Introduction

In 1997 the fifteenth-generation head of the Raku house organized a traveling international exhibition devoted to the history of his family’s ceramics, titled “Raku: A Dynasty of Japanese Ceramists.” The displayed pots, mostly consisting of the roughly shaped, simply glazed tea bowls that characterize the tradition, were dramatically lit to highlight contrasts in texture and slight variations in form. Each generation of the Raku house was represented, with particular focus on works attributed to the founder, Chōjirō (active late 1500s), and pieces by the organizer, Raku Kichizaemon XV (1949–). A video was playing at the entrance, showing Kichizaemon, dressed (uncharacteristically) in traditional Japanese artisan’s garb, removing pots from a small, bellows-driven kiln. Face lit by the glimmer of the flames, he gingerly held the long metal tongs in his hands as he transferred each fragile pot, still glowing red from the heat of the

Cover your heads and mock not flesh and blood
With solemn reverence: throw away respect,
Tradition, form and ceremonious duty,
For you have but mistook me all this while:
I live with bread like you, feel want,
Taste grief, need friends: subjected thus,
How can you say to me, I am a king?
—William Shakespeare, King Richard II
kiln. This image served as a striking metaphor for the approach to mounting the exhibition itself, an exercise in carefully relocating a tradition viewed as unique, delicate, and precious.

The exhibition was a momentous event in the history of Raku and in the broader story of the globalization of Japanese culture. Although the Raku technique spread from Japan to Europe and North America in the period after World War II and later became one of the most prevalent methods of ceramic production in the world (through the popularizing efforts of 1960s potters like Hal Riegger and Paul Soldner), the four-century history of the Raku family was largely unknown outside of a small community of specialist art historians and tea practitioners. The word “raku” had entered into the global lingua franca along with “sushi,” “tofu,” “kimono,” and a handful of other Japanese terms, but the original cultural context of its use — Japanese tea culture (chanoyu) and its associated arts — had been mostly lost along the way. Kichizaemon, a well-traveled and highly educated artist and intellectual, was surprised by the wide variety of ceramics he saw labeled “raku” outside of Japan and understandably felt that the legacy of his ancestors had been ignored to the extent that some sort of correction was required.

The catalog that accompanied the show, printed in a separate edition for each of the three European exhibition sites, is representative of the state of late twentieth-century Japanese scholarship on the history of Raku. It includes a discussion of the fertile age that gave birth to Raku ceramics, the late sixteenth-century Momoyama period; a brief biography of each potter in the Raku lineage; a discussion of the aesthetic principal of “rusticity” (wabi) in tea culture; and a technical explanation of Raku ceramic production. The impression created by the catalog is of a narrowly focused, continuous tradition dominated completely by a single lineage of individualistic potters. Patrons, consumers, competitors, usurpers, and imitators are conspicuously absent from this narrative of uncontested development. In this sense the catalog can be situated in a larger modern literature on Japanese culture that emphasizes homogeneity and continuity as hallmarks of Japanese civilization.

Yet signs of complexity thrust through the smooth veneer of this “dynasty” of potters. In Kichizaemon’s heartfelt and confessional essay on aesthetic principles, he poses two difficult questions: “[W]hat does traditional inheritance mean to cultural creation? What is the real significance of inheriting tradition?” Being trained in Raku ceramics by his father on the one hand and in modern
sculpture at the Tokyo University of Fine Arts and the Accademia di Belle Arti of Rome on the other, Kichizaemon presents an answer by juxtaposing a sophisticated discussion of traditional Japanese poetic principles with comments on the work of the influential conceptual artist Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968). Kichizaemon explores his own attempts to straddle the bifurcations of craft and art, tradition and modernity, familial past and egocentric present, all issues that inform his work as a contemporary artist.

These musings also, however, point towards a gaping flaw in the catalog, symbolic of a larger misapprehension of Japanese culture. Why ask these questions only of recent, contemporary culture? Why not pose the same queries of the entire history of Raku? Put another way, why assume that only contemporary practitioners of “traditional” arts face complex dilemmas of social status, identity, and integrity? Rather than naturalizing the continuity of long-term traditional practices, shouldn’t the historical process of maintenance and reproduction be examined through the same critical lenses used to look at the conflicts and tensions of culture in the modern world?

