American occupation of post-war Japan was drawing to a close was extremely impactful, both in the narrow sense of its influence on the rising generation of American craft potters (Sorkin, 2016), and in the larger sense of the soft cultural power being employed at the time to help shift popular American sentiments toward Japan from wartime enemy to critical ally in the emerging Cold War era (Jones, 2017). The performance of the two potters was reportedly captivating, with Hamada sitting cross-legged at a wheel and silently and masterfully throwing pot after pot while Leach narrated on his techniques and their cultural background (Kemske, 2017).

Notably, one of the main reasons that Yanagi and Leach first became friends is they shared an intense interest in Korean folkcrafts (Leach, 2011; Yanagi, 1972).

And Leach considered himself as not just a conduit of Japanese traditions for a Western audience, but as a courier of aesthetic traditions more broadly between East (not just Japan) and West (Sorkin, 2016; Rogers, 2003). But Leach's mutually beneficial relationship with Hamada and Yanagi is a critically defining part of his legacy, and his seminal book, *A Potter's Book*, first published in 1940, incorporates a great many examples and anecdotes from the Japanese craft, and it is infused with the *mingei* philosophy. This remarkable book became wildly popular among the postwar generation of studio potters in the West, and it is still considered a canonical text in craft ceramics. Just like Hamada transformed Mashiko, Leach's popularity led to the small town of St. Ives becoming a sort of pilgrimage site for potters, and many promising young artists (such as Warren MacKenzie mentioned below) spent some of their formative years apprenticing at Leach's sprawling workshop at St. Ives⁷.

While Hamada and Leach were establishing and expanding their respective workshops in the 1930s, other potters and scholars in their circle of acquaintances in Japan were actively pursuing what is sometimes referred to as the Momoyama Revival in which *shino* and other glazes from the Momoyama Period were undergoing a period of rediscovery and renewed interest after languishing in relative obscurity for several centuries (Kida, 2019; Maske, 2020). The old styles and glazes had never been completely abandoned, but archeological diggings, including important specimens of original *shino* being unearthed by Toyozo Arakawa in Mino in 1930, led to a sharp uptick in interest. Hamada and Leach both experimented with *shino* glazes themselves, and when they eventually rose to the de facto position of influential cultural ambassadors of Japanese pottery traditions, they brought knowledge of and interest in *shino* with them, thus helping the Western world to encounter this traditional Japanese glaze and laying the groundwork for an American *shino* boom half a century later.

The Case of Shino

What is a *shino* glaze? And what does it look like? The answers to these questions are surprisingly complex. First of all, if someone were to hold a traditional Japanese *shino* ware in one hand and a contemporary American *shino* one in the other, she might be bewildered by them both being called *shino* since they could actually look very different from each other (see, for example, the side-by-side comparison in Figures 1 and 2). *Might* is the operative word here, since

shino glazes tend to be especially sensitive to nearly all the major decisions a potter needs to make. These include the composition of the clay that the wares are made from, the way in which the glaze is applied, the variables of the drying process, and the firing atmosphere of the kiln. While some glazes are able to remain fairly stable across some or most of these variables, the outcome of fickle *shino* glazes tends to be much less predictable. Perhaps because of this, *shino* is frequently referred to as a “potter’s glaze” (Richter, 2001), meaning that it is frequently potters themselves more than their customers who become deeply appreciative of and, at times, even obsessed with *shino*. This is due to practitioners being intimately aware of the high-risk, high-reward behavior that is undertaken when *shino* is used: risky because its unpredictable nature often leads to disappointing results, but rewarding because occasionally a few pieces manage to gloriously surpass even the maker’s most lofty expectations.

