

Wabi and the Chawan

Milton Moon



Wabi and the Chawan
by Milton Moon

Cover image: **Milton Moon**, *Chawan*; photo: Denys Finney
Facing page: **Milton Moon**, *Chawan brush painting*, 2009

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GLOSSARY

Anagama	The most rudimentary kiln; lit., a ‘hole’ kiln
Chado	The Way of Tea
Cha-damari	Depression in the bottom of a tea-bowl; literally, a tea-puddle
Cha-jin	Someone expert in tea ceremony culture
Cha no yu	The tea ceremony
Chawan	Tea-bowl
Do	A road, a ‘way to’; lit., by extension, a ‘learning’, or ‘teaching’
Egote	A wooden tamping tool
Haiku	Japanese poetic form consisting of seventeen syllables
Hashi	Chopsticks
Hera	Spatula
Koan	A word or phrase used in Zen meditation to concentrate the mind
Koicha	‘Thick’ powdered tea
Meibutsu	Lit., a ‘very special’ and ‘highly-desirable’ possession
Mizusashi	Lit., a water container: one of the main utensils used in a tea ceremony
Renga	Linked verse
‘Saying the Name’	In Pure Land sect adherents ‘say’ the Name of the Buddha Amida
Shoin	An important ‘formal’ room – often a reception room – customarily used for formal ceremonial tea gatherings
Soan	Lit., a simple ‘hut’ in rustic style, and often very small, preferred for understated and informal ‘wabi’ tea
Usucha	‘Thin’ powdered tea
Wabi	“Aesthetic ideal rooted in an appreciation of insufficiency”
Waka	Japanese poetic form consisting of thirty-one syllables
Yama-jawan	Lit., a ‘mountain’ bowl made under primitive conditions by ordinary Japanese villagers to serve humble needs
Yunomi	Bowl for leaf-tea

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The Japanese Creation myth of *Amaterasu Omikami*, the Sun Goddess of Shinto, is a story of the opposing forces of good and evil, of lightness and darkness. It is a metaphor for purity and creativity as opposed to darkness and disturbance. As such it is a story about duality.

The reader might question what this has to do with *Wabi* and the *Chawan*? This linking is perhaps not as tenuous as it seems, because the implied morality of *Wabi* is woven into the warp and weft of Japanese cultural consciousness and expression. The Japanese sensibility had its origins within Shinto, but its cultural expression was also nurtured and burnished by Buddhism. It was within, and from, Buddhist temple practice (first in China, then in Japan) that emerged the cultural ceremony embracing the simple taking of tea; of a cup held cradled in the hands and taken to the lips. It is a story about the *Chawan*, the tea-bowl, and its role within *Chado*, the Way of Tea. The *Chawan* is both an expression and measure of *Wabi*.

The tea ceremony in Japan is clouded by legend, but it is known that over time it was refined as a cultural expression and is known by the general term, *Cha no yu*. More importantly, and especially so for the purposes of this introspection, it is sometimes expressed as *Chado* (the Way of Tea). Where those terms differ in use is that the former, *Cha no yu* (also written *chanoyu*), is a general term for the ceremony itself, whereas *Chado*, in its simplest application, means the Way of Tea. The highest point of the tea ceremony, which became known as *Wabi Tea*, is said to have had its origins in the fifteenth century, when the renowned Zen Master, Ikkyu (1394–1481), suggested to one of his disciples, Murata Juko (Shuko) (1421–1502), who was devoted to tea practice, that he develop a style of Tea that was an expression of his Buddhist understanding. But it was at a later date, in the sixteenth century, that the word *Wabi* came into use, in the Tea of Takeno Joo (1502–1555). It was this Tea that was further refined and taken to its ultimate expression through the genius of Sen no Rikyu (1521–1591).



