# Lineage of Eccentricity: A Kōrin-Kenzan Pottery Collaboration as the Nexus

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## 1. Introduction

Rinpa, or the Kōrin School, is usually considered to embody the decorative nature of traditional Japanese art. The attributed Rinpa founder, Ogata Kōrin (1658–1716), as well as two of his most identified predecessors, Hon'ami Kōetsu (1558–1637) and Tawaraya Sōtatsu (c. 1570–c. 1640), is most renowned for paintings that feature motifs such as flowers, deer, and famous local places. While art historians have long centered around these artworks to celebrate their ornamental aesthetics, other Rinpa practices only seem to receive attention in recent years, one of which being the pottery-making collaboration between Kōrin and his younger brother Kenzan (1663–1743). In this paper, I will examine a pair of plates depicting the Zen monks Kanzan and Jittoku made by the brothers to discuss their transmedia endeavor.

Relevant scholarly discussion about the Kōrin-Kenzan collaboration on ceramics has focused on family history, brotherly love, and the production technique. Combining these attempts, I argue that the Ogata brother's collaboration is symbiotic with various interconnected elements in the Genroku era (1688–1704). For Kōrin and Kenzan, their personal history and social context are interwoven, which guides them onto a life path they might have never imagined. The pair of plates made by the brother can be not only a witness to their ups and downs in life, but also a nexus that builds a lineage of eccentricity, particularly with Kōetsu and Sakai Hōitsu (1761–1828). As such a lineage is not commonly attached to Rinpa, I hope to challenge the past interpretation which limits this school of artists in the decorative mode, and shed new light on their heterogeneous artistic practices.

## 2. The Context of Production: Personal and History

Before turning to the artwork, it is worth reviewing the personal life and social context that eventually led the Ogata brothers to collaborate as artists. Kōrin and Kenzan were born as the second and third sons when their family textile business was still prosperous with the lavish patronage mainly from Tōfukumon-in (1607–78), a consort of the emperor.[1] Because of its material wealth, the Ogata family occupied a social status called city merchants (*machishū* 町衆). The political and economic regulation over this social class made it a cultural rebel against the Tokugawa authority, as *machishū* could only invest its resources in culture and aesthetics.[2] Naturally, Sōken (1621–87), the patriarch of the Ogata house and a cultured man himself, cultivated Kōrin and Kenzan with Nō drama, Chinese and Japanese literature, as well as the Kano school artistic training.[3] While both Kōrin and Kenzan lived a carefree early life, pursuing art more as a hobby than a serious career option, they develop different personalities: Kōrin is a libertine spending his money on Nō drama and pleasure quarters.[4] Kenzan, on the other hand, is an introspective Sinophile devoting himself to practicing Chinese literati values and behaviors, which made an appeal to live an idealized but eccentric reclusion life (*insei* 隠栖; *inton* 隠遁).[5]

However, the death of Tōfukumon-in in 1678 brought the family fortune to an end, which preceded the death of Sōken for nearly a decade.[6] Their death resulted in a definitive twist for the brothers' career. It is also an epitome of social changes that occurred to the upper-tier in that ten years, with court patronage dwindling and the samurai class running out of money to pay their loans to *machishū*.[7] After the declining family business was passed to the eldest

1 Masahiko Kawahara, *The Ceramic Art of Ogata Kenzan*, trans. Richard L. Wilson (Tokyo: Kodansha International Ltd. and Shibundo, 1985), 53–54.
2 Kawahara, *Ceramic Art of Ogata Kenzan*, 54.
3 Frank Feltens, *Ogata Kōrin: Art in Early Modern Japan* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021), 2–5.
4 Feltens, *Ogata Kōrin*, 17–25.
5 For Kenzan's character, see Kawahara, *The Ceramic Art*, 54. For the life of reclusion, see a more detailed discussion in W. Puck Brecher, *The Aesthetics of Strangeness: Eccentricity and Madness in Early Modern Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2013), 25.
6 Kawahara, *Ceramic Art of Ogata Kenzan*, 53–54.
7 Kawahara, 53–54.

