

The Design Philosophy of Yabu Meizan: Landscapes of Western Japan in Copperplate

Yoshie Itani

Tokyo University of the Arts, JAPAN

Abstract

Yabu Meizan(1853-1934) was a craftsman and entrepreneur of his day who made and sold Satsuma ware pottery in Osaka, Japan. That Meizan was considered “uniquely skilled with Satsuma ware” and “a supporter of public works projects” were hardly exaggerations, even if such articles tended to glorify him in light of his public donation efforts. Born fifteen years before Japan’s Meiji Restoration, Yabu Meizan lived through a period in which the Japanese export porcelain industry was transitioning from traditional to modern designs, and on to its present form.

Meizan’s work featured four distinguishing characteristics: Meizan made use of copperplate print etching to recreate these same motifs more as repetitive patterns, an approach that imbued them with a broader overall harmony similar to that of stenciled or dyed textiles.

The foundations of his design work lay in Western Japan, mainly Osaka. Looking at the breakdown of the present collection, aside from Mt. Fuji-related themes, we see that many of the works depict subjects like the Gion Festival, the Kasuga Grand Shrine, Lake Biwa, and Itsukushima Shrine. We can also see an unmistakable similarity to the many landscape copperplate prints that were being produced in the Kyoto-Osaka region at the time. The popularity in the West of Yabu Meizan’s works, on which the same motifs are often repeated, may have something to do with their inherent visual continuity. Even after winning numerous awards at international exhibitions, in the end Yabu Meizan did not seek the honor and prestige of becoming an Imperial Household Artist, but rather dedicated himself to making a business of creating porcelains.

Keywords: *Yabu Meizan; Meiji; Pottery Export Porcelain in Modern Era; Japan-British Exhibition 1910*

Introduction

Yabu Meizan (given name Masashichi) was born in Osaka’s Nagahori district on January 20, 1853, the second son of print artist Yabu Chōsui (1814 – 1867).¹ Yabu Chosui was the eldest child of scholar Yabu Kakudō (1773 – 1849), and was well known for having painted a portrait of the scholar Ogata Kōan.² In 1860, Meizan moved to Miharacho Fukura on Awaji Island, now part of Hyogo Prefecture, to become heir to Yabu Sukezaemon, and by 1868 he had moved again, this time to Osaka.³

As for the roots of the Yabu family, thus far no clear connection has been found between this family and the Mimpei ware established by Kashū Mimpei (1796 – 1871) in Awaji Island. However, it is likely that Meizan, having established his own studio, hired pottery painters from the Awaji region where he spent his childhood, and which at the time had its own prosperous pottery industry. Noguchi Sanae (an expert adviser to the Awajishima Museum at the time) stated in the pictorial record issued for the “Grace of Modern Exhibitions — Yabu Meizan”

Exhibition (1995, Awajishima Museum), “It seems that Meizan involved himself in the Mimpei Ware kiln in his youth I’d like to think that the start of Yabu Meizan’s career as a porcelain picture painter originated in Awaji Island.” Of Kashū Mimpei it is said, “Although he did not directly involve himself in the manufacturing of pottery, as other potters did, he invited many expert artisans to his studio to gather together their excellent and unique skills in one place. In this approach he was outstanding”.⁴ Mimpei’s success in managing and nurturing a pottery business was exactly the goal that Yabu Meizan was hoping to achieve. That said, Mimpei’s kiln was constantly finding itself in a difficult financial situation, and debts were piling up because he tried to take on new glazes and shapes one after another through trial and error. In addition, the Kashū family that once boasted of its great wealth had poured most of its assets into the ceramics business over a period of nearly 30 years, although Mimpei aimed to expand his sales after having established his sales shop in Osaka, and even dreamed of eventually exporting his products around the world. Mimpei’s enthusiasm for the ceramics business seems to have been acquired by Yabu Meizan, but this also revealed the management difficulties that Mimpei, Yabu Meizan and other artisans were encountering while trying to advance the emerging ceramics business, as opposed to the established families in Arita and Seto that have continued from generation to generation.

Yabu Meizan (1853 – 1934) was a craftsman and entrepreneur representing the modernity of his day who made and sold *Satsuma* ware pottery in Osaka. The May 1897 issue of *Ceramics Business News (Tōki Shōhō)*,⁵ published by Mino potter Katō Sukesaburō, says of Yabu Meizan: “Working at Dōjima-Naka 2-chome, Kita-ku in Osaka, he is a well-known artist who has brought his unique skills to *Satsuma* ware. He is also especially enthusiastic about public works projects.”⁶ This was written in response to Meizan’s donations to said projects. Similar praise was also directed at other Meizan contemporaries. For example, the *Kyō* ware potter and imperial household artist Itō Tōzan I (1846 – 1920), whom an article lauded as “a ceramicist highly regarded for his application of fine arts.”⁷ Putting all this together, evaluations that Meizan “possessed unique skill with *Satsuma* ware” and “was enthusiastic about public works projects” were not necessarily exaggerations, even if they may have been written somewhat favorably in light of his public donation efforts. He was clearly as highly regarded then as he is today.

