

**THE COMPLETE POTTER**

# Raku

Series Editor: Emmanuel Cooper



THE COMPLETE POTTER:  
**RAKU**

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藏书章

*For Angela*

# THE COMPLETE POTTER:

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# **RAKU**

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IAN BYERS

SERIES EDITOR EMMANUEL COOPER

B.T. Batsford Ltd, London

*Front cover:* Shallow dish by Ian Byers, 1986, coloured glazes, 15 × 12 in (38 × 30 cm), (photo: Pete Macertich).

*Back cover:* 'Symmetrical Days Landscape Container' by Wayne Higby, 1982. 31½ in (80 cm) wide.

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# PREFACE

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When first asked to write a book on raku, I was apprehensive. Writing and making are such different activities, and putting the information and ideas down on paper can fix ideas or attitudes, thus 'cornering' the activity. In writing this book, this has, of course, happened, in the sense that here is all this information, which I hope will inspire and inform the reader. It will, nevertheless, have ultimately to be put to one side by a potter wishing to discover things for him or herself. This is because raku firings naturally involve risk and uncertainty. What I do hope the book will provide is some understanding of how raku has developed and also be a practical basis for personal exploration. Writing this book has opened up areas previously unknown to me and has also stimulated an awareness of how little we understand other cultures. In writing a book of this type and size, I have had to exclude or limit much material, but I hope that it may be the start of your own deeper interests and investigations. It has been for me!

# INTRODUCING RAKU

## RAKU – THE PROCESS

Raku has become popularly known in the West as a technique originating in Japan in the sixteenth century in which work is rapidly fired, and removed from the kiln when glowing hot. A more recent Western development is the placing of the glowing pot in a container with combustible materials, creating particular colours, textures, and metallic oxides. The growth of interest in raku today is probably due to its own particular features: the earthiness of smoked clay, combined with vibrant coloured glazes and the fact that work may be glazed and fired all in one day.

My first experience of raku was with a group of students during a summer school. We built a wood-fired raku kiln in an hour, packed it with bisqued and glazed work, and took out the first pieces – all in a morning. It was a group experience and had its own dynamics, with some people involving themselves in building the kiln, chopping wood or stoking, whilst others immediately took to the hazards of heat and dealing with the work after it was drawn out. Few of us had experience with wood firing, and it was a



*Fig 1 Loading the kiln*



revelation when the glazes began to melt and boil. The whole process of melting and fusing was at once clearly visible, whereas, previously, most of my work had been carried out behind closed kiln doors, with only a hope and a prayer for success.

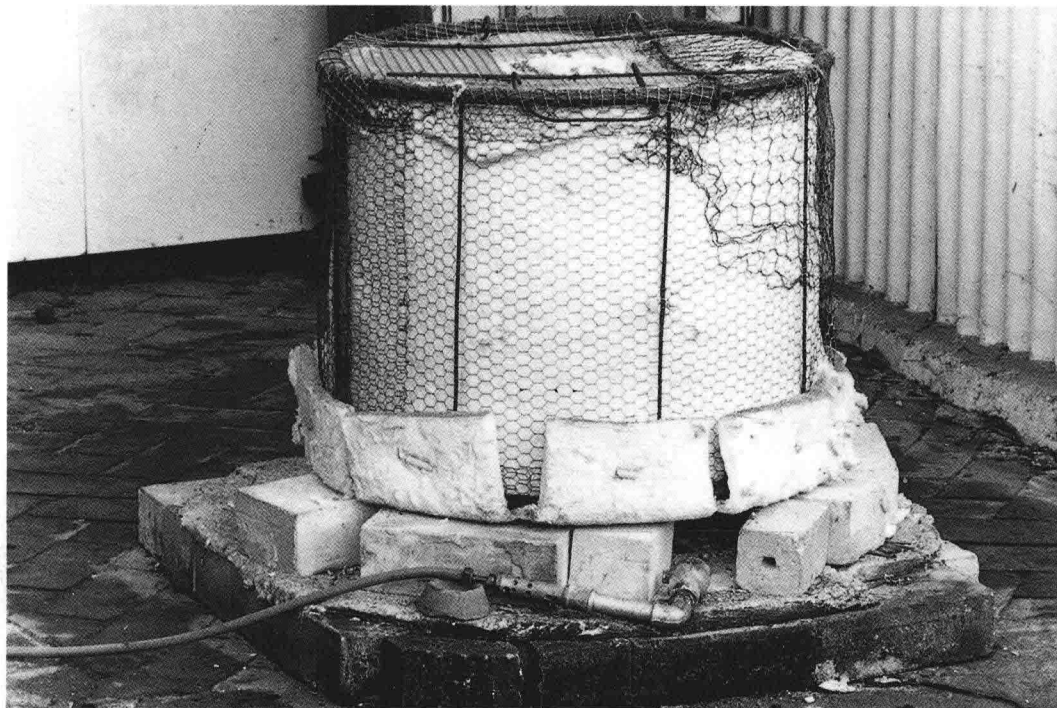
This involvement in the firing was a new experience and it was interesting to see how the same involvement overcame some

