Early Japanese porcelain found in the United Kingdom

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In my lecture today, I want to discuss some of the Japanese porcelain from the period 1630-1730, which is from my own personal collection. I shall concentrate on pieces which were found in the United Kingdom (UK), and appear to have been in the UK for a long time. I feel these pieces are both remarkable in their own right, and also not easy to find elsewhere in Europe.

1 Some pieces made before the Nangawara kilns

The earliest Japanese porcelain which I have found in the UK is the following pair of plates, H = 3.0, W = 13.8, 1630-40. They have been made in the Korean fashion, at the Hyakken kiln (now in Takeo City), and seem to have been painted by the same potter. They were found independently in East Anglia about 20 years apart, and provide evidence that some Hizen porcelain was reaching England very early.

In 1996, the sherds of a group of remarkable pieces of blue and white Arita porcelain, presumably made for the Islamic market, were discovered in a building site near Deshima Island in Nagasaki. The following ewer, H=23.5, W = 12.5, 1650’s, which was found in England, is the only surviving piece which has ever been found to match these sherds (although a later Arita jar, with closely related painting, does exist in the Topkapi Palace in Istanbul). This piece illustrates how perfectly Japanese potters had mastered the Chinese fashion of making porcelain by as early as 1650.
In addition to the sherds found in Nagasaki (see the first photograph below), a sherd was found at the Yanbeta kiln site in 2017, with closely related painting style (see the second photograph below).
An example of an early Arita piece with a distinctly modern flavour of decoration is given by the following elegant blue ground double gourd bottle, with twisted vertical lines, H = 16.5, W = 9.5, 1650’s. It was made at the Nishinobori kiln, and the silver top was added later in Europe. There are similar pieces in the British Museum and in the Shibata Collection.

The following very rare tokkuri, H = 18.7, W = 9.1, 1650-1660’s, is unusual because of its painting in overglaze blue enamel. So far the only other known similar pieces are in the private collection of Saga Prefecture here at the Kyushu Ceramic Museum.
The following small Fuji-shaped plate, \(H = 3.1, \ W = 9.6, \ L=15.0\), from the 1650’s is the only piece of early Arita porcelain in the Ko-Kutani style which I have ever found in the UK.

The following rare dish, \(H = 6.0, \ W = 35.0\), 1655-1660’s, is probably from the Chokichidani kiln. The rim is decorated with a basketwork pattern of overglaze red enamels, punctuated with reserves of underglaze blue carrying motifs of pine, bamboo and plum in overglaze gold and silver, which is now oxidized.
The final piece which I want to mention in this Introduction is the Buddhist rakan below, H = 18.2, W = 15.0, 1660-1670’s. This rakan seems to be one of the earliest Arita figures. There is a similar figure at Erdig House in Wales, and in the Czech National Museum in Prague.

2 Blue and white porcelain from the Nangawara Valley

One of the surprising aspects of early Arita porcelain found in the UK is the existence of many beautifully painted blue and white pieces which were made at the kilns in the Nangawara valley in the period 1660-1700. Many of these piece were presumably originally intended for the Japanese market, and it is not known at present how so many of them ended up in the UK. Moreover, unlike polychrome pieces made in the Nangawara valley over the same period, these blue and white pieces have often, over the last thirty years, turned up unrecognized in small sales around the UK, perhaps suggesting that the stately homes which had originally acquired them had subsequently sold them off long ago. Nevertheless, two UK stately homes, Burghley House and Sherborne Castle, have retained their historic collection which are rich in such pieces, and, in the case of Burghley House, we know from records there that such pieces arrived in the house before the end of the 17th century. In the remainder of this section, we will present some of these blue and white pieces, hopefully illustrating their beauty and the mystery surrounding their presence in the UK.
I will begin with three pieces which are from the period 1660-1670’s. The first such piece is a large finely painted plate, Arita, Nangawara, H = 5.8, W = 34.5. Variations of its painting with pheasants occur in smaller polychrome Kakiemon plates from 1670-1700.

