

## A BRIEF NOTE ON THE ORIGINS OF BANKO CERAMICS

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ABSTRACT: The origins of Banko ceramics are uncertain and obscure. We don't have enough documents about it and scholars have different opinions. The first person to produce pottery with the Banko seal was Numanami Gozaemon (also known as Nunami Rōzan). He was thought to be a disciple of Ogata Kenzan (1663/1743), but contemporary scholars now argue that Gozaemon, who was a wealthy merchant, a tea and pottery amateur, was born in 1718 and died in 1777. This means that it is quite improbable that he could have studied in Kyoto under Kenzan, because Kenzan left Kyoto for Edo in 1731 (when Gozaemon was only 13) and died there in 1743. Numanami Gozaemon started his activity producing Kyōyaki (Kyoto ware) around 1736-'40. When he was in his 30s he went to Edo, and worked there for more or less ten years (therefore, between 1748 and 1758). It doesn't come as a surprise that he was thought to be a disciple of Kenzan's, because his journey as an artist and ceramicist closely followed the taste and interests of the great master. Ogata Kenzan has left many original pieces, but he also produced pottery in different styles, inspired by different typologies of Chinese and even Dutch ceramics. The variety of shapes, colours, subjects, techniques and styles characterising the Banko production dates back to the period of its origins.

In my opinion, this points to the fact that Gozaemon, as the father of Banko ware, was largely influenced by the art of Ogata Kenzan and that this heritage was passed on to his followers. From its beginning until the present day, Banko ware has been characterised by a great variety of shapes, decorations and techniques. This separates it from many other Japanese manufactures, such as Bizen, Oribe, or Raku. There are different reasons for this, that are not altogether clear; one can be traced back to Kenzan's influence, one is probably the diffused production of Banko ceramics in the Mie area, since its beginnings.

The production of Banko pottery is still very much alive in Japan but, for reasons not altogether clear, it is not so well known, even in its homeland. Nevertheless its manufacture, which dates back to the mid-18th century, was born from the Edo culture at its most fantastical and creative.

The origins of Banko ceramics are uncertain and obscure. We don't have enough documents about it and scholars have different opinions.

Ninagawa Noritane (1835-1882), was the first scholar to try to systematise the history of Japanese ceramics. In his book *Kanko zuzetsu, tōki no bu* (A History of Japanese Antiquities. The Ceramic Art, 1876-1880) he writes that the first person to produce pottery with the Banko seal<sup>1</sup> was a «*Kenzan no monjin*»

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<sup>1</sup> The seal Banko is usually impressed on the pieces, using two kanji: 萬古. Sometimes it may be written 万古, with the modern kanji 万. Cfr. Ibi, 2007, pp. 11-22

(a disciple of Ogata Kenzan, 1663-1743). He states that Numanami Gozaemon (also known as Nunami Rōzan) studied the art of pottery in Kyoto and then opened a kiln in Kuwana (a village in Mie-ken, not far from Yokkaichi, in the Nagoya area). There he started producing imitations of Chinese porcelains. During the Hōreki era (1751-1764), he went to Edo, where he continued to produce Chinese style pottery, bringing to perfection his techniques during the An'ei era (1772-1781). At this point he started to use the Banko mark which means “forever resistant, everlasting”, literally meaning “ancient ten thousand”. Ninagawa goes on stating that during the Tenmei era (1781-1789) Gozaemon went back to Kuwana, where he was under the patronage of Matsudaira Sadanobu (1759-1829). No dates are provided for his birth and death.

If Ninagawa's information is accurate, we can assume that Gozaemon studied under Kenzan in Kyoto, while he was still very young, before Kenzan left for Edo in 1731.

Captain F. Brinkley, who published several volumes about Japan, its history and culture in 1902, states that Gozaemon, who was already quite famous, was summoned to Edo in 1786 by the *shōgun* Tokugawa Ienari (1773-1841),<sup>2</sup> to continue his work as a ceramicist there.

