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JAPANESE CERAMICS IN THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF MALAYSIA: A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

SERAMIK JEPUN DI MUZIUM NEGARA MALAYSIA: TINJAUAN SEJARAH

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Abstract

This study offers a historical overview of Japanese ceramics within the collection of the National Museum of Malaysia, highlighting their unique cultural and historical significance in contrast to the more extensively studied Chinese ceramics. Drawing upon archival research, interviews with museum curators, and existing literature, the research reveals that Japanese ceramics in Malaysia are relatively rare and often linked to colonial-era acquisitions rather than direct historical trade between Japan and the Malay Peninsula. The study contextualizes the presence of these ceramics within the broader framework of maritime trade networks in East and Southeast Asia, particularly during the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries, when political shifts such as the Ming Dynasty's trade bans enabled Japan's emergence as a key ceramic exporter. Furthermore, the research discusses how colonial collecting practices and knowledge production influenced the acquisition and interpretation of Japanese ceramics in Malaysian museums. This overview contributes to filling the scholarly gap on Japanese ceramics in Malaysia and invites further study into their historical trajectories and cultural meanings within Southeast Asian contexts.

Keywords: Japanese ceramics, National Museum of Malaysia, Southeast Asian maritime trade, colonial collection, material history, cultural heritage

Abstrak

Kajian ini menunjukkan gambaran keseluruhan sejarah seramik Jepun dalam koleksi Muzium Negara Malaysia, menonjolkan kepentingan budaya dan sejarahnya yang unik berbeza dengan seramik Cina yang dikaji secara lebih meluas. Berdasarkan penyelidikan arkib, temu bual dengan kurator muzium dan penulisan sedia ada, makalah ini mendedahkan bahawa seramik Jepun di Malaysia agak jarang dan sering dikaitkan dengan pemerolehan era kolonial dan bukannya perdagangan sejarah langsung antara Jepun dan Semenanjung Tanah Melayu. Makalah ini mengkontekstualisasikan kehadiran seramik dalam rangka kerja rangkaian perdagangan maritim yang lebih luas di Asia Timur dan Asia Tenggara, khususnya pada abad ke-17 hingga ke-19, apabila peralihan politik seperti larangan perdagangan Dinasti Ming membolehkan kemunculan Jepun sebagai pengeksport seramik utama. Tambahan lagi, makalah ini membincangkan bagaimana amalan pengumpulan era kolonial dan penghasilan pengetahuan mempengaruhi pemerolehan dan tafsiran seramik Jepun di muzium Malaysia. Gambaran keseluruhan ini menyumbang kepada mengisi jurang ilmiah mengenai seramik Jepun di Malaysia dan membuka kajian lanjut mengenai garis masa sejarah dan makna budayanya dalam konteks Asia Tenggara.

Kata kunci: *Seramik Jepun, Muzium Negara Malaysia, perdagangan maritime Asia Tenggara, koleksi penjajahan, sejarah material, warisan kebudayaan*

INTRODUCTION

Porcelain as an artistic medium only began to take root in Japan in the early seventeenth century—a relatively late start compared to China and Korea. In China, the craft of producing true porcelain had already begun as early as the Tang Dynasty and continued to thrive during the Yuan and early Ming periods, making it the centrepiece of the ceramic industry. Although porcelain clay was available in Japan, and its potential was recognised through fine Chinese examples, it was never fully explored. Japanese preferences in pottery leaned towards coarsely glazed earthenware and stoneware, styles originating in China during the Song Dynasty, which had found a special place in the Japanese tea ceremony. As a result, porcelain held little cultural value in Japan at the time (Ho 1994).

By the sixteenth century, Japanese potters still lacked the technical knowledge to produce porcelain. Meanwhile, the kilns of Jingdezhen in China had been perfecting high-fired wares and sophisticated glazing for more than five centuries, and Korean potters continued to draw upon the artistic heights of celadon craftsmanship from the Koryŏ period (918–1392) (Seyock 2006). This situation changed dramatically in the mid-seventeenth century. Political unrest following the fall of the Ming Dynasty disrupted the flow of Chinese porcelain to both Europe and Southeast Asia. For the Dutch—then the main exporters of Chinese porcelain to Europe and with trade outposts across Southeast Asia—this meant their primary supply was suddenly cut off. In response, they turned to Japan, encouraging its potters to produce porcelain for export. This opportunity spurred Japanese artisans to compete in the highly profitable Southeast Asian ceramic market. Many scholars see this as the turning point that marked the birth of Japan's ceramic export trade (Tai et al. 2020).

Phase	*Total pieces*	*Exports to*	
		Europe	*South Seas*
II (1659–61)	101,960 100%	9,102 8%	92,858 91%
III (1662–82)	95,828 100%	8,988 9%	86,840 90%
Total	197,788 100%	18,090 9%	179,698 90%

Fig1. Avarage annual Japanese ceramic exports in the seventeenth century
Sources: Ho C. (1994)

Figure 1. illustrates that exported Japanese products spanned a full range of quality, as reflected both in their varying prices and in archaeological finds. Although Japanese ceramics show certain similarities to Chinese ceramics, there are notable differences that distinguish them from other export wares. First, the Japanese ceramic industry never operated on the vast scale of the porcelain kilns at Jingdezhen, where production reached massive volumes during the Ming and early Qing periods. Even at its peak in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the porcelain industry in Arita employed no more than a few thousand workers. Second, Japanese art has long encouraged the emergence of strong artistic personalities and distinctive individual styles. In the field of ceramics, several potters became highly celebrated, including Chōjirō (d. 1592), Kenzan (1661–1742), Ninsei (1595–1666), Dōhachi II (1784–1858), and Dōhachi III (1783–1855) (Yatim 1978).

