

SPOTLIGHT: Kaneshige Family Potters

Title of Piece: Bizen Ware Vase



El Presenter: Elaine Pruett

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Year created: 1965

Artist: Kaneshige Family Potters

Three essential aspects of this object:

1. Bizen ware is one of six Japanese potteries who have been making pots since the Middle Ages. Located in Okayama Prefecture, south of Hiroshima, the clay is unique because it is dug from under the rice fields. Bizen ware, unlike most ceramics, is unglazed, and undergoes only one long firing. The clay body has a high iron content, which allows it to be food-safe even though it is unglazed. The surface resembles old bronze. It is fired in a wood-burning kiln over many days. Because of the long, complicated firing, the pottery only fires twice a year.
2. Like most Japanese ceramics, Bizen ware is a collaborative effort. The sometimes-uneven surface of a piece is considered an aid for making good tea. A good deal of experimentation with different additions to the firings have created "kiln effects." For example, pine ash fired with the pots created a sort of sesame seed spotting called goma. Other effects are created by wrapping a pot in rice straw (hidasuki), adding charcoal to the firing (sangiri) and placing mud pies directly on the pot before firing to create a rice cake effect (botamochi). The JSMA pot has this botamochi effect. A variety of different results are achieved by these additions to the firings.
3. The elder Kaneshige (1896-1967) is called the father of modern Bizen ware because he revitalized the tradition by moving from a concentration on small clay figures to the more commercial emphasis on tableware, teacups, and vases. Kaneshige's son is also a potter, and has continued to expand and experiment with Bizen, moving into more abstract forms.

Talking Points:

1. Bizen ware is very much in the wabi-sabi tradition, as it celebrates the handmade, the austere and the imperfect
2. The production of Bizen ware is essentially unchanged over many centuries

3. The creation of each piece of Bizen ware depends on natural resources such as wood, pine ash, mud, straw
4. Each piece carries with it a wealth of knowledge about the conditions of firing, the clay content and chemical reactions that occur. Each piece in that sense reflects centuries of experimentation and refinement.

Possible questions to use when discussing this piece with museum visitors:

1. What do you notice about this vase?
2. How is it different from the vases you have in your house?
3. Does it remind you of anything else you have seen?
4. How do you think the circles on the piece are created?
5. Have you ever made a vase yourself?

Tour Type: Explore Asia, Learning to Look