The words of some respected contemporary American potters (all cited in Richter, 2001) who have had their *shino* wares exhibited around the world help to illuminate the main reasons for their enduring love affair with the glaze. Judy Duff says that *shino* glazes “defy every rule, producing a wonderful variety of colors as well as the unpredictable aesthetic effects of crazing, pinholing, and crawling: a rich sensual message through... tactile properties” (p. 50). Rick Pope explains that he is drawn to *shino* “because of the range of effects, the intensity of the firings, and the unknowns that occur; all unpredictable, all beautiful... surfaces that can be carbon black, mutton fat white, and the oranges, reds, and apricots of a flower garden created in part by fuel, flame, and glaze” (p. 104). Another potter, Shirley Johnson, evocatively states that “*shino* results can be so endlessly variable – unpredictable, fugitive, surprising in the way the movement of fire can trace lips, mark edges, and leave mysterious, dramatic, or nuanced landscapes and whispers (p. 68). Finally, Dick Lehman, not only a well-known potter but also a prolific writer of the craft, poetically put it this way (p. 78):

To choose shino is to make so many other choices as well...

to choose learning, more than understanding;

to choose marveling, more than knowing;

and to choose to become a receiver, more than a maker.

Whatever this conniving glaze does... whatever it offers, the work is always, always transformed. And so, when I use it, am I.

A shared theme that emerges when we listen to these artists who excel at their craft is the notion of the potential for beauty to manifest itself when the creative process is partly relinquished to forces out of our control. It is as if they see their roles as masters of setting a stage, in the hope that their hard-earned expertise amounts to providing tempting enough conditions for the universe to be coaxed through fire into bestowing more of its gifts upon them. Glenn Burris put it this way: “Of all the glazes I fire, *shinos* are the most affected by materials, application, and firing... when all the forces come together, *shino* borders on a religious experience” (p. 40). Mary Law explains that “*shino*-type surfaces provide an impression, almost a record, of what went on inside the kiln; much is left to chance, or fate, or the kiln gods” (p. 76). Finally, another potter, Steven Glimmer, concludes by simply asserting that, for him, “*shino* is not really a glaze at all... it’s a world to explore” (p. 58). Whether these potters are consciously aware of it or not, these comments about their creative experience with *shino* can be seen as echoes of Yanagi’s core aesthetic philosophy: namely, the ideal of the craftsperson managing to overcome self-conscious expression and instead to surrender control of the outcome so that nature itself can express itself through him or her.



Figure 1: 16th century chawan from Japan’s Mino area with original shino glaze over oniita underglaze marks.



Figure 2: 20th century yunomi by Malcolm Davis with his American shino glaze bearing his name, exhibiting heavy carbon trapping.

Original Japanese *Shino*

What we now call *shino* first appeared during the Momoyama Period (1568-1600) in the Seto and especially Mino pottery regions near Nagoya, Japan. Glaze

application tended to be thick on these earliest *shino* specimens, usually resulting in a snowy white appearance with an unpretentiously gentle sheen. It is generally considered to be the first white glaze in the history of Japanese pottery (Jacobson, 2000), and from its beginning it has been intimately connected to the tea ceremony, another Japanese cultural phenomenon that was also flourishing and reaching its pinnacle of influence in the same brief but deeply influential Momoyama Period. Wilson (1995) suggests that *shino* may have resulted from the search at the time for a white glaze that could also accommodate underglaze painting (see Figure 1). It was marginally successful at doing so, but some other glazes departing somewhat from *shino* that were developed just a few decades later to best suit the relatively explosive rise in popularity of *oribe* ware were generally able to showcase underglaze painting much more clearly. This suggests that *shino*'s original moment in the spotlight was a comparatively short one in the long history of Japanese ceramic fashions and fads. While those earliest *shino* wares were indeed mostly white, some of them also appear accentuated by rusty orange scorch marks at edges where the glaze ran thin, and this was one of the intriguing features that led potters centuries later to rediscover *shino* and develop it in new ways.

Oribe ware takes its name from Furata Oribe (1544-1615), an important tea ceremony master whose assertive tastes had a major impact on the evolution of Japanese ceramics. Like any other pottery style, *oribe* ware is not limited simply to tea implements – its reach into Japanese households was and still is much broader than that. Yet the fact that an entire category of wares was named for a tea master is a testament to how influential the tea ceremony was in the development of Japanese tableware. The tea masters were the main arbiters of aesthetic taste at the time (Kemske, 2017; Wilson, 1995). And while the history of how *shino* got its name is rather more hazy, a popular version is that it too was named after a tea master: Shino Soshin (1444-1523), a pioneer in the use of incense in the tea ceremony, was a master who reputedly owned a favorite white tea bowl of Chinese origin, and the subsequent quest by Mino potters to reproduce this influential bowl and its glaze led to the development of *shino* (Britt, 2004; Kemske, 2017). However charming it may be, it is possible that this story of *shino*'s naming is partly or entirely apocryphal. *Shino* may just be a corruption of the Japanese word for white (*shiro*), and Driscoll (2001) as well as Malcolm Davis (in Williams, 2003) suggest that it is possible the term wasn't even in use until the 18th century. In any case,

