

# GLOBAL DESIGN HISTORY

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## IMPORT SUBSTITUTION, INNOVATION AND THE TEA CEREMONY IN FIFTEENTH- AND SIXTEENTH-CENTURY JAPAN

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*Chanoyu*, commonly known in the Anglophone world as the “tea ceremony,” was characterized by its most famous sixteenth-century practitioner Sen no Rikyū (1522–91) as nothing more than “boiling water for tea.” Yet like much writing on tea, such statements hide the true nature of a cultural practice that since the fifteenth century has been a driving force behind the production and consumption of both imported and domestic luxury goods in Japan. While stoneware and porcelain vessels from China and Korea predominate, ceramics from the Ryūkyū Islands, Vietnam, Thailand, and even Holland have also been used in preparing ritual tea. *Chanoyu* has been written about extensively from the perspectives of art history, anthropology, religion, and politics but less attention has been given to its socio-economic implications within the framework of a design history.

This paper examines the culture of tea from the perspective of import substitution and innovation. Import substitution, as Maxine Berg has defined it, refers to the replacement of like with like, a luxury article that becomes too scarce or too costly being replaced by a domestic product that simulates its appearance, but not its mode of manufacture.<sup>1</sup> The development of japanning in eighteenth-century Britain in response to the demand for Japanese lacquer typifies this model. But here I want to complicate the notion of import substitution, first, by suggesting how it might involve the replacement of like with unlike, and, second, by considering the processes through which these innovative goods are validated, in turn generating new imports and domestic substitutes that may come to assume the same luxury status as the articles they replaced.

Tea, as many scholars now refer to *chanoyu*, is basically a form of ritual hospitality whose paraphernalia assumes high symbolic and economic value beyond its practical functions as utensils for preparing and serving.<sup>2</sup> The implements essential to any gathering include an iron kettle to heat water, a bamboo ladle to transfer it to the ceramic bowl from which the guest drinks, a small ceramic or lacquer caddy for

holding the powdered tea, a slender bamboo scoop for transferring the powder from container to bowl, a whisk for whipping the emulsion of water and tea, and fresh and waste water containers. In the period under discussion, ownership of a large tea leaf storage jar was also deemed indispensable to tea practice.

Social tea drinking first arose among the ruling warrior and aristocratic elite in the late fifteenth century, later expanding to merchants, for whom it became a culturally legitimizing practice. It was codified and popularized among men and women of all social classes over the course of the Tokugawa period (1615–1868) by three schools of tea, Urasenke, Omote senke, and Mushanokōji senke, and their offshoots, all founded by the great-grandsons of the teamaster Sen no Rikyū. As a franchise system with branches throughout Japan and abroad, these three tea schools continue today to provide instruction in the proper practice of *chanoyu* around the world. They also oversee and certify the production of branded ceramic, lacquer, and bamboo tea utensils in prescribed forms and styles by ten hereditary families of craftsmen that trace their origins to the late sixteenth century.

At the outset, tea was limited principally to members of the socio-political circles of the Ashikaga military rulers, and gatherings were the occasions for lavish, competitive displays of their collections of Chinese art treasures. These included Southern Song (1127–1279) and Yuan dynasty (1279–1368) ink paintings, calligraphy by Zen monks, as well as stoneware, porcelain and lacquer utensils for preparing and serving tea. Finely potted celadons and stonewares with deep brown glazes known as *temmoku* in Japan (Jian ware in Chinese) were especially sought after since there were no domestically-produced works of comparable refinement.<sup>3</sup> Porcelain manufacture did not begin in Japan until the early seventeenth century, and in the fifteenth century only a few kilns in the Seto and Mino regions (modern day Aichi and Gifu Prefectures) had the technology to produce glazed wares. Vessels emulating the shapes and surface effects of sought-after Chinese imports were first made in the Seto region during the thirteenth century for aristocrats, temples and shrines. These kilns later shifted production to cater to demand for tea caddies with *temmoku*-like glazes closely modeled on Chinese imports. The tradition that Katō Shirozaemon, a potter who had traveled to China in 1223 with the Zen monk Dōgen, founded the Seto kilns, suggests that this development involved some form of technology transfer.<sup>4</sup>

