**A History of Teapots**

**The Need for Teapots**

The story of teapots begins with their necessity -- the development of tea and its regular consumption required an efficient, and later an aesthetically pleasing, vessel for brewing and drinking.

There are two legends about the invention of tea. Some attribute the discovery of tea to Shen Nung, a Chinese Emperor in the 3rd century BCE, who sat under a tree while boiling his drinking water. When the leaves of Camellia sinensis fell into his bowl, the agreeable taste prompted the genesis of tea drinking. An alternative account gives credit to a Dharuma Buddhist monk who travelled to China from India in the 5th century CE. During his fifth year of a seven year meditiation undertaken to prove his faith, he became sleepy. In an effort to remain focussed he cut off his offending eyelids and threw them onto the ground, whence sprang the tea plant. He decided to make a drink from the leaves and discovered it kept him awake, allowing him to pursue his spiritual studies.

Camellia sinensis, the common tea plant, was first cultivated in the 4th century CE, after wild specimens were brought to China from India. Actually an evergreen tree which may grow up to 50 feet, the domesticated plant is pruned to a bush-like state and kept at a height of five feet. After three to five years of growth, its leaves may be harvested to make tea. Today, women constitute the majority of pickers, and there is no machine that can exceed the 60 to 70 pounds of leaves per day that an experienced worker can collect. These 60 to 70 pounds of fresh leaves produce approximately 20 pounds of dry tea, or 2800 cups of tea. *(To find out more about the process of making tea, go to our page* [*From Tree to Teapot*](http://www.teapots.net/tree_to_teapot.html)*.)*

Teapots were not used immediately upon the discovery of tea. From the 8th century CE, tea leaves were rolled by hand, dried and then ground into a powder. At first, this powder was mixed with salt and formed into cakes that would be dropped into bowls of hot water to form a thick mixture. Eventually the powder was left in its loose form, to be mixed in a bowl with boiling water and whipped into a froth. This method of tea-making was introduced into Japan in the early 9th century CE. Tea was considered medicinal in both China and Japan for the next 500 years.

At the beginning of the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) in China, leaf infusion as we know it now became popular. The earliest examples of teapots come from this period, made from the zisha, or "purple" clay, of the YiXing region of China. Pottery in the YiXing tradition has been strong since the Sung Dynasty (960-1279); wares are valued for their fine texture, thin walls, and naturally beautiful coloration ranging from light buff to deep maroon tones. The transition from drinking bowls to teapots was a smooth one. YiXing teapots were, and still are, used to brew tea as well as act as the drinking vessel -- one sips directly from the spout of a single-serving pot. YiXing teapots gradually season, the unglazed clay absorbing the flavor of brewed tea, making them a favorite choice for tea lovers. The dissemination of YiXing teapots greatly influenced not only the forms of teapots found throughout the world, but also prompted the invention of hard-paste porcelain in the western world. (Modern YiXing teapots can be found at [www.YiXing.com](http://www.yixing.com), along with information about the manufacture and use of these legendary pieces.)

Japanese demand for teapots created a growth in the industry of this new form of pottery. By the 15th century CE, both the Chinese and Japanese were drinking tea for ceremonial purposes, and the beverage was no longer regarded solely for its medicinal properties. Chinese scholars and intellectuals involved themselves in the design of teapots. The "cult of tea" in Japan, led by the artist Sen Rikyu (1522-1591), became an impetus for stylistic and artistic evolution in YiXing teapot designs. Cha-no-yu, the tea ceremony which forms the basis for Japanese Buddhist "Teaism," serves as a natural expression and discipline of zazen meditation and is viewed as an art. *(The Japanese tea ceremony is described in detail on our page* [*Chado: Adoration of the Everyday*](http://www.teapots.net/chado.html)*.)* Teapots detailed with themes from nature or sutras were desirable adjuncts to this art, and YiXing pots themselves became prized as creative works. The Japanese began making red clay or shudei teapots; they imported Chinese artists to teach them potting methods, and developed new techniques for creating these delicate wares. The old province of Bizen became an increasingly important center for Japanese ceramics. Raku, rough and dark earthenware, emerged.

The emergence and early evolution of teapots spanned several hundred years. Tea drinking had spread South through Asia, and was noticeable in Formosa (Taiwan), Siam (Thailand), Burma/Myanmar and the islands of Sumatra and Java in Indonesia. The next 300 years would see the global spread of tea -- and, of course, the teapot.

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