people's fears of the fire. The work was drawn out with borrowed blacksmith's tongs, and the problem of numbers of pots and people made it difficult for everyone to handle their own work, or control the cooling and reduction of pots in sawdust. Then there was the obvious need for some rhythm or timing, as the next load of work had to be set in the kiln before too much heat was lost.

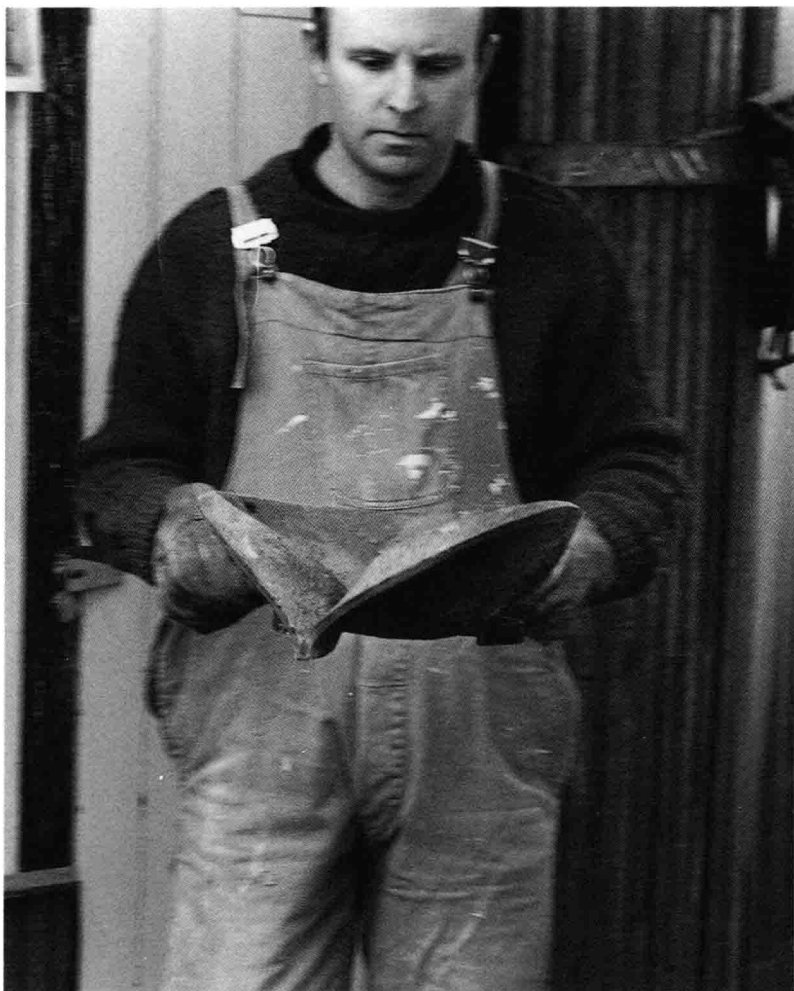
The results of our labours were, in some cases, immediately exciting, with glazed surfaces flashed metallic, crazed, or blackened by smoke. Some people had made objects that vaguely resembled teabowls, and it occurred to me that we were enacting some lost or, more rightly, never-found ritual without any sense of the sort of reason or purpose which surrounded Japanese teabowls. This thought, along with the lack of control evident in the fired work, counteracted the excitement of involvement, with the result that, for the time being, I pursued raku no further.