Kagami Shukai (Gifu, Japan), *Ki-Seto Chawan*, 2002, stoneware, wheel-thrown, h.7.3cm, w.10.5cm

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The understanding of what *Chado* encompasses goes beyond any ordinary instruction about the complexities of the form of the tea ceremony, simply because at the highest level of tuition it was, and is, seen as a moral transmission. It goes without saying, of course, that not all participants wanted to, or were capable of, experiencing Tea at those depths – and perhaps even more so today.

One meaning of the word *do* is ‘road’ – a ‘way to’ somewhere. But, when employed as a suffix, it can also mean a teaching or a doctrine. In this sense it suggests a ‘way of’ as well as a ‘way to’. Within normal language-use *Karatedo*, *Kendo*, *Judo*, *Kyudo*, *Shodo* and so on, all describe an activity, but etymologically the *do* implies learning taken to a higher level, a transmission beyond mere technique. (This is very obviously stated in the small book by Eugen Herrigel, *Zen and the Art of Archery*.) And so it is with *Chado*.

A full understanding of the somewhat difficult concept of *Wabi*, especially within the tea ceremony, presents a challenge, not only for Westerners, but also for the average Japanese who, in this modern age, mostly regard the ceremony as little more than an exercise in social manners. In earlier times it was seen as a cultural expression of refined sensibilities. Only later did it become a measure of deeper human values. Within the complexities of the tea ceremony, as in music, there are no absolutes. It is in the participation where one begins to understand the sensitivities and sensibilities awakened. In this, as in serious cultural pursuits generally, it is a link to the deeper layers of consciousness itself.

As a cultural pursuit, *Cha no yu* is said to have reached its highest fruition sometime during the Muromachi period (1336–1573), continuing in the following much shorter period of Momoyama, which ended in 1600¹. Sen no Rikyu is popularly regarded as the most illustrious person within the drama of Cha no Yu. However, it would be wrong to think that the highest point in the tea ceremony belongs to Momoyama, because Rikyu’s senses were educated and burnished by the preceding years he lived within Muromachi, a period during which some of the most penetrating insights were written, not only about Tea, but about the preceding and highly developed culture of linked verse known as *Renga*. It was largely these insights that laid the basis for Rikyu’s *Wabi* Tea. It is the association between *Renga* and Tea that provides a fascinating glimpse into Japanese culture and, more importantly for a potter, into that seemingly rarefied area of aesthetic judgment enriched by *Wabi*.

For some generations before *Cha no yu*, *Renga* held a widely esteemed place within Japanese culture combining, as it often did, both poetic expression and a form of theatre. In practice, there were teams of poet/performers and each would take turns composing verses about a set subject, not in free verse but in the traditional form of 5–7–5 or 7–7 syllables. (The poetic form in Japan known as *Waka* consists of thirty-one syllables, whilst *Haiku* is of seventeen syllables.) There were a set number of verses, often a hundred, but at times many more. It was

¹ Dennis Hirota advises: “... regarding the Azuchi-Momoyama period, both 1600 and 1615 are used for its closing date. Actual power passed to the Tokugawas in 1600, but the demolition of Osaka castle and the demise of Hideyoshi’s descendents came in 1615. From a cultural perspective, perhaps 1600 is more useful, (and) 1615 for political history.”

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Kako Katsumi (Sasayama, Japan), *Open-face 'Summer' Chawan*, 2008, hakame brushwork, stoneware, wheel-thrown, h.6.2cm, w.15.6cm

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strictly codified and was often presented as a public performance before an audience, which, at times, was both appreciative and critical, in much the same way that cultural performances of our present age are discussed and critiqued. *Renga* sessions were also considered and debated, both as to the aptness of the verses and the skill of the contesting poets.

As one would expect there were clever, even brilliant, performers whose fame spread far and wide. Not all skilled poets, though, sought fame in public performances. There were poets whom we might term 'outsiders'. Although they were highly respected, at times revered, they preferred not to seek public acclaim. Many were acknowledged masters, but they had turned their backs on the adulation of public performance. Perhaps they were of more serious mind and plumbed far greater depths of human expression. Whatever their reasons, they were content to live in relative modesty and privacy, pursuing their poetic insights amongst friends and peers of like mind. As is often the way, despite their reluctance, it was the lives and verse of these masters which achieved the greatest fame of all.