The arrival of the Japanese in Malaysia did not begin with the outbreak of the Second World War in 1941. In fact, maritime trade from the "Land of the Rising Sun" had already brought Japanese pottery and ceramic wares to Southeast Asia, including Malaysia, as early as the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Nevertheless, this trade was relatively minor compared to that of China, which had dominated the South Seas long before the arrival of Western colonial powers. Brunei marketed such Japanese products mainly in Malacca. To Brunei's east and north, a lesser but still significant trade link connected Brunei with Korea, the Ryukyus, and southern Japan. By the sixteenth century, a community of Japanese émigrés was established on the western coast of Luzon. These enterprising individuals traded raw cotton and forest products, engaged in pearl fishing, and even retrieved old pottery from abandoned native graves. They then cleverly resold these as "antique Luzon wares" back in Japan, where they were prized for use in the tea ceremony, which was highly fashionable at the time. Evidence of this period of trade includes the remains of a junk recently recovered from Brunei Bay, loaded with as many as 12,000 ceramic items—including blue-and-white porcelain from Jingdezhen—dating from that era (Harrisson 2003).

The presence of Japanese ceramics in the cultural artefact collections of the National Museum of Malaysia is considered particularly rare, especially compared to Chinese ceramics, whose presence is well documented through archaeological discoveries, trade history, and the cultural transfer of objects in the maritime trade network. This rarity is further underscored by the fact that Japan had once entered the *Sakoku* era—its self-imposed isolation policy implemented by the Tokugawa shogunate from the seventeenth century until the mid-nineteenth century. The aim of this isolation was to close Japan to almost all foreign relations and trade in order to preserve internal stability and prevent external influences from contaminating traditional Japanese culture and heritage. Laver (2011), in *The Sakoku Edicts and the Politics of Tokugawa Hegemony*, notes that this isolation served as a political tool to control the *daimyo* (feudal lords) and consolidate Tokugawa central authority. Moreover, the policy was designed to manage foreign relations selectively, particularly with the Dutch and Chinese, rather than to impose a total ban on contact with all foreign nations.

Western historians have often described Japan as practising a "closed-door policy" under *sakoku*. However, this interpretation is far from accurate. Ronald Toby (1991) offers a revisionist analysis challenging the dominant narrative that portrays Tokugawa Japan as entirely sealed off from the outside world. He argues that *sakoku*, often seen as a symbol of isolationism and xenophobia, was a strategic framework for controlling foreign relations, enabling the *bakufu* to strengthen domestic political authority and to structure international engagement on Japanese terms. Through his examination of Japan's diplomatic relations with Korea's Joseon dynasty, the Ryukyu Kingdom, and its trade interactions with China and the Netherlands, Toby highlights the vital role of Asian states in shaping Tokugawa Japan's political system and state structure. His work underscores that, although foreign relations were strictly limited and carefully monitored, Japan was never entirely cut off from Asia's regional networks. Rather, the Tokugawa government actively built a selective and strategic system of diplomacy and trade—what Toby describes as a form of "structured seclusion."

CERAMIC TRADE ROUTES IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

The ceramic trade in Southeast Asia represents one of the most significant dimensions of maritime history in the region, serving as a bridge between civilizations across the seas from the early centuries of the Common Era. Ceramics were not only utilitarian commodities but also prestige goods, cultural markers, and crucial archaeological evidence that reveal patterns of global interaction. Drawing on the works of Bellina (2022), Harrisson (2003), Witkowski (2016), Lim (2014), and Miksic (2009), it is possible to trace the evolution of ceramic trade routes in Southeast Asia through archaeological, historical, political, and cultural perspectives.

Bellina (2022) highlights the role of Southeast Asia as a critical hub of the Maritime Silk Road from the early first millennium CE. Archaeological evidence, such as glass beads, metals, and ceramics discovered at coastal sites like *Oc Eo* in the Mekong Delta, demonstrates long-distance connections with India, China, and the Middle East. These exchanges were not limited to economic commodities; they also transmitted technologies, religions, and cultural ideas. This early maritime interaction gave

rise to trade-oriented polities such as Funan, which flourished precisely because of their strategic position along the sea lanes. In this sense, the flow of ceramics and other goods laid the foundations for the emergence of Southeast Asian civilizations embedded in global networks.

Harrisson (2003) provides a more focused analysis of the period between 1350 and 1650, emphasizing the South China Sea as a vital artery for the distribution of ceramics. During this era, ceramics from China, Vietnam, and Thailand dominated regional markets, but the Ming dynasty's maritime ban significantly disrupted established flows. With the restriction of Chinese exports, new production centres emerged, especially in *Sawankhalok* and *Sukhothai* in Thailand, as well as in Vietnam, whose kilns supplied Southeast Asia with large quantities of ceramics. These goods were channelled through strategic entrepôts such as Melaka, Brunei, and Manila, from where they reached both regional and intercontinental markets. Archaeological discoveries, including terrestrial sites and shipwrecks, confirm the diversity of ceramic types in circulation and illustrate how Southeast Asia functioned as both a marketplace and a redistribution hub.

From a broader perspective, Witkowski (2016) examines the long-term history and distribution of ceramics in Southeast Asia, framing the subject within the field of historical marketing. He argues that ceramics should be understood not only as utilitarian wares but also as symbolic objects that conveyed aesthetic, cultural, and social meanings. By tracing their distribution across maritime trade routes, Witkowski demonstrates how ceramics shaped early patterns of international marketing and contributed to the processes of proto globalization. This perspective underscores the dual role of ceramics as both economic commodities and cultural signifiers in the development of global trade systems. Lim (2014) offers a concise but comprehensive synthesis in the *Encyclopedia of Global Archaeology*, outlining the relationship between Chinese and Southeast Asian ceramic trade across centuries. From the Tang and Song dynasties through the Ming and Qing, ceramics were among China's most valuable exports, with Southeast Asia serving as both a consumer and a redistribution center. When China's maritime restrictions curtailed exports, regional producers in Vietnam, Thailand, and the Philippines filled the vacuum. Lim highlights archaeological findings, particularly sherds from settlement sites and cargo from shipwrecks, which reveal the extent of ceramic trade and affirm the central role of maritime Southeast Asia as an indispensable node linking China, India, and the Islamic world. Miksic (2009), in the edited volume *Southeast Asian Ceramics: New Light on Old Pottery*, enriches the discussion by shifting attention to the ceramics of Southeast Asia itself, not only to Chinese imports. Bringing together a multidisciplinary approach that incorporates archaeology, art history, and anthropology, the book demonstrates how ceramics were integral not only to economic exchange but also to social life, religious practice, and artistic expression. By examining production centres in Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, Myanmar, and the Philippines, the volume reveals that Southeast Asian ceramics must be seen as both locally significant artifacts and active participants in the wider maritime trade system.

