

Water Jar (*Mizusashi*) with Plum Blossoms

This water jar was made by ceramicist Nonomura Ninsei, a master of Kyoto's renowned ceramic style, Kyō ware. In 1950, the water jar was designated an Important Cultural Property for its artistic excellence and as an archetypal piece of seventeenth-century tea ware.

Ninsei was active in Kyoto in the mid- to late seventeenth century. After studying in the pottery centers of Arita (Saga Prefecture) and Seto (Gifu Prefecture), he set up his own kiln in Kyoto under the patronage of Kanamori Sōwa (1584–1656), founder of the Sōwa school of tea. Sōwa guided the development of Ninsei's style to suit his tea philosophy and helped promote the potter's works among other members of the imperial court.

Water jars, called *mizusashi*, are used in tea ceremony (*chanoyu*). They hold fresh water that is used to fill the kettle and rinse the tea bowls. In tea styles where the host carries the utensils into the tea room during the gathering, the *mizusashi* is generally brought in first. Often, however, *mizusashi* are placed in the tea room beforehand due to their large size and considerable weight when filled. This one is 23.4 centimeters in diameter.

The vessel's plum tree design was made using *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. The paints change color due to chemical reactions and become fluid during firing, so the potter must have a thorough understanding of the materials' behavior to achieve the desired effect.

Ninsei often used thick layers of the yellowish-white glaze seen here as a base for his colorful designs. On this piece, the plum tree and its blossoms are rendered in red, black, and green glazes, using gold paint to add definition. Silver paint, which oxidizes over time, is applied on some of the flowers to achieve the slightly shiny gray color. Note how Ninsei skillfully evokes the lichen-covered bark of an older tree with lightly shaded green on the trunk and branches.

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.