son, Kōrin and Kenzan departed with their inheritance of estates, money, and cultural mementos. The life of the brothers seemed to be vastly parted as they followed their early life traces, albeit both strived to establish themselves as artists. Kenzan under the Chinese influence adopted a rather deviant lifestyle of hermitage near a mountain in northwestern Kyoto, changing his birth name into Shinsei, literally meaning 'deep reflection.' Thanks to his physical proximity to a master kiln in front of the Ninnaji temple, Kenzan learned a great deal about ceramics and eventually built his first kiln in 1699.[8] Nevertheless, his first take on the career seemed to exhaust rather than build up his inherited fortune. In parallel, while Kōrin in the 1701 Edo made his name as a *hokkyo*, a title attributed to high-profile artists nationwide, he continued his playboy living style, which led to an illicit love scandal, eventually costing him almost all his inheritance.[9] It was until 1709 when Kōrin returned to Kyoto that the brothers crossed their paths again to solve their financial problems, and they figured out the way to do it was through collaboration, namely Kōrin painting the pottery made by Kenzan.[10] The mingling of economic, political, and cultural elements eventually yielded the production of this pair of plates, which I will turn to in the next section.

## 3. Transmedia Endeavor: an Analysis of the Plates

Carrying the history of its producers in a changing time, the pair of plates under analysis epitomizes the personality of artists as well as its various sources of inspiration. Mimicking the quality of poem cards (*shikishi* 色紙), the plates have a flat and square shape, with a paper-like yellowish undertone. Though it is not clear whether these two plates were made together, they still exhibit certain symmetry in composition. The plates contain the images of two Zen monks from the Tang Dynasty, namely Kanzan and Jittoku. Accompanied by their own poems, these two figures demonstrate the bold and confident artistic hand of Kōrin. Kōrin's signatures, at the bottom left and right respectively, are *Seisei* 青々 and *Jakumei* 寂明. Kōrin adopted these two pseudonyms following his brother's advice, an act that shows their brotherly love and the reciprocal construction of their professional identities.[11] The pseudonyms also help date the piece roughly to 1709.[12]

The *shikishi* format is an attempt to combine painting and calligraphy. Inscribed with poems, *shikishi* is traditionally pasted onto painted screens or albums.[13] It is a classical practice within Rinpa, as Kōetsu and Sōtatsu produced some for tea gatherings (e.g., Fig. 1).[14] Being a devoted potter artist, Kenzan takes a step further by transforming the paper medium into his signature ceramic type called *kakuzara* 角皿, probably used for sweets or portions of food.[15] He uses the techniques of iron underglaze and white slip to facilitate delicate surface decoration for Kōrin: The iron oxide-bearing pigment, imitating Kōrin's diffuse ink washes, sits atop the white slip, which covers the foundation clay. Then an extra layer of a transparent glaze will be applied above the pigment to yield a translucent quality for the ceramics.[16]

With such a solid technological foundation, the figures of Kanzan and Jittoku appear vivid and lively on the ceramics. While these two Zen monks have been popular motifs in Japan for their distinguished eccentricity and the enlightened nature underneath, Kenzan, well exposed to Chinese paintings and manuals, may also come across their original looks in printed illustrated manuals such as *Marvelous Traces of Daoist Immortals and Buddhist Masters* (*Senbutsu kisō* 仙佛奇踪), which documents the life of these two mythical recluses.[17] The story goes that these two Zen masters with divine qualities live together by scavenging left food from a nearby temple, pursuing freedom and inner peace.[18]

Rendered in a deliberately abstract and stylized manner, these two characters appear ageless and cartoonish on the plates. In an almost empty background, only a few

8 Kawahara, *The Ceramic Art*, 51.

9 Feltens, *Ogata Kōrin*, 17–18.

10 The dating of the Kōrin-Kenzan collaboration is still under scholarly debate. As noted by Hiroshi Mizuo and several others, the artistic collaboration started in 1699, when Kenzan opened his first kiln. But Feltens suggests that while they started to help each other sometimes between 1699 and 1701, it is only about logistics. Only when Kōrin returned to Kyoto in 1709 that their artistic collaboration began. For Mizuo, see Hiroshi Mizuo, *Edo Painting: Sotatsu and Korin*, trans. John M. Shields (New York: John Weatherhill, Inc., 1978), 143–4. For Feltens, see *Ogata Kōrin*, 144. Given that Feltens proposes this dating based on newer evidence, I adopt his in this paper.

