EARLY PRODUCTION AND TRADE OF JAPANESE IMARI PORCELAIN

Export Porcelain wares of the Meiji Period originated in the kilns located in the Kyushu Region of Japan. Although known as “Nishiki-de” by the Japanese, the porcelain was named “Imari” by the Europeans, after the Port of Imari where it was produced and sold. During Japan’s period of seclusion of the 17th and early 19th century, Dutch and Chinese merchants had a virtual monopoly of the country’s trade. The items for export by the Dutch were stamped with the Dutch East Indies Trading Company logo “V.O.C. Vereenigde Oos-Indische Compagnie”. A significant amount of the designs were absorbed from the Chinese potters, especially from the Chinese 17th Century Kangxi period. Items for the European market included wares such as barber’s bowls, oil lamps and beer mugs. Once exposed to the Imari ware, the European porcelain factories began emulating the forms, glazed enamels and motifs. Also popular were pieces designed with ships and figures.

19TH CENTURY ARRIVAL OF COMMODORE MATTHEW PERRY’S BLACK SHIPS

The various traders’ “Black Ships” became known as “Kurofune”. The arrival in Japan, Circa 1853, of four Western vessels by United States Commodore Matthew Perry named “Mississippi, Plymouth, Saratoga and Susquehanna”. These large black ships emotet a military presence, which was helpful in Perry’s negotiating trade with Japan. Within five years, as a result of Commodore Perry’s established diplomatic relationship with Japanese Shogun officials, treaties were signed, allowing trade with the United States and Western countries, thereby breaking Japan’s centuries-old seclusion and the Dutch and Chinese trade monopoly. Influenced by the early traders and Perry’s black ships, Imari ware became known for its “Black Ship” porcelain, known as “Gososen-de” which stylistically depicts the famous “Black Ships” with their sails unfurled, flags placed high on the masts and floating upon a choppy sea. The black ship motif is usually placed within a rondel, surrounded by a border of stylized flowers and emblems.

Trade was greatly expanded during the Meiji Period (1868-1912). Although the Imari export trade flourished, the demand for Imari by the Japanese flourished as well, being especially popular with the Feudal Lords and Imperial Court.

Strangely, Imari wares were not produced for the tea ceremony, as Imari ware was considered too colorful for the Japanese taste.
CHARACTERISTICS, SYMBOLS AND DECORATION OF IMARI

The secrets in producing Imari ware were highly guarded by Japanese officials as well as the families who produced it. The porcelain clay used to produce Imari came from a decayed granite stone found near the Arita region which was rich in the iron necessary for these wares. The glazes were hand painted or enameled onto the body and fired at high temperatures in the kiln. Although earlier Imari porcelain was produced in blue and white, the Imari described herein are pieces of the Late Edo and Meiji periods which were typically decorated in overglaze enamels having a brilliant hued palette including cobalt blue, iron red, yellow, teal, green and aubergine upon a blanc de chine ground. Occasionally, a rare chocolate brown was used as a ground, typical of the Fukagawa Porcelain Company which was founded in the late Meiji period and whose wares are highly collectible.

These colorful enamels impart a vitreous glaze and are occasionally further embellished with gilt. Numerous designs were perceived by the artisans, potters and painters of Imari ware. The inspiration for various decorations came from brocade textiles. Pieces may have shaped reserves or cartouches which are separated by ribboned “streamers” or floral motifs. The underside of some pieces exhibit calligraphic script or factory marks including the six character mark of Ch’eng Hua, or Mount Fiji and River symbols of the Fukagawa porcelain factory. Small pointed spur marks are sometimes apparent on the underside from being supported in the kiln.

SOME OF THE DECORATIONS INCLUDE:

A. Patterns: diaper and honeycomb patterns, honeycomb; stylized waves, spiral ribbons and “streamers”; brocade textiles; long handled wicker vase of flowers.

B. Animals: Phoenix (Ho Ho bird); tortoise; dragon (Ryu); cicada; shi shi (Lion Dog);

C. Mitsu-Tomo-e: (Three commas in the circle; a sign of good luck)

D. Fruit and Flowers: Chrysanthemums (16 petals for the Japanese Imperial Court); peonies; iris, cherry blossoms; paulownia blossoms; pomegranate.

E. “Three Friends”: Plum blossoms, pine trees and bamboo.

F. “Precious Objects: Scholar’s Accessories, Symbols, etc.

G. “Gososen-de (Five Boat Decoration)”: In the 17-18th Century Edo period inspired by Dutch traders as well as Commodore Matthew Perry, with their sailing vessels known “Black Ships”

H. Forms: Forms including fish fans, vases, barber bowls, teapots and cups.
GUIDELINES FOR COLLECTORS OF IMARI PORCELAIN

Collectors should search for quality, not quantity and especially for unusual forms and decoration. Any pieces with chips, hairline cracks should not be considered. Imperfections that may have been created during the process of creation does not usually devaluate a piece; rather, later repairs are the problem as the piece has been unduly compromised. The charm in Imari porcelain is the quirkiness of the patterns and figures, intense coloration of the enamels as well as the varied forms. That such everlasting beautiful porcelain is becoming more and more unobtainable in today’s markets is a reason to search for Imari. There are several well known museums that have Imari, one of the best being the Kurita Museum in Japan which has a magnificent collection from the early periods to the 19th Century. The Winterthur Dupont Museum has a fine collection also. Many opportunities arise for collectors at estate sales and auctions. The best way to learn more about the porcelain is to be able to pick it up and feel the weight and texture and become familiar with the makers and marks.

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(Illustrations are from private collections; the lamp is from “Antique Center on Orange”, Orlando, FL.)

A reserve depicting a long handled bamboo base with flowers “Hankago”.

Large Imari Vase (converted to a lamp) depicting a cavorting shi shi dog within a cartouche.