

Purple clay teapots become a fading memory of craftsmanship

One of the most appreciated China's treasures, the historic Yixing purple clay teapot (Zisha teapot), rolls Chinese poetry, painting and carving into one. Ai Huosheng, a lover of the Zisha, has devoted himself to this unique craftware for decades and witnessed significant changes in the Zisha teapot market. He continues to look and learn, pursuing the item's limitless artistic perfection.

Zisha: Hard to say I love you

Most Chinese people know about the purple clay teapot (Zisha teapot) of Yixing in Jiangsu Province. It is an item that embodies the values of both artistic appreciation and practical use. In Jiangnan (literally south of the lower reaches of Yangtze River), most families have their own purple clay teapots.

Rich in shape and color, unadorned but elegant, the Zisha teapot can meet the standards of the most critical eye. When people fill it with boiled water, it is safe from breaking or burning the users' hands. As an excellent retainer of heat, the Zisha teapot is able to keep tea warm for a long time. Compared with other containers, it can perform better in bringing out the tea's unique flavor. Even if you forget to drink tea that was brewed a couple of days ago, it will not sour in a Zisha teapot. After being used for months, the new teapot will improve with time.

In my childhood, the Zisha teapot was used in my family to brew tea. It had never appealed to me until my curiosity was aroused by a coincidence.

Way back in 1983, on my return from a business trip to Binhai County in Jiangsu Province via Suzhou, I bought a Zisha teapot shaped like round bamboo for 90 yuan (US\$11.7), although my salary was only 86 yuan at the time. But later someone told me that this teapot was nothing but a crudely made industrial Zisha teapot which only worth 10 yuan at most.

Knowing that I was cheated, I felt so disappointed that I wrote a letter to a friend in Nanjing, capital city of Jiangsu Province, telling him the story. In reply, he sent me a Zisha teapot in the shape of square bamboo made by Mao Meihong, a well-known teapot maker.

By comparison, the latter one was obviously better. I liked it so much that I would take it with me all the time. However, the story didn't end there. I later met an expert who believed the teapot was not made by the artisan Mao. And thereby I determined to learn about the Zisha teapot and began to purchase, use and study them. Gradually, I grasped the fundamentals of the Zisha teapot.



Having a cup of tea on an idle afternoon is quite relaxing.

Is the Zisha teapot made of mud?

Most people would think that the Zisha teapot is made of mud. But actually it's made of "Zisha mud," which is not common mud but a kind of ore buried deep in the ground. Zisha mud looks the same as stone when it is dug out and should be weathered by wind and rain, gradually breaking down into small pieces. In ancient times, people ground it into powder with stone mills, while the modern technique is to use a ball mill.

The powder is screened carefully so that only the finest is selected and then immersed in water, yielding a mud-like precipitate that is the raw material for Zisha teapot-making.

However, we still need to process the precipitate, for it is just raw mud that cannot be used in this state. People used to pound the raw mud with a mallet, but nowadays a vacuum mill is widely used. In the past, artisans needed to complete the whole process of making Zisha teapots by themselves. But today they just need to craft them after the mud is ready to be used.

When you want to choose a Zisha teapot, merchants often tend to boast about the quality of the mud they use. Remember not to take every word they say seriously. I cannot remember how many times I have been to Yixing.

however, I have witnessed the many changes that have taken place in the Zisha teapot market.

In the mid 1980s, the Zisha teapot was being promoted as a hot item by some Taiwan merchants. Taking this opportunity, some artisans began to find contract manufacturers to produce as many teapots as possible. Since then, more and more fakes have flooded into the market.

Nowadays, since too many people are producing teapots in Yixing, many teapot makers have established brands to raise the prices of their products. But an expensive Zisha teapot does not necessarily mean good quality, and vice versa. Behind the seemingly busy teapot market, the making of the Zisha teapot has become more and more tuned to instant sales. Artisans are striving less and less for perfection.

Those who once worked with a sense of time and artistry, it seems, have become a golden memory. As a Zisha teapot lover for decades, I've often sighed recently: "Zisha teapot, it's hard to say I love you!"

Colors and kiln firing of the purple clay teapot

The color of the Zisha teapot depends on Zisha mud itself. It doesn't have a very bright color until it is fired at elevated temperatures. Since purple mud is most commonly found, people collectively call it Zisha mud (literally purple clay).

However, with the rapid development of science and technology, teapot makers have learnt how to add chemicals into the purple clay to change its original color, thus the Zisha teapot becomes increasingly colorful. The genuine Zisha mud becomes an elegant lavender after being fired, while the colors of teapots on the market are mostly deep purple because they are blended with other clay or chemicals.

Among all the pugs, Dahongpao (big red robe) is most valuable. This rare red pug can make teapots of particularly bright color that everyone likes. Unfortunately, it has almost disappeared. Sometimes, the dealers use those similar colors to deceive buyers. To distinguish between the real and the fake, you just need to knock the body of the teapot gently. If there is no weird shaking sound and the body weighs light, the teapot is real.

In comparison, there is another kind of bright red teapot which is also confusing. If you can hear a jingle when hitting the lid and the body softly, it is made of red mud. This kind of teapot is not ideal for brewing tea, as it cannot

breathery well. Whereas, the value of the little bit made of red mud is not less than that of Zisha teapots, it is good for artistic appreciation.