**Handmade Culture**

The critic Philip Fisher, in his book *Making and Effacing Art*, argues that art objects, far from being static conveyors of beauty and meaning as they appear in the modern museum, “slip from one set of practices to another, from one social world and set of purposes to another.” This book is a cultural history of the shifting “social worlds” in which people produced, consumed, and valued Raku ceramics. Despite the simplistic narrative of Raku’s development found in the 1997 catalog and the larger Japanese historiography on which it is based, the story of the Raku tradition is complex. The role of patrons and consumers in the production process, the social and economic struggles of the potters and their competitors, the publication of unauthorized secret manuals and connoisseurship guides, and the gradual dissemination of the technique to workshops across the country all contributed to the development of the culture of Raku. Also key were the recurring attempts of the Raku potters and their close allies, the Sen tea masters, to justify their proprietorship over the practice of their particular arts. From the late sixteenth century to the present day, representatives of these traditions have been engaged in a constant process of writing and rewriting the boundaries of their own histories, defining what is
and is not authentic practice, and editing the material and textual legacies that have formed the core body of culture passed from one generation to the next. The “handmade” quality of Raku thus serves as a useful metaphor for the “constructedness” of the tradition itself.

Raku is also “handmade” in the characteristics of the actual material culture of the tradition, in other words the pots and the materiality of their production. Raku potters in Japan have always made their ceramics without the use of a wheel, in contrast to most ceramic traditions in East Asia. As will be described in greater detail in the chapters that follow, Raku potters use only their hands and certain metal or wooden tools to form, shape, and decorate their work, making the resulting objects unusually rarified and self-consciously “unique.” The idiosyncratic hand-built mode of production of Raku ceramics was key to the long-term survival of the tradition and also contributed to the strong mystique that continues to surround the tradition today among fans of Japanese traditional culture. Each Raku ceramic seems to be inimitably infused with the heart or spirit (kokoro) of the maker (in the case of works by famous potters) or of the commissioning collector (in the case of works associated with famous tea masters). In the imagination of tea practitioners, looking at, handling, and drinking from Raku tea bowls brings direct access to a purer and less complicated past.

This study focuses on three elements in the Raku tradition. First is the aforementioned material culture, which consists primarily of Raku ceramics and related tea utensils. Material culture is a vital source in the study of Raku because it is a determinate element, though still, of course, subject to the viscidities of time, curatorial and editorial decisions, nature, and historical contingency. Second is the discursive element (texts), which is “a construction, a process never completed — always ‘in process.’” Lastly, symbols — iconic figures such as Rikyū and Chōjirō, the Raku lineage itself, and the Raku seal — mask and mediate tension between material culture and discourse to form a cohesive if aporetic whole. I examine this system of cultural practice by focusing on the ever-changing relationship between salient examples of material culture and the discursive traces left by producers and consumers. Analyzing the fundamental relationships between people and objects — the makers of tradition and the markers of tradition — will allow us to approach the broader, more cumbersome topic of the nature of culture itself.
The Landscape of Domestic Tea Ceramics in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Japan

Tea has played a prominent role in the life of Japan’s elite since the fifteenth century. In that period, the warrior leaders of the Ashikaga government began holding gatherings at which tea was prepared and drunk in ritualized, performative fashion. By the sixteenth century, performative tea practice had gained in popularity among Buddhist monks, aristocrats, merchants, and artisans. Tea practitioners designed tea rooms and decorated them with wood, lacquer, metal, and ceramic material culture from all parts of Japan and Asia. At first, Chinese items were the most sought after, but domestically produced wares soon became fashionable as well. In the late sixteenth century, Japanese tea practitioners shopped in one of the most diverse ceramic markets the world had known.\(^3\) Imported Chinese celadon, porcelain, and glazed stoneware were alongside Korean celadon and glazed stoneware, as well as utilitarian wares from southeast Asia. During the tragic Imjin Wars of 1592–1598, when the Japanese warlord Toyotomi Hideyoshi directed the recently unified armies of Japan to invade Korea as a platform for conquering China, numerous Korean potters were forcibly brought back to Japan to establish new ceramic industries. Domestic kilns responded to all of these influences by experimenting with techniques and designs to produce a host of new styles, often developed in close collaboration with consumers.

