

Silver and Gold: The Subtle Female

The markings of green pheasants, like those of many birds, differ drastically between males and females. While the males have developed flashy colors to attract mates, females have muted grays and browns that help them blend into their surroundings and avoid predators.

Ninsei recreated that sexual dimorphism in his feathered pair. Despite the female's sober palette, her coloring required no less skill to create. In fact, the complex shading of the brown plumage was achieved by using silver paint. As the silver content oxidizes in the kiln, gradations of brown and black appear, mimicking the variegations in a female's dun coloring.

On the female's head, Ninsei took some artistic license. Female green pheasants do not have the red wattles or ear tufts that males do, but he included them in this piece. Perhaps Ninsei wished to add a hint of color and create a visual tie with the male. Another theory suggests that he had access only to a male pheasant as a model and altered the female's body coloring based on memory. A third, intriguing conjecture is that *both* pheasants are male. In this case, the "female" version would represent a male seen at night, when colors are muted in darkness.

Ninsei was skilled at anticipating changes the clay would undergo in the kiln, allowing him to produce complex shapes. This is evident in the bird's posture: the tail rises at a 45-degree angle and the neck turns in a smooth arc toward the back, as if the bird is preening. (This preening posture is a convention used in East Asian painting to designate the female of a pair.) The incense burner's vents are cut in the shape of feathers to help them blend into the pattern.

In recognition of its artistic merit, this piece was designated an Important Cultural Property in 1960.

Reuniting the Pheasant Pair

Because the two incense burners seem to form a male–female pair and are similar in size and style, they are thought to have been produced at the same time. However, the male was purchased by the Maeda family, and the female sold elsewhere. The female resurfaced in Tokyo in 1991, when its owner, Mizuno Fujiko, donated it to the museum. More than 300 years since the pheasants were first produced in Ninsei's kiln, the pair are reunited and on permanent display.