I would like to discuss some of the more general trends that were occurring in Japan’s modern export porcelain industry during Yabu Meizan’s time, as well as the activities of some of his contemporaries.

Painting Training

In 1871, Miyagawa Kōzan the First opened a kiln in the Otamura district of Yokohama. Some years later, Watano Kichiji of Kutani, opened a branch office in Yokohama with an eye to pursuing exports. In 1872, Kinkozan the Sixth began manufacturing export porcelains. And in 1876, Morimura Ichizaemon and his half-brother, Toyō, founded the Morimura-gumi trading company—now the Noritake Company—in Tokyo’s Ginza district. A decade later, in 1877, Chin Jukan the Twelfth, from whom Meizan is said to have obtained much of his porcelain clay, set up his Gyokkozan porcelain works in Kagoshima. From these and other developments we can see that Japan’s modern ceramics industry was experiencing remarkable growth during this period. However, what sort of training was available at the time to the porcelain painting craftsmen of this expanding business? It would be hard to imagine that Meizan never studied pottery painting. So, if we assume that he studied it somewhere, where might that have been? Meizan, however, established his own ceramics painting studio only half-a-year after he began to study painting techniques. His goal seemed to not just be to cultivate his own pottery

painting skills; rather, he took a broader view which also included making moves toward operating and even expanding his business.

In Tokyo, where Meizan was living, there was an artisan from Gifu named Naruse Seishi, who also worked in the Satsuma style. Naruse was born in the Nasubigawa section of Gifu's Nakatsugawa City, and at the age of thirteen he began apprenticing at a local kiln that produced Nasubigawa ware. In 1871, Naruse moved to Tokyo to work as a pottery painter in the then rapidly growing export porcelain business. The following year he built his own kiln to produce Tokyo Satsuma ware on the grounds of Zōjō-ji temple. He also immersed himself in the study of drawing miniatures. Among the many potters associated with the various kilns of Tokyo and Yokohama, Naruse Seishi is currently most often considered to be the closest in working style to Yabu Meizan. This suggests that Meizan may have had some contact with Naruse, especially as his stay in Tokyo coincides with the period during which Naruse was also living in Tokyo. Photo 3 shows one of Naruse's works. It is decorated with an elaborate, finely detailed design that is acutely analogous to the styles seen in Meizan's works. Naruse is currently being studied by a group of researchers—including Takagi Noritoshi, a potter from Tajimi in Gifu Prefecture and foremost authority on Meiji era Japanese ceramics history—and it would prove highly significant if some relationship can be uncovered between Naruse and Meizan. Naruse is currently being researched by Takagi Noritoshi and others at the Museum of Modern Ceramic Art in Tajimi, Gifu, and it would prove highly significant if some relationship could be found between him and Meizan.

Compared to the *takaukibori* high-relief styles of Miyagawa Kōzan and Sumida ware, or the works of Naruse, Yabu Meizan's work tended to be relatively flat and two-dimensional. This was undoubtedly influenced by his use of copperplate printing as a finishing technique. In the Kansai region of Kyoto and Nara, copperplate prints of famous locales made unique tourist souvenirs and were eagerly sought after. Even now, there remain many books of delicate landscape prints from the time. One example, *Illustrations of Itsukushima Shrine* by Yamaguchi Otojiro, was printed in 1878 using copperplate. We can see from these and other illustrations that quite a lot of copperplate printing was produced in the environs of Kyoto and Osaka, where Meizan lived, and that he was especially interested in subjects related to the Kansai region. Looking at the breakdown of the present collection, aside from Mt. Fuji-related themes, we see that many of the works depict subjects like the Gion Festival, the Kasuga Grand Taisha Shrine (Figure. 1), Lake Biwa, and Itsukushima Shrine. We can also see an unmistakable similarity to the many landscape copperplate prints that were being produced in the Kyoto-Osaka region at the time.



Figure. 1 “Vase with landscape Kasuga Taisha Shurine”, End of Meiji Era, Private Collection

Yabu Meizan's Exhibition Years and Japan-British Exhibition 1910

Having won his first award at the 14th Kyoto Exhibition in 1885, Meizan began actively submitting works to other exhibitions in Japan, and especially abroad. He also worked in administrative capacities for some of these exhibitions, such as a business counselor on behalf of the city of Osaka, and representing Japan as a trustee on various counselor boards.

