

STYLES OF YIXING TEAPOTS

If you include all the artistic pieces and nuances of classical shapes, there are literally thousands of kinds of Yixing pots! Each of the classical styles has been adapted and creatively sculpted into subtle shades of the original, creating a vast array of shapes within each “shape.” The classical styles can therefore be thought of as families of pots, since students learn by first replicating the masters of old, then adapting the old masters’ pots and finally creating their own masterpieces, which will be studied down through the ages.

One of the wonderful aspects of Asian art that we appreciate is the fact that for centuries masters created beautiful works of art without any need to attach their names to the pieces. Instead, they would honor their heritage by stamping the names of past masters, especially when the piece they were making was an homage to something created by that master. This trend was certainly informed by Tea, as so many craftsmen in Asia made teaware as part of their craft or art, if not exclusively so. It is in the spirit of tea to be humble and to not desire any fame or credit for one’s service. In our tradition, we always say that we aren’t here to learn to *make* tea, but rather to *serve* Tea. And the “serve Tea” here can have several

meanings. Of course, this means to prepare bowls or cups of tea and share them with people, but it also means to serve Tea Herself, the Nature spirit within these leaves. Even in biological terms, we are symbiotic with Tea, as we not only promote the propagation of her offspring, but also teach people to care for the trees in a way that promotes their health and happiness. Serving this healing medicine, and the changes it can facilitate in the human-Nature relationship, is a very ancient practice. And it is out of such service that the need for reward or accreditation was dropped by simple Chajin stamping the names of their masters’ masters onto the bottom of pots. Their reward was in the making of the pot. Wonderfully, this tradition continues today in Yixing, though more of the younger generations of craftspeople are ambitious to make a name for themselves.

There are five basic categories for the styles of Yixing pots, though various authors categorize the styles of pots in different ways. It really is up to each collector to organize his or her own pots. We have chosen these five to simplify things, and have done our best to present you with at least one pot from each of the five categories. As you will see, all our pots are used, stained by serving water, good tea and hours of joy.

Nature Pots (自然壺): These pots are decorated with natural motifs, like butterflies, other insects, bamboo, pine trees, pumpkin-shaped pots, gourd pots and much more.

Geometric Pots (幾何壺): These are hexagonal, square or angled pots. They are influenced by ancient bronzework.

Round Pots (球形壺): These are the best pots for tea brewing, and were originally designed on a purely functional basis—for making great tea.

Quotidian Treasure Pots (日常寶壺): These pots are shaped like everyday objects, like wagon wheels, jars, cups, ladles and other charming elements of daily life, following the time-honored Tea practice of celebrating the ordinary.

Decorative Pots (裝飾壺): These are artistic pots, and are often not very functional, created exclusively, or almost solely, to be viewed rather than used. This type of pot can be carved, glazed, decorated with small sculptures or even be a unique and strange shape. (Technically, many of the Nature pots would also fit into this category.)



There are also three ways of making Yixing pots: handmade, half-handmade and cast. From lowest to highest, the cast pots are made from soft clay that is formed by machines in full-body molds, and then dried and trimmed before firing. Half-handmade pots are made with molds. The body and lid are pressed by hand into the molds and the handle and spout are often made by hand. The pieces are then assembled, trimmed and polished by hand as well. (This is how the lowest-grade student pots at Master Zhou's are made.) These pots actually still require a lot of skill to produce and each one can take two to three full workdays to complete, though apprentices often work on several at once. This is the way most students learn to make pots. Finally, fully-handmade pots are crafted in the age-old way: slapping, pounding and shaping each part by hand. Such pots can take days, weeks or even months to complete! Yixing pots are not thrown on wheels, but rather "slab-built," which means sculpted.

When choosing a teapot, one can try to learn about its provenance. Many collectors start their study of Yixing by learning to recognize some of the chop marks on the bottoms of the teapots. The chop will either be the name of the artist, or perhaps the fac-

tory itself in the case of mass-produced or handicraft pieces. Nonetheless, in the beginning it helps to have a teacher to guide our purchases. Most times anyone can distinguish the mass-produced pieces from the other categories, though the discrepancies between the finer groups are more difficult to discern. Still, even mass-produced pieces aren't necessarily undesirable, depending on one's preference of style and budget. It is important, however, for the consumer to know what it is they are buying. For that reason, it's better to buy from a vendor with a good reputation and more transparent product information. Without any help, it's best to just handle the pot for a while and use one's senses to assess its artistic quality and function. It should have a fine form and structure, with nice proportions between the spout, handle, lid and bottom. The skill of the craftsmanship should be apparent from sight and touch alone. Of course, the price and personal perspective will also play a part in the selection. It should be functional and suit the needs of the user with regards to volume, kind of tea and aesthetic representation.

There is an artistic and a functional standard for evaluating Yixing teapots. Artistically, it is important that the pot be well-formed and appealing aestheti-

cally. It should refine the tea ceremony by appearance alone. Beautiful pots add to the ambience of tea and lend elegance to an otherwise mundane activity. There are four levels of craftsmanship that we use to discuss Yixing pottery: Mass-Produced Pieces, Handicraft Ware, Special Artistic Pieces and Master Artistry.

