

Female Pheasant Incense Burner

This ceramic incense burner in the shape of a female pheasant was crafted in the seventeenth century by ceramic artist Nonomura Ninsei. Like its male counterpart, the female displays Ninsei's skillful sculpting and masterful use of overglaze enamel techniques. These talents cemented his renown as a master of Kyō ware, a style of painted pottery that arose in Kyoto and catered to the samurai elite.

Ninsei's elegant ceramics were highly sought after for use in *chanoyu*, or tea ceremony. In fact, many surviving examples from Kyō ware's early days—including the pheasant incense burners—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 scent the room and set a seasonal tone.

Female pheasants are less colorful than their male counterparts. Males have evolved flashy colors to attract mates, but evolution favors females whose patterning blends into the ground and helps them avoid predators. For the most part, Ninsei faithfully recreated the female pheasant's sober palette by using silver paints that oxidized in the kiln to achieve gradations of black and brown. On the head, however, Ninsei took some artistic license by adding a touch of color: a red-and-gold wattle and the tiniest slip of blue around the eyelid. He also gave the female feathered ear tufts that project like horns from the back of her head. Both the wattle and the ear tufts are found only on male pheasants, and various theories exist to explain their presence. One is that Ninsei used a male pheasant as a model, and while he knew to change the overall coloration, he did not realize female heads were different. Another conjecture is that the "female" pheasant is actually a second male—a "nighttime" version that shows the male in shadow.

In the kiln, where clay shrinks and moves, producing complex shapes takes expert skill. The shaping of the pheasant's body shows a high degree of mastery, with the tail jutting out at a 45-degree angle and the neck turned in a smooth arc toward the back, as if the bird is preening. In East Asian painting, this posture is a common way to represent the female of a pair.

Ninsei's skill helped make him one of the most in-demand artisans in the country. He

was one of the first famed ceramicists to apply a personal potter's mark—a signature-like stamp to identify his work. This practice signified a shift in thinking that elevated potters from anonymous laborers to known, individual artists. Ninsei's mark can be found on the base of this piece.

The Female Pheasant Incense Burner was designated an Important Cultural Property in 1960. Along with the Male Pheasant Incense Burner, it is on permanent display.