At the Paris Exhibition of 1900, although Meizan did not win a grand prize himself, he did receive a silver medal in the category of Ceramic Flower Vases, etc. Meizan and others, such as Watano Kichiji, who had relocated his operation from Kutani to Yokohama, and Takito Manjiro of Nagoya, all exhibited pieces that attracted considerable interest among the exhibition visitors. The main question, though, was how to win the most orders from European customers. Naturally, winning a grand prize was a good way to attract attention, which could lead to the development of sales channels. However, the ultimate goal had less to do with elevating one's name recognition as an artisan, and much more to do with expanding overseas sales.

Although Yabu Meizan took an active role in numerous international expositions, among these stood out one of his most remarkable achievements, that being at the Japan-British Exhibition of 1910. This international exposition played an integral role in prompting the Japanese ceramic industry to change its initial production style from large flower vases and dishes to such pieces as tableware that were more in step with the ongoing evolution of Japan's export ceramics industry. We have chosen to focus on this exposition because of its importance for these reasons. The 1910 Japan-British Exhibition was held from May 14th to October 29th in London's Shepherds Bush. Along with Ando Jubei, Fukagawa Chuji, and Kinkōzan Sōbei the Seventh, Meizan was appointed an exhibition counselor, and was also named a trustee on the board of the Osaka Exhibitors Alliance. According to a report from the Japan-British Exhibition Association⁸: "Tea utensils, coffee cups, candy dishes, fruit bowls and other items suited to everyday use were the biggest sellers... but when it came to items like vases, incense burners, shelves and so on, only the smaller versions of these sold well...." Table 1 shows main pottery exhibitors and their selling prices in Japan-British Exhibition.

Exhibitor	Place	Price of Exhibited Work (£)	Selling Price (£)	Selling price relative to exhibited price (%)
Kato Tomotaro	Tokyo	331	3	9
Miyagawa Kozan	Kanagawa	382	101	26
Watano Kichiji	Kanagawa	229	87	37
Wataya Heibei	Kanagawa	84	55	65
Union of Potter in Nomi	Ishikawa	191	100	52
Matsumoto Sahei	Ishikawa	22	9	40
Terasawa Tomeshiro	Aichi	151	95	62
Morimura-gumi	Aichi	73	61	83
Shimizu Rokunosuke	Aichi	25	6	24
Tashiro Ichiroji Shop	Aichi	11	7	63
Kato Shubei	Aichi	8	2	25

Kato Mon'emon	Aichi	7	2	28
Nishiura Enji	Gifu	18	6	33
Kinkozan Sobei	Kyoto	1483	328	22
Ito Tozan	Kyoto	178	41	23
Shofu Pottery Company	Kyoto	69	28	40
Suwa Sozan	Kyoto	54	12	22
Kawahara Noritatsu (Kyoto)	Kyoto	15	15	100
Yabu Meizan	Osaka	254	83	32
Danto.Co.Osaka Branch	Osaka	5	3	60
Tsuji Shigenosuke	Saga	427	212	49
Tominaga Genroku	Saga	335	19	5
Koransha	Saga	305	212	70
Fukagawa Chuji	Saga	215	52	24
Imaizumi Tota	Saga	46	2	4

Table 1: Main pottery exhibitors and their selling prices in Japan-British Exhibition 1910

Among the larger vases, the report noted: “visitors to the exhibit gave much praise to those with shapes or visual patterns featuring more purely Japanese designs.” In terms of production regions, it said: “the relatively inexpensive yet highly decorative Kutani ware were the most popular... followed by the brocade Nishikide ware of Arita. Finally, the Satsuma-style ceramics from Kyoto and Osaka exhibited very fine designs, and the artistic stylings of the Makuzu ware from Kanagawa seemed to have great commercial promise.” It seems almost certain that Meizan’s works were among the more highly valued pieces at this exhibition.

When the First World War broke out in 1914, Meizan was working on the upcoming 1915 Panama Pacific World Exposition to be held in San Francisco, as a counselor for the Osaka Exhibition Association. In regards to the Exposition, a report filed by one Kitamura, an engineer with the Ministry of Agriculture and Commerce, recounts that “Japan should be very happy that Morimura-gumi and other Nagoya makers began producing practical drinking and dining utensils. Miyagawa Kōzan’s products are certainly excellent in terms of design art, but there are no unique new designs among them.”

Kitamura’s report also hinted at the direction that Japan’s export ceramics were taking at the time. Craftsmen like Miyagawa Kōzan, who had by then risen to the status of Imperial Household Artist, were supported by government pensions and had their production costs for government-ordered items paid for in full. They were thus freed from concerns about generating income. On the other hand, individual craftsmen not in this class of artisans had a tougher time making a living, and the costs involved in exhibiting at world expositions made them far too expensive, even if encouraged by government recommendation.

