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Teapots through the Ages

A brief history
by Laura Everage

From China, Japan and Indonesia to Europe and the United States, tea has made an indelible mark on the history of the world. While tea and history have been intertwined for thousands of years, the world's history with the teapot is much more modern. It is a well-known fact that tea had been consumed for centuries before the first "official" teapot hit the scene around 500 years ago. One reason for the late arrival of the teapot is that tea wasn't consumed in the manner it is today. Instead of drinking an infusion of the leaves, the Chinese (in the third century) roasted the tea leaves, then pounded them and made the pounded paste into a cake that was then boiled with salt, rice, ginger, orange peel and spices to create a type of soup. This process was refined, and the tea paste was formed into cakes, bricks or tablets, which were then pounded back into powder form prior to use.



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Kam Leung - funalliance.com/tea/yixing.htm

Nearly every tea-drinking culture has created its own vessel for consuming this ancient beverage. Similar to the acceptance of tea within society, the teapot has a history that is closely connected with class. Whether it is the prized Yixing or the more everyday Brown Betty, the teapot continues to develop with designs that cater to prevailing tea-consuming trends.

Emergence of the teapot

The refinement of tea consumption—and most likely the impetus for the creation of the teapot—came during the Sung Dynasty (960-1279). It was during this time that leaves were pounded into a fine powder, after which boiling water was added then stirred with a bamboo brush. However, this “whipped” or “whisked” tea was made in a bowl while other teas were prepared in a cup (think Gaiwan), but it was surely a step in the right direction.



Yixing: the first “official” teapot (Nicole Maas)

As James Norwood Pratt writes in “The Tea Lover’s Treasury” (First Edition), “The teapot has not always been the undisputed lord of the tea service; historically the teacup comes first,” explaining how the tea bricks were crumbled into kettles filled with boiling water. Pratt also notes that “the first teapots of which positive records exist only appear around the year 1500.” But he finds this discovery hard to believe because there has been much conjecture among tea scholars that the wine ewer, a tall, water-pitcher-shaped vessel with a spout, resembled a teapot, and, “It strains credulity to believe so inventive a people as the Chinese never thought to brew tea in their so-called wine ewers.”

Setting aside the numerous theories as to the teapot’s origin, it is generally agreed that the history of teapot began around 1500 with the development of the Yixing teapots. The Yixing, considered the first “official” teapot, hails from the Jiangsu province of China, located about 120 miles northwest of Shanghai. It is the only source for this unique purple, or red, clay. While it is

believed to have appeared in the 1500s, it remained relatively unknown until the Ming Dynasty (1600s), when its use and production began to flourish.



Rococo style, two white panels on a broad band of salmon color, each with a floral group (Shrewsbury Museums Service)

What makes the Yixing pot so special is the purple clay, called zisha. It creates a pot with a fine texture, thin walls and beautiful color that ranges from a light buff to a deep maroon. It has properties that make it ideal for brewing tea as it allows the color, smell and the flavor of the tea that is brewed in it to absorb into its surface. Because the Yixing teapot develops a seasoning after repeated use, each pot is often dedicated to brewing one type of tea so as not to intermingle the flavors of various types of teas. In fact, tea brewed from a well-seasoned teapot is a special treat. The Yixing teapot is designed for individual use and is sized for one to two servings. The Chinese would historically carry their own teapot and drink directly from the spout.

Helping fuel the artistry of the craft of the Yixing was the demand from Japan. The Japanese imported the Chinese artists to teach them potting methods, and as a result, according to Yixing.com, "The old province of Bizen became an increasingly important center for Japanese ceramics, where Raku, this rough and dark earthenware, emerged."



Transfer-printed with "Fisherman" print in underglaze blue (Shrewsbury Museums Service)

The original designs of the Yixing were simple and elegant, but during the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) the designs became more decorative as artists began painting them, with many being inlaid with gold and silver. Eventually in Japan, there was a stylistic and artistic evolution in the design of Yixing, which resulted in teapots that featured themes from nature.

By the late 19th century, the Yixing potteries suffered due to industrialization, and they eventually were closed during World War II by invading Japanese forces. The potteries were reopened in the 1950s, a move that brought new creativity in teapot designs. While still formed by hand from a single sheet of clay, the Yixing teapot has taken on a wider variety of shapes ranging from round to square and everything in between.