Import substitution was tied to the growth of tea consumption both as ritual and as part of everyday life among all levels of society. (The green tea that gained popularity in Japan was picked, heated, then dried in sealed containers; unlike Chinese or European teas it was not allowed to ferment.) When tea drinking was confined to the elite, the dried leaves were stored in lugged jars imported from China or Southeast Asia that the military rulers sent to tea plantations in the spring to be filled and sealed for delivery in the autumn. These are commonly known as Luzon jars since they were trans-shipped to Japan via the Philippines (see Figure 4.1).<sup>5</sup> The large tea jar, with its brocade cap and decorative cords, was displayed in the decorative alcove of the tearoom as part of the ritual held upon its arrival. Both the cost of such imported vessels and the aesthetic discourses that

developed around them testify to their material and symbolic value. The luxury status of the container guaranteed the quality of its contents.

Sixteenth-century sources testify to the extraordinary value of Chinese tea caddies and tea leaf jars. Alessandro Valignano (1539–1606), who was in Japan twice between 1579 and 1592, wrote of “a small earthenware caddy for which, in all truth, we would have no other use than to put it in a bird’s cage as a drinking trough; nevertheless he [the king of Bungo] had paid 9,000 silver *taels* (or about 14,000 ducats) for it.”<sup>6</sup> Sen no Rikyū, in a letter written about the same time, mentions a price of fifty pieces of gold for one antique Chinese tea leaf jar. Since one gold piece bought about 10,620 liters of rice, the cost of this vessel was equivalent to some 540,000 liters of rice.<sup>7</sup>

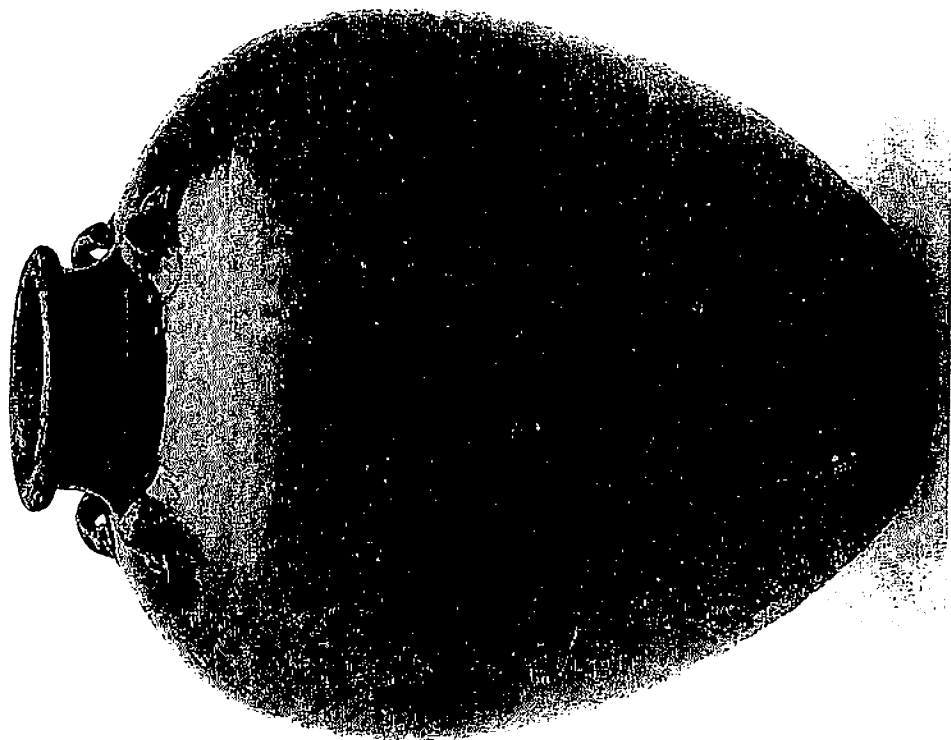


FIGURE 4.1 Luzon tea leaf storage jar, 16th century

Source: © Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC. Gift of Charles Lang Freer F1900.22

The expansion of the market, combined with the disruption of international trade owing to the Onin and Bunmei Wars (1467–87) put pressure on the supply of such imported containers, precipitating the adoption of utilitarian domestic jars that farmers used for storing seeds and grain and to hold water. Unlike the refined imports from China, these vessels from rural kilns in Shigaraki and Bizen near modern-day Kyoto and Okayama were coarsely potted with awkward, often sagging forms made with clay pitted with sand and pebbles (see Figure 4.2). Their surfaces were further marked by the accidental effects of burnt straw or vitrified wood-ash from the firing process. Tea distributors and merchants especially favored those from Shigaraki kilns because these were conveniently located near Uji, a region whose tea plantations saw a surge in production in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries.<sup>8</sup>



