

The Glorious World of Yabu Meizan — Comparing the Heisei Memorial Art Gallery and Khalili Collections

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Abstract

The life of potter Yabu Meizan (1853-1934) closely followed the historical course of Japan's modern export ceramic industry. He was a craftsman and entrepreneur representing the modernity of his day who made and sold Satsuma ware pottery in Osaka.

As the recipient of numerous awards at western world expositions, Yabu Meizan's works were highly appraised, and attracted numerous new customers. As a result, many of his creations are today proudly displayed in Western museums as representative of Japanese ceramic works produced following the advent of Japan's Modern Age. I will cover the reasons for this success while describing many of the features of Meizan's works, and what relationship these characteristics have with the Japaneseness inherent in his creations.

One facet of Yabu Meizan's high assessment is the quality of the illustrations painted by his workshop on small porcelain pieces. One of the first books to feature these elaborate paintings, and one of the first to introduce Yabu Meizan's works to the world, was *The Nasser D. Khalili Collection: Japanese Art That Crossed the Sea*, published by Dōhōsha in 1995 as *Vol. 5, Ceramic Art, based on the Nasser D. Khalili (1945-) Collection*, which introduced 103 pieces of Meizan's works. Last year, the author released the book, *The Glorious World of Yabu Meizan*, which features 147 pieces from the Heisei Memorial Art Collection.

I will be comparing individual pieces from the two collections, highlighting 103 pieces from the Khalili Collection and 147 pieces from the Heisei Collection, in order to provide a detailed analysis of the transition of these pieces, their motifs, and how Meizan's works were exhibited at the 1910 Japan-British Exhibition, as well as their appraisal in other countries.

Keywords: *Osaka Satsuma ware; Genre painting; Japan-British Exhibition; Replication of the flowers; copper plates*

Preface

Yabu Meizan (1853-1934) was a potter of the Meiji and Taishō eras who introduced the magnificent and elaborately decorated creations of Osaka Satsuma ware, known as Satsuma *Kinrande* (enameled and gilded) ware, to the western world. Meizan's Osaka Satsuma ware, as well as Satsuma ware from the Chin Jukan XII (1835-1906) kiln and the Kyō-Satsuma ware of Kinkōzan Sōbei VII (1868-1927), gained tremendous popularity in the United States and Europe during the period from the end of the Edo era through the Meiji era, all the while receiving numerous awards at international exhibitions.

Features of Meizan's Works

While many of Meizan's early works featured large flowers, this subsequently changed to landscape drawings or genre pictures that utilized copperplate printing technology to depict intricate patterns of butterflies or flowers.

In contrast to contemporary Imperial Household artists who portrayed flowers, birds and landscapes in more artistic styles, Meizan sought to achieve an overall harmony by utilizing copperplate printing to replicate "patterns" of flowers, birds and landscapes in a motif, as might be seen on printed paper or fabrics. And even though the same motif might be used over and over again, Meizan's works came to be highly appraised in the countries of the West.

Copperplate Printing

Compared to the *takaukibori* (high-relief) style of Miyagawa Kōzan, or the works of Naruse Seishi or the Sumida wares, Yabu Meizan's work tended toward the relatively flat and two-dimensional, undoubtedly influenced by his use of copperplate printing as a finishing technique. Both the copper sheeting and the process used to make it into a plate for copperplate printing were relatively expensive, so the technique would not have been economical for pieces made in small quantities. Nevertheless, it was still used frequently by artisans like Yabu Meizan because of its convenience in the repeated application of the same pattern to different parts of a piece. The type of bamboo-based paper used to transfer images from the copper plates to the ceramic surface is still in use today, and is a highly durable material that is stronger than normal paper and thus capable of making well over 100 such transfers.

Khalili Collection and Heisei Collection

Then, did Yabu Meizan set out to use the copperplate print transfer technique from the start? The fact is, as with the works of other modern era ceramic artists, many of Meizan's works feature large arrangements of flower-and-bird paintings or landscapes. So it doesn't follow that he had it in mind to use the copperplate printing process early on.