Brinkley, who gives Gozaemon's dates as 1736-'95 writes:

The thick unadorned Raku ware and ill-favoured Korean faiences supplied him with models that seemed not less worthy of reproduction than the delicate conceptions of Ninsei or the bold designs of Kenzan. In both directions, however, Gozaemon was successful; so successful that his fame reached the court at Yedo, and a special order was sent to him from the *Shōgun* Iyenari (1786). [...] The best connoisseurs could scarcely distinguish his pieces from Chinese porcelain decorated with red and green enamels of the Wan-li period (1573-1620) [...] His imitations of Delft faience, too, were certainly quite good [...] He was at his best when, departing from his models, he combined brilliantly glazed surfaces with chaste floral decoration in the pure Japanese style.<sup>3</sup>

The world of Banko pottery represents from its outset a deeply interesting example of artistic expression where the contributions of different and wide-spread cultures converge.

Later, Hazel H. Goram writes: «His fame spread to Tokyo and in 1785 the Shogun Ienari summoned him to Tokyo as official potter. Under Ienari's

<sup>2</sup> Ienari was the eleventh *shōgun* of the Tokugawa shogunate and he held his office for fifty years, from 1787 to 1837, being the longest serving *shōgun*.

<sup>3</sup> BRINKLEY, 1902, vol. VIII, pp. 359-360

patronage Gozayemon made copies of the Chinese famille verte and famille rose, even copies of the Delf wares of Holland».<sup>4</sup>

Soame Jenyns refers to the biography of Gozaemon in detail, even saying that «his mother, a skilled painter, was the daughter of Chikusei Takegawa» - but he points out - «There seems to be some doubt as to the exact dates at which this clever amateur was at work. Hobson gives his dates as 1736-95; Fukui 1719-78; another writer 1736-55. Okuda says he died in 1775 and another Japanese source in 1795».<sup>5</sup>

Contemporary scholars now argue that Gozaemon, who was a wealthy merchant, a tea and pottery amateur, was born in 1718 and died in 1777. This would mean that it is quite improbable that he could study in Kyoto under Kenzan, because – as already stated - Kenzan left Kyoto for Edo in 1731 (when Gozaemon was only 13) and died there in 1743.

In his book *Yokkaichi Bankoyaki shi* (History of Yokkaichi Banko ware), Mitsuoka Tadanari states that Numanami Gozaemon was born in 1718, and started his activity producing *Kyōyaki* (Kyoto ware) in Obukemura (now Asahichō) around 1736-'40. When he was in his 30s he went to Edo, working there for more or less ten years (therefore, between 1748 and 1758). This was much earlier than Ienari's leadership of the Tokugawa *bakufu*. Mitsuoka, quoting some documents, gives the exact date of Gozaemon's death (day, month and year) in 1777,<sup>6</sup> but Barry Till has written: «Captain F. Brinkley puts forth a detailed account of Rozan's life with tombstone dates of 1736-1795, and where Rozan went and what he did, including working in 1786 for the Tokugawa Shogun Ienari. It is widely thought that the extensive information on Rozan is not something that Brinkley would have dreamed up.»<sup>7</sup>

Further researches are necessary to clarify the facts.

According to Ninagawa, Brinkley and Goram, Kenzan was already dead, when Gozaemon arrived in Edo. Even at the much earlier date given by Mitsuoka for Gozaemon's activity in Edo, Kenzan was no longer living. Nevertheless we can imagine how the memory of the great master was still alive and that it was possible for Gozaemon to admire the art works that Kenzan had left in Edo.

Richard L. Wilson, referring to a manual written by Kenzan's adopted son, Ogata Ihachi (act. 1720-1760), writes:

An epilogue mentions that Nunami Rōzan (1718-77), the founder of the Banko kiln in Kuwana, Mie Prefecture, had gone to Kyoto for study under

<sup>4</sup> GORHAM, 1971, p.155

<sup>5</sup> JENYNS, 1971, pp. 293-294

<sup>6</sup> An'ei era, 6<sup>th</sup> year, 9<sup>th</sup> month, 13<sup>th</sup> day. Cfr. MITSUOKA, 1980, pp. 39-40

<sup>7</sup> TILL, 2013, p. 21

Omotesenke-school tea master Sen Joshinsai (active 1730-51) during that stay Rōzan received the pottery manual from one Seigo, a disciple of “Kenzan”. Rōzan period in Kyoto would seem to coincide with Ihachi’s heyday.<sup>8</sup>

This could have been another link between Kenzan and Gozaemon.

