

History of Arita Ware

Why Did Porcelain Develop in Arita?

In the late sixteenth century CE, Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1537–1598), the retired imperial regent (*taikō*) of Japan, launched the conquest of Ming China by way of the Korean Peninsula. Many of his commanders brought Korean artisans back with them after the failed invasions, including the lords of Hizen Province (modern-day Saga and Nagasaki Prefectures). Even before the failed invasions, the daimyo lord of Karatsu, a coastal town in Hizen, had brought Korean artisans to create Karatsu ware (*karatsu-yaki*), a type of non-porous stoneware. Karatsu ware is the oldest type of glazed pottery from Kyushu. By the 1590s, many Korean potters had started their own kilns and were producing Karatsu ware across Hizen, including in Arita, which is south of coastal town.

In the 1610s, pottery stone was discovered in the Arita area. The term “pottery stone” refers to a wide range of micaceous or feldspathic rocks that contain high levels of silica, quartz, and kaolinite. Pottery stone is used to create the kind of clay needed to make porcelain. Firing that porcelain also required massive quantities of wood. With the discovery of pottery stone and a plentiful supply of timber from the mountains, Arita became the first place in Japan to produce porcelain and has been the center of porcelain production ever since.

The Saga daimyo recognized the potential of producing porcelain. Throughout the Edo period (1603–1867), the domain allocated resources and labor to manage and protect new porcelain kilns in Arita. Early Arita ware (*arita-yaki*) is characterized by the blue-and-white (*sometsuke*) technique of painting cobalt-based pigments onto white porcelain before applying a translucent glaze. The first domestically produced porcelain with multicolor overglaze (known as *uwa-e* or *aka-e*) appeared in the 1640s, when local artists learned how to recreate Chinese overglaze techniques.

Most of Japan was closed to foreign trade during the Edo period, but the Dutch East India Company was allowed to operate a trading post in the port of Nagasaki, also part of Hizen Province. In the early seventeenth century, the most popular porcelain in both Japan and the West was made in China (porcelain is still often referred to as “china” in some English-speaking countries). Then, around 1644, in the midst of the civil war (1618–1683) during the transition from the Ming dynasty to the Qing dynasty, Chinese exports of porcelain stopped and Dutch traders switched to buying Japanese porcelain. To meet the new demand, more kilns were built on the mountainsides of Arita. Porcelain produced by these kilns and those nearby was shipped around Japan through the port of Imari, and through this association it came to be called Imari ware (*imari-yaki*). Today, however,

“Imari ware” refers to ceramics produced in Imari rather than merely trafficked there, while the porcelain made in Arita from the seventeenth to the latter half of the nineteenth century is often called Old Imari (*ko-imari*).

Discovery of Izumiyama

In the 1610s, ceramic production in Arita was centered on a group of Korean potters on the western side of the town, who focused on creating porcelain based on Chinese blue-and-white designs. However, pottery stone was hard to find and their few porcelain pieces were fired in the same kilns alongside many stoneware pieces.

In 1616, a Korean potter whose name is recorded as Kanagae Sambe’e (d. 1655) moved to western Arita with a group of other potters. Sambe’e is said to have discovered pottery stone deposits at Izumiyama, on the eastern side of Arita, and built new kilns nearby. The pottery stone from the Izumiyama quarry was high in kaolinite, which is necessary for making porcelain, and could be mined in large quantities.

In 1637, the Saga domain concentrated Arita’s porcelain production in the east, near Izumiyama. Kilns were built on the steep sides of the valley near the mountain, and the river was used to power wooden trip hammers that crushed the pottery stone into powder. This powder was mixed with water to form the porcelain clay. The kilns near Mt. Izumiyama produced only porcelain. Izumiyama quarry was designated a National Historic Site in 1980 and was in general use until the 1990s.

Flourishing Exports

Arita’s porcelain production grew rapidly in the second half of the seventeenth century as porcelain exports increased. Chinese porcelain had all but disappeared, and new designs were needed to meet the demands of the European market. This included shapes previously unknown to Arita’s potters, such as coffee pots, wine decanters, beer mugs, saltcellars, and mustard pots. As European requests grew, new colors and styles were invented by the Arita craftsmen.

One of the most important types of Arita ware in the latter half of the seventeenth century was Kakiemon-style porcelain ware. Its distinctive overglaze colors and designs inspired European ceramics producers, including Germany’s Meissen porcelain kilns. In the first half of the eighteenth century, another style of Arita ware known as *kinrande* became popular among Western upper classes. *Kinrande* (literally “gold brocade”) was inspired by antique Chinese styles of porcelain that used overglaze gold to create extravagant, colorful designs.

By the 1680s, the Qing dynasty had taken control of all of China. With the onset of

peace, Chinese exports resumed, creating sudden competition for Arita ware. In 1757, the Dutch East India Company stopped official export of Arita ware. Approximately 100 years later, Japan reopened to foreign trade, and many merchants began selling Arita ware overseas again. Trade with the West led to an influx of new technologies that had been developed abroad: European craftsmen had invented plaster molds, discovered new pigments, and created new kinds of kilns in attempting to copy Eastern porcelain. Japanese artisans quickly adopted these advances into their work.

During the Meiji era (1868–1912), the Japanese government promoted the export of traditional goods, such as silk and porcelain, as a way to stimulate the national economy. The government helped promote Arita ware and other craft goods at several world's fairs, notably Vienna in 1873, Philadelphia in 1876, and Paris in 1878.