Taken together, these studies allow us to reconstruct the trade routes of ceramics across Southeast Asia as a multi-layered phenomenon. Bellina shows how early maritime interaction fostered trade-oriented policies and set the stage for centuries of exchange. Harrisson details the critical role of the South China Sea and the transformative impact of Ming restrictions in shaping regional production. Witkowski provides a long-term perspective on the distribution and symbolic meanings of ceramics within global marketing history. Lim synthesizes the broad trajectory of ceramic trade between China and Southeast Asia with strong emphasis on archaeological evidence. Miksic underscores the importance of local production and cultural dimensions in the study of ceramics. The synthesis of these works reveals that ceramic trade routes in Southeast Asia cannot be reduced to simple economic pathways. They constituted a complex socio-political and cultural landscape that shaped the region's history of maritime connectivity. From early nodes of the Maritime Silk Road to the flourishing ceramic exchanges of the late medieval period, and from the shifts induced by political decisions in China to the flourishing of regional kilns, ceramics embody the entanglement of Southeast Asia in wider global processes.

VOC, TOKUGAWA JAPAN, AND SOUTHEAST ASIA: THE DISSEMINATION AND TRADE OF CERAMICS

Within the framework of Tokugawa foreign policy, relations between Japan and the Dutch East India Company (VOC) represented a carefully managed form of economic and diplomatic interaction that served as a key conduit for information, technology, and goods from Europe. Following the enforcement of the *sakoku* edicts in 1639—which banned the entry of Christian missionaries and excluded other Western powers such as Spain and Portugal (Toby 1991; Arano 2005)—the VOC became the only European entity officially permitted to trade with Japan. The company's operations were relocated from Hirado to the man-made island of Dejima in Nagasaki, which became the exclusive site of contact between Japan and the European world. This relationship was pragmatic rather than ideological: the VOC agreed not to propagate Christianity, which the *bakufu* regarded as a grave threat, and in return they were allowed to conduct trade. The Dutch presented annual tribute gifts (*o-nenga*) and submitted scholarly reports known as *Oranda fusetsu-gaki*, which became a vital source of information about the outside world for the Tokugawa elite.

Beyond their economic role, the VOC also acted as an informal diplomatic agent, occasionally delivering letters or gifts from other foreign powers to Japan. This intermediary role illustrates that *sakoku* was more a policy of selective engagement than one of absolute isolation. Ronald P. Toby (1991) emphasises that the Japan–VOC relationship demonstrates the *bakufu*'s ability to control the narrative of international relations through highly regulated institutional and symbolic arrangements, with the VOC ritually "submitting" to Tokugawa sovereignty in their annual diplomatic ceremonies. Such practices not only reinforced the *bakufu*'s internal hegemony but also underscored the functional use of foreign relations as an instrument of domestic legitimacy.

From the seventeenth to the eighteenth centuries, the VOC played a crucial role in disseminating Japanese ceramics across Southeast Asia. This activity took place against the backdrop of major shifts in the Asian ceramic trade network, particularly after the Ming Dynasty's maritime trade bans and the early instability of the Qing Dynasty in China. This vacuum created opportunities for Japan, then under the Edo period (1603–1868), to emerge as a significant producer and exporter of ceramics in East Asia (Ho 1994). The VOC, as the sole European power authorised to trade legally with Japan via its post at Dejima in Nagasaki, capitalised on this exclusive arrangement to import large quantities of Japanese ceramics—particularly Arita, Imari, and Kakiemon ware—to its Asian administrative hub in Batavia (present-day Jakarta). From there, these ceramic goods were distributed to major ports across Southeast Asia, such as Melaka[1], Patani, Ayutthaya, Manila, and other trading towns (Ketel 2011; Klose & Schrire 2018). Japan, through production centres such as Arita in Kyushu, began producing export ceramics known as Arita ware or Imari ware, which were actively traded to Southeast Asia, China, and Europe. This trade was mediated by various commercial actors, including Chinese merchants, the Dutch East India Company (VOC), and Japanese traders themselves.

Ho (1994) discusses how Japan, despite implementing the *sakoku* (national seclusion) policy, remained engaged in foreign trade through designated ports such as Nagasaki, where interactions between Japan and foreign merchants were limited but significant. An important aspect of this history is the way Japanese producers adapted their designs, techniques, and decorative styles to suit the tastes of overseas markets. They not only imitated the shapes and motifs of Chinese ceramics that were popular among buyers but also introduced local elements that made their products distinctive and highly valued. The strong demand from Europe—particularly from the Netherlands—stimulated the rapid expansion of Japanese ceramic exports, leading to their widespread distribution across many parts of Asia and into Europe. Ho (1994) also examines how the maritime network, centred on key ports such as Batavia, Melaka, Manila, and trading hubs in Japan and China, formed critical nodes in the ceramic trade. Japan capitalised on these routes to strengthen its position in the regional ceramics market, thereby contributing indirectly to the early processes of East Asian economic integration. Ayutthaya, and Manila, as well as smaller entrepôts along the Malay Archipelago. This redistribution network not only catered to European colonial markets but also integrated into existing intra-Asian

trade circuits, where Japanese ceramics were exchanged alongside Chinese porcelain, Southeast Asian stoneware, and other regional commodities.