Meizan’s Sunset Years

The year 1916 saw the passing of Miyagawa Kōzan and Kato Tomotaro, and the following year both Suwa Sozan and Ito Tozan became Imperial Household Artists. Around the same time, Okura Magobei and his son Kazuchika were making plans to found Okura Tōen Art China to

produce high-end porcelains. The establishment of such companies as Nippon Tōki and Tōyō Tōki all pointed to a prosperous future for the modern porcelain business.

Meizan passed away on May 2nd, 1934, and his funeral was held at the Naniwa Church in Osaka. Yabu Tsuneo, who had worked alongside Meizan to promote the Workshop's business interests, died seven years later, on February 19th, 1941. As can be clearly seen, what Yabu Meizan really wished for was “not to remain an independent artisan, but rather build up a workshop around himself, recognizing his role as an art producer.” Setting aside any desire for personal fame, he instead wished to be known as an artist and creator named Yabu Meizan.

Conclusion

Born fifteen years before Japan's Meiji Restoration, Yabu Meizan lived through a period in which the Japanese export porcelain industry was transitioning from traditional to modern designs, and on to its present form. Meizan's work featured four distinguishing characteristics:

- (1) The foundations of his design work lay in Western Japan, mainly Osaka.
- (2) He did not remain an independent artisan, but rather built up a workshop around himself, recognizing his role as an art producer.
- (3) He had his eyes firmly focused on markets abroad.
- (4) Even after winning numerous awards at international exhibitions, in the end he did not seek the honor and prestige of becoming an Imperial Household Artist, but rather dedicated himself to making a business of creating porcelains.

In particular, his work on various boards and committees was associated with the international exhibitions and expositions of the day. And while this certainly helped promote the development of his own ceramics business, it also demonstrated his equal dedication to the promotion of Japanese art and culture.

While Meizan produced many works with large floral patterns early in his career, he later transitioned to more detailed landscapes and genre paintings made possible by copperplate etching (Figure 2). Over time, his subject matter evolved toward more finely rendered classic motifs, such as autumn leaves, butterflies and chrysanthemums.



Figure 2. “Round Vase with Landscape painting and swirling millefleur and butterflies design” Early Taisho period, Private collection

While his contemporaries as Imperial Household Artists—notably Suwa Sōzan and Miyagawa Kōzan, and later Itaya Hazan and Inoue Ryōsai—concentrated on artistic renderings of flower-and-bird and landscape subjects, Meizan made use of copperplate print etching to recreate these same motifs more as repetitive patterns, an approach that imbued them with a broader overall harmony similar to that of stenciled or dyed textiles. The popularity in the West of Yabu Meizan's works, on which the same motifs are often repeated, may have something to

do with their inherent visual continuity. Following Meizan's passing, the designs of Japanese export porcelains, especially for table ware and vases, gradually moved away from traditional Japanese themes toward more Western flower-and-bird and landscape motifs done in repetitive patterns, much like Western wallpaper. The origins of this fundamental change in can be seen in Yabu Meizan's *kikuzume* chrysanthemums and *hanazume* blossom millefleur designs.

Notes

1. Yamazaki Tsuyoshi, *The Life of Yabu Meizan* in *The Grace of Modern Ceramics Exhibitions* — *Yabu Meizan*, Awajishima Museum, 1995, p. 24.
2. Yamazaki Tsuyoshi, p. 24.
3. Yamazaki Tsuyoshi, p. 24.
4. "The Essence of the Awaji Ceramic Industry-About Kashu Mimpei," *Osaka Mainichi Shimbun*, December 27, 1927.
5. *Ceramics Business News* was Japan's first monthly ceramic trade journal, published by the ceramics wholesale trader Marusu Shokai for about 15 years starting in 1894. Katō Sukesaburō, a businessman in Mino (now Tajimi City, Gifu Prefecture) who contributed to the development of Mino ware, played a leading role in its publication.
6. From a front-page column entitled *Yabu Meizan's Voluntary Contributions* that appeared in *Ceramics Business News* No. 47, May, 1897, in appreciation of Yabu Meizan's donation of 400 ceramic motif stamps.
7. *Ceramics Business News*, August, 1895 issue.
8. Inoue Gennojo (in charge of dealing with remaining works for the Japan-British Exhibition Exhibit Association), *Administrative Reports of the Japan-British Exhibition Exhibit Association*, 1911, p. 182.

Author Biography

YOSHIE ITANI

Yoshie Itani D.Phil born in Itami, Hyogo, Japan in 1954, read history of art at the University of Oxford, U.K. where she completed her Doctor of Philosophy in 2006. After taking up several academic posts in Japan, she has, since 2015, been Project Professor of Global Support Center at Tokyo University of the Arts, Tokyo, Japan. Her publications on the subject of the history of art include *Yabu Meizan no Sekai* (Inaho Shobo, 2019).