Asian influence in the west

Before tea ever reached the Western world, it spread from China and Japan throughout Asia, reaching Burma and Siam as well as Sumatra and Java. It was, however, the spread of Yixing teapots that not only greatly influenced the forms of others found throughout the world but also prompted the invention of hard paste porcelain in the Western world.



Gilt with underglaze blue border hand-painted with lion crest in natural colors (Godden Collection)

Europe much admired the pottery works of the Asian world, with their thin, burnished walls and attention to form and detail. But Europeans were stumped as to how to produce the hard and translucent glazed pottery that the Asians could. Explains Pratt in "The Tea Lover's Treasury," "Second only to tea, perhaps the most important contribution China made to European life was "china" itself—the hard, translucent glazed pottery the Chinese had invented under the T'ang Dynasty and which we also know as porcelain."

During the 17th century, Europeans were introduced to the beauty of Chinese pottery through the East India Company, which imported the tea and used the pots as ballast in the lower portion of the cargo ships, while the tea was stored above the water line. "Among the earliest porcelain teapots shipped to Europe were pear-shaped pots with straight spouts," explains Leah Rousmaniere in "Collecting Teapots." "They were called East India pots or pots from the East Indies."



Parian ware, moulded with lilies-of-the-valley (Shrewsbury Museums Service)

These teapots proved more effective in standing up to boiling water than their own Delft earthenware did. Similarly, elsewhere in Europe, factories were attempting to duplicate Chinese porcelain. This soft-paste porcelain was made with glass-like materials that were mixed with clay. When this was fired, it never quite reached the same hardness as Asian-made porcelain, but for the time being it remained the norm. A multitude of soft-paste teapots in various styles appeared throughout Europe, but because they were extremely fragile, they often exploded when boiling water was poured into them.

A European breakthrough

Among the European innovators who helped move forward the porcelain industry in Europe was the German, Johan Bottger of Meissen, who invented a fine stoneware that could be used to create the first true European porcelain. This "hard paste" porcelain was white and had a smooth texture with a translucent quality. (Although, it wasn't until the second half of the 18th century that porcelain production became widespread in Europe).

This breakthrough allowed the industry to become more innovative in its decorating techniques. This porcelain was expensive, which is why many of these early pieces remained small—much like the Yixing teapot.

England and France began using this technique by the mid 1700s, infusing the teapots with Baroque and Rococo designs. The shape of the teapot remained globular, with some pear-shaped pots coming into fashion, although at this point, it was still an upper-class drink.



The ultra-modern Maestro (The Tea Spot)

But, as the technique spread across Europe and industrialization took over, the middle class came to have more money available, and with that came the desire to emulate the lifestyle of the upper class. As demand grew in Europe, the mainstay of the production at Worcester, Chelsea, Spode, Limoge and all other centers of china making in Europe was the 'tea equipage,'" explains Pratt.

In England, this resulted in the emergence of "afternoon tea." To meet the growing demand for teapots in the middle class, artist-merchants, including Josiah Wedgwood and Josiah Spode, quickly responded with their version of the teapot.

Along with the increase in interest from the middle class came the desire for fantasy design. In fact, at this time novelty was much more valued than either taste or style. According to Garth Clark in "The Eccentric Teapot: Four Hundred Years of Invention," "the exploration of teapot forms was never carried to the same level of obsession as it was in England. From 1750 onwards this small island dominated the art of creating teapots."

Throughout the 18th century, teapot shapes changed frequently, and villages throughout England were producing many teapot varieties. (At the turn of the 18th century came the addition of silver pots, although at this time, they mainly appeared on the tables of the wealthy.)

Color glazes and other decorations continued during this time, as the English pottery industry expanded. In the second half of the 18th century, the process of paper transfers taken from copper plates was used, resulting in the ability to print engraved scenes onto ceramics, many of which were classic in nature. Designs that most frequently appeared included Oriental designs, such as Blue Willow; those designs adapted from European prints such as the Georgian "house" teapots; and decorations bearing the coat of arms of major European families.



