JAPANESE CLOISONNÉ ENAMEL;
THE WORK OF THE ARTIST NAMIKAWA YASUYUKI

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CLOISONNÉ ENAMEL IS not an old Japanese traditional craft; but in the later Edo and the Meiji periods (1600-1868, 1868-1912) its rapid acceptance and evolution into one of the outstanding achievements of the Japanese craftsman is an extraordinary phenomenon. In the space of some forty years, it developed from a crude imitation of Chinese enamel into the characteristic brilliance that we shall explore here. To follow this change, we shall concentrate on the work of one artist, Namikawa Yasuyuki (1845-1927).

CLOISONNÉ ENAMEL INVOLVES the decoration of a metal body, usually copper, with vitrifiable materials fired to melting point in a kiln. Colours are separated from each other with narrow bands of metal (called 'cloisons', or, more usually, just 'wire') fixed, sideways on, to the metal body, thus forming a sort of hedge delineating discrete areas for a pattern or picture. Repeated firings and polishing are required to create a smooth surface and to eliminate any bubbles formed. This is a complex process requiring great skill and experience. The greatest problem is to stop the molten enamels slipping off the body in the kiln under firing conditions. Thus the cloisons performed a dual function in the early stages of the development of the craft, until the craftsmen had learned how to get over this problem; this led to the elimination or partial elimination of the cloisons if required, enabling larger areas of one colour to be used, and obviating the need for the complex borders previously necessary. As we shall see, some craftsmen went down this road, virtually eliminating wire, others used it as a vital component of the decoration.

ALTHOUGH CLOISONNÉ ENAMEL techniques had been used in Japan since the early Edo period, it was used only on small-scale objects such as sword-furniture, on *tsuba* and on *kozuka*, by members of the Hirata school of makers and perhaps a few others, but always on more-or-less flat grounds, never on objects in the round. The story of the emergence of cloisonné enamel as an art form, possibly apocryphal, centres on one Kaji Tsunekichi who, in the 1830s, stimulated by finding a broken Chinese enamel dish, attempted to imitate it. The earliest Japanese cloisonné of which we are sure of the date (*a terminus ad quem*) is a *jubako* bought by the South Kensington Museum (now the Victoria and Albert Museum) from the Paris Exposition of 1867. The decoration is mostly pattern-making, to ensure the presence of enough wire, and the colours are crude, opaque and rather muddy. The pictorial part is somewhat larger in a dish bought by the V&A in 1881, and the background is comparatively larger than before, meaning the enameller was confident of being able to do without too much wire on this, a more or less flat object, fired in a flat position.

Figure 1
The workshop of
Namikawa Yasuyuki
photographed by
Herbert Ponting before
1903, and published in
his *In Lotus-land Japan*,
London, 1910.
Namikawa stands at the
back on the right-hand
side.

CLEARLY, BY THE 1870s, there were several makers of cloisonné in Japan, mostly centred around Nagoya, but few pieces can be identified as the work of any particular artist. And from here on, the craft progressed astonishingly quickly as new techniques were mastered and new colours prepared. The cloisonné technique in itself leads to intricacy, to delight in detail, while the new transparent and translucent colours made possible new styles of decoration. But there is no one stream of development to be followed; while innovations were available to all, some makers chose to specialise in one overall style, while others chose to be eclectic and use every technique available (sometimes all on one piece). One could here suggest that there were two main lines of development, those makers who chose to retain the intricacy of wire-work, in one form or another, and those who attempted to eliminate or much decrease the use of wire.

THE TWO ARTISTS AT the furthest poles from each other in their way of working, were Namikawa Yasuyuki (1845-1927) (Fig. 1), and his namesake, no relation, Namikawa Sosuke.