11 Feltens, *Ogata Kōrin*, 144.

12 Feltens, 146.

13 Feltens, 147.

14 John T. Carpenter, *Designing Nature: The Rinpa Aesthetic in Japanese Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 14, 62.

15 Richard L. Wilson, *The Potter's Brush: The Kenzan Style in Japanese Ceramics* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 2001), 62.

16 Kawahara, *The Ceramic Art*, 68–70.

17 John T. Carpenter, *Designing Nature*, 88. Carpenter suggests that Sōtatsu atelier and his followers may be quite familiar with books such as this.

18 Helmut Brinker and Hiroshi Kanazawa, *Zen Masters of Meditation in Images and Writings*, trans. Andreas Leisinger (Zürich: Artibus Asiae Publishers, 1996), 142.

washes at the bottom indicate that they are in the wild. Kanzan, identified by the scroll held in his hand, occupies the bottom left of the picture plane. He wears an ambiguous smile hinted by a slight twist of his mouth, eyes seemingly peering at his own poem at the top right: "I live in the mountain, with no one knowing my presence. Amidst the clouds, I am in solitude." A similar composition is reiterated in the Jittoku plate. Holding a broom in his hand, Jittoku looks up to the poem at the top left corner. As he faces back at the viewer, his expression is also ambiguous, but the color tonal gradation on his face is not as distinctive as Kanzan's. Jittoku's poem is longer than his companion: "Always called as Foundling, my name is not by chance. Without any other relatives, Kanzan is my only brother. Our minds resonate, our emotions deviant. [If anyone asks] 'How old are you'? [I will reply] 'How many times has the Yellow River turned limpid'?" Kenzan may empathize with these two figures on their shared pursuit of spiritual freedom and individuality, and it is worth noting that his pseudonym Kenzan coincides with a similar phonetics to that of Kanzan. The extracted two poems can also be a reference to Kenzan's own brotherly bond with Kōrin, for they, too, struggle to earn a living and go through life hardships as each other's witnesses and supporters.

To conclude, the choice of subject matter can be a direct expression of Kenzan's identity as a Sinophile hermit, while it also hits the keynote of eccentricity popularly pursued by Rinpa artists. The balanced composition between imagery and calligraphy signifies the equal importance of Kōrin and Kenzan in the production. In this pair of plates as in many other collaborations, the brothers actively make references to past practices within and outside the artistic lineage they identify with, and are brave enough to transcend traditional media to achieve their own creative ambition. Their boundary-crossing act would later become an inspiration for future artists, which reinforces their critical position in the genealogy of eccentricity.

## 4. Before and After: a Nexus in the Genealogy of Eccentricity

Albeit the pair of plates are decorative in the sense that artists paint descriptively on the tableware, it inherits more legacy from the Kōetsu-Sōtatsu production and inspires later Rinpa artists such as Sakai Hōitsu. Nevertheless, I do not suggest that the artistic trace of eccentricity is a linear one. Instead, as Lillehoj points out, premodern Japan developed a cyclical time model, where the past is integral to the present, and the future can reiterate what is before it.[19] Following this model, I argue that Kōrin and Kenzan's cooperation incarnated in this pair of plates serves as one of the interlocking layers in Rinpa history. Though Kōrin and Hōitsu both consciously construct a sense of continuity with the past, their ideas of art marketing and self-invention are not what some consider to be modern subjectivity.[20] It is more an art-historical awareness to situate themselves in a more advantageous position to confront the changing social order.[21]

For Kōrin and Kenzan, they are familiar with Kōetsu due to their family connection and artistic practices. They share a distant bond by blood, as the Ogata great-grandfather married Kōetsu's sister.[22] Politically, both the Ogata family and Kōetsu built a relationship with Toyotomi Hideyoshi, the rival of Tokugawa Ieyasu, which made them the political outcast once Ieyasu established his reign in 1603.[23] Intended to remove Kōetsu from any further political participation, Ieyasu in 1615 granted Kōetsu a marginal area in Kyoto named Takagamine,[24] which later developed as an artistic hub—Kenzan would eventually inherit a cottage there and build his first kiln nearby.[25] Hence, a pursuit of independent artistic expression is very much a family tradition for Kōrin and Kenzan under Tokugawa's censorship and political dominance.

