

Male Pheasant Incense Burner

This ceramic incense burner in the shape of a male pheasant is one of the museum's most prized pieces. It was crafted in the seventeenth century by renowned ceramic artist Nonomura Ninsei.

Ninsei is known as a master of Kyō ware, a style of painted pottery that arose in Kyoto. Ninsei's elegant pieces were highly sought after by Kyoto's samurai elite for use in *chanoyu*, or tea ceremony. Many surviving examples from Kyō ware's earliest days—like this Male Pheasant Incense Burner—are tea utensils. Typically, the host of a tea gathering places seasonal decorations in the tea room's tokonoma (alcove). Pheasants are traditionally associated with spring, so the burner may have been used at spring gatherings to set a seasonal tone.

Several aspects of this work demonstrate Ninsei's skill. The realistically rendered feathers are a fine example of *iro-e* overglaze enamel, a ground-breaking decorative technique that had just been introduced from China in Ninsei's time. In *iro-e*, the artist paints colored glazes over the surface of a previously glazed and fired piece. The item is then fired again at a lower temperature to fuse the two layers of glaze. Because the paints become fluid and change color during firing, the artist must have a thorough understanding of their behavior at various temperatures to achieve the desired effect.

The shaping of the pheasant is similarly masterful. It has an alert, lifelike bearing conveyed through its slightly cocked head, which Ninsei achieved through a careful layering of clay. Furthermore, the horizontal angle of the pheasant's long tail is remarkably difficult to achieve, as clay tends to droop under its own weight or fracture during firing. Two small marks on the underside of the tail show that Ninsei used supports to maintain its position during the firing, but such methods alone do not guarantee success.

Ninsei was one of the foremost artisans of his day and among the first famed ceramicists to apply his own potter's mark: a signature-like stamp identifying the creator. This practice denoted a shift in thinking—by signing their works, potters elevated themselves from anonymous laborers to known, individual artists. On the Male Pheasant Incense Burner, Ninsei's mark can be seen on the inside of the lid (next to the smoke vents) and on the bottom of the piece.

The pheasant's skillfully rendered form and Ninsei's masterful application of overglaze enamels led to the piece being designated a National Treasure in 1951. Ninsei's Male Pheasant Incense Burner and its companion piece, the Female Pheasant Incense Burner, are on permanent display at the museum.