FIGURE 4.2 Shigaraki tea leaf storage jar, 1400–1500. Museum no: FE 201984

Source: © V&A Images/Victoria and Albert Museum, London

The use of such local wares was not entirely new, but previously had been limited to the storage and distribution of low grade tea. To reposition them as containers for ceremonial tea, merchants, who were becoming increasingly active in *chanoyu*, re-presented these rustic vessels in terms that linked them to a repudiation of the excessive luxury of their imported counterparts. This rationalization of domestic vessels of inferior materials and craftsmanship gave merchants the moral high ground *vis-à-vis* the military elite. At the same time, their lower cost in relation to imports made it possible for an increasing number of aspiring commoners to take up the practice of tea.

The names of Murata Jukô (1422/3–1502), Takenoo Jôh (1502–55) and Sen no Rikyû, monk-teamasters who were themselves of merchant background, are touchstones in the formulation of the rhetoric of rustic poverty and imperfection known as *wabi* that validated domestic wares in moral and aesthetic terms.<sup>9</sup> To understand this process, however, requires looking beneath the kind of anecdote and myth prevalent in orthodox texts about tea, a mode of writing history that conceals its own method. It also requires careful interpretation of writings by, or authorized by, the heirs to the lineages of tea instruction and practice founded by Sen no Rikyû's three grandsons.

The Zen monk Murata Jukô is said to have "discovered" rustic wares from Shigaraki and Bizen, and encouraged their adoption as part of a critique of shogunal excess; yet he is known to have formed a large personal collection of Chinese ceramics himself. He also is said to have served as teamaster to the Ashikaga Shogun Yoshimasa, a tradition more likely to have been promoted after his death to lend legitimacy to what was still a contested taste in tea wares. To Jukô is also attributed the invention of a new-style tearoom of reduced size and simple décor, known as *sôan*, or "thatched hut." While this too is likely apochryphal, there is no doubt that the advent of the *sôan* dates to his lifetime.<sup>10</sup> This space dramatically restricted both the number of guests and articles that could be displayed.

The *Letter of the Heart* [*Kokoro no funi*], that Jukô wrote to a disciple, is the most reliable source of information about his position in the transformation in taste and practice occurring in the late fifteenth century. In it, he advocates the judicious use of domestic wares to complement imports, elsewhere analogizing this to "tying a fine steed to a thatched hut." In other words, just as we may better appreciate the quality of a fine horse when we see it next to a rough dwelling, so too the rough dwelling becomes more visually interesting by the contrast. This recognition of the mutually constitutive relationship between luxury imports and their rustic substitutes is reinforced by his declaration that it was essential to "dissolve the boundaries between imported and domestic wares."<sup>11</sup>

Examination of patterns of usage during the sixteenth century, well documented in the diaries kept by merchant teamen, suggests that the boundaries between imported and domestic wares were in fact dissolving. Although unglazed Shigaraki and Bizen stonewares may be contrasted with so-called Luzon jars, they have much in common with unglazed low-fire wares that were also being imported from South-East Asia. As the ceramics scholar Louise Cort has observed, these prestigious

imports likely contributed to the validation of local unglazed wares.<sup>12</sup> Of particular note in this respect is a type of bulbous, low-fire, unglazed jar with a repeated cord pattern around its circumference that became fashionable in tea circles in the mid-sixteenth century. This type of vessel came to be known in Japan as *imogashira*, or potato head.<sup>13</sup> Shigaraki potters were so successful in imitating these "potato head" jars that nineteenth-century collectors were warned: "Among pieces called Shigaraki are mixed many pieces made in Luzon [the Philippines]. All those that make the sound 'kin-kin' when tapped are not from our country but from China or the South Pacific."<sup>14</sup>