TYPES OF JAPANESE CERAMICS SOLD BY THE VOC IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

In the maritime trade landscape of Asia during the 17th and 18th centuries, the Dutch East India Company (VOC) emerged as a key player linking Japan with the outside world, particularly Southeast Asia and Europe. Following the opening of the port of Deshima in Nagasaki exclusively to the Dutch under the Tokugawa *sakoku* policy—which strictly limited foreign relations—the VOC became the sole official intermediary between Japan and the Western world. Through a well-organised trade network centred in Batavia, the VOC traded various types of Japanese ceramics, mainly sourced from the Kyushu region to strategic ports across Southeast Asia (Ho 1994).

Arita Ware

This ceramic type was among the earliest Japanese ceramics to be successfully developed into high-quality porcelain. It originated in the Kyushu region in the early 17th century, following the discovery of kaolin clay in the *Izumiyama* area—an essential raw material for producing hard, white porcelain. This discovery marked a turning point in the emergence of a competitive Japanese porcelain industry, providing artisans in Arita with the opportunity to create products on par with Chinese porcelain (Ho 1994).

In its early phase, Arita ware was characterised by its pristine white porcelain and cobalt blue decorations painted beneath the glaze (underglaze cobalt blue). This style strongly reflected the influence of Ming Dynasty blue-and-white porcelain, particularly in its floral motifs and geometric arrangements. However, with advances in firing technology and greater openness to external influences, Arita ware evolved. It began to incorporate bright colours and overglaze enamel decoration techniques, eventually giving rise to distinctive styles such as Kakiemon and Imari. The introduction of Arita ware to international markets occurred under strategic geopolitical circumstances. When the Ming Dynasty imposed its ceramic export ban (Ming Banned), Japan swiftly filled the gap in the global ceramics market. The Dutch East India Company (VOC), which held exclusive trading rights with Japan through the port of Deshima in Nagasaki, seized this opportunity by distributing Arita ware to Southeast Asia and Europe. It became one of the key commodities in maritime ceramic trade during the 17th and 18th centuries (Ho 1994).

Archaeological findings at major port sites such as Banten and Batavia reinforce this narrative. Ceramic fragments discovered in these areas display decorative styles and manufacturing techniques consistent with those produced in Arita, indicating an active and sustained trade network (Klose & Schrire 2018). Arita ware was more than just a trade item; it embodied the technical skill, aesthetic sensitivity, and cultural adaptability of Japanese artisans in responding to the tastes of foreign consumers. In the long history of Japanese ceramic production—particularly in Arita—three main stylistic phases can be identified, reflecting both technical advancements and responses to global demand: Ko-Imari, Shoki-Imari, and Export Arita. Ko-Imari, literally meaning "old Imari," refers to the earliest type of Arita ceramics produced in the early 17th century. It featured cobalt blue underglaze decorations on hard white porcelain surfaces, imitating the blue-and-white style of Ming Dynasty China. Although its designs were simple, this style showcased the precision and understated elegance of Japanese artistry. Ko-Imari was not only distributed domestically but was also found in VOC ports such as Batavia, making it one of Japan's earliest ceramic exports to gain popularity abroad. Shoki-Imari emerged as an evolution of Ko-Imari, when ceramic artisans began experimenting with additional colours such as red, green, yellow, and gold applied over the glaze. This style reflected an innovative spirit and openness to more vibrant and luxurious tastes. It aligned with foreign market demands and was often associated with large-scale production, especially when Chinese porcelain production was disrupted by political instability toward the end of the Ming Dynasty.

The culmination of this development was Export Arita—a style of ceramics produced specifically to meet international demand, particularly from Europe and Southeast Asia. Its designs were more dramatic and richly decorated, featuring motifs of flowers, exotic birds, and natural symbols adapted to appeal to foreign consumers. In this context, Export Arita represented not only the technical mastery of Japanese artisans but also their deep understanding of the global market and the cultural symbolism valued by overseas buyers. This type of ceramic often became part of the collections of European nobility and local elites in Southeast Asia, cementing its status as a symbol of luxury and social prestige.

Imari Ware

Imari ware refers to a type of Japanese export porcelain produced in Arita but shipped through the port of Imari, which began to attract global attention from the 17th century onward. This ceramic ware is distinguished by its striking and luxurious visual style—adorned with vivid colours such as red, blue, green, and gold set against a white porcelain background. Its decorations often depict traditional Japanese themes such as chrysanthemums, phoenixes, drifting clouds, and stylised Eastern landscapes, arranged in a complex yet harmonious composition. Unlike the early Arita ware, which was more domestic in focus and semi-commercial in nature, Imari ware was produced on a large scale for the express purpose of export. It directly catered to the tastes and demands of the international market, particularly in Europe and Southeast Asia. Among the Southeast Asian elite—in port cities such as Melaka, Batavia, and Ayutthaya—Imari ware served not only as functional tableware but also as palace decoration and a symbol of social status. Possession of such items signified the owner's connectedness to the wider world and a refined cosmopolitan taste.

In Europe, Imari ware became one of the most prized luxury goods, especially among the aristocracy in the Netherlands, France, and Germany. Its popularity surged when the export of Chinese porcelain was disrupted by the political upheavals marking the end of the Ming dynasty and the beginning of the Qing. In this context, Imari ware filled the market void by offering an equally beautiful yet more exotic alternative. Exceptional firing techniques, bold decorative compositions, and outstanding visual quality made this ceramic ware desirable not only as functional objects but also as collectible items representing power and refined aesthetics. As noted by Pamugari (n.d.), Imari ware played a role far greater than that of a mere trade commodity—it became a symbol of luxury, a marker of social standing, and a mediator of cross-continental cultural identity.

The aesthetic influence of Imari ware also extended well beyond its function as an export commodity. It significantly shaped the development of European decorative arts, particularly through imitation and local adaptation. In the Netherlands, for example, artisans in Delft began producing Delftware—a form of tin-glazed earthenware—seeking to replicate the style and refinement of Japanese porcelain. Motifs such as exotic flowers, birds, and curling clouds in Delftware clearly reflect direct inspiration from Imari ware. This phenomenon was not merely technical or market-driven, but also reflected how Europe appropriated and adapted foreign elements into its own aesthetic narrative and aristocratic identity.