the world of modern *shino* extends far beyond Japan, its uses encompass far more than tea wares, and its color palette now ranges far beyond its original snowy white.

Traditional Japanese *shino* glazes were made almost entirely from powdered feldspar rock, probably with small amounts of wood ash added as flux. Feldspar is a common type of rock found all over the world (with considerable variation in its composition) and is used as a base in a great many glazes, but traditional *shino* relies on an unusually high amount of it. Without wading too deeply into a scientific explanation, suffice it to say here that this simple formula does not result in what ceramicists would consider a “stable” glaze (Britt, 2004). It tended to result in pinholing, crawling, and crazing⁸ – the sorts of glaze behavior that are considered to be flaws in most aesthetic traditions but were, conversely, admired and even sought after within the Japanese tradition for their potential to reveal sublime instances of imperfection (Jacobson, 2000; Kemske, 2017).

Shino’s coloration and texture were mostly due to how the local variety of feldspar interacted with the local high-alumina clay body, as well as effects from the firing process undertaken in the semi-subterranean kilns in use around the Mino district during the Momoyama Period. Those kilns tended to be moist and rather inefficient by modern standards, leading to prolonged firings. Such conditions helped bring about the orange blushing and rusty scorch marks that *shino* ware is known for (Wilson, 1995).

In sum, traditional Japanese *shino* was a relatively unstable glaze with an appearance that was highly dependent on the unique characteristics of local materials and on the suboptimal firing conditions found in a type of kiln design that is no longer in use (Kusakabe and Lancet, 2005). So, when *shino* was rediscovered and newly appreciated in the modern era, completely faithful replication of the beautiful wares those ancient Mino potters managed to produce was never actually viewed as a practical goal. Instead, modern potters charmed by *shino* set out to achieve similar results by somewhat different means. And the directions that their efforts took them in have left us today with a greatly expanded palette of glaze recipes, application and firing techniques, and, above all, stunning results that all now crowd together and vie for attention beneath the umbrella term of *shino*.

Characteristics of American *Shino*

At the heart of the modern history of *shino*'s rediscovery and subsequent boom among American craft potters is an often-told origin story. In brief, Warren MacKenzie, arguably America's most influential craft potter of the last century or so, was teaching his pottery course at the University of Minnesota in early 1974. MacKenzie had read Leach's *A Potter's Book* while still a student, and he went on to apprentice at Leach's renowned St. Ives Studio for three years (1949 to 1952) where he spent time with Shoji Hamada and other Japanese potters, and in that workshop he found himself surrounded by pots of the *mingei* tradition. He readily admits that Leach and Hamada were the primary influence on his craft (Riddle, 2007), and he and his wife helped organize the 1952 lecture and workshop tour in the United States that Leach undertook along with Hamada and Yanagi. Off and on over the following decades, still intrigued by traditional Japanese *shino* wares that he had come across, MacKenzie conducted experiments to emulate the old Japanese glaze using materials available to him in America. He says that he finally settled on a few recipes that he figured were close enough to call *shino*, but he wasn't actually very satisfied with them (MacKenzie, 2001). So he therefore decided to turn it into an assignment: He challenged his graduate students to experiment with ceramics materials in the studio to come up with glaze recipes that would surpass his own in their emulation of the old *shinos*.