Recent observations by the ceramics scholar Hiroko Nishida throw further light on the complex dynamics of the domestic and international trade in tea ceramics. She has remarked that in the absence of excavated examples on the Korean peninsula, Ido wares are likely to have been made as tea bowls expressly for the market in Japan, where large numbers have survived.<sup>15</sup> Traditional scholarship, however, holds that Ido ware bowls were originally produced in Korea as common rice bowls, and subsequently "discovered" and repurposed by Japanese tea practitioners. Such narratives strategically elevate the discriminating eye of the collector while effacing the contributions of the maker. By the same token they symbolically appropriate and redefine Korean bowls in the same manner as the Shigaraki and Bizen jars purportedly "discovered" by Murata Jukô. If Nishida is correct, rustic Japanese wares that were first adopted as low-cost substitutes for luxury imports from China were the catalyst for the production of new imports from the Korean peninsula that similarly embodied the ideals of poverty and imperfection. In this way, as Marina Bianchi has argued in her study "Taste for Novelty and Novel Tastes": "a novel characteristic may carry novelty much farther and start a chain of change that involves all the other interacting goods . . . And the new good is never completely new."<sup>16</sup>

Growing demand for tea ceramics also fueled new domestic production. Mortars (*suribachi*) are among the daily wares that teamasters are said to have "discovered" and repurposed for use as water containers in tea. Later, Bizen and Shigaraki potters began to make vessels that self-consciously simulated them. The late sixteenth-century fresh water container from Bizen illustrated in Figure 4.3 is a case in point. It reproduces the shape of a mortar with broad base and inverted conical walls and interior combing for grinding soybeans, sesame seeds, and making sauces. However, it has been deliberately distorted to make its appearance more interesting.<sup>17</sup> This spectacularization, often in defiance of functionality, that distinguishes new designs from their recycled counterparts went hand in hand with the development of a new aesthetic vocabulary that legitimated and in turn helped to popularize this new style. Today this water container is presented as a unique masterpiece, but excavations in Kyoto have revealed that vessels of this type were not uncommon. The discovery of hordes of imported and domestic *wabi*-type ceramics in Kyoto's sixteenth-century shopping district testifies to the surge in domestic and imported production and consumption following Nobunaga and Hideyoshi's policies to promote commerce and crafts in this city.<sup>18</sup>

How did these radical innovations in ceramics gain acceptance? Discovery, as Marina Bianchi has argued "is not reducible to chance or search. Discovery is wholly

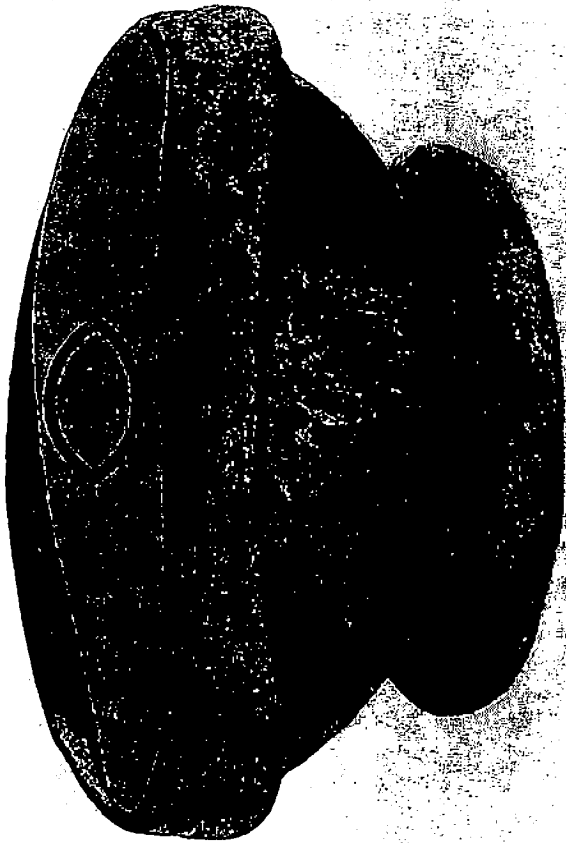


FIGURE 4.3 Bizen fresh water jar, c. 1590–1605, stoneware with natural ash glaze  
Source: © Freer Gallery of Art and Sackler Museum, F1998.17

due to the explorer's ability to take advantage of existing opportunities in ways that are not yet explored, to his or her abilities to detect new and gainful options."<sup>19</sup> Low cost and availability were no doubt huge incentives for the initial adoption of domestic ceramics for tea, but there were also other equally significant aspects to this process.