*Printed and painted with a boy and girl carrying a milk pail and milking stool
(Shrewsbury Museums Service)*

The beautiful red teapots that Dutchmen John-Philip and David Ehlers created became much coveted in England. While the Ehlers brothers guarded their secret in making the beautiful teapot, Englishman John Dwight eventually created the first red stoneware teapot in the country, helping to build a market that became flooded with this design by the late 1700s. Joining the red teapot was a dizzying array of offerings including soft-paste porcelain, stoneware, slipware, saltglaze and cream-colored pots.

By the time the 19th century emerged, teapot styles were extremely eclectic. "Designs changed so quickly that a tea service two years old was considered scandalously passé, at least by the fervently fashionable," explains Rousmaniere.

The Brown Betty

It was during the 19th century that England's now-ubiquitous Brown Betty teapot began to emerge. The Swinton Pottery developed a rich brown glaze that contained manganese and iron that was brushed on the pottery and left to run, creating a streaky effect. The teapots decorated in this manner were called Rockingham, after the marquis of Rockingham's estate on which the pottery was founded. "The original Rockingham pots had a tall, baluster shape and looked more like coffee pots," explains Rousmaniere. "Rockingham teapots certainly looked nothing like the later archetypal brown teapots considered their progeny, or the modern-day version of the Brown Betty." However, the Rockingham is often considered the precursor to the Brown Betty.



The Brown Betty

It is believed that the first Brown Betty found its foothold during the reign of Queen Victoria (1837-1901), when every home owned a teapot, as tea was no longer only an upper-class beverage. However, its origins reach back to the end of the 17th century, when the small, unglazed teapot of red clay from the Stoke-on-Trent area was a true luxury item. The red clay gives the teapot wonderful heat retention. Its round shape causes the leaves to be gently swirled around as the boiling water is added, producing an exquisite infusion.

America catches on

As the British headed to the New World, shiploads of teapots were sent to accommodate their tea drinking needs, despite the emergence of American potteries. Following the War of 1812, many of the teapots were printed with American landscapes and scenes of the American war victory. Also popular was Lustreware, which has a metallic glaze, as did many whimsical pots that included the 1840s Toby-With-a-Wooden-Leg teapot, in which Toby the "pirate" sits with his legs splayed, his "wooden" leg forming the spout and the good leg forming the handle.

At this time, commemorative teapots as well as figural teapots (although certainly not a new concept) were more important than ever. By the mid-

19th century, the American pottery industry really took off, and companies such as Hall, Homer Laughlin China Company and Lenox all found a foothold offering up a multitude of designs. As the technology of making "pottery" had reached throughout the world, the history of the teapot became more about design rather than acquisition of knowledge.

The drive behind teapot design was now a function of existing consumer trends and current home décor. For example, as the tea bag emerged in the early 1900s, there was no longer a need for a sieve, or strainer, at the base of the teapot's spout. In a more aesthetic vein, the Arts & Crafts Movement of the late 1800s helped drive designs, as did the rise of Fiesta ware in the mid 1950s, making the Fiesta teapot an icon in U.S. households.

In fact, teapot designs have become so varied that in some cases the teapot no longer serves as the vessel for tea but is more a vessel for show, with designs that can be quite unusual. Today, interest in tea is helping to drive the demand for new variations on the old teapot theme. While the tea-bag-brewing-in-a-cup scenario is still popular, consumers are realizing that their interest in specialty tea requires a bit more attention to detail.

To meet this demand along with the consumer need for convenience in preparation, the teapot now appears in many forms that borrow from history and add a bit of modernity to the design. Consumers who want the convenience of keeping their brewed tea hot over an extended period can indulge in a vacuum-insulated tea maker that allows them to brew the perfect cup (in bag or loose form), then keep it on the counter or desk at the perfect temperature. Other contemporary designs are designed to take the guesswork out of preparing loose-leaf tea by incorporating a timer into the pot. The timer can be set according to the type of tea being prepared; it then automatically removes the tea infuser from the heater, allowing anyone to enjoy the perfect tea experience without much fuss.

Surely the aesthetic teapot, designed with modern-day convenience, is on the rise, but for the purist, there are certainly enough designs to choose from. Whether you desire something antique or modern, whimsical or pure art, stoneware or porcelain, there is definitely a teapot to fit your brewing needs and your aesthetic sensibilities.

Comments on this article may be sent to comments@freshcup.com.

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