Sixteenth-century Japanese ceramics ranged from artfully simple wares to those with intricate design and decoration. Bizen ceramics (made in Bizen province, contemporary Okayama prefecture) and Shigaraki ceramics (made in Omi province, contemporary Shiga prefecture) emerged in the twelfth century (though the roots of the former go back to the eighth century). Originally these unglazed stonewares consisted primarily of utilitarian storage vessels.\(^4\) It was not until tea practitioners appropriated them as tea jars at the turn of the sixteenth century that additional forms such as flower containers, water jars, and occasionally tea bowls appeared. Bizen and Shigaraki ceramics were roughly thrown on a potter’s wheel, resulting in organically irregular but essentially symmetrical shapes. Potters eschewed most applied surface decoration in favor of carefully orchestrated, but seemingly natural, kiln effects. In Bizen ceramics, for example, a poetic vocabulary later developed to describe the increasingly stylized forms of “natural” decoration, such as spotted ash deposits...
called “sesame seeds,” drops of glaze called “jewel drops,” and marks left by straw wrapped around the pot, called “fire cords.”

Mino province (contemporary Gifu prefecture) and Owari province (contemporary Aichi prefecture) were home to another significant ceramic industry in medieval Japan, known alternatively as Mino or Seto ceramics. From the fifth century to the sixteenth century, assorted kiln groups ranging across these two provinces produced ceramics based on continental techniques and styles, including unglazed, natural-ash glazed, and, beginning in the twelfth century, glazed stonewares. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, potters experimented with the idioms established in Chinese celadon: translucent, ash glazes in pale green, yellow, or brown, applied to coiled and wheel-finished stoneware vessels. Beginning in the early sixteenth century, new ceramics emerged as Mino and Seto kilns began to use the stylistic vocabulary of Chinese iron-black glazed stonewares (known in Japanese as temmoku) and three-color (sansai) wares to create new native designs. Derivative copying of Song dynasty era tea caddies, conical tea bowls, and storage jars soon developed into distinct Mino and Seto wares.

Four particularly influential ceramic styles were produced in the region’s climbing kilns and “great kilns” (ogama) in the sixteenth century. The Yellow Seto (kiseto) style emerged directly from earlier Chinese-inspired techniques. Like Chinese celadons, Yellow Seto ceramics had symmetrical forms, simple inscribed or carved designs, and yellow-green feldspathic glazes. Unlike Chinese celadons, designs were highlighted with green copper accents, and conical teabowl shapes were adopted from Korea. The Black Seto (setoguro) style consisted of a thick, iron-black glaze applied to cylindrical tea-bowl forms; this style was the closest to Raku in appearance of all Japanese ceramics. The Shino style, consisting of a white feldspathic glaze applied to a thick but lightweight stoneware body, was famous for its motifs in underglaze iron-red. (Sometimes white and red were inversed, with a red-grey slip applied to a stoneware body, decorated with white sgraffito motifs.) Lastly, the Oribe style was one of the most radical wares to emerge from late sixteenth-century Japan in terms of form and decoration. Vessels were thrown on the wheel or drape-molded, decorated with white slip and abstract underglaze iron designs, and then glazed with combinations of a translucent glaze and a copper green glaze.

Southern Japan became the source of a significant variety and quantity of tea ceramics after the end of the Imjin Wars, known in Japan as Hideyoshi’s two invasions of the Korean Peninsula. Though certain workshops in Kyushu
appear to have been operating before the wars, the forced (and in some cases, perhaps, voluntary) wartime relocation of large numbers of Korean potters led at the beginning of the seventeenth century to the establishment of a range of new kilns in Agano, Hagi, Karatsu, Satsuma, and Takatori. Certain kilns were tightly controlled by domainal authorities and run as proto-industrial manufacturers of porcelain and stoneware tablewares for national distribution; others produced limited tableware and tea ceramics for local warrior patrons or customers in Edo, Osaka, and Kyoto. Porcelain production also began in Kyushu during the seventeenth century, though its impact on the world of tea ceramics was minimal.

Raku was therefore only one of many wares available to tea practitioners in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, and it is not even clear when the style acquired its now famous name. The term “Raku” does not appear to have been part of the common ceramic lexicon in the late sixteenth century. The first usage appears in the early seventeenth century, deriving from the place-name of the Juraku region in Kyoto. This area may have been the source of the sandy clay used to make early wares. By the mid-seventeenth century, the name had been appropriated by one ceramic workshop. The potters of that workshop began to mark their wares with a seal bearing the character “raku,” the first known instance in Japan of ceramists marking their work with a kind of brand name. In the late seventeenth century the term “Raku” became associated with a single household as a kind of family name. The Raku house soon became well known as the legitimate producer of Raku ceramics. In the eighteenth century the technique was spread among potters across the archipelago, though the association with the Raku house remained strong. In the late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries, usage of the term divided. Tea practitioners have tended to use “Raku” to refer strictly to the ceramics of the Raku house. Potters with no connection to organized tea culture (including foreign potters), however, use the term to refer to a certain ceramic technique.

