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About Tea and Teapots: General and Historical Information

In researching tea drinking and teapots I encountered a great deal of misinformation online, and the following has been distilled from what seemed to be the most credible sources. I have attempted to paraphrase in my own words except where quotations are indicated, and I hope I have done so effectively. If you do your own research, maintain a healthy skepticism about the accuracy of the information you find, especially at the many websites associated with tea importers and commercial tea accessories. Some of the information you find there was clearly made up off the top of their heads.

The consumption of tea began long before the appearance of teapots. The traditions and habits of tea consumption and the means of its preparation eventually inspired the creation of efficient and aesthetically pleasing vessels for brewing and drinking tea. It is not known exactly how and where the drinking of tea as a beverage first appeared, but it certainly an outgrowth of the tradition of herbal medicine and specifically the use of infusions featuring herbs steeped in hot water.

Camellia sinensis, the common tea plant, was consumed in China for health benefits at least by the 10th century BC, and was in widespread cultivation by the 5th century BC. The writings of early Chinese philosophers and physicians contain passages discussing the healing powers of tea. The tea plant is actually an evergreen tree up to 50 feet tall, but when domesticated for commercial tea production is pruned to a bush and kept at about five feet. A newly planted tea bush will yield a harvest after three to five years and subsequently its leaves may be harvested annually. Most harvesting is done by women today, and no machinery has been developed that exceeds the 60 to 70 pounds of leaves an experienced picker can harvest in a single day. Those 60 to 70 pounds of fresh tea leaves produce about 20 pounds of dry tea, which translates to 2800 cups of tea. All types of real tea (as opposed to “herb tea”) including black teas and green teas are from *camellia sinensis*, and the variety results from the processing.

In early tea processing in China, the tea leaves were crushed and then steamed, mixed with a little salt as a preservative, and formed into small nuggets or blocks and dried. In preparing tea, those nuggets or blocks were dropped into hot water or sometimes ground to a powder in a mortar and pestle and then steeped in hot water. Dried cakes or bricks of compressed tea were sometimes used in place of money, especially in remote rural areas where formal currency was less common. Teapots did not exist at that time, although vessels called **ewers** that look like teapots were in common use in China for wine or water.

The 9th century AD Chinese author Lu Yu was heavily influenced by the Zen sect of Buddhism, and wrote “The Classic of Tea” about the cultivation and preparation of tea. His writing had a major impact on Japanese practices surrounding the consumption of tea. Equally important, tea

production changed radically in China during the Song Dynasty in the 11th century AD, when the processors began leaving some teas in loose-leaf form, which in preparing was added to a bowl of hot water as is, or ground to a powder before steeping. These methods were introduced into Japan at the time, and the Japanese quickly showed a preference for powdered tea, especially in the tea ceremony.

By the 12th century AD both the Chinese and Japanese were drinking tea as a daily beverage and for ceremonial purposes, and tea was rarely regarded solely for its medicinal properties. While the Chinese showed a preference for black teas such as the famous Oolong from Taiwan, the Japanese started cultivating tea in quantity and processing it as green tea, preserving a more delicate flavor of the original plant.

By the beginning of the Ming Dynasty in 1368 in China, the infusion of loose-leaf tea as we know it today was the prevalent method. The first Chinese teapots made specifically for brewing tea come from this period and were made either from porcelain or from the fine brownish-purple clay of the **Yixing** region of China. The imperial potteries that served the Emperor and royal family were set up in Yixing during the late Sung Dynasty, and most of the finest Chinese pottery has been produced in that region ever since. Yixing teapots, especially the unglazed ones that still carry that name, were immediately valued for their fine texture, thin walls, and natural color ranging from light buff to deep maroon.

The transition from brewing tea in bowls to teapots happened quickly in China, especially in domestic tea preparation. Unglazed Yixing teapots became especially popular, since the clay seasons over time as it absorbs components from the brewed tea, and improving the flavor of each pot of tea. The widespread popularity of Yixing teapots domestically and abroad greatly influenced the design of teapots throughout the world.