When I came back to the process it was almost by accident. I put some low-temperature glazed tiles into a raku firing with the intention of fast-testing some bright colours. They were only lightly smoked after drawing out, and hardly affected by the sawdust (being small they had almost cooled by the time they reached it). The smoking had in some way completed the surface: there did not seem to be a top and bottom, it was an all-over effect. That seemed to me to be a great bonus, for most work fired in kilns needed to be stood on stilts, wiped clean of glaze, or have footings. Raku seemed to allow for and even absorb scars or marks in the glaze into its nature.

The freeing of the pot from its footing liberated the front or back, or the inside and outside, of work by making them continuous surfaces. The back or underside of dishes became as important, if not more important, than the front; the outside and inside of work



*Fig 2 Firing*



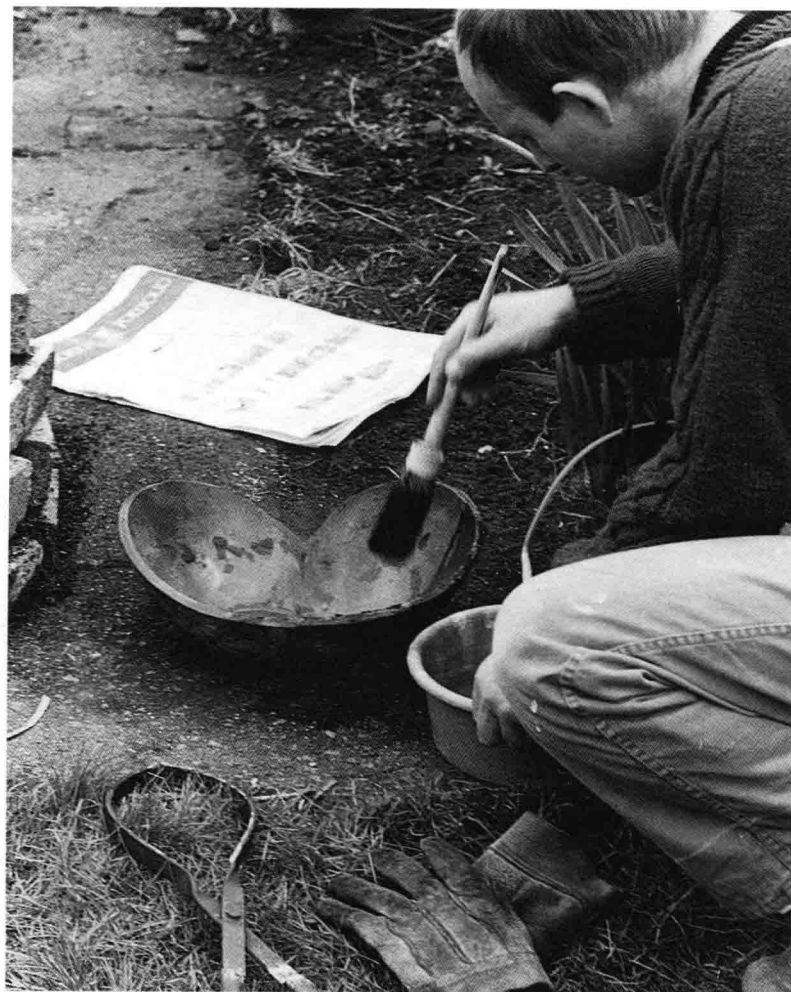
*Fig 3 The work is removed with tongs*



*Fig 4 The piece surrounded by newspaper and covered in sawdust*



*Fig 5 The heat from the piece ignites the reduction materials*

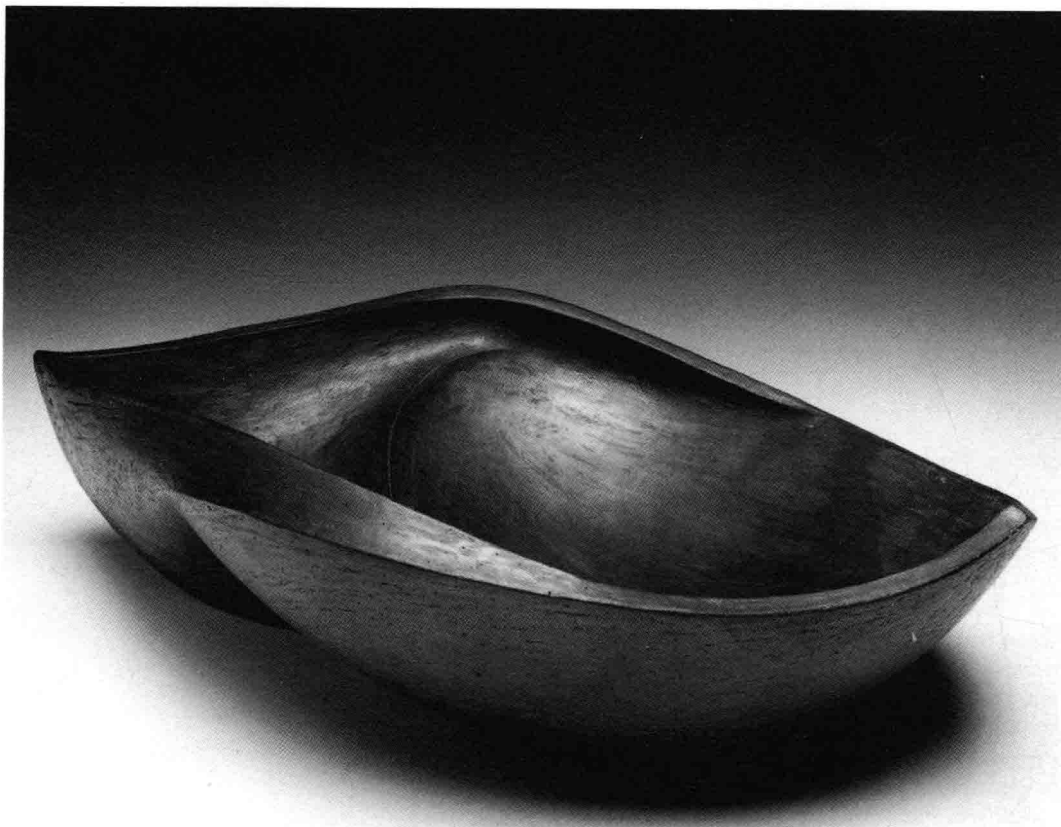


*Fig 6 Starting to clean off the carbonized surface*

formed an interplay of surfaces, of which the inside was the more logical starting point, the edge a transition, and the outside spread from the inside in a fairly free, unplanned way. The post-firing reduction effect on surface and colour through timing, temperature, speed, and different reduction materials, all worked to create a balance and tension of expectation and control. I was expecting certain combinations of effects and sought them during the 'action', but was most pleased when my expectations were somewhat defeated by events.