One of his students, Virginia Wirt, was following a promising trail and was getting closer and closer to her goal, but she felt that she needed a bit more of a fluxing agent because she observed that her trials were not fusing enough. One way of increasing the fluxing power of a glaze is to add sodium in some form, and so to address this issue, she decided to add some soda ash (sodium carbonate) to her recipe. Soda ash is soluble, and potters generally prefer insoluble materials in their glaze slurries because soluble materials cause glazes to behave less predictably. Specifically, they tend to destabilize the viscosity of the glaze as well as changing its firing behavior. She admits that chance played a big role in the choices she was making (Wirt, 2001), but her rather unorthodox addition of soda ash led to a sort of breakthrough in the evolution of *shino*. Rather than enabling a more exact replication of the traditional Japanese glaze, the soda ash became a catalyst for pushing *shino* in a whole new direction.

When a *shino* glaze containing soda ash is fired in a reduction atmosphere⁹

while passing through the critical stage of firing when the last of the carbon particles are burning out of the clay body, the soda ash gets in the way. Basically what happens is that as water molecules in the clay and glaze evaporate in the early part of the firing, they carry the soluble soda ash with them to the outer surface of the glaze and deposit it there. The migrated soda ash, now bereft of water, momentarily crystallizes there on the surface just as the carbon particles are trying to escape the clay. The soda ash blocks some of the carbon from escaping while the glaze is melting and fusing, and after a certain point the carbon can no longer break free – it gets trapped forever just below the surface of the glaze. How does this affect the visual qualities of the finished pot? The trapped carbon tends to fall somewhere on a continuum between a subtle cloudy grey and a more prominent speckling of black dots or spots, and these marks appear on random parts of the pot and in irregular patches (see Figure 2). MacKenzie describes his first encounter with carbon trapping in one of Wirt's *shino* wares in this way:

Although this might be seen as a flaw in the glaze, it often produces patterns that are more interesting than a clear glaze. On a pot of Wirt's that I bought from her thesis exhibition, there are beautiful passages of grey and black that resemble mountains and clouds in a Chinese painting. We all called this glaze 'Ginny's carbon trap,' and over the years it found its way into use throughout the United States and even to Europe and South America.
(2001, p. 15)

Richter (2001) concurs that word of this alluring new *shino* glaze effect spread rapidly through American ceramics circles, and variations soon proliferated. But why was the carbon trap effect viewed as a particularly good match for *shino* glazes? The answer to this question is no doubt partly dependent on subjective aesthetic sensibility, but for potters I imagine at least part of the explanation was hinted at by MacKenzie in the above quotation when he noted that carbon trapping "might be seen as a flaw in the glaze." As noted earlier, *shino* is often referred to as a "potter's glaze" because it presents such a tempting challenge to the artists themselves. It's erratic, unstable, and always fickle; and yet for those who feel its pull, its irresistible charm as a glaze lies in its seemingly haphazard and occasionally sublime amalgamation of "flaws." Seen in this light, carbon trapping is yet another difficult to tame "flaw" added to the palette of so-called

flaws that account for much of *shino*'s remarkable range of expression. The attraction that *shino* potters and aficionados feel for this glaze is no doubt due at least in part to their admiration for one of *shino*'s primary governing aesthetic principles: the allure of serendipitous imperfection. And this aesthetic sense has its roots in the remarkable cultural milieu of the tea ceremony within which the original Japanese *shino* glazes were developed roughly half a millennium ago.

In an influential article entitled *Revival Fires: Another Face for Shino*, Jim Robinson (1992) also recounted the origin story of Wirt's carbon trap, and he pointed out that it wasn't just the use of soda ash but also the introduction of spodumene into the glaze recipe that marks a significant turning point in *shino* evolution. He notes that "this fortunate blend has spawned an almost endless series of contemporary *shino*-type glazes" (p. 62). The article goes on to list fifty of these new *shino* glaze recipes, and actually more of them contain spodumene (33) than soda ash (24)¹⁰. Spodumene is a lithium-rich mineral that is similar enough to feldspar that it is sometimes called lithium feldspar. In the right eutectic environment it acts as a powerful fluxing agent, so when part of the feldspar in a *shino* recipe is replaced with spodumene, and if soda ash is also present, then it tends to lower the temperature at which the glaze melt starts during firing (Obstler, 2000), thereby enhancing the possibility of carbon trapping and other qualities that some potters seek. For example, it lowers the expansion co-efficient of sodium during the melt which counters some of the more extreme crazing, while also sometimes enhancing the richness of orange scorch accents (Davis in Williams, 2003).