The widespread repurposing of Shigaraki and Bizen wares and production of new rustic style wares in Japan and Korea would not have succeeded without the development of the ideology of *wabi*. Its historical emergence in the sixteenth century to valorize austerity and imperfection as aesthetic ideals is inextricably entwined with the growth of a consumer society and the attendant competition for cultural authority between increasingly prosperous merchants and warriors. The new moral economy of tea promoted under the banner of *wabi* austerity was nothing less than a radical ideology of consumption. Although informed by poetic theory and Zen Buddhism, *wabi* should also be recognized as an example of the symbolic inversion of values that in the language of Bourdieu could be called "ostentatious poverty." Luxury is central to its meaning but is disguised by being presented in the form of its denial. The "distinction" accrued from *wabi* is predicated on knowing its coded meaning.

A critique of Sen no Rikyū by one of his contemporaries throws light on this symbolic inversion:

In [tea] objects he liked, [Rikyū] declared good points bad and bought them for mean prices. In vessels he disdained, [Rikyū] declared bad points good and

bought them at high price. He called new old and old new. No he made yes, false he made genuine.<sup>20</sup>

What is at stake here is not good or bad taste but economics. Skillful manipulation of the aesthetic discourse of *wabi* gave merchant teamen control over the market they created by their "discoveries."

The taste for rustic austerity did not arise spontaneously or catch on immediately among all tea practitioners. It appealed to commoners on the political margins, because it was a contested, even subversive, discourse that symbolically undermined the cultural authority of the elite. To be a true *wabi* teaman, declared Sen no Rikyū's contemporary, Yamanoue Sōji, one need not own even one luxury article from China, but simply "incorporate the qualities of resolution, creativity and skill." Yet the same passage, the author also acknowledges that one who owns a Chinese import and "who can judge the value of things" is also a "master."<sup>21</sup> As this makes clear, the novelty of *wabi* taste was dependent on the esteem in which familiar luxury imports were held. Like the modern subculture styles analyzed by Dick Hebdige, *wabi* might be characterized as "a compromise solution between contradictory needs: the need to create and express autonomy and difference from parents . . . and the need to maintain the parental identifications."<sup>22</sup>

The rise of *wabi* taste in tea utensils came about in response to particular historical circumstances. The fifteenth and sixteenth centuries were not only marked by political instability but also by an erosion of traditional markers of social distinction. The practice of tea became a mark of civility, the mastery of its etiquette and the ability to manipulate the cultural codes attendant on the selection and display of tea utensils became associated with sociocultural and political power.<sup>23</sup> The discriminating eye and creativity required to build a fine collection of tea utensils provided opportunities for merchants to develop individual social identities. This underlies the many "discovery" narratives in tea modeled by Jūkō, Jōō and Rikyū. In addition, the practice of *chanoyū* enabled men of different social backgrounds to easily meet and establish networks that brought access to knowledge and business opportunities well beyond the confines of the tearoom.

*Wabi* did not, as is commonly assumed, imply a complete renunciation of imported luxuries, merely moderation—a reduced number of articles used and displayed being dictated by the small room where tea gatherings were held. Combining Japanese rusticity with Chinese refinement, however, created a relational aesthetics which moderation was offset by the expanded opportunities of diversification. As a result, by fostering new materials, forms and styles of utensils, *wabi* paradoxically increased consumption. Tea adepts were encouraged to invent their own personal assemblages for each tea gathering by mixing and matching colorful Chinese porcelain with more sober domestic ceramics. In the sixteenth century, the visual dissonant and inventiveness required to mix and match, a process known as *tenawase*, became the defining characteristic of the most admired men of tea.<sup>24</sup> The innovations associated with import substitution in the context of *chanoyū* are thus situated at the intersection of a variety of discourses. These involve individual and local

economic, ideological, and institutional factors, but they must also take into account the larger geographies of which ceramics production and consumption in Japan were an inextricable part.