In a parallel development, the Kakiemon style of ceramics from Arita also gained traction in the European market, though it adopted a different approach. While Imari ware emphasised drama and bold colour, Kakiemon ware embodied minimalism and aesthetic restraint—making careful use of empty space and presenting orderly motifs such as cranes, pine trees, and seasonal flowers. The visual balance of Kakiemon ware was well received among European noble collectors as it aligned more closely with artistic ideals of serenity and harmony.

Together, Imari and Kakiemon ware formed the core of early modern Japanese influence on European decorative arts. Their impact not only enriched the global ceramic heritage but also contributed to the birth of the Chinoiserie style in the 17th and 18th centuries. Although "Chinoiserie" literally refers to Chinese influence, many decorative elements in this trend—such as exotic flora and fauna, luxurious gold accents, and asymmetrical spatial arrangements—were directly inspired by Japanese ceramic designs, particularly those of Imari ware. These ceramics, despite their small size

and everyday appearance, played a significant role in the history of global cultural exchange. From workshops in Arita to palaces in Amsterdam and Batavia, Imari ware stands as evidence of the technical mastery of Japanese artisans and as a symbol of the interaction between East and West. It served as a medium through which beauty, power, and social meaning were conveyed across geography and culture.

Kakiemon Ware

This refers to a type of fine porcelain from Arita that emerged around the mid-17th century, renowned for its minimalist aesthetic and skilful use of white space. Unlike the dramatic and richly coloured Imari style, Kakiemon ware appears more serene and balanced, with delicate paintings rendered in soft hues such as reddish orange (aka-e), pale blue, yellow, and light green. The compositions are typically light and airy, leaving large portions of the surface unadorned, allowing negative space to become an integral part of the artistic expression. This approach reflects Japanese aesthetic principles such as shibui (elegant simplicity) and ma (meaningful space), making Kakiemon ware distinctive not only within the context of Japanese ceramics but also in the history of decorative arts worldwide. Frequently used motifs include cranes, pine trees, seasonal flowers, and other symbolic objects arranged asymmetrically yet harmoniously. Originally, Kakiemon ware was produced for the Japanese elite, including imperial court ceremonies and noble collections. However, during the same period, overseas demand—particularly from Europe—rose dramatically. Kakiemon porcelain became a highly prized export, shipped through the port of Imari alongside other types of Imari ware. The key difference, however, was that Kakiemon was more favoured by European collectors and royal households for its design, which was considered more "refined," aligning closely with European artistic values that emphasised balance, order, and delicacy of expression.

The enthusiastic reception of Kakiemon ware in Europe led to numerous attempts to replicate it, especially by leading porcelain manufactories such as Meissen in Saxony, Germany. Beginning in the early 18th century, Meissen artisans not only copied the shapes and motifs of Kakiemon but also recreated its decorative style in European porcelain. This imitation was not purely market-driven—it also represented an admiration for the artistic value embodied by Kakiemon. According to Nagatake (2003), the style's popularity and influence were so profound that Kakiemon became one of the primary models for Meissen's early experiments in producing original European porcelain. Kakiemon ware thus played a vital role in shaping Europe's perception of Japanese aesthetics. It helped introduce a different form of beauty—quieter, more understated, and deeply meaningful—that later influenced decorative styles such as Japonisme in the 19th century. In many ways, Kakiemon ware became the silent meeting point between two worlds of art: an East that was contemplative and restrained, and a West that admired and sought to interpret that beauty within its own artistic framework.

Nabeshima Ware

Nabeshima ware is among the most refined and exclusive types of Japanese porcelain, originally produced solely for the internal use of the ruling family of the Saga domain—the Nabeshima daimyo. Unlike Arita or Imari ware, which were made for broader markets including export, Nabeshima ware represented the pinnacle of Japanese porcelain artistry, created for official use, internal diplomatic gifts, and court ceremonies. Its designs are characterised by symmetrical arrangements, soft and harmonious colours, and a high-quality, smooth glaze finish. Common motifs include traditional Japanese symbols such as seasonal flowers, birds, or intricate textile patterns, painted with meticulous precision.

Satsuma Ware

Satsuma ware, or Satsuma-yaki, is a traditional form of Japanese pottery originating from the Satsuma domain (present-day Kagoshima) in southern Kyushu. Its history dates back to the late 16th century, when Korean potters were brought to Japan by the Shimazu clan daimyo following Japan's invasions of Korea (1592–1598). These artisans introduced pottery techniques and aesthetics that were

subsequently absorbed and adapted to local tastes. During the Edo period (1603–1868), Satsuma ware was produced in limited quantities for the nobility and samurai class. Its design was simple, made from pale yellow clay and coated with a fine crackled glaze—features that later became its hallmark. The style reflected the aesthetic of wabi-sabi, the appreciation of beauty in simplicity and imperfection (Geare 1915; Pollard 2005).

A major transformation occurred during the Meiji era (1868–1912), when Japan opened its borders to the outside world and began adapting traditional crafts for international markets. In this context, Satsuma ware underwent significant commercialisation. Large workshops such as Kinkozan and Yabu Meizan produced more luxurious items, intricately decorated with Japanese cultural imagery—Buddhist deities, natural landscapes, cherry blossoms, and cranes. These decorations often used bright enamel paints and lavish applications of gold, making Satsuma ware popular among European and American collectors. World's Fairs such as those in Paris (1867, 1878) and Chicago (1893) played a key role in introducing Satsuma as a symbol of Eastern exoticism, aligning with Orientalist tastes in the West (Pollard 2005).

