

The Art of Kintsugi: Finding Perfection in Imperfections

By

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Abstract

Everything that is manufactured is meant to be broken sooner or later. Such broken things often find their solace either in a trash heap or at a recycling shop to be further transported to a factory where they are destined to be transformed into something new, losing their originality. When we talk about broken or chipped ceramic, all we can imagine is a dustpan full of small fragments of once a proud and magnificent decorative piece or tableware. In this article, I am going to discuss an age-old Japanese technique known as “kintsugi” used to restore the glory of such broken pieces without losing their identity and original purpose. The method and materials used to perform this art are also discussed along with tracing back the dates and history of its origin. The philosophy behind this art is brought into light based on the strong aesthetics of wabi-sabi: an Eastern philosophy indicating beauty in imperfect things and mottainai: expressing regrets over mindless wastage.

Keywords

kintsugi, repair, ceramics, Japanese aesthetics, urushi lacquer

Kintsugi

Kintsugi is a combination of two Japanese words: kin and tsugi with the literal meaning of ‘gold’ and ‘to join’ respectively, hence it can be translated as joining with gold. Kintsugi is a traditional Japanese craft mainly used to repair ceramic pieces, broken either by accident or by purpose, in order to give them a new life. This process is performed by using Japanese

urushi lacquer, which acts as a binding agent, and gold or silver dust to add magnificence to the repaired piece.

Urushi lacquer is prepared from sap extracted from the urushi tree (*Toxicodendron Vernicifluum*) native to Asian countries like China, Korea, and Japan. For extraction of the sap, the tree must be tapped carefully to form the desired incision. The sap in its extracted form is poisonous, thus it is required to follow a method curated over the years combined with expertise to collect it. Collected grayish resin further goes through many stages over a period of three to five years before it turns into a transparent lacquer ready to be used as an adhesive to fix broken ceramics. It can be tinted with various hues depending on the requirements of the craftsman.

Urushi lacquer is the most suitable glue for performing the technique of kintsugi having its cross-linked polymer structure that provides the strength and hardness required for a durable repair. Its natural property of resistance against water and abrasion makes it the preferred choice for ceramic repair. Urushi has been a part of Japanese craft for a very long time; tableware prepared using urushi is one of the finest examples. Apart from the above-mentioned qualities it has preservative qualities as well; a coat of urushi lacquer enhances the life of any furniture while giving it a unique glaze. It is also used to preserve old and important documents.

Due to its name, 'kintsugi', many people think that ceramic pieces are repaired by mixing the gold powder in glue, but this is not the case. Broken pieces are first collected and glued together using a mix prepared by combining lacquer and rice flour into a sticky paste. This paste is not only used to join the pieces but also is used to fill the holes, reconstruct broken edges, or any other part that is missing from the broken ceramic. After filling this sticky mixture of urushi into the crevices, the piece is stored carefully for the urushi to dry completely, which takes more than a month's worth of time. After drying, the excess urushi is scrapped off the surface with the help of charcoal, leaving a smooth surface behind.

Then, with skilled hands, a fine line of urushi is applied again on the visible lines of the repair; this line is then dusted with pure gold powder, highlighting and decorating the repair work. Based on the kind of effect and semblance the craftsman desires from that particular

piece, he selects the granules of gold dust, which can be obtained in round or flat shapes ranging in fifteen various levels of fineness. A repaired crack symbolizes not only the damage and catastrophe but above all signifies the care, amelioration, and creative thoughts dedicated to the renewal of the piece by the artist.



Image 1: Kintsugi Ceramic Art

History

The history of kintsugi leads us to a legend of a Japanese king named Ashikaga Yoshimasa who reigned from 1449 to 1473, who by accident broke one of his favorite bowls, which he had gotten from China. Being very much attached to the bowl, he didn't want to throw it away therefore he sent the bowl back to China for repair. After repairs, the bowl arrived however, it was filled with unsightly metal clips used to attach the pieces; this shocked and saddened the emperor as the Japanese delicate aesthetic didn't see value in such work. Finally, the challenge of fixing the bowl was given to Japanese artisans. The method had to be such that the bowl could be used again for the same purpose, so the artisans discovered urushi lacquer and glued the broken pieces together with it; and to make it alluring, they dusted the sealed crack with gold powder. This repair work enhanced the beauty of the bowl which looked more elegant than the original piece. Now, adorned with gilded streaks of lightning this bowl gave birth to the art of kintsugi.



Image 2: Japanese Kintsugi Bowl

Aesthetics

The philosophy behind kintsugi is derived from the Japanese principles of wabi-sabi and mottainai.

Wabi-sabi is finding beauty in imperfect or faulty things; it reminds one that the perfection we seek throughout our life to get approval and acceptance from others is merely a mirage. Because in reality there is nothing called perfect; we all are embedded with faults and instead of embracing them we keep them hidden to shield our vulnerability. The aesthetics of wabi-sabi applied in kintsugi convey that ‘Do not try to hide the damage; it is the fault lines that make the piece more beautiful’; it also emphasizes that faults and imperfections are like badges earned during the journey, make one resilient and stronger. Imperfections when embraced wholeheartedly can become one of the biggest strengths.

Japan, where earthquakes are a frequent occurrence causing a lot of damage, has learned to devise methods to reuse the broken things emphasizing the very core aesthetics of the Japanese culture of mottainai. This Japanese spirit is used to show regrets over wastage. Kintsugi is the extension of this firm belief of Japanese society which is reflected in every

aspect of their daily life. Instead of buying new things, we can always give a meaningful makeover to old, broken, and withered items.



Image 3: Golden Mended vase

Conclusion

Kintsugi is the expression of Japanese aesthetics which might have appeared in the form of repaired ceramics but has its roots spread deep, defining and shaping their day-to-day life. In the contemporary era of over-consumption and use-and-throw culture, the art of kintsugi shows us that broken things need not be thrown but can again be given a purpose by offering conspicuous care for fixing them. Japanese see the beauty in imperfection so much that sometimes the crockery is broken on purpose to be fixed by kintsugi; it is believed that perfect things are not as interesting as imperfect or flawed things. Every crack carries a story and thus highlighting it after the repair reminds the valuable message behind it, which is, “Nothing is permanent and nothing is perfect.”

About the Author

Neha Gupta is a freelance Japanese teacher who holds the certificate of JLPT N3 and has lived in Japan for eight years learning and embracing the culture. She loves to weave her experiences and inspiration into words to create stories and poems. She has won many accolades for her writing endeavors. Many of her write-ups have been published in numerous anthologies, ALS blogs, ALS books, and journals.