Over the next few pages, we would like to show you some of the classical styles of teapot we enjoy. As we are tea-brewers, our proclivity is for shapes and styles that make nice tea. That said, we have tried to present you with what are some of the most famous styles of pots, and to show you some that are more artistic than utilitarian. For us, however, the best styles of pots are always the ones that look gorgeous, are balanced and harmonious throughout, and also make great tea—which means they pour well, are made of nice clay and have a design that is nice to hold in the hand. Each of these styles of pot is really a family, with many subtle variations. Over time, as you learn about Yixing pots, you will begin to recognize the more famous shapes, even if they are adapted slightly. Compare your pots to the shapes shown over the next few pages and show us some of the variations in your collection on the app!



Shui Ping (水平)

Called “Balances in Water,” as these pots are supposed to float if they are made perfectly. These are probably the most produced pots in history, made extensively throughout the Republic (1911–1949) and Communist eras (post-1949).



Duo Qiu (掇球)

These “Chopped Ball” teapots are named this because it is supposed to be made from the slices of a perfect orb, cut up and rearranged with skill in various shapes and styles. This style began in the mid-Qing Dynasty, which lasted from 1644 to 1911.



De Zhong (德鐘)



Fang Gu (仿古)



Xian Piao (線瓢)

“Straight Scoop” teapots are styled after other scoop-shaped pots and also influenced by pear-shaped pots, of which there are many. This is a great shape for beginners, as it is useful for all kinds of tea. These pots are also known as “Guava pots (芭樂壺).”



Si Ting (思亭)

This is a specific kind of pear-shaped pot that has been famous for centuries. They are often inscribed “思亭” on the bottom. The long, elegant spout means less room to choose the speed and distance of the pour when decanting, but they sure are gorgeous!



Meng Chen Pear (孟臣梨式)



Xi Shi (西施)

Shi Yiguang (施夷光) is one of the “Four Great Beauties” of China. She is said to have been so beautiful that fish in her pond would gaze at her and forget to swim. This style of pot is designed to resemble her breast. Also, the handle is upside-down.



Court Eunuch (Tai Jian, 太監)

These famous pots date to the middle of the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911). Many variations of this style exist. The name is a bit cheeky, as it refers to the shape of the spout. (Someone obviously had a strong sense of humor.) They are wonderful pots for tea.



Arhat (Luo Han, 羅漢)

This is an “arhat” teapot. Arhats are Buddhist saints. The pot is said to resemble a saint seated in meditation, especially if you cover the handle and spout. These pots date back to the Ming Dynasty and are one of our all-time favorite pots.



Monk's Hat (Seng Mao, 僧帽)

“Monk's Hat” teapots are said to resemble a sacred hat of the time. This style was created by one of the earliest and greatest Yixing masters, Shi Da Bin (時大彬). They aren't easy to shower, so they aren't great for all tea, but they do make nice red tea.



Cow Nose Lotus Seed (Niu Gai Lian Zi, 牛蓋蓮子)



Stone Dipper (Shi Piao, 石瓢)

Shi Piao teapots are named after ladles used in wells. These pots, like many other styles, are celebrations of Quotidian Treasures, the honoring of the ordinary. This shape of pot is great for young sheng puerh, or for serving many guests.



Palace Lamp (Gong Deng, 宮燈)

These common pots have been made in many styles over the centuries. They are often adorned with engravings or carvings to highlight their royal flair. This simple version is made of a decent grade of clay and is good for striped oolong teas, like Dancong or Cliff Tea.



Wish-Fulfilling (Ru Yi, 如意)



Pine Tree (Song Shu, 松樹)



Bottle Gourd (Pao Zun, 匏尊)

This is one of our favorite pots for making tea. This shape makes excellent shou puerh and red tea. The tall, thick walls preserve the heat better than many shapes, producing a thicker and more delicious liquor.



Cang Hexagon (藏六方)

This pot is thus named because “cang” is a homophone with “cang (same word, different sound),” which is when turtles retreat into their shell, which the pot resembles. Turtles hiding in their shells is an old Zen metaphor for meditation.



Upright Ji (Ji Zhi, 汲直)

Chen Man Sheng (陳曼生) read “The Book of Han,” from the Han Dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE). Inside was one story about an official named Ji An (汲黯), who spoke honestly and bluntly to the emperor, demonstrating integrity that was rare in those days. There was an old saying regarding Ji An, “Straight like Ji (汲黯方直).” Inspired by this story, and the uprightness of this ancient noble, Master Chen created this pot. This amazing pot is straight and tall, representing the uprightness of a noble man. These pots can be rare, but if you search, you can find versions of them. They are excellent for preparing red tea, as the tall and thick walls allow for longer steeps, creating a bright and sweet liquor, especially when brewing gongfu red teas.





Remote Springs (You Quan, 悠泉)

This is amongst our all-time favorite teapot shapes, reminiscent of a mountain spring bubbling to the surface and cascading down in clear and pure pools. It is inviting to hold, touch and use to prepare tea. The button even resembles the center of the crystal spring pool where the water rises from.



Han Fang (漢方)

This pot was also created by the great Shi Da Bin. It is based on the bronze works of the Han Dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE). This is one of the more famous shapes of Yixing teapots. We find it makes nice red tea or perhaps shou puerh as well.



Pumpkin Pot (南瓜)