However, rising demand also led to mass production, which eventually compromised the quality and authenticity of the art. While Satsuma ware continues to be produced, many modern scholars view the Meiji period as both its golden age and turning point, when traditional Japanese art was reinterpreted to suit global market demands. Today, early and Meiji-period Satsuma pieces are highly valuable collector's items, and they remain important subjects of study in art history, cultural diplomacy, and international trade. They represent not only the technical mastery of Japanese potters but also the dynamics of cultural adaptation in an era of transition towards modernity.

JAPANESE CERAMICS IN THE COLLECTION OF THE NATIONAL MUSEUM

During a fieldwork visit to the National Museum Repository in Kuala Lumpur, the author had the opportunity to closely examine the museum's ceramic collection. Interestingly, within the ceramics section, more than 24 Japanese ceramic pieces were identified and catalogued as part of the official collection of the Department of Museums Malaysia. Based on inventory reviews and interviews with curators and museum officers, it was noted that these Japanese ceramics originate from two main periods—the 17th century and the 19th century.

However, an important issue identified was the lack of detailed documentation for this collection. According to Puan Azlina Ariffin, one of the senior museum officers, systematic documentation and inventory work only began to receive serious attention in 2013. Prior to Before that—particularly for collections acquired since the establishment of the Department of Museums Malaysia in the post–Second World War period—many artefacts lacked comprehensive records of their provenance, cultural context, or origins. This situation makes research on older collections challenging, yet it also opens significant opportunities for re-imaging and reinterpreting them in the study of material heritage. Table 1 presents the documented data collected by the researcher during fieldwork, particularly through observation and documentation processes conducted at the National Museum Repository.

Table 1. Collection of Japanese Ceramics in the Department of Museums Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur (**Source:** Department of Museums Malaysia, 2025)

Ceramic	Photo	Artifacts description
Satsuma		This Satsuma plate has a height of 3 cm and a width of 32 cm. Its design features a white background as the main base, adorned with delicate floral motifs and depictions of three Japanese women wearing traditional Kimono attire. Based on its aesthetic characteristics and style of craftsmanship, this ceramic piece is believed to date back to the 19th century.
Imari		This Imari porcelain plate, measuring 5 cm in height and 39 cm in width, is one of the most striking Japanese ceramic artefacts discovered in the collection. Its beauty lies in the rich visual composition of floral elements and geometric forms, arranged in a dense and intricate manner. The vivid blue serves as the primary colour of the design, accentuated by touches of white and red that bring the entire surface of the plate to life with vibrancy and energy. The flamboyant style not only showcases the refinement of Japanese ceramic artistry but also reflects the aesthetic values appreciated within the social and cultural context of its time. With such a complex and meticulous design, it is no surprise that objects of this nature were considered symbols of luxury and high social status in their era. This plate is more than just a vessel; it is a work of art that embodies the taste and precision of Japanese society in producing objects that are not only functional but also visually captivating. Japanese ceramics featuring dense and eye-catching designs were specifically created for the European market in response to market demands. This was explained by Professor Yoko Taniguchi of the University of Tsukuba, Japan, during an online interview. She elaborated that the Japanese themselves place great importance on the concept of minimalism in crafting cultural objects, heavily influenced by the Zen philosophy which values balance and moderation. Wabi-sabi (わびさび) is a Japanese aesthetic philosophy that emphasises beauty in imperfection, the impermanent nature of all things, and simplicity. It teaches the appreciation of natural, modest, and aged beauty, rather than striving for flawless and eternal perfection.

(See Tsaknaki (2021), *Reflections on the Value of Imperfection in Crafts through the Japanese Philosophy of Wabi-sabi*).

Kutani

This Kutani plate, measuring 4.5 cm in height, 33.7 cm in width, and with a circumference of 105.5 cm, is believed to date back to the 17th century and stands as one of the finest examples of how Japanese ceramics served not only as functional household objects but also as cultural narrative canvases. The surface design depicts seven *tsubone* court ladies, who played important roles as entertainers and companions within the environment of the Japanese feudal court.

What makes this plate remarkable is the way these figures are portrayed—each adorned in richly coloured kimonos in hues such as green, blue, purple, and black. They are shown in an intimate and serene setting, surrounding the empress seated at the centre against a warm brown backdrop, while the rim of the plate is decorated with white chrysanthemum motifs set against a medallion background. These decorative elements are not merely aesthetic but carry deep symbolism related to status, beauty, and hierarchy within the private spaces of the Japanese court.

Unlike ceramics from China, Vietnam, or Thailand, this work demonstrates a bolder and more open approach in depicting actual court life, including its more personal and sensual aspects. It is not merely an art object, but also a reflection of the emotions, aspirations, and roles of court women within a world that was both closed and rich in ritual. Within the fine brushwork and careful selection of colours lies a narrative of humanity—of roles, sacrifices, and beauty within the constraints of a courtly environment that was grand yet silent.

Kakiemon

This large Kakiemon ceramic plate measures 7 cm in height, 55.5 cm in width, and has a circumference of 175 cm. It is believed to have been produced in the late 17th century, during the height of Japanese porcelain artistry.

The design of the plate features intricate and highly detailed motifs, including geometric patterns and floral arrangements carefully composed with precision. Interestingly, the visuals on the surface are divided by fine lines, which are thought to have served as guides for arranging and separating different types of

		dishes—a feature that may suggest its use during lavish banquets or formal gatherings. The physical and aesthetic characteristics of this plate highlight the elegance of the Kakiemon style, renowned for its refinement and the harmonious use of bright, striking colours. Shades such as purple, white, orange, and red are combined with great balance, making this plate not only a serving vessel but also a work of art that reflects the aesthetic sensibilities and social status of its owner at the time, as well as Japan's marketing techniques for exporting goods to Europe.
Nabeshima		This Nabeshima ceramic plate, measuring 37 cm in width, is believed to date back to the 17th century. It is renowned for its minimalist and soft use of colour, particularly in shades of blue and white, which are characteristic features of the Nabeshima ceramic aesthetic style.