The latter, more of an entrepreneur than an artist-craftsman, was the leading figure among those who used less and less wire; Sosuke blended colours to a startling effect in backgrounds, and with great delicacy in more detailed work, such as in the leaves of a plant. Sosuke attempted to imitate brush-paintings in cloisonné; some of his earlier work, such as the vases he exhibited in Amsterdam in 1883 follow the work of Onishi Chinnen, a Shijo painter, while

Plate 2 (above left)
Cloisonné tobacco box
and tray, Namikawa
Yasuyuki, circa 1880,
height of box alone
7.8 cm. Ashmolean
Museum, EA1995.151.
Story Fund.

Plate 3 (right)
Cloisonné vase,
Namikawa Yasuyuki,
circa 1885, height 18.3
cm. Khalili Collection
of Japanese art.

Figure 2 (bottom left)
Drawing by Nakahara
Tessen for the vase
illustrated as Plate 3.
In the vase, the upper
bird of the design has
been omitted. From *Kyo
shippo monyo shu*,
Kyoto, 1981.

later he used the designs of Watanabe Seitei. Many Sosuke pieces are trays and platters, which may bear the signature of Seitei on the front and of Sosuke on the reverse. Sosuke was trying to promote cloisonné as 'art', (*bijutsu*) rather than a craft (*kogei*); this was a distinction new to Japan, but one which Sosuke perceived as important in the west. And, indeed, in some of the International Expositions of the period, Sosuke's work was exhibited among 'art' while Yasuyuki's was shown among other crafts.

THE EVOLUTION of the skill, and the taste and style of Yasuyuki's work was quite different from that of Sosuke; he came to specialise in the use of the metal wires to enhance his designs, to be a vital constituent of the picture, rather than to be mere necessary divisions, or to wish to hide them. He also came to use large areas of absolutely plain colour, whereas Sosuke more frequently graded his background colours. There were, of course, many other craftsmen and factories who made cloisonné, many of whom were perhaps almost equally as skilful as either of the Namikawas, but who were less specialised, and were more open to innovation. The names of Ando Jubei, Hattori Tadasaburo, Kumeno Teitaro and Hayashi Kodenji stand out, while many lesser factories produced huge quantities of mass-produced inferior wares for the lower ends of the market. I have chosen Yasuyuki to demonstrate the development of the increasing technical skill of the cloisonné craftsman, first of all because of the exquisite taste of most of his work, secondly because he seems to me to be the finest craftsman of them all.

if a bit on the conservative side, and thirdly because I have been able, with my colleague Malcolm Fairley, to draw up, from documentary evidence and from securely dateable pieces, a sequence of his work, so that we can tell extremely accurately from which date any piece of his work comes. This we have been unable to do for any other comparable artist, though we can usually suggest dates for their work by comparison of the techniques employed.

THE EARLIEST WORK of Yasuyuki that is known still belongs to his descendents; it is a small round box and cover dated 1874, a piece fairly typical of its time, and of indifferent quality. There would be no way of knowing its authorship except for its family history. And the next pieces have to be identified from extrapolation backwards; backwards from known pieces, for no pieces as yet are signed. The vase illustrated as Plate 1 is attributable to the mid to late 1870s, largely for the style of the borders, the translucent border colours and the area of black background. He won medals in 1872 in London, in 1875 at the Kyoto Industrial Fair (for a vase) and in 1876 in the International Exposition in Philadelphia. In the First National Industrial Exposition, in Tokyo in 1877 a vase of his work was purchased by the incipient Tokyo National Museum; this was in a style that he did not follow up, and, again, it would be difficult to identify as his work unless one had the evidence, except that the pictorial (as opposed to pattern-making) features are similar to other work by him. Much more typical of his work, and extremely useful for identification is the tobacco box and stand in the Ashmolean Museum (Pl. 2); it is unsigned, but with it is Yasuyuki's original invoice, signed, but not, alas, dated. It must, however, date from about 1880.

CERTAINLY BY 1885, his work tended to be of pictorial elements within cartouches of some intricacy; a piece almost identical to this (Pl. 3) was bought by the Museum für angewandte Kunst, Vienna, from the Nuremberg International Fair in 1885, at which Yasuyuki won a Gold Medal. This piece comes from a series about which we know, because the original drawings exist, possibly worked-up drawings by Nakahara Tessen, who seems to have been the chief designer at the workshop, though this is ambiguous; certainly the drawings are for work by Yasuyuki (Fig. 2).