Most importantly for this reflection, it was those reclusive poets who determined and nurtured the very qualities which they had found to be the essence of all culture. They had reached that stage where one recognises that it is not public acclaim and lavish reward that gives culture its value, but rather the depth of the aspiration and expression of the quest itself. It was, in fact, these recluse-poets who determined that which came to be known as *Wabi*, and it was this very quality that raised *Cha no yu* to become *Chado*, the Way of Tea.

At the time when *Renga* was fading in cultural importance and *Cha no yu* was becoming increasingly more appealing and popular, there were those who wanted not only to save the highest ideals which had been developed within poetic expression, but also preserve that sensitivity within *Cha no yu*.

Outside of its temple origins, the tea ceremony in Japan was a cultural practice almost entirely limited to within the court and the aristocracy generally. It gradually spread amongst the wealthy merchants and the privileged classes. Initially, as with *Renga*, there were special places where Tea was performed and the ceremony was codified in such a way that almost every aspect of it followed accepted rules, even down to the architecture of the special rooms where the ceremony was performed.

The *Shoin* architecture of the tea-houses of the time was of the most skilled craftsmanship, and the utensils used, which came mainly from China, were the finest money could buy. There was great competition as to who owned the most desired and rarest *meibutsu*, as the utensils were known. Connoisseurship was admired and envied and experts arose who knew their utensils intimately. They, like the most educated of today's curators, were not only

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knowledgeable but their opinions could make or break a collection. Quite literally, fortunes were made or lost on their determinations of merit.

Tea was so expensive initially that it was largely confined to the wealthy; however, with changing times and changing fortunes, not only was it more widely practised within the population at large, it was also to change in emphasis. Where once it had been an exercise of lavish privilege and refined sensibilities (and at times, pretension, dilettantism and even outrageous vulgarity), there were those who regretted the exclusivity of a Tea practised only within aristocratic confines as not being a reflection of its Buddhist beginnings. These were the practitioners of higher principle and deeper sensibilities – the ones who have left us the lasting ideals of *Wabi*.

For those who embraced the modesty and simplicity of this new expression of Tea, even the architecture of the Tea House changed from one which was an expression of richness and grandeur and social-rightness, to a highly contrasted reflection of poverty, embracing the humility of the religious hermit or that of the reclusive ascetic. This was the Tea of *Soan* (the Tea of the Grass-Hut). This was the Tea of *Wabi*.

From the *Sasamegoto*, one of the most famous classic writings on linked verse (and it could just as easily have been said of *Wabi* Tea):

Some poets desire only an illustrious name and set worldly success as their goal, whilst others, upon attaining mastery, prefer a life of seclusion, seeking to purify their hearts of all attachment.²

As part of the changing expression of tea not only did the architecture change, but so did the choice of the implements (the utensils or instruments) of performance. Items of more simple origin were collected, especially those that expressed ordinariness and humility such as a simple Korean rice bowl or a rough *yama-jawan*, a bowl made by ordinary Japanese villagers to serve humble needs, and certainly not the refinement of Tea. These potters were also rice-farmers, or ordinary artisans, and pottery-making was just one of the village activities. The pots they made expressed their humble origins. Imperfectly made, often of rough clay, they were often imperfectly fired in the most rudimentary kiln, the *anagama*. In every sense of the word, their very ordinariness made them the perfect item for the expression of *Wabi* Tea.

But therein lay the seeds of a new sort of connoisseurship. Whereas previously items were desired for their perfection, now they were chosen for their imperfection and humble origin; and herein lay the seeds of a new deception – one where knowledge supplanted innocence, and where the ‘ideal’ of simplicity became a mannerism, an expression of duality and duplicity.

² Wind in the Pines compiled and edited by Dennis Hirota, Asian Humanities Press. 1995. P.145.