It doesn’t come as a surprise that he was thought to be a disciple of Kenzan’s, because his journey as an artist and ceramicist closely followed the taste and interests of the great master.

Ogata Kenzan has left many pieces which are completely original, some of which he produced together with his elder brother Kōrin (1658-1716), but he also produced pottery in different styles, inspired by different typologies of Chinese and even Dutch ceramics. We could go as far as to describe his production in the same way Brinkley does for Gozaemon’s.

As a curious example of how Banko manufacturing was linked to the work of Kenzan, we can consider the small *kogō* (incense container) found in the collection of the Luigi Pigorini Museum in Rome, with Kenzan signature (Fig. 1). It isn’t clear yet if the *kogō* is original or not: it could be an original Kenzan or a fake Kenzan made by a Banko artisan. At the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts there is another incense container, in the same shape of a turtle and with similar colours, which Wilson identifies as a work of Kenzan’s son Ogata Ihachi.<sup>9</sup>

In the Yokkaichi Municipal Museum, we find another example and we can be fairly certain that this is Banko ware.<sup>10</sup> All of them are imitations of Kōchi ware.<sup>11</sup>

As it has been stated, this first phase of Banko ware is quite obscure and no item can be attributable to Gozaemon with any certainty.

In the Kobe Municipal Museum we can admire a *mizusashi* (cold water jar used in the tea ceremony) which is thought to be one of the pieces made by Gozaemon. It is a cylindrical jar with a lid. On the white body of the jar there are a lion and a lioness painted in blue. The upper and the lower edge are decorated with an inscription in Dutch, written in capital letters. It is a Dutch proverb which says: «The lion is brave and he is the king of animals, but he is scared of the noise of wheels and the cry of the cockerel». Another proverb in Dutch is written on the lid, this one using lowercase letters: «Still

<sup>8</sup> WILSON, 1991, pp. 165-166

<sup>9</sup> Cfr. WILSON, 1991, p. 246, fig. 355 e p. 259

<sup>10</sup> Cfr. YOKKAICHI SHIRITSU HAKUBUTSUKAN, 2006, fig. 238, p. 72

<sup>11</sup> The term Kōchi is used in Japan for a Chinese ceramic produced in Cochin (today Chiayi, Taiwan). Cochin pottery originated from the Chinese regions of Fujian and Guangdong and was brought into Taiwan during the Qing Dynasty. It is a low-temperature polychrome ceramic.

waters are deep».<sup>12</sup> This *mizusashi* bears testimony to a deep interest and good knowledge of Dutch culture.

In her M.A. thesis, Vittoria Amelia Arbia has clearly showed the relationship between a painting by Pieter Paul Rubens (1577-1640), *Daniel in the Lions Den* (1614-1616, National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.), and the design of lions on the Kobe *mizusashi*. The lions appear first in a book by a Polish scholar, Johannes Jonstonus (1603-1675), who copied a couple of Ruben's lions. Jonstonus' book was later republished in Frankfurt with illustrations by Matthias Merian the Young (1621-1687).

It seems that Hiraga Gennai (1728-1780) had a copy of the German book (imported in Japan by Dutch merchants). The same lions appear in a Japanese book, published in 1787, the *Kōmō zatsuwa* (A Miscellany about the Red-Hairs; an illustrated discussion of assorted things related to the Dutch) written by a *rangakusha* (a scholar of Dutch science and culture), Morishima Chūryō (1756-1810).<sup>13</sup>

It seems quite improbable that the author of the Kobe *mizusashi* could see the precious copy owned by Gennai. It is more probable that he had access to the Japanese book. If this is the case we must consider that the *Kōmō zatsuwa* was published ten years after the date Mitsuoka gives for Gozaemon's death and this would imply that it cannot have been made by Gozaemon.