Table 1 presents several examples from the Japanese ceramic collection held by the Department of Museums Malaysia. In order to trace the origins of these ceramics, the researcher conducted an interview with Asyaari Muhammad, a researcher and lecturer at ATMA, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, to gain his insights on the subject. Based on the narrative from this interview, it can be concluded that the study of Japanese ceramics in Malaysia is still a very new field, unlike the more established research on ceramics from China[2]. This is since the Malay Peninsula and China had a well-documented history of trade relations, as evidenced by old manuscripts and archaeological discoveries from both shipwreck excavations and terrestrial digs.

According to Asyaari, the presence of Japanese ceramics in the museum's collection is likely linked to the former British curators, and I share this view. This can be seen in the early history of museums in Malaysia, particularly in the selection of artefacts during the colonial period. Many early collections consisted of cultural objects owned and stored by British officers who served as the first curators in the Department of Museums Malaysia. For example, in the Sabah Museum, several ceramic pieces—especially those not originating from China—were once part of the personal collections of British officers and were later donated as part of the museum's early holdings.

As Asyaari further explained, cultural objects from abroad that are linked to a nation's history and heritage are often discovered during fieldwork or excavations connected to past historical events, such as early trade. This suggests that Japanese ceramics in Malaysia did not intentionally arrive here through direct historical trade routes but rather entered the country through channels such as the personal collections of colonial officers. This situation differs from neighbouring countries such as Indonesia and Thailand, which had direct trade relations with Japan before World War II—during the Batavia and Ayutthaya periods—when these ports served as hubs for trade with the Land of the Rising Sun. Ceramics were among the commodities traded into Southeast Asia, particularly after the *Ming Banned* policy in the 17th century, which spurred the commercialisation of Japanese ceramics as a substitute for Ming porcelain from China, meeting both utilitarian and market demands in the region.

It is well known that ceramics played a highly significant role in the formation of early cultures in Southeast Asia. Their functions ranged from food storage and domestic use to serving as ritual and spiritual implements for worship, funerary rites, and religious ceremonies. This is supported by an interview with Baszley Bee, who noted that ceramics are a vital cultural component, in parallel with the presence of temples in Southeast Asia. The development of clay technology enabled the production of ceramic vessels for religious and ritual purposes, a tradition that China later advanced into a more sophisticated ceramic industry through technological innovation.

In conclusion, the Japanese ceramics preserved in Malaysian museum collections are not simply remnants of maritime trade but also artefacts entangled in the politics of colonial collecting, curatorial authority, and postcolonial memory. Their presence highlights the dual narrative of Southeast Asian material history: on the one hand, the circulation of ceramics as commodities and ritual objects within vibrant Asian trade networks; on the other, the framing and interpretation of these objects within colonial epistemologies that positioned Western institutions as arbiters of heritage and value. While Chinese ceramics have long dominated the archaeological and historical discourse of the region, Japanese ceramics remain comparatively understudied, and their role in shaping cultural practices and trade connections in Southeast Asia deserves further scholarly attention.

Future research should therefore move beyond institutional collections and explore more grounded archaeological contexts. Field investigations at potential shipwreck sites, particularly in the Straits of Malacca, the South China Sea, and waters around Borneo, may yield crucial evidence of Japanese ceramics integrated into maritime trade during the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries. Such studies would not only enrich the historiography of Japanese–Southeast Asian exchanges but also recalibrate our understanding of the interplay between commerce, ritual, and colonial collecting practices. By situating Japanese ceramics within both their maritime and colonial trajectories, scholars can contribute to a more nuanced appreciation of their significance in the cultural and historical fabric of Southeast Asia.

ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION

The collection of Japanese ceramics at the Department of Museums Malaysia represents a unique set of artefacts that reveal a dimension of material history often overlooked compared to Chinese ceramics. Based on interviews with Asyaari Muhammad from ATMA, UKM, Baszley Bee from UMS, and officers from the National Museum and Sabah Museum, it can be concluded that research on Japanese ceramics in Malaysia is still in its early stages, unlike Chinese ceramics, which have long been the focus of academic and archaeological studies. This is understandable, given that trade relations between the Malay Peninsula and China are clearly documented in historical manuscripts and supported by archaeological evidence, such as shipwreck sites and terrestrial excavations.

In contrast, the presence of Japanese ceramics in Malaysia is most likely linked to the influence of British colonial curators during the early establishment of museum institutions in Malaya. Asyaari emphasises that during the colonial era, many museum collections came from the personal holdings of British officials, which were later donated or transferred to museum institutions. A clear example can be seen at the Sabah Museum Department, where a number of non-Chinese ceramics, including Japanese pieces, were donations from British officers who had served in North Borneo.

The establishment of museums during the colonial period was not merely an act of cultural preservation but also a display of power — a symbolic assertion of Western dominance over peoples they perceived as "uncivilised" and inferior to the white race. The Japanese ceramics at the National Museum, although seemingly East Asian cultural heritage, are in fact deeply entangled with the history of colonialism and European influence. During the British era in Malaya, the selection, cataloguing, and exhibition of artefacts were shaped by colonial epistemic authority — a form of white supremacy that positioned Europe as the ultimate arbiter of historical and aesthetic value. This meant that artefacts from Japan, China, or the Malay Archipelago were interpreted through a Western lens, often

disregarding the regional trading contexts, inter-Asian diplomatic relations, or the role of local communities in the circulation of such goods.

From a postcolonial perspective, this phenomenon can be seen as part of *colonial knowledge production*, where the museum functioned as an instrument of hegemony, structuring heritage discourse to fit colonial narratives. Japanese ceramics that arrived in Malaysia between the 17th and 19th centuries do not merely signify maritime trade connections but also reflect how colonialism-controlled access to, ownership of, and the telling of stories about these objects (Said 1978; Fanon et al. 1963; Bennett 2013).

