

Japanese Enamels: The Seven Treasures



Display: Combining gems from the V&A's collection with the Edwin Davies Gift of cloisonné enamels, this display presents a rounded picture of one of Japan's most exquisite art forms.

View over 120 objects dating from the late 17th to the 20th century. 14 June-19 August 2011

The V&A collection illustrates the renaissance of Japanese enamelling in the 1840s, the experimental works of the 1850s and 1860s, the rise of master artists such as Hayashi Kodenji, Namikawa Yasuyuki of Kyoto and Namikawa Sosuke of Tokyo and the output of the creative, innovative and prolific Ando Cloisonné Company of Nagoya. Mr Edwin Davies, a benefactor of the V&A and Trustee, donated a fine collection of Japanese cloisonné enamels to the Museum in January 2011. These date predominantly from the Golden Age of Japanese enamelling, c.1880-1910, when artistic and technological sophistication reached a peak. The V&A now holds the largest and most comprehensive collection of Japanese cloisonné enamels in any world museum outside the USA.

'There are two distinct qualities or types expressed in Japanese art: one suggesting endless patience in the execution of minute detail, the other denoting a momentary conception of some fleeting idea carried out with boldness and freedom of expression in form and line – profuse complexity and extreme simplicity... the work on Japanese cloisonné ware generally exhibits the quality suggestive of unwearying labour and patience.' (Harada 1911, p.271)

The characters used for Shippo, the Japanese term for enamels, are a reference to the Seven Treasures mentioned in Buddhist texts. The Japanese applied this term to the rich colours found on Chinese enamels and to those made later in Japan. The art of cloisonné enamelling was, from the late 1850s, one of Japan's most successful forms of manufacture. The peak of artistic and technological sophistication was between 1880 and 1910, a period referred to as the 'Golden Age', and a time when the taste for Japan in the West was at its height and museums were avidly acquiring from dealers and international exhibitions.

The combining of the V&A's historical collection (including examples acquired at the Paris International Exposition of 1867, the earliest documented cloisonné enamels in any world collection) with the recent generous gift of cloisonné enamels from Mr Edwin Davies, OBE, now enables the V&A to present a rounded picture of one of Japan's most exquisite art forms in an exhibition that will be held in the Japanese Gallery from 14 June 2011 - 19 August 2012.

The exhibition focuses on enamels from their early use as architectural fittings, through elegant inlaid metalwork of the late 17th century and into the Golden Age and the 20th century. It includes objects from the renaissance of Japanese enamelling in the 1840s; the experimental works of the 1850s and 1860s and the rise of master artists such as Hayashi Kodenji, Namikawa Yasuyuki of Kyoto, Namikawa Sosuke of Tokyo and the output of the creative, innovative and prolific Ando Cloisonné Company of Nagoya.