

KINTSUGI

A new look at beauty

EVELYNE SCHOENMANN

If we look around us, we cannot ignore it: we are living in a material world, as pop diva Madonna once bluntly put it. Goods are bought, used and disposed of as if there were no tomorrow. And yet there are people for whom, for instance, a piece of broken ceramics means a lot. In the course of our lives, we humans too acquire a lot of scars. Some endeavour to hide them, cover them up or even have them surgically removed. And yet others have no problem showing that they have a story to tell.

Several years ago, I became aware of the Japanese tradition of *kintsugi*, or more rarely *kintsukuroi*: delicate gold landscapes on once-broken ceramics. They are restored using the kintsugi technique in order to use them again or to show them off as beautiful objects without concealing their past. On the contrary, in the final stage of this technique when the gold is applied, the cracks and break lines (called *kesniki*) are even emphasised. You may find it strange that Japanese society of all places, which we see as perfectionist and which is a world leader in technologies like electronics, car manufacturing and precision optics, paradoxically commits itself so strongly to preserving

POJ Studio Kyoto



Mike Martino: with gold repair (detail)

the old, broken or much used as things of beauty. Restoring a broken or chipped vessel has a lot to do with philosophy.

A variety of kintsugi sets are now available on the market. Some make possible the traditional, laborious working method whereas others make life easier to the extent that the whole thing can be dealt with in an abbreviated procedure. For myself, I prefer tradition and authenticity, even if the conventional process takes weeks. To learn how to restore a broken item in the kintsugi technique, I ordered a kintsugi set from POJ Studios in Kyoto. The Pieces of Japan (POJ) Studio is trying to keep the ancient Japanese art alive with waza kits. In contrast to many other suppliers selling Japanese style products, POJ has remained faithful to the Japanese tradition and has adapted it to our contemporary lifestyle. In a beautifully crafted wooden casket from POJ Studio Kyoto I find two urushi lacquers (kiurushi and eurushi), tonoko and gold powder, masking tape, sandpaper, brushes, protective gloves and a small spatula. Just seeing this carefully assembled set on my work table fills me with anticipation for the job ahead. The individual steps are precisely laid down and must be worked through in strict order. POJ Studio provides a "how to" video on its website (link at the end of the article). What you also need is patience because scars only heal slowly, whether for humans or ceramics.

To familiarise myself with the materials and the process, I first practice with a chipped vessel and only move on to a broken pot afterwards. For completely broken ceramics, you also need a glue like wheat or rice flour as well as eurushi and water. For the following seventeen days, I adhere strictly to the process described in the video mentioned above



Mike Martino: **chawan** with gold repair and overlaid black pattern

Mike Martino: **Izumiyama porcelain teabowl** with gold repair



– seventeen because after every step the piece must be placed in a drying container (muro) for 5 – 7 days to harden fully. After such a long process of working and waiting, the result is a joy to behold.

From Hiroki Kiyokawa, I have learned that urushi is won from the sap of a tree native to Japan. The lacquer is very valuable because the tree is cut down after the sap has been extracted. It is like the tree's blood, and when it has been extracted, the tree's life is over. A debt of thanks is owed to nature for this gift. It is desirable to work with urushi, but this natural product can produce skin allergies, which is why my colleague Mike Martino works with surrogates in his studio Gotanbayashi Kama in Taku, including a mix of red iron oxide and silver powder mixed with a resin binder. He says, "There are people like me who are allergic to urushi. Most urushi artists must become immune to it in time. But there are the same reservations for modern resins. The main thing is to be careful with both and to understand the science behind them to be able to use them properly and safely. They must be correctly mixed and fully hardened to become nontoxic and food safe. With thin lines on the restored ceramic, the user's exposure will be negligible, in contrast to coating large areas of a vessel." Safety measures like disposable gloves and long sleeves are thus indispensable.

If the term kintsugi is mentioned, wabi-sabi is usually not far away. So as not to go beyond the scope of this article, I will note just a few ideas here. Is this principally about the concept of the perception of beauty? Or about the idea that objects that exhibit wabi-sabi become more beautiful with age? A 90-year-old teamster I know becomes annoyed when Westerners describe it as "the beauty of imperfection". Personally speaking, it seems to me that pieces exhibiting wabi-sabi teach us to understand the beauty of things in a new way.

To access the "how-to-do-it" video, go to:
www.pojstudio.com

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