Since Miss Arbia's M.A. thesis has not been discussed yet and this is the first time I have considered this topic and provided my opinion about these dates, we can assume that the curators of the Kobe Museum, which is the proud owner of the *mizusashi*, don't yet know about the origin of its decoration and the problems that arise from the origin of the lions.

With all the uncertainties surrounding the subject, when all the Banko production is considered, we notice a great variety of styles, shapes, techniques and decorations. Some are original, and some are taken from foreign manufactures like the Chinese, Korean or Dutch ones.

In my opinion, this points to the fact that Gozaemon, as the father of Banko ware, was largely influenced by the art of Ogata Kenzan and that this heritage was passed on to his followers.

Gozaemon lived during that part of the Edo period when great artists like Ogata Kenzan and Itō Jakuchū (1716-1800) were active. The works of these two excellent artists testify to how it is possible that the two souls, or aesthetic visions, of Japanese art, one *shibui*, essential, meditative, minimal and the

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<sup>12</sup> Cfr. MITSUOKA, 1980, fig. 11, p. 7

<sup>13</sup> Cfr. ARBIA, 2015

other profusely decorative, imaginative, full of colour and vivacity, can very well coexist in the artistic research of one single artist.

The variety of shapes, colours, subjects, techniques and styles characterising the Banko production dates back to the period of its origins. Mitsuoka Tadanari states:

Banko ware with its characteristic style, and Antō [or Andō] ware are enamelled pottery wares originally of Kyō ware style. Influenced by exoticism which had become the rage since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, they developed a unique new style by adopting chintz designs.<sup>14</sup> Some works of Banko ware are ornamented with exotic patterns, such as figures of Europeans and letters of the alphabet. Others include imitations of enamelled *gosu* porcelain of the late Ming dynasty, Shino, E-Garatsu and Raku ware pieces.<sup>15</sup>

Even the most antique pieces frequently show shapes and decorations which can appear far from the delicate and the minimal taste generally associated with Japanese arts and crafts; some of their typical bright colors, like pink or turquoise, are rare or unknown in other contemporary ceramics.

From its beginning until the present day, Banko ware has been characterised by a great variety of shapes, decorations and techniques. This separates it from many other Japanese manufactures, such as Bizen, Oribe, or Raku. There are different reasons for this, that are not altogether clear; one can be traced back to Kenzan's influence, one is probably the diffused production of Banko ceramics in the Mie area, since its beginnings. Many kilns were run by different families of artisans and they, following Gozaemon's steps, were looking for that variety which was to become a clear idiosyncrasy of Banko ware. Banko ceramicists utilised not only the most popular techniques, like those of throwing on the wheel, and hand building, but also resorted to molds specially designed for export pieces.

They succeeded in perfecting a peculiar technique, which is said to be used only for this kind of pottery, the *kigata* or *warigata*<sup>16</sup>. Many of the pieces produced in Kuwana are the refined result of one more technique: the ceramicist begins his work with a thin layer of clay, on this foil he makes some cuts and then the piece is folded following those cuts, leaving visible

<sup>14</sup> Cfr. TAKAHASHI, KAJITANI, OKA EDS., 2014. A/N

<sup>15</sup> MITSUOKA, 1960, p.114

<sup>16</sup> Also known as *kata-banko* it is used for making teapots by creating a kind of wooden moulds for them. These are made like a tridimensional puzzle. Clay is applied to the mould, and then flattened using paper or fabric, giving the objects incredibly smooth sides. When the clay is hard enough, the key-piece of the puzzle is removed and the teapot is ready for the kiln. Cfr. BRINKLEY, 1902, vol. VIII, p. 362 and MITSUOKA, 1980, pp.170-175.

the overlapping lines (Fig. 2). Even though it is a relatively simple technique, thanks to which it is possible to get superb results, this one too seems to be an exclusive heritage of Banko ceramicists.

There are also some vases and plates where the coil building technique has been used to realistically reproduce a small basket (Fig. 3).

After the death of Gozaemon, an apprentice carried on working in the style for some time, but the production died out shortly after this. Then, in 1830 – here the story merges with legend – a peddler selling junk and bric-a-brac found some sheets of paper describing Gozaemon's formula and some techniques he used in the ceramic production.