The Khalili Collection was published in 1995 by Dōhōsha Publishing, and features Meiji era art crafts collected by one Nasser David Khalili (1945-), an Iranian-English researcher, collector and philanthropist. As to Yabu Meizan's works, a total of 103 pieces are introduced in *Volume 5, Ceramic Arts—Part 2*.

Compared to this, the works that constitute the main body of the Heisei Collection were assembled by the Heisei Art Gallery and its founder AKIMOTO Hisao. Yabu Meizan's works were first introduced into the collection in December of 2009 with the purchase of Meizan's "Hexagonal tea container with paintings of landscape and human figure," shown on Page 20 (Item No. 8, Figure 1) of the book *The Glorious World of Yabu Meizan* (2020). It is not known precisely when Khalili first began collecting Meizan's work, but there is a gap of 25 years between the publication of the two books.

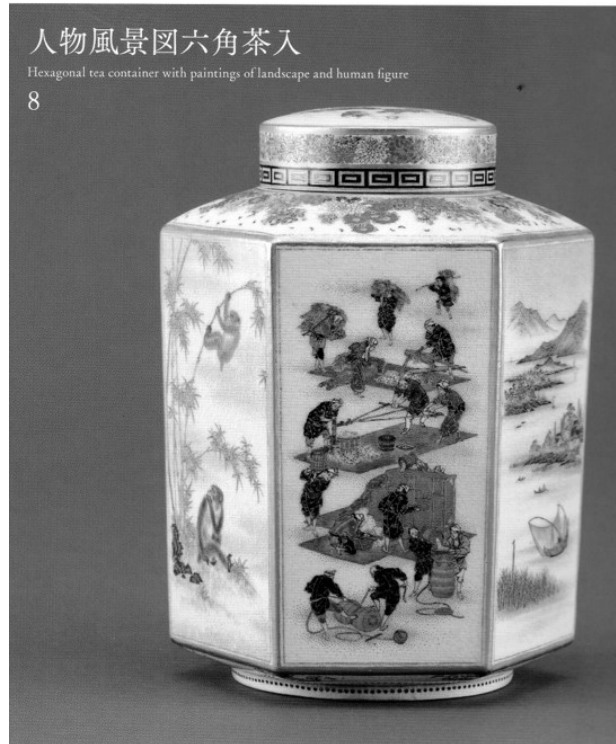


Figure 1: First Heisei Acquisition; Hexagonal tea container with painting of landscape and human figure. In Yoshie Itani, *Yabu Meizan no Sekai* [The World of Yabu Meizan] (Tokyo: Inaho Shobo, 2019), p. 20.

Since art craft works of the Meiji era did not attract much interests at the time of the book's publication, either at home or abroad, *The Khalili Collection* assembled those articles with the aim of "focusing only on items of the highest caliber" (1). Especially as it pertains to Yabu Meizan, his creative output was highly regarded as "having produced only crafts of the highest quality," and the book's author assembled pieces worthy of this assessment.

In contrast, the pieces introduced in *The World of Yabu Meizan* include not only smaller articles not shown in *The Khalili Collection*, but also such everyday items as a coffee set.

Whereas the themes of *The Khalili Collection*'s genre paintings are, in many cases, old in terms of era, the works featured in *The World of Yabu Meizan* include those that depict a playfulness that transcends the age, such as scenes of umbrella play and string play.

For a perspective that clearly illustrates this, I refer to the articles contained in both the Khalili Collection and the Heisei Collection.