The technique will be explained in detail in subsequent pages, but can be briefly summarized here. The main defining characteristic of Raku, as mentioned above, is that potters made the ware entirely by hand, without the aid of a potter’s wheel. The maker laboriously hand built and hand carved the sandy clay into the desired shape. The second characteristic is that Raku potters covered their ceramics with a lead-based glaze and fired them to a low temperature in a small (often indoor) kiln. Such kilns could be located in major urban areas because they produced little environmental pollution and
did not take up a great deal of space. Low temperature, lead-glaze workshops (in other words, Raku workshops) operated on a small scale that allowed a great deal of familiarity between potter and urban consumer.

The organization of the Raku workshop in Kyoto run by Raku Kichizae-mon’s ancestors is almost completely unknown, though documents show that the wives of Raku potters often took up potting after their husbands died. We also find references to male workshop assistants in several sources, though few extant ceramics are attributed to them. We can assume that female relatives and male workshop assistants played an active role in making Raku ceramics, particularly in light of the small scale of production. Furthermore, it is clear that tea practitioners became closely involved in Raku production, sometimes entering into the workshop to participate in the process of making and glazing ceramics. This fact, along with the low-temperature, lead-glaze technique, makes Raku an atypical example of Japanese ceramics despite the frequent claims that it is a “representative” example of traditional Japanese culture.

A Cultural History of Raku

Previous studies of Raku ceramics have consistently employed the official Raku lineage to structure analysis and explanation. Examining the tradition in terms of the recognized generations of the Raku house, however, limits our field of vision to a teleological narrative leading irrevocably from founder (Chōjirō for Raku, Rikyū for tea) to the present-day representatives. This structure naturalizes the perceived continuity and smooths over contingencies, challenges, and uncertainties. In fact, the long-term survival of Raku and tea was anything but natural or smooth and required a tremendous amount of effort on the part of numerous historical actors, the details of which are only known to us in part. Moments of particularly intensive exertion and transformation leap out of the historical record and inform the following narrative. I am also interested in what developments in the Raku tradition tell us about larger cultural shifts in Japan.

Chapter 1 explores the hagiographic story at the core of Raku history. According to this tale, Sen no Rikyū — Japan’s most famous tea master and a beloved aesthetic martyr — selected a foreign craftsman, Chōjirō, to invent a radical, new style of tea ceramic that became known as Raku. I examine documentary evidence, extant ceramics, and archaeological evidence to argue that
this tale is a product of political and economic struggles among competing tea schools more than a century later. It appears that in fact the first Raku ceramics emerged from a small population of Chinese immigrant artisans who served as middlemen between urban tea-ceramic consumers and the large rural kilns that produced ceramics in significant quantities.

Chapter 2 looks at the emergence of a single kiln in Kyoto as the predominant producer of the ceramic style that became known, in the early seventeenth century, as Raku. Analysis of ceramics and letters shows that this kiln distinguished itself from others by inviting tea practitioners to enter into the production process and reify their own aesthetic vision by hand-making eccentric tea bowls. Analysis of the many tea diaries written in this same period also shows that a number of important tea practitioners began to patronize this emerging Raku workshop, most important among them being Sen no Rikyū’s grandson and great-grandsons, who soon after founded three tea schools that dominated the business of tea in early modern Japan. The backdrop for these events is the early seventeenth-century cultural renaissance in Kyoto.

Chapter 3 follows the fortunes of the Raku workshop in the difficult decades of the mid-seventeenth century. Multiple rival kilns appeared in and around Kyoto, and an illegitimate Raku son, unrecognized by his own father, established a kiln south of the city with the claim that he made authentic Raku ceramics. To counter this, and in response to a nationwide census trend, the leader of the Kyoto Raku workshop reinvented himself as the patriarch of a closed, family business. He recorded this shift in identity in a series of genealogical documents timed to coincide with the centennial celebration of Sen no Rikyū’s death. These acts are representative of a larger transformation occurring in identity in Japan in this period, as Tokugawa census and registration policies overlap with an increasingly competitive urban marketplace to produce a heightened awareness of the household among merchants and other successful commoners.