Interestingly, spodumene was not and is not available to Japanese potters: It has never been mined in Japan, and even today it is not being imported and Japanese ceramics materials suppliers do not offer it. So American *shino*'s trajectory is moving in a direction that is no longer accessible to Japan-based potters, further widening the gap between the tradition and its current manifestation overseas. Does it still make sense to call these new glazes *shino*? Robinson (1992) asks the question in this way:

But here's the dilemma. If we don't live in or use the materials of the Mino area of Japan, are we even making *shino*? Are we so far afield that our wares are pale imitations and lack the verve and rugged power of the originals?

Should we even dare to use the name, or give up the quest?
(p. 62)

As this passage implies, purists might argue that American *shino* wares aren't really *shino* in the traditional Japanese sense because they generally look different and are composed of different materials. Others could counter, however, that American *shino* is indeed within the Japanese tradition because they are a contemporary expression of the same animating aesthetic sensibility that gave birth to those original *shino* wares back in Japan's Momoyama Period. In any case, the term *shino* has entered English and is now in very wide and usually reverential use in Western countries, so it is hard to imagine it being abandoned anytime soon. This is how Wirt herself addressed the issue: "Having lived in Japan for several years, would I hesitate to ascribe the word *shino* to the glaze? I hadn't thought of it that way, but add the word *American* to it, and it might fit" (2001, p.14).

With over thirty important exhibitions throughout the world, Malcolm Davis is the American *shino* potter most famously associated with the carbon trap effect. He was a mathematician, chaplain, and social activist who didn't touch clay until well into his forties. He was enamored with pottery from his first encounter with a wheel, but once he discovered *shino* glaze, he admits it became a true obsession:

Not unlike falling in love, it began with enchantment and fascination, turned into obsession, and gradually moved on to commitment. Peppered with the requisite disappointments and struggles – there were even threats of separation, followed by reconciliation. Such is my life with *shino*. It has never been easy.

(Davis, 2001, p. 17)

His obsession led him to collect over 300 *shino* glaze recipes and try them all, gradually zeroing in on the carbon trap type, and the carbon trap *shino* recipe that he eventually perfected and that now bears his name¹¹ is currently one of the most widely used American *shino* glazes. The excerpt of Williams' (2003) interview with Davis below is instructive because it captures in a single paragraph the transformation in actual *seeing* that *shino* is able to induce in some people. It illustrates the profound shift in aesthetic sensibility that can happen when certain

“flaws” are no longer seen as flaws, but as a visitation of a special sort of rare magic. For potters like Davis, the revelation seems to border upon religious epiphany:

The first *shino* tea bowl I fired in my West Virginia kiln was far beyond what I wanted. It was crazed and pitted and the glaze crawled away on the inside – all the imperfections I had avoided when previously firing celadons. I was disgusted and threw the pot into the trash bin. Weeks later, when I was taking out the trash, I noticed the tea bowl had not broken, and pulled it out. And Lord! I began to see all the magic the kiln had given me that I had not noticed two weeks earlier. I saved the pot and it won first prize in several shows... I still have that pot and wouldn't part with it for the world.

(p. 29)

No doubt many of those ancient tea masters of the Momoyama Period could easily relate to this ecstatic sentiment about *shino*.

Conclusion

The story partially recounted here of *shino*'s discovery in Japan, subsequent obscurity, revival centuries later, and eventual journey across oceans leading to its further evolution is, in a sense, a typical story of cultural borrowing. Also, we can also say that it typifies the way in which human knowledge has always spread and advanced, but that the scale and rapidity of this ages old process has greatly expanded in the modern age. In ancient times, for example, word of a new farming technique or innovative pickling procedure discovered in one secluded village would have eventually made it over the surrounding mountain passes and into neighboring villages, where the new knowledge would have been applied in slightly different ways, leading to gradual evolution and regional variation in the processes and products.