Motif	Heisei Collection	Khalili Collection
Genre Painting	19	31
Autumn Leaves	13	4
Chrysanthemum Millefleur	12	15
Landscape	5	11
Birds	3	8
Doll and Other Festivals	5	6
Children and Chinese Dolls	4	6
<i>Daimyō</i> Procession	5	5
Butterflies	3	3
Gion Festival	2	1
Chinese Lion	3	3
Mt. Fuji	4	4
Animals	2	4
Rice Farming	2	2
Cherry Blossom Viewing	2	0

Table 1: Comparison of motif quantities in Heisei and Khalili Collections

As can be seen in these figures, depictions of the activities and customs of everyday life in Japan account for by far the largest number of designs found in the Khalili Collection of Yabu Meizan works, while many of the Meizan pieces kept in the Heisei Collection are characterized by autumn leaves. The works of both collections utilize the copperplate printing technique, however one reason for the prominent difference in styles between the two collections is probably because the Khalili Collection was able to acquire the more exquisite copperplate printed pieces that depicted particular Japanese customs and scenes from daily life, while on the other hand, those pieces depicting autumn leaves could be produced in larger quantities relatively easily, making them easier for the Heisei Collection to assemble as it began collecting Meizan’s works many years later than the Khalili Collection. Further, it is also obvious that both collections feature many pieces that incorporate chrysanthemum millefleur designs, which were also easier to reproduce by way of copperplate printing.

Of course, both collections may have had many more pieces than those featured in the books. Furthermore, it can’t be denied that the intentions of editors or authors may have intervened during the publishing process due to page limitations. However, when viewing the design motifs used in the works of both collections, it soon becomes clear which of these motifs was most representative of Yabu Meizan. The motifs that Meizan most frequently used in his works included the activities and customs of everyday people, autumn leaves, chrysanthemum millefleurs patterns and landscapes with birds. However, all these designs could be repeatedly reproduced using the copperplate printing technique, and the designs used for landscapes and festivals were mainly those that depicted festivals and scenery common to western Japan, such as Kyoto’s Gion Festival or Lake Biwa in Shiga Prefecture.

Furthermore, among the works of both collections, the largest items in size are:

Items	Heisei Collection			Khalili Collection		
Vase	1	Vase with picture of large peonies and butterflies	(H) 31.0	55	Vase painted with two panels, one depicting rice farming and the other decorated with a <i>daimyō</i> procession	(H) 32.3
Dish	2	Flower-shaped dish with genre painting of human figures and festival (4 pcs.)	(D) 21.9	5	Large ornamental plate painted with a snowy mountain landscape	(D) 27.7
	3	Ornamental dish with genre painting of women	(D) 22.0	4	Ornamental plate painted with a white elephant and <i>karako</i> Chinese boys playing around its feet	(D) 37.2
Bowl	5	Bowl with picture of kingfisher in landscape surrounded by fine lattice pattern	(D) 18.6	63	Bowl with three exterior panels depicting a genre painting, a coastal landscape with shrine, and flowers and birds, interior decorated with numerous tiny butterflies	(D) 18.0
Incense Burner	6	Incense burner topped by Chinese lion, with three separate pictures and chrysanthemum millefleur design	(H) 12.1	43	Incense burner surmounted by a Chinese lion finial and decorated with three separate pictures and a chrysanthemum millefleurs design	(H) 15.4
Tea Container	8	Hexagonal tea container with genre paintings and human figures	(D) 15.2	12	Tea container painted with genre and landscape paintings and monkeys	(H) 37.0

Table 2: Comparison of largest sized items in Heisei and Khalili Collections

Until now, it has widely been assumed that the earlier-started Khalili Collection had a greater number of pieces that are both large in size and high in design quality than the later-begun Heisei Collection. However, as far as size alone is concerned, there are no significant differences in terms of maximum size between the two collections, as can be seen from the figures shown above. Since the Khalili Collection features a mixture of pieces that are both large in size and have impressive designs—notably “Ornamental plate painted with a white elephant and *karako* Chinese boys playing around its feet” (Item No. 4, Figure 2), whose white elephant could not possibly have been transferred, and “Tea container painted with genre and landscape paintings and monkeys” (Item No. 12, Figure 3)—might the Khalili Collection be regarded as being higher in quality than the Heisei collection? Further, tea utensils thought to have been used in everyday life are included in the Heisei Collection, and this can also be considered one of the main reasons for its high assessment.