During the early Ming Dynasty (after 1368) tea consumption and cultivation spread throughout Southeast Asia including Taiwan, Vietnam, Thailand, Burma/Myanmar and the islands of Sumatra and Java in Indonesia. Proliferation of green tea and development of variations occurred primarily in Japan and China, while black teas were produced in quantity in South China, Southeast Asia, Indonesia, and eventually India and Africa.

The Spread of Tea and Teapots to the West

Throughout Europe, hot herbal infusions known in England as **tisanes** were popular through the medieval era. There is little question that the tradition of medicinal infusions originated in Chinese herbal medicine and arrived in the Middle East very early via the Silk Road, but there is some disagreement as to how it traveled into Europe. Some evidence indicates that these traditions came with the Great Migrations of the early middle ages via the various competing nomadic cultures of the Central Asian Steppes. They also may have arrived with the spread of Islam across

North Africa and into Spain in the eighth and ninth centuries AD, or a little later through Eastern Europe by way of Byzantine or Ottoman traders.

In the 1620s, the Dutch East India Company began importing tea from China, Japan, Sumatra and Java into England, France, and Holland. In 1669, the East India Tea Company was formed and monopolized the tea trade until 1833, when tea production began in India and Africa. Along with varieties of tea, the company imported Chinese teapots including Yixing unglazed wares.

Tea quickly became very popular as a hot beverage throughout much of Europe and was seen as an essential and precious commodity imported from faraway exotic lands of the East. Some Europeans called the new drink **cha** after **ch'a**, the Cantonese word for tea. Today, English-speakers often use the word **chai** in reference to spiced teas originally from India. The southeast Chinese term **tay** was adopted in Britain in the late 17th C. and evolved into the familiar word **tea**.

Since tea arrived in Europe long before East Asian teapots, an interesting twist in the evolution of European teapots involves the appearance and popularization of several other beverages and the vessels designed to brew and serve them. Posset was a concoction of curdled milk and wine or ale popular in Europe during medieval times. Posset pots resemble teapots with long loopy spouts and were in common use from the 15th century onward. Coffee and hot chocolate were both introduced into Europe in 16th century and potters and metalsmiths began designing pots specifically for serving these new beverages, generally taking the form of covered pitchers so as to preserve the heat, and often with an elongated spout to facilitate pouring into a cup, or perhaps just as sculptural embellishment. With the introduction of tea, it was only natural that people brewing the beverage for a group would grab their posset, chocolate, or coffee pot, and thus the designs of those vessels had a major impact on the evolution of European teapots.

A tall, silver vessel in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London is the earliest known silver teapot, inscribed "1670 - Tea-Pott." The earliest known European pottery vessels intended specifically as a teapot were made in the latter half of the 17th century in the Dutch town of Delft. They were quite small, intended for just one or two cups of tea, and they featured a loop handle and short spout such as are found on most Yixing pots. They were also made of a red earthenware, producing an appearance similar to the red or brown stoneware of Yixing. Despite this rather tasteful early example, potters and metalsmiths, especially in Britain, quickly began designing ever more ornate teapots and tea sets, usually with elaborate decoration and a long, curved spout, often with an S-shape and a tip resembling the mouth of a goose.

As European teapot production became more widespread and tea drinkers in Britain and the mainland developed specific demands based on evolving local traditions, potters and traders in East Asia were attune to feedback about European preferences. Export wares intended for the European market had become a major part of Chinese and Japanese ceramics production. The result is the creation of larger and increasingly ornate teapots to satisfy the European tastes, and in

particular the appearance of hybrid **export porcelain**, made by Chinese or Japanese artisans to European standards and aesthetic specifications and incorporating European symbols and design features, leading to the widespread dilution of Chinese design tradition that is seen in much export wares.

The Japanese Appreciation of Tea – Chado: Adoration of the Everyday

Zen Buddhism teaches simple living in harmony with a natural path of life, and its philosophy influenced calligraphy, martial arts like archery, elaborate gardens, and the consumption of tea. These practices are not seen as having direct religious content, but rather as disciplines that aid in contemplation and meditation.