WHAT WE SHALL see in Yasuyuki's work henceforward, is a lessening of the pattern-making part of the design, both in the background and in any borders, in favour of more pictorial design. Thus the cartouches become fewer in number; three and then two, until eliminated altogether in favour of a single-colour background and the pictorial designs are arranged in groups around the vase, or other shape. Again, these are progressively eliminated from three to two elements until we come to a single large element against a clear monochrome background, with a very small picture on the reverse. There is now a clear front and back. The areas of plain colour, often of the dark colours which are so difficult to control in the kiln, are now almost as important as the design. It is in the late 1880s and early 1890s that we get the first pieces that are signed.

Plate 4
Cloisonné vase,
Namikawa Yasuyuki,
circa 1895, height 18.2
cm. Khalili Collection
of Japanese art.

A PAIR OF vases, very similar to that in Plate 4 was exhibited in the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1894, where Yasuyuki won another Gold Medal, and was subsequently bought by the new Tokyo National Museum in 1894. These must be among the earliest pieces to have no

Plate 5 (left)
Cloisonné vase,
Namikawa Yasuyuki,
circa 1896, height
23.8 cm. Khalili
Collection of Japanese
art. The knob of the lid
is a replacement.

Figure 3
Drawing by Nakahara
Tessen for a vase
similar to that in Plate 5,
showing how one of the
three main pictures
integrates with another,
just visible on the right
hand side. From *Kyo
shippo monyo shu*,
Kyoto, 1981.

cartouches framing the design. In 1896 he exhibited in the Fourth National Industrial Exposition a pair of vases that may well have included that in Plate 5. Of these, the judges wrote;

Yasuyuki has been good at making pieces of cloisonné with designs of dragon, phoenix, colourful birds and flowers, and traditional subject-matter, using intricate wire-work. However, in this exhibition there are fewer such pieces and the designs have changed; here flowers of the four seasons, with birds of exquisite colouring, are set on to a black background colour, forming a picture far beyond a mere pattern. But he still seems to adhere to the traditional methods of depiction, not attempting to imitate brushwork as do some other persons. He places great emphasis on fine wirework and on a flawless surface with no pitting or bubbles, achieved through painstaking study of glazing and firing. For this he has been awarded the first prize.

In these vases there are three sets of groups of trees and flowers, thus making three 'pictures' that each integrate and overlap with the next picture; this is typical of the work of Yasuyuki, and can most clearly be seen in the drawings of Tessen (Fig. 3), but is virtually absent in the work of any other contemporary cloisonné artist. Borders are much-reduced and will later

Plate 6 (above left)
Cloisonné vase.
Namikawa Yasuyuki,
1900-1903, height 22.9
cm. Khalili Collection of
Japanese art.

Plate 7 (above right)
Detail of Plate 6.

Plate 8 (right)
Cloisonné brush-pot,
Namikawa Yasuyuki,
circa 1903, height 11.1
cm. Khalili Collection of
Japanese art.

disappear; again, most other artists preferred to retain and emphasise the borders, partly in order to display intricate wirework, partly for reasons of firing problems.

By ABOUT 1898, there are two 'pictures' of equal importance; later, as we have mentioned, there will be one major and one minor picture, or only one major picture. In 1899, Yasuyuki seems to have invented a new technique, first seen in a vase bought by the Imperial Household in that year. Here, instead of the wire being a mere ribbon, even though it is often of gold, of even shape, Yasuyuki has sculpted the wire and tapered it to use it as a significant element in the design (Pls. 6 and 7).

In 1903 HE made yet another innovation; the judges of the Fifth National Industrial Exposition wrote (of Yasuyuki's sole, very small, entry; what confidence!), a 'gold-wired cylindrical brush-pot of bamboo design', that 'the few delicate bamboos look as if they were brush-strokes on a dark purple ground, and each leaf is carved as if it were a brushstroke'. This is an extraordinary technique; there is no attempt to imitate a painting in the sense that Sosuke tried, but Yasuyuki has nevertheless shaped the metal to look like a brush-stroke, almost a reversal of the normal use of wire, and certainly of its normal importance. For an example which must be closely similar, see Plate 8.