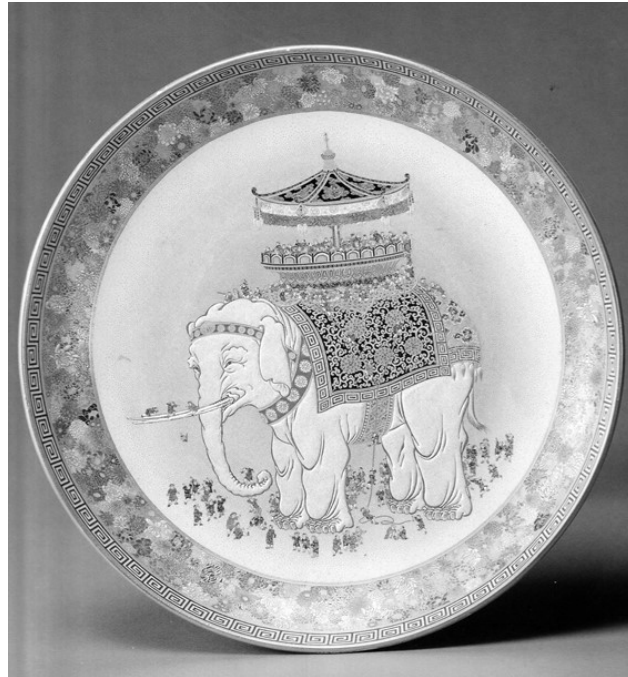


Figure 2: Khalili Collection: Large earthenware, c.1890, Item No. 4



Figure 3: Khalili Collection: Tea container painted with genre and landscape paintings and monkeys, c.1890, Item No. 12

The Japan-British Exhibition of 1910

The Japan-British Exhibition was held from May 14 to October 29, 1910, in the Shepherds Bush area of London. Meizan was designated as one of the exhibition councilors, along with Andō Jubei (1876-1953), Fukagawa Chūji (1871-1934), and Kinkōzan Sobei VII (1868-1927) (2), and was also named a trustee on the board of the Osaka Exhibitor Alliance (3).

According to the Japan-British Exhibition official report regarding Pottery and Porcelain (4): “There are many excellent vases, among which some of the most attractive were one in chrysanthemum design by Kinkozan Sobei, another with a graceful decoration of millet by Ito Tozan, still another with a cherry blossom design by Yabu Meizan and by Shimizu Rokubei (i.e. Kiyomizu Rokubei).”

『日英博覧会新美術品図録』 日英博覧会事務局						The Japan-British Exhibition of 1910—A Collection of Official Guidebooks and Miscellaneous Publications			Japan-British Exhibition, 1910; Printed by Bemrose & Sons, Ltd, Derby and London		
番号	陶器并 人物	作品名	出品者	作家	受賞	番号	作品名 (英語)	出品者	番号	作品名 (英語)	出品者
一四六	陶器并 人物	藪明山		大阪		146	Bowl with Design of a Festival Procession (porcelain)	Yabu Meizan	174	Bowl, with Figure Decoration (Pottery)	Meizan Yabu, Esq.
一四七	陶器花瓶 花鳥	藪明山		大阪	藪明山 作品名 「復咲桜 図花瓶」 が「銀賞」	147	Flower Pot with Design of Flowers and Bird (porcelain)	Yabu Meizan	175	Vase, Decorated with Flowers and Birds (Pottery)	Meizan Yabu, Esq.
一五七	陶器深形 茶碗人物 年中行事	藪明山	自家 工場作	大阪		157	Tea Pot Design— Customary of Occu- pations of the Year (earthenware)	Yabu Meizan	176	Bowl, Decorated with Figures (Pottery)	Meizan Yabu, Esq.
一五八	陶器香盒 人物菊詰	藪明山	自家 工場作	大阪		158	Incense Case with Chrysanthemums Pattern (earthenware)	Yabu Meizan	177	Incense Case, Decorated with Figures and Chrysanthemums (Pottery)	Meizan Yabu, Esq.

