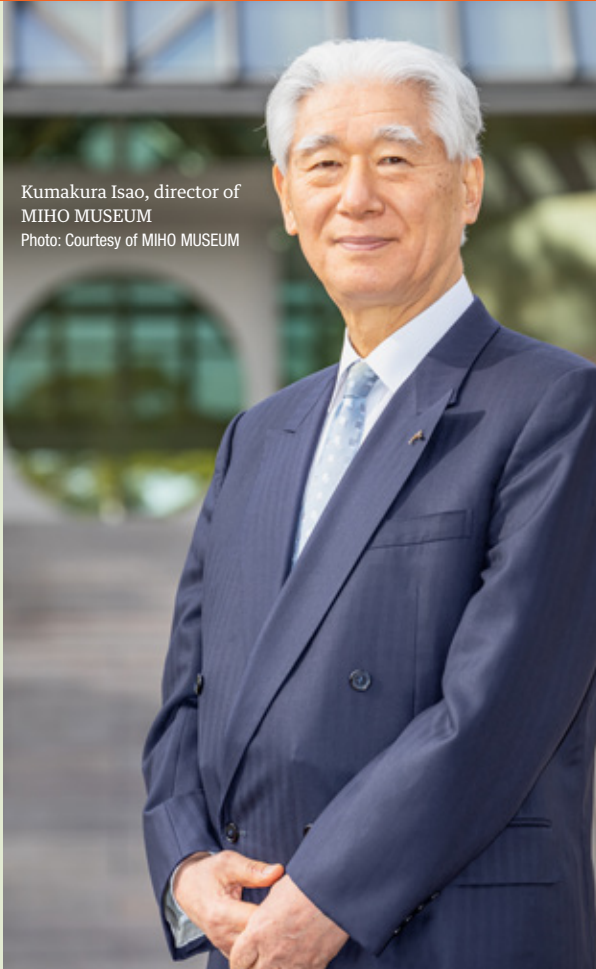


Showcasing *Washoku* with Dishware



Kumakura Isao, director of MIHO MUSEUM
Photo: Courtesy of MIHO MUSEUM

IN Japan, many different types of dishware for serving food and drink have been made using a variety of materials. We spoke to Kumakura Isao, director of MIHO MUSEUM and a specialist in the cultural history of Japan, about Japanese dishware.

How has Japanese dishware developed historically?

Japanese dishware comes in a wide variety of shapes and utilizes a diverse range of materials. Dishware can be made from materials such as clay, glass, wood or bamboo. A country like Japan that uses many different types of dishware is rare in the world. Yet the history of Japanese dishware design and techniques does not date back that far. Until the sixteenth to seventeenth centuries, most dishware had consisted of lacquered wood, earthenware, and simple pottery with natural glaze. Around that time, however, large quantities of pottery made in China, the Korean Peninsula and Southeast Asia began to be imported and came to be highly prized. The influence of these potteries led to the flourishing of local pottery production, laying the foundation for today's famous pottery producing areas such as Karatsu, Mino, Seto and Imari, where the variety of dishware increased. In the background, there was the influence of *chanoyu* (way of tea). *Chanoyu*, enjoyed by feudal lords and other influential individuals, placed great importance on utensils such as tea bowls, so potters began to make a variety of dishware to meet the demand.

In Japan, some dishware pieces made over 400 years ago that were not made as ornamental items but were actually used are still carefully preserved and are designated as national treasures and important cultural assets. During the Edo period (1603-1867), when peace prevailed, people's quality of life improved and the cultural trend for enhancing the quality of everyday items such as

Lidded Dish with Plum Blossoms and Waves Design made by Ogata Kenzan (1633-1743) with Osechi New Year Cuisine
Courtesy of Koshida Gozen/MIHO MUSEUM



dishware gathered pace. This placing of value in everyday items has continued to the present day.

I think Japanese people have a very deep relationship with dishware in their daily lives. For example, in many Japanese households each family member has their own rice bowl and teacup. Some sake lovers go to the trouble of bringing their own sake cup to parties.

In Japanese, a person who is tolerant and generous of spirit is described as *utsuwa ga ookii* (having big dishware). The word *utsuwa* (dishware) here refers to the innate capacity of a person. In this sense, *utsuwa* is likened to a person who demonstrates broad-mindedness. It is one of the key words to think about Japanese culture.

What is the relationship between Japanese cuisine and dishware?

Two individuals who have had a great influence on modern Japanese cuisine are the artist Kitaoji Rosanjin (1883-1959) and the founder of a famous *ryotei* (traditional Japanese restaurant) Yuki Teiichi (1901-1997).

Rosanjin bequeathed the phrase “dishware is a ‘kimono’ for food.” Serving food on good dishware

elevates the food. Not satisfied with commercially available dishware, Rosanjin created many artistic pieces with his own hands that complemented his cuisine.

When devising a menu, Yuki is said to have first lined up pieces of dishware and considered the best food to serve with them. Yuki also collected precious dishware pieces almost worthy of important cultural asset status and served cuisine on them at his restaurants. As a result of these influences, the idea of dishware in Japanese cuisine as being not merely something on which to serve food but also a platform to showcase the theme or purpose of a meal spread widely, including in the home. For example, different dishware is used depending on the seasonal theme of the meal, such as the celebration of spring or the arrival of the New Year.

Recently, Japanese cuisine has become popular internationally. If you have a chance to enjoy Japanese cuisine, your pleasure may be enhanced if you are able to catch the theme of the meal being showcased by the dishware. ㊦

Interview by SAWAJI OSAMU
