

Interpreting Oribe Ware

When engaging with ceramic works, especially prized, one-of-a-kind items like Oribe ware, there is a tendency to focus on the skills of the artist and the process of production. The descriptions of different styles emphasize the methods used in forming, glazing, and firing the pieces. However, what happens after the creation of a work is just as important. Because Oribe ware is made to be used, not just admired, a significant aspect of Oribe ware is the creative interpretation of each piece that happens each time someone handles it.

The uniquely distorted forms of Oribe ware force an active engagement with the pieces. How does the form fit into one's hands? How can one effectively whisk tea in the irregularly shaped bowl? How can one drink from an undulating rim without spilling? Each person finds their own answers through individual exploration.

The ornamentation of Oribe ware is similarly open to individual interpretation and tends to favor stylized motifs over realism. A series of dots and squares, as seen in the five bowls below, suggests the first flush of cherry blossoms, but they could instead be a star-filled sky. Artists often drew inspiration from scenes from rural life, which would have been unfamiliar to the samurai elite who bought the pieces, encouraging them to consider the image more closely.

This stylization makes these works just as engaging today as when they were first made. Consider this Narumi-Oribe style tea bowl. What could the figures on the outside represent? Experts suggest they were intended to portray snow-covered reeds, but previous visitors to the museum have interpreted them as hair combs, jellyfish, or even cupcakes. What is important is each person's moment of consideration, a kind of dialogue with the piece, in which a connection is formed between the object and its observer.