Harvey Sadow, as one of the exhibiting artists in an exhibition called Raku and Smoke in 1984 wrote, 'Regarding the raku process in general, the ultimate surrender of control after carefully orchestrating a set of possibilities always gives the pot an opportunity to be a little better than the potter'. In my view this collaboration with fire and smoke is no easy option: it demands involvement, concentration and considerable energy. What you personally bring to the activity in the form of ideas and expectations will shape your work as much as the process, because raku firings cannot provide the answers if the questions were not there in the first place.

Some people think that raku is not 'real' ceramics. This view was perhaps generated by Leach's garden party experience of raku (*A Potter's Book*, 1973) as a social event and by the non-functional quality of much raku work, but I have never seen raku in this way.



*Fig 7 Ian Byers, 'Beaked Form', 1988, burnished, lustred and smoked, 14 in (35.5 cm) long (photo: Pete Macertich)*



Mass raku is a different experience, and has led to its disregard as an activity worthy of serious consideration. Most raku potters handling this physically-involving process work either by themselves or with another partner, rather like studio glass workers. This combination of talents can give an edge in terms of timing or energy which, particularly with large work, can make the difference between success and failure.

When firing, I usually like to work alone, perhaps with some help at critical points in the firing or reduction. Because it involves action, working with someone who can skirt around the danger zone (you), and be there on cue is the person to seek. In this regard timing is essential, and perhaps a developed sense of timing is a natural requisite for raku or other post-fire treatments where the work is in close and direct contact during the firing or finishing process.

