

Kataro Shirayamadani

Kataro Shirayamadani was an active artist at Rookwood Pottery, Cincinnati, Ohio from 1887-1991 and 1921-1948. He was born in Kanazawa, Japan in 1865 and his name means White Mountain Valley.

After several unsuccessful attempts to retain a Japanese artist, Kataro was hired at Rookwood. Kataro was a major influence on Rookwood's decorative ware. He possessed "*the ability to hand paint a piece in its totality, rather than in part*".¹ He transferred from Fujiyama, an import retail and decorating shop in Boston and was known as a skilled porcelain painter. When he began at Rookwood, he lent authentic influence to pottery when Japanese inspired design was extremely fashionable. He was the first of the decorators not American born who had his own studio at Rookwood. It was quite an honor.

*"The extent of his influence on other Rookwood decorators is unknown, although such an imposing talent must have been an inspiration. More important, Shirayamadani brought an international stature to Rookwood. It was his art that helped the pottery to capture the gold medal at the Exposition Universelle in Paris in 1889."*²

Rookwood was trying to perfect a glazing technique. Kataro returned to Japan to visit Japanese potteries to help solve the problem of crazing, cracking, spotting, staining, surface roughness, color fading and other technical problems at Rookwood. He returned in 1894 with his friend, E. H. Asan, a worker in metals, to create an overlay metal, which was popular at the time. In 1899, Rookwood established a metal mounting department to apply metal overlays by "electro deposit process". Early results were successful and Rookwood planned to show at the Paris Exposition.

Kataro Shirayamadani and a few others decorated some magnificent vases embellished with electro plated copper and silver plated copper designs of fish, crabs, octopi, seahorses, frogs, water lily blossoms, leaves and pods, cattails and rocks. Unfortunately, electro-plating turned out to be labor intensive and cost prohibitive.

"The *Dragon Vase* is a classic example of Shirayamadani's best work."³ He created some of the most spectacular dragon paintings on pottery. The vase combines realistic painting of the leaves and seed pods, wisteria and vines, with use of fantasy dragons with human facial characteristics. He used the entire surface of the vase as his canvas rather than just decorating the front and ignoring the back. This was characteristic of Shirayamadani's style of work. The painting style was very unique because it was crisp and detailed but combined his Eastern training with western style.

The war in Europe in 1915 had little impact on Rookwood. However, at that time, Kataro Shirayamadani returned to his native land and took a position working for the Japanese government. Kataro returned to America in 1925.

The Depression had significant influence on Rookwood Pottery. Shirayamadani managed to produce exquisite work. Instead of having a big celebration for the 50th anniversary, it was decided that stockholders and a few others were invited to see a kiln "drawn." The work of twenty-three decorators was in the anniversary kiln, including Kataro Shirayamadani. By January of 1931, nearly all of the anniversary pieces had been sold. In 1935, Rookwood was \$130,000 in debt and Kataro Shirayamadani decorated a few pieces, but was not regularly paid. In 1943 a greatly diminished Rookwood seemed stable and rehired Kataro, its most experienced decorator at the age of 78.

To celebrate Rookwood's anniversary in 1947, it was planned that Shirayamadani would demonstrate the sculpting of a bas-relief vase before a television camera. He fell climbing a stairway to the presentation and required hospitalization. Shirayamadani ultimately recovered and returned to work at the age of 83. However, he died a few months later on July 19, 1948.

Kataro Shirayamadani has work in museums all over the world including works in the Industrial Art Museum, Prague, Czechoslovakia, State Hermitage Museum, Leningrad, Victoria and Albert Museum, London, England and Bavarian Industrial Museum, Nuremberg, Germany, just to list a few.

¹ Rago, David, *American Art Pottery*, Knickerbocker Press

² Ellis, Anita J., Cincinnati Art Museum, *Rookwood Pottery, The Glorious Gamble*, Rizzoli International Publications 1992

³ Mint Museum Acquires Rare Rookwood, Kataro Shirayamadani's *Dragon Vase*, <http://www.tfaoi.com/aa/2aa/2aa523.htm>

Peck, Herbert, *The Book of Rookwood Pottery*, Bonanza Books 1968