THE TOSHIKANE COMPANY—NEW DETAILS ABOUT THIS ARITA BUTTON MAKER

by Inge Borland and Mika Jarmusz

The Toshikane Company (pronounced TO-SHEE-KAH-NAY) was a Japanese firm that manufactured Arita-type porcelain buttons and other decorative objects for several decades in the mid-1900s. An article in the December 1982 National Button Bulletin (NBB) showed many beautiful examples of these buttons. The Editor's Note at the end of the article stated, “Still a big mystery about the Aritas…. why are these buttons with such startling beauty and workmanship no longer available?”

Co-authors Mika Jarmusz and Inge Borland prepared this current article to provide some missing background information about Toshikane's Arita porcelain buttons.

Several months ago, Inge contacted a Japanese seller who had listed an Arita piece at an online auction site. The seller led her to a couple of articles written about the Toshikane company in Japanese1. Inge quickly found that online translators do no justice to the Japanese language! So, with the collaboration of Mika Jarmusz, who is both a professional Japanese translator and a button collector, Inge set out to decipher the text and gather more information about Toshikane. Mika contacted several Japanese sources including the Director of the History and Folklore Museum of ARITA, who was also the author of one of the referenced articles2.

The Toshikane story starts with two Japanese ceramic artists, Shun-ichi Kojima and Kenzo Minami3. Mr. Kojima was born in the town of Arita, an important center of Japanese porcelain-making since the early 1600s. He started his career at the renowned Fukagawa Porcelain Kiln, where the president Chuji Fukagawa and his wife Moto encouraged young workers to develop their skills.

In 1931, Shun-ichi (俊一) Kojima partnered with Kenzo (兼蔵) Minami, a talented artist who had been working at the Tomiemon Kiln. Together, they founded the Toshikane (俊兼) Art Porcelain company. The company name was created by combining first characters of the founders’ first names. Mr. Minami was the chief designer of Toshikane's products.

The two men started their porcelain business by producing obidomes prior to World War II. There are beautiful examples of these vintage obidomes for sale on Japanese auction websites. One Toshikane obidome has a beautiful design of a maple leaf combined with grapes that looks very similar to the maple leaf and grape designs also used for the company's buttons.

During World War II in Japan, obidomes were viewed as unnecessary luxury items. So, Toshikane started
making military badges in support of the war effort. This is similar to many US companies who also changed their product line to the manufacture of military goods during the war.

After World War II, Japanese companies were allowed to resume private export trade in 1947. Soon, Toshikane began marketing Arita porcelain buttons and jewelry through military Base Exchanges in Japan and Guam for purchase by Western servicemen. These items were no doubt popular souvenirs to send home to wives and sweethearts. As the demand for Toshikane products grew, they were also marketed to private shops in Japan for sale to Western tourists and businessmen. Although not mentioned in the two Japanese references for this article, they were likely exported directly to U.S. shops by the 1960s, as was stated in the 1982 NBS Bulletin.

Many button sets were produced, including the popular Seven Gods of Fortune set originally sold in a wooden box. Other button designs including flowers, birds, and numerous themes were sold on western-style paper cards of five or six buttons each, and were originally wrapped in cellophane.

A few cards can still be found with the original price tags. One set of six seen online recently had an original price tag of $1.70 US. Assuming these cards were from the mid-50s, and correcting for inflation and currency type, this would work out to a price of about $15.00 per card in 2016 dollars. Oh, to go back in time!

The production of Toshikane buttons was a multi-step process involving techniques developed exclusively by the company. In order to protect these proprietary techniques and formulas, the founders moved their plant from Arita to the town of Tafuse in Saga prefecture sometime during the 1935-1939 period. The referenced article from the Arita Folklore and History Museum features an interview of 84-year-old Mitsukichi Suzuyama who used to work in the molding section of the Toshikane plant. He recalls that the plant had a Research and Development lab for developing carving techniques and paint/glaze formulas.

The following is a general description of Toshikane's button-making process. The first step was the time-consuming process of designing and creating a prototype for each item. Next, a mold was created from the prototype. Buttons were then cast from the mold and given a first firing. After firing, the design was cleaned up and further defined by hand carving. Additional firings were completed to add colored matte and shiny glazes, as well as gold metallic glaze. The temperature of each firing determined whether the glaze took on a matte or shiny finish.

Arita buttons made by the Toshikane company can be identified by a couple different backmarks. The first mark is two kanji characters for Toshikane (俊兼) surrounded by a fan-shaped cartouche.

These are the marks referred to in the 1982 NBB article as "Shun-ken" which is an alternate (but, in this case, incorrect) pronunciation. The other backmark consists of the letters "TK" usually surrounded by an oval cartouche (see page 7). The TK backmark is often seen on the realistic butterfly buttons. Buttons are also usually backmarked "Japan." Toshikane used the trade name Kojima Art Porcelain on the packaging for some of their Seven Gods of Fortune buttons. The authors were unable to ascertain the time period for the use of this Kojima trade name. Most Arita buttons with backmarks have a Toshikane backmark or trade name on the packaging. The only other company backmark known to the authors on Aritas is "Marukin" which appears on sets of realistic Noh Mask buttons.

During the peak of its production, the Toshikane plant employed 50-60 people, filling orders for several tens of thousands of finished pieces per year. The plant continued to operate until around 1975. The export of Toshikane products to the U.S. ceased completely after the Plaza Accord of 1985. The Plaza Accord was
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an international trade agreement that made it much less profitable for Japan to export its goods to the West. As a final note, in the last few years, some plastic resin buttons bearing the backmark "Toshikane" have come onto the market. Based on information from the U.S. Patent and Trade Office website, a U.S. company called Merchanteer, Inc. licensed the Toshikane name and trademark in 2011 and is likely producing these buttons. The Japanese references indicate that the original Toshikane Company of Japan is no longer in business, and I believe this U.S. company is likely unrelated. Co-author Mika Jarmusz corresponded with Mr. Taizo Kaneko of IRIS Co., Ltd., a Japanese button company. A few years ago, Mr. Kaneko had made inquiries with current Arita porcelain makers about restarting production of the Toshikane button designs, only to find out that it would not be technically feasible to resume production of these buttons. Perhaps the proprietary methods that the company safeguarded by moving their factory decades ago are still not easily duplicated.

We hope you enjoyed these additional details about the Toshikane Company which produced so many of these fascinating and exquisitely-made Arita porcelain buttons during the mid-to late 20th century.

3 Japanese kanji characters can be pronounced in different ways. We are using "Kenzo" as Mr. Minami’s first name, as the true pronunciation could not be verified.

Figure 5-7. Tree peony obidome. Courtesy of the Luana KK at iroha-kimono.com
Figure 8. Two obidome including the maple leaf. Image courtesy of
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ABOVE: Toshikane arita buttons from the collection of Inge Borland.

BELOW: A boxed set of six Toshikane arita porcelain masks for the Noh play.

Jarmusz

RIGHT: Toshikane angel fish buttons on their original card.

Jarmusz