Chado, "the way of tea," reached its prime during the 16th century under the influence of the artist and tea master Sen no Rikyu. By that time tea was a common drink throughout Japan. In China, elaborate tea tasting events held in all economic classes evolved into ritualistic feasts or parties that included frequent hedonistic behavior. The parallel evolution in Japan led to the practice of throwing tea gatherings displaying wealth and prestige and often involving gambling, public bathing, and consumption of large amounts of sake. Zen monks are credited with "rescuing" tea from such a level of decadence, and instead promoted the tea ceremony as an opportunity to recognize and celebrate the beauty of ordinary life. The definitive work on the subject is *The Book of Tea*, written in 1906 by Okakura Kakuzo specifically for the Western audience. It provides in-depth discussions of Chado and the spiritual aspects of tea in Japanese culture.

The Japanese Tea Ceremony

Chanoyu, which simply translates as "hot water for tea," is the primary type of tea ceremony practiced in Japan, and forms the core of Japanese tea appreciation. Chanoyu grew out of **zazen**, the Buddhist discipline of seated meditation. Very specific practice and protocol for the tea ceremony developed very early, encouraging the appearance of tea masters known for their proficiency in performing this ceremony.

Central to the performance of so much Zen ritual is the concept of wabi-sabi. Wabi is the inner or spiritual self, the experiences of our individual human lives. The meaning goes further in advocating quiet refinement and subdued taste celebrating restraint, humility, simplicity, imperfection, and asymmetry. In contrast, sabi represents the external, material side of life. Originally the word meant "worn," "weathered," or "decayed," but came to refer to a celebration of the effects of nature, unadorned objects, and simple, uncomplicated architectural spaces, and especially the quality of mellow beauty that care and long-term use impart to materials and objects. In his book on the subject, Richard Powell says, "Wabi-sabi nurtures all that is authentic by acknowledging three simple realities: nothing lasts, nothing is finished, and nothing is perfect." In *Wabi-Sabi: The Japanese Art of Impermanence*, Andrew Juniper says, "If an object or expression can bring about, within us, a sense of serene melancholy and a spiritual longing, then that object

could be said to be wabi-sabi.” These concepts are central to the simple beauty and harmony found in the ritual and fixtures of the tea ceremony.

In the traditional Japanese tea ceremony, teapots are never utilized teapots for brewing tea, although the Japanese have long used and appreciated teapots in preparation of tea in the home or business. The tea ceremony can be performed anywhere, but in its purest traditional form takes place in a dedicated tea house in a formal Japanese garden, and the specific aspects of the ceremony are very precise. The formal tea house is intended to remove participants from the concerns and cares of the outside world. In ideal circumstances, guests approaching the tea house walk across damp grass or paving stones, symbolically leaving the dust and grime of the outside world behind.

As the guests arrive at the teahouse, the host kneels inside the door while guests wash their hands in a stone basin before entering, leaving their shoes and weapons outside. The entryway is low, forcing the guests to bow as they enter, and the host bows to each in return. The guests kneel before the *tokonoma*, a shelf-like alcove that usually displays a few simple decorative objects, often including a small *ikebana* arrangement of flowers.

The host brings out the tea ware, carefully rinsing off each object with clean water, always using very precise choreographed movements silently observed and appreciated by the guests. The guests are given sweets and sometimes sake while the tea is being prepared. Water is heated in a cast iron pot on a small charcoal stove. Powdered *matcha* green tea is measured with a small wood or metal spoon in an amount appropriate to the number of guests and placed in a large teabowl and hot but not boiling, water is added. The mixture is beaten to a froth with a small bamboo whisk, and the teabowl is passed to the chief guest who contemplates the bowl itself, takes a few sips of tea, wipes the rim with a cloth, and passes it to the next guest with a precise choreographed movement. The next guest takes the bowl, repeats the same movements, wipes the rim, and passes it on.

In less-formal contemporary versions of the tea ceremony, the tea is often prepared one guest at a time in smaller teabowls, with the chief guest served first. At the conclusion of the ceremony, the host rinses all of the tea ware with hot water once again, and the guests are free to handle and admire each of the items, including the teabowl or bowls, the bamboo whisk, the small wood or metal spoon, the tea caddy or container, and the water pot. Each is seen and appreciated for its individual beauty and contemplative qualities.