A similar process now happens regularly on a global scale, and in some circles there is a tendency to problematize the phenomenon by portraying it negatively as a form of cultural appropriation. But as Avins (2015) has pointed out, cultural exchange on any level and the dynamism it promotes can more positively be cast as one of the great benefits of living in our increasingly multicultural world. Avins offers the examples of blue jeans, reminding us that the stretchy synthetic fibers

developed mostly in Japan and now the most popular type of jeans worldwide are in fact a far cry from the iconic American denim garment that Levi Strauss originally designed. And yet we still refer to them as “jeans” and most wearers probably still consider them to be an American-inspired fashion item.

Also, let’s not forget that Levi Strauss himself was actually an immigrant from Germany, and this makes our jeans example even more apt because it illustrates that cultural “ownership” is often more complex than it at first appears. Similarly, most of those old Momoyama Period potters were no doubt cognizant of their indebtedness to Chinese and Korean predecessors as they worked with local materials to create *shino* and other glazes that are now commonly portrayed as uniquely Japanese breakthroughs. So, in a strict sense, it is indeed true that American *shino* glaze recipes and the resultant wares are different from their Momoyama Period antecedents. But when a potter is using a new *shino* glaze thanks to being deeply inspired by the originals and is working within a similar aesthetic sensibility, the continued use of the term *shino* for his or her pots is perhaps best seen as an act of accrediting and of paying homage to *shino*’s long and rich tradition.

Notes

- 1) For potters working within a handcrafted tradition, purity of materials is not necessarily desirable since it is often the unique composition of impurities that help steer the finished wares away from stagnant uniformity. So, in the case of *nuka*, while the non-silica impurities make up just a very small percent of the rice hull ash used, their composition is affected by the mineral characteristics of the soil in which the rice was grown, and therefore one potter’s signature *nuka* glaze can never be exactly replicated by another. This guarantees a usually welcome degree of idiosyncrasy to the glaze and originality to the outcome.
- 2) *Raku* wares are decorative in the sense of not being fully functional since they are earthenware rather than stoneware. As *raku* is typically fired to a comparatively low temperature, it tends to not be completely watertight over time, thereby making it impractical for extended use as tableware but sufficient for its original role in the tea ceremony.
- 3) An interesting side note to kiln naming is that one enterprising Western potter, John Thies, recently designed a new type of compact kiln and

dubbed it *manabigama*. Because of its small-scale and versatility, the kiln design is marketed as being particularly suitable as a teaching kiln for students to experiment with. Japanese readers who come across the term will naturally imagine it as 学び窯 in Japanese characters, an inventive neologism derived from a word that means learn/learning (*manabu/manabi*; 学ぶ/学び) coupled with the word for kiln (*kama/gama*; 窯). But this is not exactly how the designer explains the name: “In Japanese, *mana* means educational or learning, *bi* means a thing of beauty, and *gama* means kiln.” (Thies, 2014, p. 12). While *bi* can indeed mean *beautiful* in certain words made up of compound characters like this, it would have to be written with the 美 character. However, if you substitute the phonetic character in the middle of 学び窯 in order to spell it as 学美窯, most Japanese readers would likely read it as *gakubigama* instead of *manabigama*, and would arguably struggle to make any sense out of the term. In other words, the neologism doesn’t quite work in Japanese.

My purpose here is not to argue that only “proper” Japanese ought to be used in situations like this or to belittle the designer for choosing the name that he did. Instead, I’m sharing this example because it can be seen as an extremely clear linguistic distillation of some of the key dynamics involved in cultural borrowing. Assuming that this potter-inventer doesn’t see Japan as the primary market for his kiln design, it hardly matters whether the new Japanese-inspired word he has coined is decipherable or not in the actual Japanese language. He likely came up with the term *manabigama* because he realized the positive evocative connotations that a Japanese-sounding name can afford to a kiln design when targeting his particular Western audience. In other words, while imperfect in a strict sense, the neologism likely suits this person’s needs perfectly well.