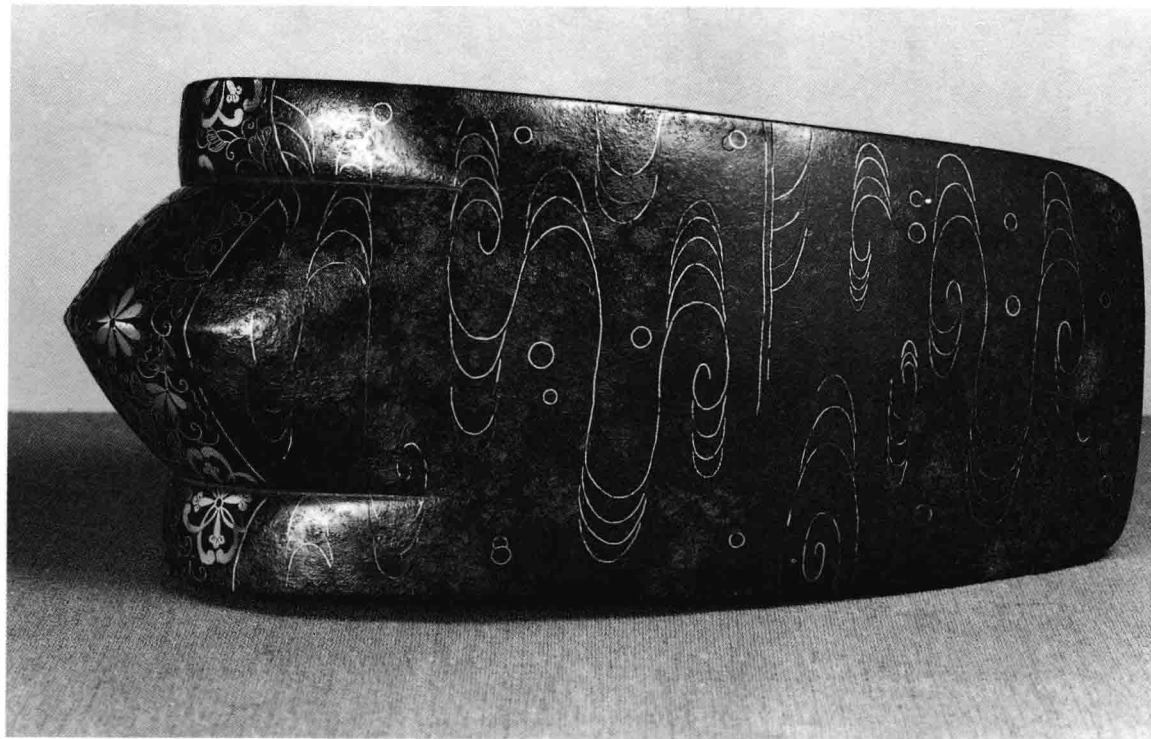
As with any activity, discovery and development can become clichés. Accepting what happens or what sells best can create constant conflicts of interest to direct expression or experience. The work may need to be fired again and again in order to rediscover itself; or perhaps raku is not the way that a particular idea is best developed. It is then up to you to make the break from the process.

Most potters who have become heavily involved with raku firings have in some way extended their understanding of the process, some to the point where their work can no

longer be recognized as having anything to do with the rapid fire then post-fire reduction used first by Paul Soldner. We all need different things at different times; raku work, whatever the term means to other people, will to me always at best involve directness and spontaneity in thought and action.

## RAKU – THE ORIGINS

Raku teabowls first made in Kyoto, Japan, were certainly not representative of the majority of Kyoto ceramics made in the sixteenth century. They should also not be seen in complete isolation from other



*Fig 8 Saddle stirrups, inlaid with silver, 1700 (photo: courtesy of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London)*

contemporary art and craft forms. Seen alongside articles such as the intricate and highly-technical swordguards and armour (Fig 8), sumptuous lacquerwork (Fig 9), or painting (Fig 10), and without the onlooker having any knowledge of the social context within which they function, they can look

puzzlingly crude to the Western eye. How is it that these apparently simple objects were, and still are, regarded with such respect by the Japanese? To gain insight Western attitudes must be put aside and the objects looked at more closely. The social and philosophical background out of which raku

sprang, and the origins of the Japanese tea ceremony (*Cha no yu*) itself must be examined.

### THE TEA CEREMONY

Japan has often looked to China for inspiration and influence in artistic and philosophical matters. Tea drinking in Japan is thought to have arrived with Zen Buddhist monks from China in the twelfth century. Tea was originally drunk on ceremonial and religious occasions, or used as medicine. The practice then spread during the next two centuries to a wider section of the population.