## Notes

- 1 Maxine Berg, "In Pursuit of Luxury: Global Origins of British Consumer Goods," *Past and Present* 182 (2004): 85–112.
- 2 Basic studies include *Tea in Japan*, edited by Paul Varley and Kumakura Isao. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1989; *Japanese Tea Culture: Art, History, and Practice*, edited by Morgan Pitelka. London: RoutledgeCurzon 2003; and Morgan Pitelka, *Handmade Culture: Raku Potters, Patrons, and Tea Practitioners in Japan*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2005. For a good discussion of the period under consideration informed by Bourdieu see Dale Slusser, "The Transformation of Tea Practice in Sixteenth-Century Japan," in *Japanese Tea Culture: Art, History, and Practice*, pp. 39–60.
- 3 On Jian wares see Robert D. Mowry, *Hare's Fur, Tortoiseshell, and Partridge Feathers: Chinese Brown and Black-glazed Ceramics, 400–1400*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Art Museums, 1996.
- 4 Louise Allison Cort, *Seto and Mino Ceramics: Japanese Collections in the Freer Gallery of Art*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, Freer Gallery of Art, 1992, pp. 56–60.
- 5 On tea jars, see Tokugawa Yoshinobu, "Chatsubo," in *Chadō shūkin*, vol. 10. Chadōgus hanaire, chaire, chatsubo. Tokyo: Shogakkan, 1986, pp. 161–72.
- 6 *They Came to Japan: An Anthology of European Reports on Japan, 1543–1640*, compiled and annotated by Michael Cooper. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965, p. 261.
- 7 Louise Allison Cort, "Shopping for Pots in Momoyama Japan," in *Japanese Tea Culture: Art History and Practice*, p. 65.
- 8 Louise Allison Cort, *Shigaraki: Potters' Valley*. Bangkok: Orchid Press, 2001, pp. 105–10.
- 9 On *wabi* see Koshira Haga, "The Wabi Aesthetic through the Ages," translated and adapted by Martin Collcutt, in *Tea in Japan*, pp. 195–229.
- 10 The earliest surviving example of a reduced size tearoom is in the Tōgudō sub-temple of Yoshimasa's Silver Pavilion, thought to date to circa 1480. See Fumio Hashimoto, *Architecture in the Shoin Style: Japanese Feudal Residences*, translated and adapted by H. Mack Horton. Tokyo & New York: Kodansha International, 1981, pp. 55–8.
- 11 The myths surrounding Jukō, his place in tea history, and aesthetic philosophy are well discussed in *Wind in the Pines: Classic Writings of the Way of Tea as a Buddhist Path*, compiled and edited by Dennis Hirota. Fremont, CA: Asian Humanities Press, 1995, pp. 63–80. For cited passages from his writings on tethering a horse and on dissolution of boundaries, see pp. 70 and 67.
- 12 Cort, "Shopping for Pots in Momoyama Japan," in *Japanese Tea Culture*, p. 75.
- 13 This designation is now assumed to be strictly humorous, but potatoes were a valuable crop newly introduced to Japan through Portuguese traders, so it may have had different connotations at that time.
- 14 Cited in Cort, *Shigaraki: Potter's Valley*, p. 133.
- 15 Takeshi Watanabe, "From Korea to Japan and Back again: One Hundred Years of Japanese Tea Culture through Five Bowls, 1550–1650," in *Yale University Art Gallery Bulletin 2007: Japanese Art at Yale*. New Haven: Yale University Art Gallery 2007, p. 84 citing Hiroko Nishida, *Kanzō chawan hyakusen*. Tokyo: Nezu Bijutsukan, 1994, p. vi.
- 16 Marina Bianchi, "Taste for Novelty and Novel Tastes: The Role of Human Agency in Consumption," in *The Active Consumer: Novelty and Surprise in Consumer Choice*. Marina Bianchi (ed.) Routledge 1998, p. 67.
- 17 For a detailed discussion of this work, see *Beyond the Legacy: Anniversary Acquisitions for the Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery*, edited by Thomas Lawton and Thomas W. Lentz. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1998, pp. 289–92.

- These discoveries are the basis for Cort's "Shopping for Pots in Momoyama Japan." Bianchi, "Taste for Novelty and Novel Tastes: The Role of Human Agency in Consumption," pp. 3–4.
- Mary Elizabeth Berry, *The Culture of Civil War in Kyoto*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994, p. 242.
- Cited in Paul Varley and George Elison, "The Culture of Tea; from its Origins to Sen no Rikyū," in *Warlords Artists and Commoners: Japan in the Sixteenth Century*, edited by George Elison and Bardwell L. Smith. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1981, pp. 204–5.
- Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: the Meaning of Style*. Routledge, 2007, p. 77.
- On this subject see Eiko Ikegami, *Bonds of Civility: Aesthetic Networks and the Political Origins of Japanese Culture*. Cambridge University Press, 2005.
- Christine M. E. Guth, *Art, Tea, and Industry: Masuda Takashi and the Mitsui Circle*. Princeton University Press, 1993, pp. 64–8.