The Ogata brothers are also connected with Sakai Hōitsu, the successor and revivalist of this eccentric lineage. Five generations before Hōitsu, the head of the Sakai family endowed Kōrin with notable employment as an artist and naturally collected many of his works.[26] The family collection then inspired Hōitsu to study and commemorate Kōrin, as he eventually exhibited and compiled works by the two brothers on the centennial of Kōrin's death, among which are books such as *Kōrin hyakuzu* 光琳百図 (One hundred works by Kōrin) and *Kenzan iboku* 乾山遺墨 (Paintings and calligraphy by the late Kenzan).[27] In the meantime, Hōitsu is no less eccentric than his Rinpa

19 Elizabeth Lillehoj, "Introduction," in *Critical Perspectives on Classicism in Japanese Painting, 1600-1700*, ed. Elizabeth Lillehoj (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004), 10.
20 Brecher, *The Aesthetics of Strangeness*, 17.
21 Lillehoj, "Introduction," 11.
22 Mizuo, *Edo Painting*, 80.
23 The Ogata great-grandfather Dohaku was said to be a retainer of Asai Nagamasa, whose daughter became the mistress in Hideyoshi family, while Kōetsu himself is Hideyoshi's former retainer. For Dohaku, see Ibid. For Kōetsu, see Brecher, *The Aesthetics of Strangeness*, 42.
24 Brecher, *The Aesthetics of Strangeness*, 42.
25 Kawahara, *Ceramic Art of Ogata Kenzan*, 53.
26 Feltens, *Ogata Kōrin*, 128–9.
27 Yūzo Yamane, "The Formation and Development of Rimpa Art," in *Rimpa Art: From the Idemistsu Collection, Tokyo* (London: The British Museum Press, 1998), 44.

forebears, for he also withdrew from official life to join a monastery, but finally quit it in the pursuit of leisure and aesthetics.[28]

Therefore, the three generations of Rinpa artists construct their lineage of eccentricity with similar elements: political ostracism, aesthetic pursuit, and a constant awareness of interpreting the past. All three generations can be viewed as the social dropout of their time, with their distinct individualities contributing to a much more diverse artistic spectrum than traditional interpretation.

## 5. Conclusion: More than a Decorative Mode

Rinpa, traditionally considered a school of artists that excels in their decorative paintings, is in fact a later construct primarily in Meiji Japan.[29] Since then, the scholarly attention on Rinpa artists has rested on its decorative attempt, while the nuanced aspects under cover of decoration are downplayed. This paper aims to challenge the previous understanding by discussing the lineage of eccentricity within Rinpa. While the Kōrin-Kenzan collaboration on pottery still has an ornamental nature by painting on utilitarian wares, some of the select motifs such as the Zen masters discussed in this paper have an undertone of individuality and eccentricity that connects three generations of artists in this school. The transmedia collaboration is a nexus of this lineage, but it is by no means the only one in the spectrum. We still need deeper reflection on our rather linear understanding of Rinpa art, if not Japanese art in general, which in fact has the potential to question an underlying hierarchy of representation that trivializes decoration in visual culture.

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28 Brecher, *The Aesthetics of Strangeness*, 18.

29 Yamane, "The Formation and Development of Rimpa Art," in *Rimpa Art*, 13.

## Figure

**Figure 1**
Hon'ami Kōetsu (calligraphy) and attr. Tawaraya Sōtatsu (underpainting), *Poem by Kamo no Chōmei with Underpainting of Cherry Blossoms*, 1606.
7 15/16 × 7 in. (20.2 × 17.8 cm). Ink, gold, and silver on paper.

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