Plate 9
Cloisonné incense
burner, Namikawa
Yasuyuki, circa 1905,
height 8.7 cm.
Ashmolean Museum,
2000.180. Story Fund.

Plate 10 (right)
Cloisonné vase,
Namikawa Yasuyuki,
circa 1910-1915, height
14.9 cm. Ashmolean
Museum, 2002.177.
Anonymous fund.

AT THE SAME time, Yasuyuki began to experiment with the use of shaded ground-colours; not the startling effects used by other artists, but a subtle use in restricted areas. This meant, presumably no coincidence, that he was able to use landscape (Pl. 9) as a subject, in the same way that differential wiping of the colour off woodblock prints had enabled Hiroshige and others to depict landscape as a subject-matter in Ukiyo-e prints.

WE ARE MUCH less sure of the dates of the work of Yasuyuki after about 1905, for we lack sure evidence, but we can assign pieces to this period, and can be reasonably sure of a sequence, though an undated one, as there are so few landmarks.

DURING THIS PERIOD a new technique appears; pieces of wire, triangular in cross-section, are cut into very short strips, and are luted onto the body, end-on, making the effect, in the finished piece, of short 'axe-cut' brush-strokes (see Pl. 9). By 1912 he was using wire, if we can still call it wire, of *shakudo*, a pickled silver alloy, in place of his more usual gold or silver. In 1912 he was commissioned to make a *koro* for the birthday of the Emperor, but before presentation the Emperor died and the *koro* went to the Tokyo National Museum. It was similar to that in Plate 10.

IN 1915 YASUYUKI retired; in all probability this retirement was partly forced on him because of his unwillingness to compromise his standards; by then the world had moved on, and collectors either in Japan or in Europe (fewer,

Plate 11
 Cloisonné incense
 burner, Namikawa
 Yasuyuki, circa 1910,
 height 11.8 cm.
 Khalili Collection of
 Japanese art.

of course, because of the War) were simply not prepared to pay the very high prices necessary to sustain such a high quality product. In retirement he retained much of his stock, some of which was eventually to reach the Baur Collection in Geneva, some of which is retained by the family, who wish to set up a Namikawa Yasuyuki Foundation. Some of these pieces still retain their price tickets; for instance, a cigarette box and tray is priced at Y600, enough to buy a good-sized house; for sake of comparison, an English collector in Japan in 1906 bought a superb pair of six-fold screens, by a well-known artist, in a serious antique shop, for Y320. Even in retirement, Yasuyuki was well respected; the signature of Edward, Prince of Wales appears in his Visitors Book on 3 May 1922.

NAMIKAWA YASUYUKI WAS not the greatest artist-craftsman working in cloisonné in every respect; he chose to ignore some techniques – he never used *moriage* or *plique à jour*, for instance – and his style was based on different assumptions from those of, say, Namikawa Sosuke, but within his field he was pre-eminent. It is fortunate indeed that we are able so closely to follow his artistic career.

OF HIS PERSONALITY we know less; Herbert Ponting, that great photographer and useful diarist, clearly became extremely friendly with him, and regarded him as a great gentleman. Of his consideration for others we may remark that when he rebuilt his house in the Shijo-Shirakawa area of Kyoto, not only did he create an exquisite house and garden, but the house was especially built with unusually tall proportions, so that his foreign clients and visitors should not feel uncomfortable.

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References

For a general history of Japanese cloisonné enamel, see L. Coben and D.C. Ferster, *Japanese cloisonné*, New York and Tokyo, 1982. For a specialised account, see Oliver Impey and Malcolm Fairley (eds.) *Meiji no takara; the Nasser D. Khalili collection of Japanese art*, Vol. 3, *Enamel*, London, 1994.