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When many of the potters of Japan saw the pots chosen by the Tea Masters (who, after all, were the arbiters of taste in these matters), they then made pots 'pretending' to be an expression of innocence and unconcern – a pretence that still persists to this day.

Market forces? It was, and still is, almost a parody: “My *Chawan* is more *Wabi* than your *Chawan*”; but not in all cases.

What does *Wabi* mean now? There are, of course, many books on the subject of Tea, and most mention *Wabi*, but not all penetrate deeply into the historical, social, religious or philosophical aspects of the subject. Some are very thorough in their scholarship (as well as being gems of information), such as the classic book compiled and edited by Professor Dennis Hirota, *Jodo-Shinshu* priest and translator of many texts on Buddhism, and Tea.

Himself a *Cha-jin*, Dennis Hirota's *Wind in the Pines, Classic Writings on the Way of Tea as a Buddhist Path* is a delightful and important book which traces the way *Renga* and poetic expression generally informed the later development of *Cha no yu*. Importantly, it also traces the aesthetic development of *Wabi*, which, as he records, has undergone change in the way the word was and is used.



Before the Muromachi Period the word *Wabi* was used to express distress and



Maruta Munehiko (Saga, Japan), *Karatsu-style Chawan*, 2008, iron decoration, stoneware, h.7.5cm, w.14 cm

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loneliness, but later it changed in meaning and was used to express an 'aesthetic ideal rooted in an appreciation of insufficiency'. But how one discerns *Wabi* within a *Chawan* is a tantalising question, especially if one wishes to avoid the duplicity of trying to make something look what it is not. Can one make a pot that is an innocent reflection of *Wabi*?

American potter Doug Lawrie (a very astute observer and authoritative collector of crafts generally) spent many years living in Japan and for a time also studied formal Tea. I recall him saying: "... making tea bowls, as a non-Japanese isn't all that easy as most (non-Japanese) just aren't that tuned in to the real requirements of a successful *Chawan*."

To decide what is a good tea bowl is a vexed question in itself. In fact, there are many questions.

What should the shape be? As one learns more about the traditional bowls of the past there are so many shapes one can adopt as a standard, but the question remains ... What is it that determines the ideal shape, and size, and other subtle points such as the slope of the rim? Should it slope *outwards* or *inwards*? And the 'depression' in the bottom of many bowls ... Is it a necessary part of the utensil? And when was that first introduced? Is it used in all traditions? Should all tea-bowls have a depression in the bottom? Are there any answers that are absolutes?

Doug Lawrie's comments on these issues are both interesting and of value. He wrote (as an American he uses Imperial measurements, 1" = 2.54cm):

I have a Kawai bowl that is basically a big Yunomi (for leaf-tea) shape and is 4" inside diameter, and an open Hamada bowl that is 5" inside diameter. My own bowls are roughly 4 1/4" to 5" inside diameter, depending on the shape, but mostly are 4 1/4 to 4 3/4". Where most foreigners mess up on tea-bowls, if they are not familiar with Tea, is that they make them too big, too heavy or have no sensitivity in trimming the foot ... but the challenge and fascination, especially if one knows historic Japanese/Korean bowls and just how subtle and beautiful they can be, is very intriguing. As far as I am concerned, it is the simplest of shapes, but by far the most difficult object to make successfully. Occasionally I will come close but ... for my own work, generally, I like a shape that fits comfortably in the hands; maybe more an oversized cup concept than actually a bowl, although without question, my favourite historic Chawan are definitely bowls, Korean Ido-Bowls, and large bowls at that ...

... Again, for me, one of the most intriguing aspects of the tea-bowl is the aesthetic of the foot or the trimming technique that created the foot. There you have a totally

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Zen statement, just like in calligraphy ... there is just one chance and it must be executed without hesitation or mistake... In formal Tea, the foot has to function when holding the bowl to pour out the cleaning water. As for the depression, I don't know much about it, but I would think that probably most bowls don't have it if they drain naturally to a curve in the bottom. Maybe flat bottom Mino bowls (Shino, black-Seto etc) have such a depression, but I don't really know if it is only that tradition ...

