

KINTSUGI

The Healing Power of Pottery Repair



A chawan bowl repaired using the *kintsugi* technique

IN the sixteenth century in Japan, Sen no Rikyu perfected the traditional tea ceremony known as *chanoyu* (or *chado*), a culture of hospitality, and items integral to the tea ceremony developed alongside it. One important item was the *chawan*, a bowl held in the hand in the tea ceremony for the drinking of matcha tea. Chawan were first imported from China and Korea, and came to be made in various regions in Japan. Some exquisite antique chawan survive and are designated as national treasures today. However, no matter how carefully these bowls were handled, over time some would break or chip. *Kintsugi* (literally, gold seams) is a traditional repair method that takes the broken or chipped parts of cherished vessels, glues them back together with a Japanese lacquer, and paints the seams with gold or silver powder. Nakamura Kunio, the owner of Rokujigen, a book café in Ogi-kubo, Tokyo, that offers *kintsugi* workshops and other educational activities, says this about the origins of the technique.

“Kintsugi has a beauty within the imperfection. This developed from a concept called *wabi sabi*

All photos: Courtesy of Nakamura Kunio

In Japan, there is a traditional repair method known as *kintsugi*, where broken pieces of pottery are stuck back together with a Japanese lacquer (*urushi*), the joints are painted and decorated with gold or silver powder, and the pottery continues to be used. Now efforts are underway to spread this technique not just within Japan but overseas, as well.

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which is treasured in the tea ceremony. It is an aesthetic sense unique to Japan that finds spiritual richness in simplicity.”

In the world of *chanoyu*, the tea ceremony, sometimes a perfect piece of pottery is even purposefully broken and repaired. Then the pattern from the cracks made through *kintsugi* is likened to a beautiful scene from nature and enjoyed.

“The cracks in the pottery form a dramatic landscape. When the gold color is added along the joins of the broken parts, the lines look like lightning brightening the darkness, a golden-colored river, or a branch reaching into the firmament. New scenes are thus born in the pottery.”

Nakamura, who has collected antiques since from when he was a child, encountered *kintsugi* in his 30s. He interviewed a number of *kintsugi* artisans in Japan as he was working as the director of a TV show at the time, and he learned about the techniques on his own.

After the Great East Japan Earthquake that occurred on March 11, 2011, demand for *kintsugi* increased. Nakamura hosted a workshop to repair

pottery that had been broken in disaster-stricken areas. The kintsugi technique, which beautifully brought back mementos of lost family members or pottery with special memories, also calmed the hearts of those who were wounded. Nakamura says he received a letter from a participant at one of his workshops that said of a repaired item, “It is not just the memento but also me myself that you healed.” While running the book café, Nakamura authors books related to kintsugi and old works of art and is involved in activities to popularize kintsugi both in Japan and abroad as well as in support activities in disaster-stricken areas.

However, the lacquer *urushi* used in the traditional kintsugi technique is an irritant to the skin, and as such it is quite difficult to use outside of Japan. So in Nakamura’s workshops, participated in even by enthusiasts from abroad, they use a different plant-based resin and other safe materials. Nakamura says that he will spread kintsugi techniques that use fair trade materials that can be imported at fair prices and that have a minimal burden on the natural environment, and also use brushes made without animal hair. There is a need to create a “new tradition,” he says.

“Last year, a short film entitled *Kintsugi* was shown at the Sundance Film Festival in the United States, and there have been more and more students attending kintsugi classes,” says Nakamura. “I feel like the boom in kintsugi will accelerate going forward.”

At the end of 2019, the Kintsugi Academy, based in Los Angeles, was opened in cooperation with a gallery in New York. Currently, lessons are offered online as a measure against COVID-19, but the Academy plans to hold workshops, exhibitions, and more to further demonstrate the healing power of kintsugi to the world. **V**



- 1 Nakamura Kunio at work on a *kintsugi* repair job
- 2 A *chawan* bowl repaired using the *kintsugi* technique
- 3 A *kintsugi* workshop hosted by Nakamura Kunio