Some will view a case like this as demonstrating a shallow and therefore disrespectful misunderstanding of the cultural roots of a tradition, while others will see it as a mindful and respectful nod toward those same cultural roots while participating in the inexorable evolution that the tradition naturally undergoes as it leaps across cultural borders. In short, this is the sort of thing that animates our controversies about cultural borrowing in this age of unprecedented globalization. Do we generally view it negatively in the sense of insensitive cultural appropriation, or positively in the sense of paying homage to one’s cultural source of

inspiration? It's a delicate issue, and a nuanced answer no doubt involves taking into account the stance and intentions of the borrower (Avins, 2015).

- 4) In general, this paper argues that cultural borrowing is a natural and for the most part welcome element of advancing human knowledge. At the same time, it's important to remember that such "borrowing" was sometimes accomplished in brutal and unwelcome ways. During the Momoyama Period, Japan twice invaded the Korean peninsula (1592 and again in 1597-98) and although Hideyoshi Toyotomi's troops failed to accomplish their main objectives, upon retreating they captured tens of thousands of Korean artisans, including as many as 6,000 potters (Duong, 2015), and brought them back to Japan. These potters, taken from their homeland against their will, brought with them the skills and techniques that kickstarted some of Japan's most important pottery traditions. They essentially established, for example, the pottery regions and unique styles of Hagi and Karatsu. Their impact on the trajectory of Japanese pottery was so immense that the wars that brought those Korean potters to Japan are sometimes referred to as *The Pottery Wars* in recognition of how consequential this aspect of the confrontations ended up being (Wilson, 1995; Yellin, 2001).
- 5) A twenty-minute video of Phil Rogers, one of England's most renowned contemporary studio potters, making a narrated pilgrimage to Mashiko is available here: www.youtube.com/watch?v=-gRUFloO8as
- 6) During Hamada's stay at St. Ives, he and Leach built the West's first *noborigama* (climbing kiln). Interestingly, it performed so poorly that another more experienced Japanese potter had to be brought over from Japan in 1923 to completely rebuild it. This episode illustrates that, even for these men who later went on to become counted among the most famous of 20th century craft potters, their enthusiasm at first seems to have sometimes outpaced their technical skill.
- 7) Mashiko and St. Ives both realize their indebtedness to the Hamada-Leach relationship, as evidenced by the two towns entering into a Sister City relationship with each other in 2012 to celebrate the connection.
- 8) *Pinholing*, as the name implies, refers to a glaze surface that looks as if it has been pierced by many tiny holes. *Crawling* occurs when the glaze shrinks at a higher rate than the clay body it rests upon, resulting in it

pulling away and pooling in a fashion similar to how water behaves on a waxed surface. *Crazing* refers to a surface of extremely thin hairline cracks in irregular geometric patterns, much like the random crack lines found in the dried mud of a lake when a drought has evaporated all the water.

- 9) A reduction atmosphere refers to a firing in which the fuel being used is deprived at certain crucial points in the process of some of the oxygen it needs to fully combust. This forces the roaring fire to seek to extract available oxygen molecules from the clay and glaze of the wares themselves as it makes its way through the firing chamber before reaching the chimney, resulting in all sorts of dramatic effects depending on the composition of clay and glaze. This is a natural occurrence with most wood-burning kilns since each time more wood is added the kiln momentarily cycles into reduction. Gas kilns can also provide a reduction atmosphere, but electric kilns cannot. Nearly all mass-produced, industrial-scale ceramics of the modern era are fired in electric kilns which only offer fully oxidized atmospheres. This is why *shino* and a great many other traditional glazes are not generally considered suitable for electric kiln firings. If tried, the results will generally appear dull and static compared to what can be achieved in a reduction firing.
- 10) Jacobson (2000) also lists American *shino* recipes at the end of his article, and of the 27 listed only two of them do not contain spodumene. One of the two spodumene-free recipes is the carbon trap *shino* glaze formulated by Malcolm Davis (see Note 11 below).
- 11) As a hobby potter living in Japan, I am personally indebted to Malcolm Davis for formulating a carbon trap *shino* recipe which does not contain spodumene since that material is unavailable here. Not only is his *shino* recipe possible to replicate in Japan, but it seems to be a particularly good fit with Japanese feldspars which tend to be slightly higher in soda content and lower in potash compared to most feldspars available abroad.

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