The significance of the tea ceremony and the associated elaborate protocol cannot be overstated. People in Japan who appreciate the ceremony often spend a lifetime learning the specifics both as a presenter and a guest, because the protocol are very precisely delineated for each. A person’s stature in society or even business can be greatly enhanced by skill in and cultivated appreciation of the tea ceremony. People commonly attend classes to learn the specific choreography and

technique, and upon completing the training may earn certificates indicating level of mastery. A great tea master receives tremendous reverence and respect, far greater than that of a major celebrity in the western world. Tokugawa Ieyasu, after whom the great Tokugawa Era of medieval Japan is named, was a powerful and widely feared samurai warlord, courageous in battle. He unified the city states of Japan into a coherent nation, but was also widely known and respected for his skills as a tea master and his collection of tea ceremony vessels and fixtures. For more information, see the recently-published book *Spectacular Accumulation: Material Culture, Tokugawa Ieyasu, and Samurai Sociability* by Morgan Pitelka.

Tea from Tree to Teapot

Camellia sinensis provides the young leaves and leaf buds from which all true tea is processed. The method of production determines which of over 3,000 varieties of tea come from this plant. Like wines, teas are often named for their location of origin, such as Darjeeling or Assam. As mentioned earlier, teas are classified as either green or black, and many mistakenly refer to black tea as "fermented" tea. As opposed to true fermentation, black tea is subjected to an oxidizing process that alters the flavonoids. Green teas contain more of the simple flavonoids called catechins, while the oxidization that is part of the process to make black teas convert these to the more complex varieties that account for the distinctly different flavor. Most tea purists see black tea as farther removed from the pure essence of *camellia sinensis*, but that is not seen as a bad thing, just a variation.

Tea has been prepared in a multitude of ways throughout history-including pickling, steaming, hand or mechanical rolling, cooking in pans, roasting, smoke-curing, and sun-curing as various steps of the processes. In the preparation of green tea, the tea is 1) withered (spread in the open indoors or outdoors and allowed to partially wither or wilt and dry), 2) steamed and parched, 3) disrupted (mechanical rolling to bruise the leaves, breaking cell walls and allowing greater release of flavor), 4) dried by tumbling in a blast of warm air, and 5) sometimes subjected to a final low-temperature roasting. Black tea is 1) withered indoors, 2) disrupted, 3) oxidized (leaves are left spread out in a climate-controlled room for a period of time and become progressively darker), 4) fixed (oven drying to stop the oxidation and preserve the tea), and 5) sometimes slow-roasted over charcoal to impart a smoky flavor as is found in some **Oolong** teas. The most extreme example is the famous **Lapsang Souchong** from Fujian Province in southern China, smoked over pinewood fires and characterized by a very strong smoky flavor that some non-aficionados equate with the smell of burning tires.

Both green tea and black tea can be finished in several ways. Black tea is sometimes formed into cakes or bricks including include pieces of the stem and stalk and are less expensive and lower quality teas traditional exported in quantity, often to the Soviet regions. Today domestic tea in China is still often produced in blocks or cakes, but most users in other parts of the world prefer loose-leaf tea, often compressed and vacuum packed to ensure freshness. Green tea is sometimes ground to a powdered, as is required in the **matcha** or "milled tea" used in the tea ceremony. By

far the majority of tea used around the world is in loose-leaf form, ready to be infused. As with so many contemporary artisanal products, tea production and cost varies enormously. Good quality and reasonably-priced Japanese *sencha* is widely available in loose leaf or teabags for a dollar or two per ounce. Among the most celebrated Japanese loose-leaf varieties is *gyokuro karigane*, consisting of the finest stem tips and attached leaves harvested at the very start of the tea harvest season and producing a rich broth-like tea. Gyokuro karigane is readily available from the best tea importers, but expect to pay at least \$15 per ounce.

Teabags were invented in 1904 and the early ones were silk. Commercially-made disposable ones widely used today are made from chlorine-bleached materials. For the best bag-tea, look for non-bleached products to avoid the carcinogens associated with chlorine-bleaching. Better yet, use loose leaf tea and prepare it with re-usable cloth tea bags, tea balls, or the now-popular basket infusers inserted in the top opening of your favorite mug or teapot. Consider purchasing a teapot with a built in sieve infuser, like the traditional artisan Yixing teapots. Such tea-making wares are not only safe, they preserve natural resources and reduce waste.