From the same period, we have the following two small plates, Arita, Nangawara, with dimensions H = 3.5, W =14.3 for the first plate, and H = 3.0, W = 14.2 for the second plate. These two plates seem to be amongst the earliest products of the Kakiemon kiln.
From the period 1670-1680’s, one finds in the UK examples of the finest blue and white porcelain ever made by the Kakiemon kiln, which was presumably made for the Japanese domestic market. This is illustrated by the following two pieces which were acquired in small sales around East Anglia over the last 10 years. The first bowl, which is so beautifully painted with egrets and paulownia flowers, has H = 7.5, W = 23.7. The second plate, also painted with paulownias and an iris, has H = 3.0, W = 21.5
Here are two further examples of blue and white porcelain made in the period 1670-1680’s by the Kakiemon kiln. Both pieces were presumably intended for the Japanese market, but were found in the UK. The first piece has dimensions $H = 6.0$, $W = 18.5$, and the second piece has dimensions $H = 2.5$, $W = 14.5$. The painting design of the first piece seems to be new for the Kakiemon kiln. Examples of the second piece are also known at some stately homes in the UK, for example Burghley House. Also, the sherds of the second piece have been found at Deshima in Nagasaki (see the final two photographs).
One also finds examples of beautifully painted blue and white pieces from the Nangawara Kamanotsuji kiln. A striking example is the set of 8 plates, each with $H = 3.0$, $W = 20.0$, dated 1680-1690’s below. The fourth photograph is of a sherd of these plates found in Arita.
Another example of a beautifully painted blue and white piece from the Nangawara Kamanotsuji kiln is the following rectangular dish, H = 4.0, L = 20.3, W = 12.1, dated 1680-1700’s.

3 Polychrome porcelian from the Nangawara valley

It is very well documented that there are many fine polychrome pieces from the kilns in the Nangawara valley in the stately homes of the UK dating from the period 1670-1690’s (see, for example, the book "Report on the Kakiemon Style Wares Research Project in Europe” Kyushu Sangyo University, 2009). However, substantial changes took place in the production of porcelain in Arita around 1690, partly because production and export of porcelain in China was again operating fully. It was not known until some recent work by Professor Koji Ohashi what polychrome pieces from the Nangawara valley were reaching Europe after 1690. Professor Ohashi’s work is largely based on two sherds, which were found at the Kakiemon kiln site, and which are now here in the Kyushu Ceramic Museum. The first of these sherds is
It turns out that there are many polychrome pieces of Arita porcelain with the same underglaze blue clove mark as this sherd in the UK, and very few anywhere else (only a few examples seem to be known in Japan). I will now briefly discuss some of the pieces matching this sherd which are found in the UK. The first is an octagonal bowl or cup, with a matching saucer, and a closely related saucer with different painting, which are all from the period 1690-1710’s, and all are products of the Kakiemon kiln. The bowl has dimensions H = 7.0, W = 11.0, and the two saucers have dimensions H = 3.4, W = 16.8. In fact, the saucer on the right has been given to the Kyushu Ceramic Museum because it matches the bowl which is Item 2677 in the Shibata Collection.

A second piece matching this sherd is the following fluted bowl with H = 7.9, W = 15.6 made by the Kakiemon kiln in the period 1690-1730’s. A matching fluted lid for this bowl, with the same underglaze blue clove mark, was given to the Kyushu Ceramic Museum.
Yet another example matching the above sherd is the following large bowl dated 1690-1720’s, with $H = 5.7$, $W = 31.0$. This bowl was made in the Nangawara valley, and is probably a product of the Kakiemon kiln.

A further interesting item matching the above shard is the bowl with $H = 6.0$, $W = 10.9$ and two matching small plates with $H = 2.4$, $W = 15.0$, all dated 1690-1730’s. The two small plates are almost identical with a plate in the National Palace Museum, Taipei, which is one of the 12 pieces of early Arita porcelain brought to Taipei from the Forbidden City in Beijing. Also, a similar small plate, with the underglaze blue clove mark, was given to the Kyushu Ceramic Museum.
A final example matching the above sherd is given by an octagonal cup, with $H = 7.1$, $W = 8.2$, and matching saucer with $H = 3.5$, $W = 13.7$, dated 1690-1730’s. These pieces are probably from the Kakiemon kiln.

The second of these sherds found at the Kakiemon kiln is
A large bowl, with a mark on its base matching this sherd, is given by the following item, with H = 14.0, W = 23.0, dated 1690-1710’s. It is a product of the Kakiemon kiln, and the only other known example of a similar bowl (see the third paragraph) was owned by the Ii family and is in the Museum of Hikone Castle on Lake Biwa.
Finally, we mention two other polychrome items from the Nangawara valley. The first is the set of 6 dishes, $H = 3.5$, $W = 19.0$, dated 1690-1720’s, from the Nangawara Kamanotsuji kiln. They were found individually in the UK over the last 20 years.

The second is the bowl, $H= 5.8$, $W = 14.3$, dated 1690-1730’s, which is believed to have been made at one of the Nangawara kilns.
The period 1690-1720’s seems to have been a time of considerable change in the production and painting of porcelain in Arita. Nevertheless, many very fine pieces of polychrome Arita porcelain from this period seem to have come to the UK. The work of Dr. Miki Sakuraba, which is based on a detailed study of papers of the English East India Company held in the British Library, shows that much of this Arita porcelain came to the UK via two steps. After being acquired in Nagasaki, it was first taken by the Chinese Junk Trade to various ports in South-East Asia. In these ports, it was then bought by the English East India Company ships and transported to the UK. For example, Dr. Sakuraba’s work shows that in 1703, the East India Company ship “Fleet Frigat” arrived in England carrying 37,906 pieces of Japanese porcelain which had been acquired in Batavia and Whampoa. Similarly, in 1702, the East India Company ship ”Dashwood” arrived in the UK carrying 23,097 pieces of Japanese porcelain which had been acquired in Amoy. Further evidence of the links between the UK and China in connexion with early Japanese porcelain is provided by the existence of considerable numbers of Chinese copies, often made soon after 1690, of early Japanese porcelain which are found in the UK (see, for example, the two pieces illustrated at the end of this lecture), and seemingly not in other European countries.

