



元禄・宝永, *Genroku-Hôei*

The Genroku-Hôei period (1688-1713), was certainly the peak of the Tokugawa shogunate (1600-1868) where the regime attained a high state of development and stability. The end of the 17th century is known for economic prosperity and its lively mood and luxurious urban life where literature and the arts flourished. It was during this period that Japan produced such famous authors as Chikamatsu (1653-1725), Saikaku (1642-1693) and Basho (1644-1694). It was also during this period that Nô dance, Kabuki, tea ceremony, ikebana, garden architecture, ukiyoe and ceramics, along with many other arts blossomed or reached their apogée. It is not an accident that the 5th shogun, Tokugawa Tsunayoshi, who ruled between 1780 and 1709, was probably the most scholarly of all shogun – even if he was subsequently ridiculed as the *inu kubô*, the shogun of the dogs, for his misinterpreted edict for the protection of dogs and other animals that was part of an effort to promote compassion in his country. Even that is not necessarily an accident, for the Genroku- Hôei culture was the culture of the merchant class, the *chônin* from Osaka and Kyoto area, and is also well known for its corruption and its spoiled samurai class. This culture centered on licensed quarters, pleasure districts packed with courtesans, musicians and actors. Nevertheless, cities were filled with instructors in all arts to teach the *chônin* and the samurai class proper etiquette and arts



Large dish on footring, spreading flat rim. Design of Chichibotan (Lion and peonies). Late 18th century.

appreciation, and that infatuation for arts in urban centers generated a high demand for artisans of all sorts of refined goods. In fact, the intellectual elite of the time, like Sen no Rikyû who definitively influenced the rituals of the tea ceremony by teaching the use of common instruments, or Bashô teaching the art of Haiku, a poetry genre using ordinary vocabulary and brevity to produce rapidly-conceived poems conveying universal meanings, were teaching humility and frugality in reaction to the fatuous and materialistic urban climate that was prevalent. Meanwhile the 5th shogun Tsunayoshi was doing his best to promote the study of Confucianism among the ruling Samurai class. Thus, the Genroku-Hôei culture constantly underwent a continuous movement back and forth between lavish luxury and the economy of deeds, reflecting a society constantly pulled between a merchant society at its business peak

and the poverty of the commoners for whom life was harsh (as some laws would put animals rights above human rights!), just as it was for the lower-ranked samurai.

This dichotomy of the Japanese society of the Genroku-Hôei period is conveyed through the production of the artisans of the times, as the finest objects are made with the finest know-how of the time, but with the simplest designs, and the most common motives. Artisans rarely chose expensive materials such as gold or ivory, as they would definitely convey too much of a “nouveau rich” image. Instead, they used simple materials, commonly available, like lacquer or clay, but refined to a point never attained afterward. It is no wonder that some of the finest antiques preserved today come from the Genroku-Hôei period, thanks to traditional storage houses (*kura*) where people kept safe all their valuables against fire, earthquake and thieves, so that we can still enjoy them today!

The period also saw a boom in the exporting of Japanese porcelain, through the Dutch merchants of the VOC based in Nagasaki. Imari porcelain is a magnificent example, with its gorgeous vases and plates filled with colors, enamels and gold, all of which were deeply appreciated by Europeans. The Genroku-Hôei period became the highest point of imari production, and, although the amount produced was relatively small compared to that of other periods, imari porcelain from the second half of the 17th century remains the most coveted by collectors.



Large oviform covered jar on footring, high shoulder, wide upright neck. High domed cover with wide everted rim, a finial modeled as a *bijin*, Japanese beauty dressed in kimono. 1680-1700.