Table 3: Yabu Meizan pottery pieces displayed at the 1910 Japan-British Exhibition

Table 3 shows four of the Yabu Meizan works displayed at the Japan-British Exhibition of 1910 and introduced in English and Japanese literature prepared by the relevant secretariats. Several different catalogues printed in both English and Japanese were published after the exposition. Misspellings or omissions of artisan names can be found in some of these catalogs, but there are no such errors regarding these four pieces as far as the explanation of Yabu Meizan and his works is concerned. Also, two of the four pieces from the Khalili Collection, “Bowl, with Design of a Festival Procession” and “Flower Pot with Design of Flowers and Bird,” are shown in contemporary black and white photos from the period (Figure 4) (5). Further, “Tea Pot Design—Customary of Occupations of the Year,” in the official report (6) is generally regarded as being essentially the same deep bowl as the Khalili Collection’s piece No. 83 (Figure 5).



Figure 4: “Bowl, with Design of a Festival Procession” and “Flower Pot with Design of Flowers and Bird” from *The Nasser D. Khalili Collection: Japanese Art That Crossed the Sea*, Dōhōsha Publishing, 1995, P. 49



Figure 5: Khalili Collection, “Deep bowl painted with a long procession of figures pulling ceremonial carts and carrying a model of Mt. Fuji,” Item No. 83

In Conclusion

The most important aspect of Yabu Meizan’s pottery painting is his use of copperplates for the designs. What should be specially noted, from the perspective of the author of *The World of Yabu Meizan*— who purchased the book *The Nasser D. Khalili Collection* immediately upon its first publication and spent many years studying it—is that both collections have many pieces that bear remarkable similarities, but no two pieces have ever been found to be exactly the same, even though considerable time was invested in comparing the 250 Yabu

Meizan pieces that are featured in both collections. More than anything, this can be said to demonstrate the incredible diversity to be found in Yabu Meizan's work.

As the report from the Japan-British Exhibition of 1910 noted, Yabu Meizan's works were considered to be the most attractive, along with those by Kinkozan Sobei and Ito Tozan.

The following four points can be seen as the main features of Meizan's works:

1. Designs were based on traditional stylings from Western Japan, mainly Osaka.
2. Meizan did not create individual ceramic works so much as products of his workshop, strongly recognizing his role as a producer of art rather than as an artisan.
3. Meizan was keenly aware of contemporary currents in foreign countries.
4. Although his works won numerous awards at international exhibitions, Meizan regarded these as merely part of the business.

Meizan did not create individual ceramic works so much as products from his workshop, strongly recognizing his role as a producer of art rather than as an artisan. However, Meizan sought to achieve an overall harmony by utilizing copperplate printing to replicate "patterns" of flowers, birds and landscapes in a motif, as might be seen on printed paper or fabrics. Because of these characteristics, Meizan's works came to be highly regarded in the countries of the West.

Notes

1. Oliver Impey and Malcom Fairly, eds., *The Nasser D. Khalili Collection: Japanese Art That Crossed the Sea, Volume 5 Ceramics Art – Part 2* (Tokyo: Dōhōsha Publishing, 1995), 27.
2. Genjo Inoue, *Nichieihakurankai Shuppin-kyokai Jimu-Hokoku* [Official Report of Japan-British Exhibition] (official report, Nichiei Hakurankai Shuppan Kyokai Zamu-gakari [Secretariat of Japan-British Exhibition], 1911), 44.
3. Takezo Inamura, *Nichiei Hakurankai Osaka Shuppin Domeikai Hokokusho* [Official Report of Osaka Exhibitors of Japan-British Exhibition], 1911, 88-89.
4. *Official Report of the Japan British Exhibition 1910* (London: Unwin Brothers Ltd, 1911), 187.
5. Impey and Fairly, *The Nasser D. Khalili Collection*, 49.
6. *The Japan-British Exhibition of 1910- A Collection of Official Guidebooks and Miscellaneous Publications* (Tokyo: The Shinbushoin, 1911), Item No 157.

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).