Our aim in this last section of my lecture is to illustrate some of the beautiful pieces of polychrome Arita, which probably came to the UK via this two step process. They include a number of pieces which seem to have no parallels in Holland or elsewhere in mainland Europe, or even in Japan. Needless to say, there would be great interest in any extension of Dr. Sakuraba’s work on the records of the English East India Company to an earlier period, and ideally for the period 1660-1690.
The first such piece is a bowl, H = 6.0, W = 14.9, and dated 1690-1710. Although this bowl seems to have been made in the kilns of central Arita, its beautifully accurate painting is reminiscent of some of the finest Nabeshima porcelain of this period. Presumably the bowl was intended for the Japanese market.

A second piece is the following beautifully painted square plate, H = 4.0, W = 18.8, dated 1690-1710. Again it was presumably intended for the Japanese market.
The pair of teapots below, H = 10.0, W = 10.1, L= 15.4, dated 1690-1710’s, seem to have no parallel examples in other collections. There seems to be only one other known piece of early Arita porcelain (Item 2693 in the Shibata Collection) with the same moulded peaks around the top of the body.

The tokkuri below has the same two moulded figures on its side as the two teapots above. Other examples of this tokkuri are known (at Belton House in the UK and the Schlossmuseum in Amstadt in Germany).
This square plate, $H = 2.3$, $W = 18.1$, dated 1700-1730’s, has painting which is probably directly inspired by a Chinese story. I believe there is a similar plate here in the Kyushu Ceramic Museum.

The finely painted sake kettle below, $H = 16.4$, $W = 10.0$, $L=13.5$, dated 1700-1730’s has very similar enamels and painting to the square plate above.
The large crackled tokkuri below, H = 21.5, W = 17.0, dated 1700-1730’s, was probably intended for use in the Tea Ceremony. Its polychrome decoration was possibly added later.

A plate, H = 3.6, W = 22.6, dated 1700-1730’s, has very unusual decoration of its rim, which may have been inspired by some early pieces of Chinese kraak porcelain from the Wanli period.
Finally, as remarked earlier there are considerable numbers of Chinese copies, both polychrome and blue and white, of early Arita porcelain found in the UK. The two blue and white plates below, which have been given to the Kyushu Ceramic Museum, are Chinese copies, presumably from the 1690’s, of blue and white Kakiemon pieces. The plate on the left has H = 3.5, W = 21.2, and the plate on the right has H = 4.0, W = 22.3.
5 Thanks

I want to end my lecture by saying how much I owe in the world of early Japanese porcelain to my teacher and friend Professor Koji Ohashi. I am a mathematician by profession, and my interest in early Japanese porcelain was awoken during my first visit to Japan (for a mathematical conference in Kyoto in the spring of 1978). However, it was only after returning to live in Cambridge, England, in 1986 that I became aware that very interesting pieces of early Japanese porcelain, selling at modest prices, could still be found in the UK, especially at Portobello Market in London. On a sabbatical visit to New York around 2002 I acquired my first catalogue of the Shibata Collection. Thus on my next visit to Japan in 2003, I asked my colleague Professor Masato Kurihara of Keio University if we could make a visit to Arita and the Kyushu Ceramic Museum, to see this marvellous Shibata Collection, and hopefully meet some of the experts who had been writing about it. He enlisted the help of another mathematician, Professor Fujisaki, whom, I believe, had grown up in or near Arita. Professors Fujisaki and Kurihara and my wife I came to Arita in October 2003. This visit turned out to be a wonderful success, thanks to Professor Ohashi, who looked after us wonderfully well, and showed us so many interesting sites in and around Arita. I was struck then by the great thoroughness and precision of all his work, whether it was on the Shibata Collection itself or on the archaeology of the many kiln sites in and around Arita. The next photograph shows the group of us during this visit.

At the end of the visit, Professor Ohashi made the extremely kind offer of being willing to give advice on dating etc. for any early pieces of Japanese which I acquired in the future. Since that time, I have benefited enormously from his expert advice on so many pieces of Japanese porcelain. He has been my teacher and my very good friend, and his advice has been of enormous practical value in making my collection. Let me end by thanking him very warmly for all he had done for me over the last 16 years.