Regarding the depression in the inside bottom of the bowl, I wondered if there was any record as to when this first occurred. I have photographs of two famous Yi dynasty Korean bowls, both with a depression very obviously part of the bottom inside curve. For some years I wondered whether it was put there for formal Tea purposes, or whether it was natural to some of those Korean bowls which had been appropriated for use in *Wabi* type tea; both are shallow summer-type shapes. If it was not put there purposely, then why? ... an intriguing question.

I do know that when potters throw off the hump there is a tendency for an 'S' crack to develop on drying. To avoid this some Japanese potters with whom I spoke tamped down the bottom with a wooden tool called an *egote*, of which there seem to be many forms and shapes. Compressing the bottom this way can leave a natural depression, the edges of which can be removed quite easily. But, if the perfectly rounded bottom was of no great importance, a potter might just leave it as it was. Anyway, with the bowls being used for rice dishes (or noodles), these foods would be eaten using *hashi* (chopsticks) and the slight depression would be of no consequence. For soup dishes, if using a spoon, the depression could be a hindrance. I wonder ...



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In tea circles, this depression is called a *cha-damari* – literally a tea-puddle – derived, I presume, from the verb *tamaru* meaning ‘to collect, gather, and accumulate’. (The phonetic change, from the ‘t’ sound to a ‘d’ is not uncommon in conjunctions like this.)

Dennis Hirota wrote:

Tea masters noted the depression (*cha-damari*) in Korean bowls and later codified it in the bowls they designed and had made specifically for tea. The encyclopedia mentions raku bowls specifically, which would place the date in the latter part of the sixteenth century with Rikyu. I suspect the depression was demanded in the flat-bottomed raku and Mino wares (*ki-zeto*, *seto-guro*, *shino*). The idea is that tea masters (of that tradition?) preferred the flat bottoms for the kneading of thick tea, which ideally is done with a minimum of time and strokes so as to preserve the fragrance, warmth, and color of the tea ... I am uncertain of the practical usefulness of the *cha-damari* depression in the making of tea, and suspect that it is mainly for the aesthetics of drinking and the additional ‘scenery’ in the broad bottom. Practically speaking, one gets to the bottom of the bowl but, as you know, the entire bottom is coated with thick tea and the tea does not really gather in the depression.

Dennis Hirota mentions ‘thick’ tea. Certainly with the greater fluidity of ‘thin’ tea, the remnants would pool in the depression. As Doug Lawrie points out, “... bowls for ceremonial thick tea (*koicha*) are different from the bowl for thin tea (*usucha*) ... the *koicha* bowl is larger and passed around and shared by guests in the tea-room while, of course, with thin tea each guest has an individual serving ...”



Kakurezaki Ryuichi (Okayama, Japan),
Bizen Chawan, 2008, stoneware, wheel-thrown,
wood-fired and carved, h.9.5cm, w.15.4cm

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There is another possible reason for the presence of the depression on the Korean bowls mentioned previously. Examining the photographs again, I noticed that immediately inside the edge of the depression was a ring of small, unglazed scars. These are easily explained by the fact that pots of that period were often stacked one inside the other for firing, with small round pellets of clay supporting the foot rim of the pot above – an economical way of stacking and firing pots of this sort. After firing, these beads of clay were ground away leaving the scars previously described. In Japan, I often noticed this, particularly with the Seto oil plates and so-called ‘fish’ plates. The much larger horse-eye food serving dishes were also stacked in this manner. With the rice bowls (later used for tea), perhaps this could be the original reason for the depression – that the potter compressed the bottom with a form of the right diameter, with the outside edge locating the exact place where the foot of the pot above would be placed, thus reducing the chance of the stack toppling. Co-incidence, or intentional?

