

SÃO ROQUE

Antiques & Art Gallery

Sake Bottle — Japan, Kyoto, Edo Period, first-half of 17th century



NONKO (ATTR.)

SAKE BOTTLE

Red raku ware, glazed stoneware

Japan, Kyoto, Edo Period, first-half of 17th century

Dim.: 17.0 × 20.0 cm

F1353

Provenance: Saiuchi Kyushiro, Japan.

Exhibited: 'Winds From Afar: Europe through the Eyes of Edo-period Kyoto', The Museum of Kyoto, March and Tobacco & Salt Museum, Tokyo, May 2000.



This sake bottle, or rather, this display bottle (*kazarimono*) not destined for practical use, is defined by its globular shaped body, resembling a pomegranate (*zakuro*), and by the two male figures, possibly drunken 'Southern barbarians', or *nanban-jin*, holding firmly onto it.¹

Hand moulded with expressive naturalism, it is made from iron-rich red stoneware (*juraku*) clay, coated in glossy, transparent lead glaze, and low-fired in an indoor kiln (*uchigama*). Similarly to other early-seventeenth century *raku* pieces, which were removed from the kiln while still glowing hot and allowed to cool in the open air, this bottle features glossy lead glazing and high-quality finishing. It was most probably designed for displaying in an alcove, its iconography ensuring its importance as a conversation piece.

Presented in a double box, the protective inner case in which it is stored features an inscription in its cover that reads:

'Europeans holding onto the hot water [or liquid] bottle, this design made by Nonko. [signed:] Gengensai'. Gensensai Seichu Soshitsu (1810–1877) was the eleventh-generation master of the Urasenke tea school, who authenticated other works by Nonko. Another authentication note (*hakogaki*) inscribed to the base of the same protective case, informs: 'Acquired this piece in the eleventh month, Meiji 29 [1896], representative, Rikimaru [probably the shop's name]'. Another *hakogaki*, written on the inner case cover, informs: 'Europeans holding onto a hot water [or liquid] bottle, an alcove display item'.

Gengensai's most important caption however, states that the potter responsible for the making of this sake bottle was Nonko, name by which Raku Donyu, or Kichizaemon III (1599–1656), was known in his lifetime. Nonko was the third-generation *raku* master from the Raku family. Grandson of Chojiro, the founder of the Raku family and kiln, Nonko is considered the

¹ Published in: Akai Tatsuro (ed.), *Winds from Afar. Europe through the Eyes of Edo-period Kyoto* (cat.), Kyoto, 2000, p. 44, cat. 2.17 (catalogue entry by Yasumasa Oka).





most innovative *raku* potter, having introduced new styles into these wares.²

He is renowned for the use of white or transparent glazes over black glazes, and for applying thick layers of glossy glazes. According to an almost hagiographic official version, the production of the earliest *raku* wares is closely interlinked with tea drinking, and with the 16th century development of the *wabi-cha* tradition of the tea ceremony (*chanoyu*), by Sen no Rikyu (1522–1591). This Japanese tea master was involved in the building of Kyoto’s Jurakudai Palace (1586), under the command of Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1537–1598), the feudal warlord regarded as Japan’s second ‘Great Unifier’.

According to traditional tales, discredited by research and archaeological evidence, Rikyu, who served as the palace’s tea master, had the foreigner tile-maker Chojiro producing hand-crafted tea bowls. These cutting-edge bowls, basic and rather rustic, became known as *ima-yaki*, or ‘contemporary wares’, or as

juraku-yaki, from the local red clay (*juraku*) that was used in the making of earlier pieces. Still according to the tale, it was only afterwards, once Toyotomi Hideyoshi had presented Chojiro with a seal featuring the Chinese character for *raku* — or enjoyment — that such production was named *raku-yaki*, or *raku* ware. *Raku* would thus turn into the name of the family that produced this type of ceramics, but the word is now used as a generic term to refer to a ceramic technique popularized throughout the world. In fact, the earliest *raku* wares seem to have been produced by Chinese potters working in the Kyoto region, and it was only in the early-17th century, in the so called ‘Kyoto Renaissance’, that the *Raku* kiln, managed by Chojiro’s descendants, namely by Nonko, reached its dominance, under the patronage of Sen no Rikyu’s grandson and great-grandsons.

Once the globalization process became irreversible by the Portuguese 15th century exploration of the uncharted seas, and by the crossing of Africa’s southernmost tip that led them to India

² Regarding Nonko, see: Morgan Pitelka, *Handmade Culture. Raku Potters, Patrons, and Tea Practitioners in Japan*, Honolulu, University of Hawai’i Press, 2005, pp. 49–53. Excepting tea bowls normally produced in white clay and proudly marked with the ‘*raku*’ stamp, pieces attributed to Nonko do include serving plates.





in 1498, new intercontinental trading routes would be open to the exchange of luxury goods, foodstuffs, plants, animals, technology, religion, and ideas. Japan would be of the last lands to be reached by the Portuguese, the earliest contacts dating from 1543 in Tanegashima, a small island to the south of the archipelago. This contact would have enormous consequences for Japan, pushing it into a new era, after centuries of semi-isolation.

In addition to Chinese raw silk, lacquers, and Chinese ceramics for exchanging with Japanese silver, the large Portuguese black ships (*kurofane*), the main motifs depicted on contemporary Namban screens produced for cosmopolitan local merchants and businessmen, also carried wine. It is thus unsurprising that the perceived Portuguese fondness for wine, and for the excesses it provoked, opposed to Japanese restraint and polite manners, would be caricaturized by the Japanese potter. The portrayal of 'Southern barbarians' or *nanban-jin*, on contemporary objects was often stereotyped and caricatural, in a manner that was deeply

rooted in ancient Japanese art. With their unusual attire of short baggy breeches, or *kurusan*, from the Portuguese 'calção', and bizarre practices, these foreigners were depicted with long 'barbarian' noses.

Regardless of its origin, either from the Raku family or not, this rare sake bottle, conceived as a display object featuring Europeans, stands out as a powerful testimony to the vitality of the *nanban-jin* theme as a cosmopolitan subject in early-17th century Kyoto. As does also another object of identical chronology, a glazed stoneware candle stick fashioned as a European figure of Oribe type — introduced by the master potter Furuta Oribe (1543 /44 – 1615), and most certainly produced in the Province of Mino —, now kept in the Suntory Museum of Art, in Tokyo.³ Unlike our bottle, other similar candlesticks from this production do survive, some handed down as heirlooms through the generations or exhumed by the archaeologists. ✎ HC

³ See: Miyeko Murase (ed.), *Turning Point. Oribe and the Arts of Sixteenth-Century Japan* (cat.), New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2003, p. 122, cat. 46 (catalogue entry by Misato Shomura).





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