

Ninsei's Pheasants: Treasures of Overglaze Enamel

The two pheasant-shaped incense burners in the center of the room are masterworks crafted by seventeenth-century ceramicist Nonomura Ninsei. Modeled after the green pheasant, they portray a mated pair: a brightly colored male and a muted female. They are exceptional even among Ninsei's many celebrated works.

Ninsei was active in Kyoto in the mid- to late seventeenth century. After training at kilns in Kyoto and Seto (in what is now southern Gifu Prefecture), he set up his own kiln near Ninnaji Temple in the foothills of western Kyoto. The techniques he developed there, particularly his use of overglaze enamels, were instrumental in the evolution of the city's distinctive Kyō ware.

Kyō ware was deeply intertwined with both life at court and tea culture. Many of the earliest surviving examples—including these incense burners—are utensils used in *chanoyu*, or tea ceremony. Incense is burned in the tea room to heighten the sense of purity and tranquility for the occasion.

Ninsei became one of the first among famed artisans to apply a personal potter's mark, a signature-like stamp identifying the creator. This practice signified a shift in thinking that elevated potters from anonymous laborers to known, individual artists.

Ninsei was also influential in the development of Kutani ware in Kaga domain (now Ishikawa and Toyama Prefectures). The ruling Maeda family and their retainers deeply admired his style and acquired many of his works, including the male pheasant displayed here.

Plumage and Pigment: The Colorful Male

Ninsei was best known as a master of the potter's wheel, but this piece shows he was also skilled in handbuilding, painting, and glazing.

For example, the pheasant's tail: this long, perfectly horizontal extension from the main body is extremely difficult to produce, as clay tends to droop under its own weight or crack during firing. To counteract this, Ninsei placed supports beneath the tail as it went into the kiln, leaving two small marks on the underside.

Viewed from the front, the bird's head is very slightly cocked, giving it an alert, animated expression. To produce this pose, Ninsei had to account for the way clay shrinks and warps when fired. The ability to anticipate such changes is the mark of a master, and the close fit of the top and bottom halves of the burner are further evidence of Ninsei's skill. Note the continuity of the feather patterns across the split, which help

to disguise the small gap.

The male's realistically rendered plumage is a fine example of *iro-e*, an overglaze enamel technique in which 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 change color and become fluid during firing, the potter must clearly envisage the desired effect and have a comprehensive understanding of the materials' behavior at various temperatures. Given that the *iro-e* technique had only recently been introduced from China in Ninsei's time, his recreation of the kaleidoscopic plumage of a male pheasant is remarkable.

The Male Pheasant Incense Burner was designated a National Treasure in 1951 under slightly unusual circumstances. Sometime in the late seventeenth or early eighteenth century, the Maeda family gifted it to one of their retainers, whose descendants eventually sold it to the Yamakawa merchant family in the late nineteenth century. The Yamakawas so highly treasured the piece that only a select few were allowed to see it. In fact, when the government wished to designate the work a National Treasure, the Yamakawas refused to bring it to Tokyo for the official exhibition and designation ceremony. As a result, the designation was granted without a public display.