I received a further note from Dennis Hirota, after he consulted with an historian familiar with tea utensils who supplied the following comment:

Regarding the cha-damari, I think there are two issues here. Firstly, the quite accidental cha-damari seen on Korean and possible western Japan-Kyushu bowls prior to say, the second half of the 17th century and, secondly, the other, the stylized cha-damari that were part of the standardization of tea equipment. Regarding the former, I am in agreement with your correspondent – the cha-damari is a natural result of passing/pressing the spatula (hera) over the inside of the bowl while forming ... This is different to the consciously made cha-damari, which seem artificially deep and sometimes relatively narrow, and may have had deliberate, ‘aesthetic’ placements of spurs. This happens chiefly in Japan, but I wouldn’t be surprised if it showed up in, say, late Keicho or Genna-era Korean bowls ordered from Japan.

So all aspects of tea bowls are not as clear cut as some Western potters might assume, but I do think the following observations might be a starting point if one wishes to pursue the challenge of, what I term, ‘the making and learning’:

A *Chawan* is a utensil, but it is also akin to an instrument inasmuch as it is used as part of a performance. It must be a suitable instrument and it must be able to be performed. As Dennis Hirota confirmed “... after being used, either hot water from the kettle, or plain water from the mizusashi, is used to rinse out the bowl, depending on whether another bowl of tea will be whisked.” The tea-host must be able to hold and tip waste water from a bowl using one hand – “... the thumb is at the rim and the other fingers held together, but chiefly the index finger, at the foot rim.”

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It seems a small point, but any bowl that can't be held in this way would no doubt be rejected, although of course there are classical exceptions. Quite apart from any technical consideration, there is the most important point of all, and that is, the 'spirit' of the *Chawan* itself. This spirit is glimpsed within a genuine expression of *Wabi*, but it is this very essence of *Wabi* that is the most difficult thing of all to penetrate.

To conclude, perhaps the words of an ancient potter might provide the best guide to an understanding of the fleeting value, within a *Chawan*, of genuine *Wabi*:

One must not forget that the origins of tea came to Japan, via China, and refined within Buddhist practices. It must be kept in mind that where deception lingers, Buddhism is stained and disfigured. Even so, the essence of Buddhism is always there, even if seemingly hidden.

How does one make a pot of *Wabi*? The answer is, 'one doesn't, because one can't'. The potter doesn't make '*Wabi*' – '*Wabi*' happens, 'of itself'.

If you want to make *Chawan*, choose a shape you are comfortable with ... one that pleases your senses ... that has a sense of rightness about it and make them until you do them with little thought.

You must pay attention to the foot. Traditionally there are many styles of feet but you must be able to hold a *Chawan* with your thumb at the rim, and one or two other fingers inside the foot rim. You must be able to turn the *Chawan* upside down with ease, without fear of it slipping from your hand. Even so there are acceptable exceptions.

In the Zen tradition you are told to 'just say' the koan until that point is reached where the koan develops a life of its own. In the Soto sect of Zen, you are told to 'just sit'. This word 'just' is very important. Also, in the Pure Land sect you are told to 'just say the Name'. What does that word 'just' mean? It means to do something without the stain of 'calculation and intention'. Eventually, when you are 'just' making pots, whether it is a *Chawan* or a vase, you will suddenly realize that one pot (in particular) has 'something' that the others haven't got, perhaps a blemish, or a distortion, or some unexpected 'life' that has made it different. Maybe that 'something' is in its unexpected 'ordinariness'. A highly developed man of tea might recognize that pot as having '*Wabi*'. He will know that it wasn't intentional – it happened 'of itself'.



Milton Moon
(Adelaide, Australia), *Chawan*, 2008
stoneware, gas and charcoal-fired
h.7cm, w.12.4cm
photo: Milton Moon



Milton Moon was born in 1926 and has been a potter for close to sixty years.

His awards include a foundation Churchill Fellowship, a Myer Foundation Geijutsu Fellowship for study in Japan, a Creative Arts Fellowship awarded by the Australian Government, an Advance Australia Award and an Order of Australia (AM).

In 2008 Milton was conferred with an honorary doctorate (DUniv) by the University of South Australia.

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