The findings suggest that some Japanese ceramics in Malaysia may not have arrived through direct trade or diplomatic networks but rather through the personal acquisitions and transfers of colonial collections. This contrasts with neighbouring countries such as Indonesia and Thailand, which had direct trading relationships with Japan before World War II — especially during the Batavia (VOC) and Ayutthaya periods, when these regions served as Southeast Asia's major port hubs for trade with the Land of the Rising Sun. From the perspective of Asian maritime trade history, the circulation of Japanese ceramics in Southeast Asia was heavily influenced by the *Ming Ban* of the 17th century, when the Ming Dynasty in China halted ceramic exports. This created a major commercial opportunity for Japanese ceramic producers, particularly in Arita and Imari, to fill the market gap. Japanese ceramics subsequently became key commodities in Southeast Asian trade, especially in port cities with active trading links to Japan. Beyond trade, ceramics also played a significant cultural role in Southeast Asian societies. Baszley Bee emphasised in his interview that ceramics were not only used for domestic purposes such as food storage, but also in ritual contexts — including worship, funerary rites, and religious ceremonies. This perspective aligns with *material culture theory* (Miller et al. 2005), which asserts that objects are not merely physical entities but carriers of social, symbolic, and spiritual meaning. In the Southeast Asian context, the presence of ceramics at archaeological sites is often associated with religious centres such as temples, underscoring their role as mediums in ritual practices.

In sum, this analysis reveals that the presence of Japanese ceramics in Malaysian museum collections is not solely the result of historical trade networks between Japan and Malaya but is also profoundly shaped by the legacy of colonial collecting practices. This observation is consistent with Tony Bennett's (2013) *museum studies* perspective, which argues that museum collections during the colonial era were largely shaped by the narratives and tastes of colonial authorities — influencing how a nation's cultural heritage is recorded, displayed, and interpreted today.

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[1] Although no direct evidence exists to indicate that Japan established formal trade relations with Melaka, Shunzō Sakamaki (1964) emphasises the important role played by the Ryukyu Kingdom within the maritime trade networks of Asia, including its indirect connections with Melaka in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. While there is no record of official diplomatic missions, Ryukyuan ships are reported to have frequently called at and traded in the port of Melaka, which at the time was a major commercial hub in Southeast Asia. Through these interactions, Ryukyu acquired a variety of tropical goods such as spices, cotton, and other natural products for re-export to China and Japan. This pattern of exchange reflects Ryukyu's foreign policy strategy, which was characterised by diplomacy and peaceful engagement, and demonstrates its role as an economic and cultural bridge between East Asia and Southeast Asia. The exchange also included the circulation of goods such as ceramics, which carried both artistic and symbolic value that transcended political and geographical boundaries.

As noted by Aman and Ros (2016), although Japan did not maintain direct diplomatic or commercial links with Melaka, Ryukyu served as the primary channel for the exchange of goods between the two regions. Through its tributary relationship with the Ming Dynasty, Ryukyu gained access to ports such as Melaka, where it traded Japanese products—including ceramics and swords—while importing Southeast Asian commodities such as spices, cotton, and agarwood. This relationship is corroborated by Chinese historical records documenting Ryukyuan trading activities in Melaka, thereby underscoring the city's importance within Ryukyu's maritime network.

[2] The most recent research related to Japanese ceramics was authored by Othman Yatim (1985), who compiled documentation and conducted a study on the Japanese ceramic collection at the National Museum of Malaysia. This included examples from various eras, such as Arita, Imari, Nabeshima, Satsuma, and Kutani, which are part of the Department of Museums Malaysia's holdings. However, this study was primarily limited to documentation and left many gaps, particularly regarding the provenance of these Japanese ceramics and how they entered the museum's collection.

The study by Baco, Bee, and Chia (2022) demonstrated how research on Chinese ceramics recovered from shipwrecks in Malaysian waters provides crucial evidence of international maritime trade networks. Identified ceramics included pieces from the Tang, Song, Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties, indicating a long history of trade relations between China and the Malay Peninsula. Several shipwreck sites, such as those at Tanjung Tuan (Melaka), Pantai Bidong (Terengganu), and Kuala Selinsing (Perak), contained rich collections of ceramics, including blue-and-white ware, celadon, and white porcelain from the renowned kilns of Jingdezhen and southern China.

These ceramics not only demonstrated economic and aesthetic value but also served as chronological markers and evidence of established trade routes. They reflected Southeast Asia's high demand for luxury goods from China and the role of local ports as distribution hubs for ceramics to further destinations, including the wider Nusantara and possibly the Ryukyu Islands. Such findings support the hypothesis that Melaka, as a major port, played a key role in redistributing Chinese ceramics, which may have been brought in by traders from both China and Ryukyu. In this context, ceramics become important archaeological evidence for economic relations that transcended geographical and cultural boundaries.

The research by Muhamad (2010) reinforces and strengthens the findings presented by Baco, Bee, and Chia (2022) regarding the Malay Peninsula's pivotal role as a major hub in Asia's maritime ceramic trade. Through archaeological site investigations in Melaka, Kuala Selinsing, Pengkalan Bujang, and Santubong, Muhamad confirmed that Chinese ceramics—particularly celadon, blue-and-white ware, and Jingdezhen porcelain—were actively traded and widely distributed in the region as early as the 9th century. This aligns with the material evidence examined by Baco et al., in which similar ceramic fragments were found in Malaysian shipwrecks, further confirming the sea as the primary conduit for the ancient ceramic trade.

Both studies emphasise that ceramics functioned not only as trade goods but also as markers of social status and symbols of material culture in local societies. Furthermore, they concur that ceramics reached Melaka not solely via direct routes from China but also through complex trade networks that included Ryukyu, Vietnam, and Thailand—reflecting the dynamics of multilateral trade that crossed

geographical and political boundaries. In this regard, Muhamad's (2010) research clearly supports the findings of Baco et al. (2022), providing a broader chronological and historical context while strengthening the evidence that the Malay Peninsula, particularly Melaka, played a crucial role in the distribution and reception of Chinese ceramics within Southeast Asia's maritime network.