The dealer's son, Mori Yusetsu (1808-1882), who was already active as a ceramicist, immediately understood the value of the discovery and decided to use Gozaemon's formula. He convinced Gozaemon's grandson to sell him the master's seals, and resumed the production adopting a new style of his own.

The real boom in the production of Banko pottery occurred during the Meiji period (1868-1912).

The export of Banko pottery to the United States of America, Great Britain and France was simplified by the fact that the production took place in and around the port town of Yokkaichi.

In 1877 Mori Yusetsu was appointed President of the Japanese Ceramics Industry and began to sign his pieces under the *banko yusetsu* brand, while in the area, numerous kilns were opened by those who would go on to become the most famous Banko potters of the Meiji period; of these we will only mention Hori Tomonao (1827-1895) and Kawamura Matasuke (1843-1918), both very active in increasing the Banko production for export.<sup>17</sup>

The first acknowledgements of Banko pottery in the West occurred first at the International Exposition in Philadelphia in 1876, and then at the Paris Universal Exhibition in 1878, where the works of 21 artisans using the Banko mark were presented.

A particularly interesting aspect of the Meiji period Banko ware is that the domestic production had different characteristics compared to that made for export, which has its own peculiarity.

The humoristic accent, which is so strong in Banko ceramics made for export during the Meiji and Taishō (1912-1926) periods, is quite rare in the pre-Meiji production. At the same time, these objects are sometimes molded in peculiar shapes, or hybrid shapes that seem to be new in the certainly unlimited field of the Japanese pottery production. In Japan almost nothing

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<sup>17</sup> MITSUOKA, 1980, pp. 80-98

remains of the pieces produced for the foreign market. Even the museums in Kuwana and Yokkaichi - where Banko pottery is still produced – despite their wide collections of antique Banko ceramics, have only a few pieces made for export.

Several pieces of the Banko export production, mainly teapots but also figurines, vases and flat wall vases, are characterized by a fanciful and bizarre style, sometimes graceful, sometimes grotesque, that can be defined as “capricious and fantastic” and that, in certain cases, can even appear as “zany” (Fig. 4). The main subjects are popular characters from history and folklore, as well as themes from nature. Images and shapes are often rendered into an organic style springing from both an innate sensitivity towards nature and from a taste for the Art Nouveau style which was the international trend of the time.

The connoisseur of Victorian majolica will recognize its influence in some details, while the lover of chinaware will do likewise: what is interesting to note is that the Chinese influence is sometimes direct, and sometimes – in a sort of “ping pong between cultures” – mediated by England .

In the introduction to a catalogue of an auction of Victorian majolica at Sotheby’s New York in 1997, the curators underlined the success that this kind of items had got in a very short time after a period of neglect, both among collectors and scholars:

The reasons for this rise in popularity are not hard to find. Apart from the sheer quality of majolica, its decorativeness is undeniable and the vivacity that emanates from it is almost palpable. Combine that with an Alice in Wonderland Eat Me / Drink Me surrealism - small objects like the shell are blown to vast scale, or a diminutive monkey clammers over a giant nut – and majolica becomes irresistible.<sup>18</sup> (Fig. 5)

We could use exactly the same words when talking about the wonderful world of Banko ceramics, which is so rich with creativity, fantasy, humor, poetry, love for nature and old legends.

I hope that in a near future we will witness a revival of interest in and appreciation of Banko ware, as has already occurred for the afore mentioned Victorian majolicas.

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<sup>18</sup> SOTHEBY’S, 1997, p. 7





Fig. 1 - Ogata Kenzan (?), Incense container in the shape of a turtle, Luigi Pigorini Museum, Rome



Fig. 2 - Banko ware, Vase,  
Meiji period, Private collection



Fig. 3 - Banko ware, Vase,  
Meiji period, Private collection



Fig. 4 - A.A. Vantine & Co., Mail Order Catalogue page, U.S.A., 1916-17.



Fig. 5 - Minton's Majolica, Teapot in the shape of a monkey claspng a coconut, England, 1874 c., Private collection

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