



Tea Bowl Matching Activity

Lesson Plan: Tea Bowl Matching Activity

Created By: Joseph T. Sorensen, University of California, Davis

Creation Date: January 10, 2024

Keywords: chawan, tea bowl, ceramics, art appreciation, close-viewing, visual analysis

Tea Bowl Matching Activity

Target Audience:

Undergraduate students

Duration:

One class session (50 min), or one-half class session of a two-hour class that introduces other material culture aspects of chanoyu.

Learning Objectives:

- Building visual analysis skills
- Exposure to history and lineage in Raku ware
- Developing vocabulary for art object appreciation
- Cultivating attention to formal detail

Potential Courses to Include this Lesson in:

- Japanese Studies courses

- East Asian Studies courses
- Art History courses

Background:

This is a simple matching activity designed to increase students' awareness and appreciation of tea bowls as historical art objects. The activity can be adapted to encompass other tea bowl examples, or other utensils. I have selected twelve specimens that I feel are particularly suited to this activity, comprising two sets of six. The first set has a range of contrasting examples to get the students used to the exercise. The second set includes bowls that are all similar in size, shape, and color, requiring a more discerning eye to distinguish them. The basic instructions to the students are to match each bowl to its catalog description.

To set up the activity, you will need a way to present, separately, the first six bowls (labeled by letter and randomly arranged) and the descriptions (labeled by number, also randomly arranged). Students are to match the letter to the number—so, for example, W=2. Once they have completed the first set, the instructor goes over the examples, and then everyone moves on to the second set.

What has worked for me is having laminated full-page reproductions of the bowls, and large-print descriptions, taking up a full page, also laminated. Students work in groups of 4–5 (I usually have 4–5 groups of 4–5 members each), with all groups competing for speed and accuracy. I usually offer the leftover *wagashi* from the day's tastings or some other treat to the winning team.

Once everyone has completed the task, I have students from each group report out ONE matching pair and describe the characteristics in the description that led to the match. There is room for error in both sets, which can lead to "teaching moments" for the instructor. Completing the activity for the first set stretches the students' minds such that, when I

announce that in the second set, the bowls are all black and all roughly the same shape and size, it's hard for them to imagine completing the exercise successfully, but they always do. I then pass out the laminated pictures and descriptions for the second set and do another round of competition and reporting out.

This exercise could also work as an individual online activity, but I have found that group work and the cooperation necessary is good for classroom dynamics.

As a follow-up activity, I note that the numbers are essentially in chronological order, so larger numbers are more recent works, and vice-versa. I ask the students to put the pictures in chronological order, and see if they have any observations, duly noting that "development" and "influence" are problematic terms. Even so, we can still ask questions such as: "What characteristics strike you as more modern? Why?" "Can you describe the difference between 'stillness' (#13 e.g.) and 'movement' (#27 & #189) in these bowls?"

Other points for discussion can include: the phenomenon of naming bowls (#187 Thousands of Snowflakes, #38 Kinoshita, #189 Demon of Subtle Movement), the practice of designating something an Important Cultural Property (and National Treasure, Living National Treasure, etc.: #13, #33), and the cross-fertilization of the arts with the famous calligrapher Kōetsu's bowl (#33). It is also nice to have these concrete examples in front of the students when introducing issues of lineage, the *iemoto* system, and how seals can assist in the dating of objects (#115 & #128).

Credits:

All of the examples for the activity come from the English-language version of the catalog for the Raku Museum in Kyoto, Japan. They have been lightly edited for clarity.

Raku Kichizaemon XV and Raku Antsundo. *Raku: A Legacy of Japanese Tea Ceramics*. Edited by Melissa M. Rinne. Translated by Christopher Stephens et al. Kyoto: Seigensha, 2015.

Download Activity Files:

- [Key: Raku Tea Bowl Descriptions](#)
- [Tea Bowl Files](#)