Japan was controlled during the fifteenth century by a military aristocracy, who combined their talents with those of artists and writers, laying down rules for tea meetings, and including tea utensils in the lists of art treasures. This was an important act because it established connoisseurship and care of such articles, and it also enhanced the cultural standing of the owners. Christine Guth, writing on Sencha and art collecting in *Chanoyu Quarterly*, says:

*Since its beginnings in the 15th century, chanoyu had provided a creative setting for artistic innovation. It helped to break down social and political distinctions by encouraging interaction amongst courtiers, samurai, merchants, artists, and craftsmen. It fostered innovation in nearly every sphere of artistic production, from ceramics and lacquer, painting and calligraphy, to architecture and garden design.*



Fig 9 Box and cover (wood decorated with black, gold, and silver lacquer)  
(photo: courtesy of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London)



The fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries were a time of great social and political upset. The old aristocratic shoguns who had ruled since the twelfth century were gradually overthrown by a new military group of non-aristocratic birth, who now assumed power. This new force, with the help of increasingly successful and wealthy merchants, brought the tea ceremony to the point where it had a positive identity of its own, with specific rules and procedures.

#### TEA MASTERS AND THE FIRST RAKU TEABOWLS

Sen no Rikyu (1552–1591) was a man of great artistic judgement, and one who, as a tea master, gained influence over Hideyoshi (1536–1598), one of the three great generals of the period who gradually unified the country. Under Rikyu's influence, each element of the ceremony was carefully distilled, with the purpose of creating a situation and atmosphere where spiritual self-development could take place. His extremely disciplined version of the tea ceremony was designed to appeal to all the senses and, through a quiet focusing of the mind, to achieve an ego-less state. This state of being

*Fig 10 Detail from a two-leaved painted screen – tigers in a bamboo grove, painted on a silver ground, Kano school, seventeenth century (photo: courtesy of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London)*



*Fig 11 Interior of the tearoom Yuin 'Further Retreat'. Believed to have been built by Sotan in 1653, this room follows the four and a half mat tearoom proportion which was Sen Rikyu's 'ideal' in size. (Photo: courtesy of Urasenke Kyoto, Japan)*

was not concerned with intellectually 'knowing' about an object, but of literally fusing with it, of 'being' the object. A poem by the eighteenth-century poet Buson (1715–83) perhaps conveys the directness, simplicity, naturalness, and one-ness at which the Zen aesthetic aimed.

*Dew on the bramble  
thorns  
sharp white.<sup>1</sup>*

The teabowl, the preparation and handling of tea implements, the quiet filtered light and simplicity of the tearoom, its scents and objects, even the movements of the people participating, were essential in his form of ceremony. In this context the teabowl exists naturally and harmoniously.

Sen Rikyu must have recognized the potential of the work made by two Kyoto potters: Ameya and his wife Teirin. Ameya's work was mostly modelled roof tiles which were low fired then drawn out of the kiln whilst still red hot. Teirin made teabowls which were looked upon favourably by Rikyu. The simple rather crude appearance of their work fitted with the 'tea' aesthetic of Wabi, which, translated, can mean 'poverty'. For the same reason of unselfconscious appearance, other rugged or simple wares such as Korean rice bowls had already been

<sup>1</sup> Translated by Lucien Stryk and Takashi Ikemoto (see Bibliography)



sought out and valued for their use in the tea ceremony during the early sixteenth century.

Sen Rikyu later commissioned Chojiro (the son of Ameya and Teirin) to design and produce teabowls to his specification.

Chojiro's tea wares were to find favour with Oda Obunaga, one of the great generals of the period. This acceptance of the wares by such an esteemed figure promoted the standing of Sen Rikyu and made Chojiro's teabowls highly sought after. These bowls were carved, not thrown on the wheel, and therefore great subtlety could be caught in their structure and volume and in the relationship between internal and external space. This collaboration produced many fine teabowls, some of which are today the most highly-treasured bowls in Japan. Chojiro's son Jokei was awarded great status by no less than Hideyoshi himself, who gave the family a stamp of authority carved with the symbol raku, meaning pleasure, enjoyment, at ease, and the title 'best in all the world'. This title has been passed down through succeeding generations of the family until today and, interestingly, sometimes to adopted sons who have invigorated the tradition. Some of the most famous of the line are Chojiro, Donyu, Sanyu, and Ryonu.



*Fig 12 Black raku teabowl, seventeenth-century, attributed to Kōetsu (photo: courtesy of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London)*