Chapter 4 explores the role of Raku ceramics in one of the most influential social and cultural institutions of early modern Japan: the iemoto system. The three tea schools founded by Sen no Rikyū’s grandsons developed in the early eighteenth century into iemoto (large pyramid-structured institutions) that recruited students from across the archipelago while maintaining tight control over practice. I examine a series of letters exchanged between successive heads of the Raku house and the Sen tea schools, to tease out the complex and shift-
ing relationship between these organizations. I argue that the iemoto had the power to institutionalize aesthetic preferences—in other words, technologies of seeing and handling art—in a process that transformed cultural production in Japan.

Chapter 5 shifts focus from the private relationship between the Raku house and the tea schools to the public perception of Raku ceramics in book culture during the eighteenth century. I analyze the changing representation of Raku in public and official texts, with particular focus on the 1736 wood-block printed *Collected Raku Ceramic Secrets*, published in Osaka and distributed widely across the archipelago. This book explained the entire process of Raku ceramic production and proved to be extremely popular among potters and tea practitioners. I then examine a range of extant ceramics to argue that this text fueled a national boom in Raku ceramic production by amateur potters and provincial kilns outside of Kyoto.

Chapter 6 examines warrior patronage of tea and ceramics in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Of particular interest is the effect on the tea world of the collapse of the Tokugawa government, a devastating blow that resulted, initially, in a complete loss of the network that had sustained the Raku house and Sen tea schools for centuries. The tea school Urasenke, however, led the way forward by reinventing itself as a “modern” institution of civilization and enlightenment: use of chairs during the tea gathering, training for women, adoption of nationalist and imperial rhetoric, and participation in the mass media soon followed.

The epilogue closes the book with a brief discussion of the postwar history of Raku inside and outside of Japan. I end the chapter by arguing that Raku ceramics create dilemmas, for connoisseur-collectors and museums, that reveal the bifurcated epistemology of “art” in the modern world.

**Historicizing Japanese Culture**

It is common in twentieth-century writing on world ceramics in both English and Japanese to find an intellectual absolutism that privileges the beauty of the object over its historical context. Such writing is based on the assumption that aesthetics are objective and universal. This supposition forms the base for the ranking of art according to standards that are nominally above boundaries of time, space, or other markers of difference. It is presupposed that objects “speak for themselves,” making connoisseurship the most viable method of
studying art. The ultimate goal is to distinguish high-quality objects from fakes or those of low quality.

One critic has argued that this approach is marked by the following characteristics: concentration on a narrow body of subject matter; focus on individual producers; reliance on restricted methodology; and indifference to structures of power inherent in the subject matter. Postwar research on Raku ceramics shows all of these characteristics, in its consistent focus on ceramics attributed to Raku lineage potters; fixation with certain key figures such as Rikyū, Chōjirō, Kōetsu, and Nonkō; repeated references to the same small group of objects and documents paired with disregard for “outside” evidence; and denial of the role of tea practitioners and potters in constructing particularistic histories at key historical junctures.

The origins of this approach can be found in the post-Enlightenment rejection of tradition and embrace of creative imagination, individual genius, and scientific rationalism. Reproducing the works of the past became anathema, and imitation—once the central skill of the artist—was cast aside as “a childish, senseless enterprise.” The work of the genius was said to occur in the vacuum of originality rather than the field of rote-learned forms and inherited styles. For early twentieth-century Japanese intellectuals, this epistemological framework necessitated rethinking the history of their nation’s cultural production to highlight the triumph of innovative individuals rather than the dominance of conservative schools. This task was urgent because Japan was already under suspicion as a notorious “borrower” of technology and culture from other societies. One British diplomat commented in 1900, “It must be remembered that Japan has never originated anything.” Proving otherwise became the goal of many historians, artists, critics, and government officials. While Japan’s fortunes improved as a colonial and capitalist Great Power, Japanese intellectuals moved from proving that Japan was on a par with the West to demonstrating that the former was a superior civilization. “Traditional” arts such as tea found a new identity in the nationalist climate of the interwar years as living proof of Japan’s cultural uniqueness. The understanding of the Raku tradition that emerged out of that period has survived to the present with few changes.

The questions posed by Raku Kichizaemon XV in his 1997 essay are vital ones, not only for the study of Raku and tea in Japan, but for the apprehension of cultural change and continuity across a broad temporal and geographic spectrum. What is the value and significance of inherited objects, knowledge,
and discourse in the process of cultural production? How do practitioners nego-
tiate the tugs of historical precedent and present necessity, and how do their
decisions impact cultural change? These questions must be answered with
careful attention to the material and documentary evidence, to be sure, but
also by decentering notions of individuality, genius, and the autonomy of the
work of art.