The magic of the Zisha teapot lies in the dual-holocausture of its wall, which is capable of breathing well as protecting the water from leaking. The temperature sustained in the kiln firing is quite important. Purple clay is usually controlled between 1,120 and 1,160 degrees Centigrade, with mud at a temperature of 1,160 degrees Centigrade. Any change of temperature influences the quality of the teapot.

How to make a Zisha teapot

Every time I go to Yixing for Zisha teapots, I love to watch artisans making them, and ask plenty of questions. So after some time, I have learnt how a Zisha teapot is made.

The production process is entirely different from that of china. As for the Zisha teapot, artisans still adopt the unique processing method that has been passed down for centuries. Generally, there're two ways of making a handcrafted Zisha teapot.

• **Patting formation, normally used for square shapes**

First, cut the flat clay into pieces you need, then combine them with glutinous rice clay into a square or hexagonal-shaped pot body. Next, make the clay into a spout, knob and handle that can fit the body. It is highly demanding of artisans' craftsmanship that is good at making round shaped wares doesn't necessarily do well square shapes. Consequently, the prices of square shaped teapots are higher than round shaped ones.

In today's ceramics field in Yixing, only a few experts survive in making square shaped teapots, such as Pan Chiping, Shi Xiaoma and Zhuang Yulin. All are senior craftsmen, the work of the first two being quite difficult to obtain.

• **Patting formation, normally used for round shapes**

First, make the clay flat by patting it again and again, then cut it into a rectangle with the width you need. Stand it on the prepared clay bottom and shape the rectangular clay around it. Next, with small wooden bat, continuously pat the outside of the cylinder with one hand, holding the other hand inside the cylinder to support it. The artist turns the cylinder into the shape and thickness he has in mind for the teapot. Thirdly, use a bamboo sheet to smooth the inner wall of the teapot and then a thin bullhorn sheet to perfect the outer wall. Finally, attach the spout, knob and handle to the body.

Making a teapot requires extreme care and focus. The artisans spend years in isolation making the perfect Zisha teapots. Without this perseverance, one couldn't be a master. Apart from handcrafted Zisha teapots, semi-handcrafted styles are also available.

Since the late 1950s, some teapot makers started using moulds for shape, revolutionizing the way of producing teapots but reflecting both advantages and disadvantages.

On the one hand, it is faster and more accurate, which is suitable for mass production. On the other hand, the teapots that are produced in this way lack creativity and vitality.

Moreover, in order to draw patterns easier, the mold is made of two pieces, thus the body of the teapot is stuck together with an unavoidable connecting seam between the pieces.



How to buy a Zisha teapot to your liking

When it comes to buying a Zisha teapot, it largely depends on your own understanding and aesthetics about teapots.

Faced with a variety of choices, first you just sense some by insight, then select a few more carefully and finally decide which one to buy. There are also some tips that may help you choose an excellent Zisha teapot.

Holding a teapot in hand, you can first check the uniformity of its color. Then shake the teapot horizontally and see whether the lid and the body

are well fit, whether the lid can be turned smoothly and whether the teapot can be held in hand comfortably.

If the teapot is decorated with some characters or patterns, pick one that you are fond of. Then, put the teapot on a flat surface and observe the shape of the spout, the handle and the body, making sure that they all have ideal shapes.

Last, but not least, you can fill the teapot with some water and see how the water comes out of the spout. The further the water spreads, the better the teapot is.

Practice makes perfect. After accumulating more and more experience, you will naturally gain a keener insight into the Zisha teapot.

Always be cautious when buying a Zisha teapot. Never will a merchant stop seeking profits. So always be cautious when buying a Zisha teapot. There are several suggestions for you to follow:

First, what really matters is the quality not the seal underneath the teapot, for the seal has nothing to do with the quality of the Zisha teapot.

Second, you should never buy a celebrated product without calling on an expert for verification. You can keep this principle in mind: "Teapots are not made in Yixing City; excellent teapots cannot be bought at the shops; good teapots don't lie in beautiful packages."

Third, put the teapot in bright light and observe it carefully. Since the teapot trade markets and the artisans' homes often have brown-colored glass for their windows, it's difficult to find a flaw on the teapot in dim light. I didn't find out that secret until I was taken in several times.

Fourth, never ask the price the second you take a fancy to one. Dealers are all psychologists. When they find you are focusing on one of the teapots, they will ask for a high price. Knowing that, operate the same way to get

the best price, always taking the initiative in bargaining. If time permits, there is no harm in shopping around to get a good buy.

Finally, in most cases, ordering items is not recommended. Even if you book one from a dealer that you are familiar with, you have to face the time limit and accept any quality problems because it is only made for you. So, leave yourself some leeway.

How to properly care for your teapot?

If you love your Zisha teapot, just use it. The more often you use it, the more brilliant it will become. It is like an animated creature — when you are fond of using it, it will love you back.

Before using a new teapot for the first time, you just need to remove the white powder (adherence-proof material) inside and wash it quickly with boiled water. Never boil the new teapot in salt water because the purple clay has an excellent absorbability so the salt will find its way into the pot's structure.

Try to use good tea leaves the first time, for the Zisha teapot can lock in the fragrance for a long time. Wash it without delay after use, and remove the greasy dirt with a clean soft cloth, but the inner just needs washing with clear water.

If you have many Zisha teapots, use them in turn and clean after a while. Using them frequently is the best way to care for Zisha teapots.



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(Stories compiled by Ai Huosheng and translated by Shi Jihua)



A tea shop owner in Jiading District recommends green tea and teapot for consumers. A teapot expert reminds consumers to put the teapot in bright light and observe it carefully.