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Kintsugi: When a Broken Bowl is Repaired with Gold!

In today's age of sustainability and recycling, repairing to reuse is all the rage. Usually, the goal of a repair is to hide the damage. But an old Japanese repair technique instead celebrates the history of the object by showing off the imperfections.

Kintsugi, translated as golden joinery, is the Japanese technique of repairing ceramics with lacquer (a natural resin made from tree sap) and powdered gold. The technique is also called kintsuguroi, which translates to golden repairs. The goal: Through the repair, the object becomes more beautiful than before it was broken.



Tea bowl, Satsuma ware, White Satsuma type, Kagoshima prefecture, Japan, 17th century, Edo period, Stoneware with clear, crackled glaze, stained by ink; gold lacquer repairs.

Source: Smithsonian Institution, The Beauty of Broken Objects.

How Did Kintsugi Begin?

Lacquer had been used for ceramic repairs in Asia as far back as the prehistoric ages, but gold was not part of the act until much recently.

In or around the 15th century, a Japanese shogun named Ashikaga Yoshimasa dropped a Chinese tea bowl. He sent the pieces back to China to be repaired. Months later, the bowl was returned, the pieces held together by bulky metal stapes. Disappointed, he asked local artisans to fix it.



Modern kintsugi art, Naoko Fukumaru

The artisans sanded the edges of the broken pieces and then glued them back together using lacquer, to which they had added gold. The craftspeople had transformed the piece – with its flaws highlighted – into something more beautiful than the original bowl. By the 17th century, kintsugi was so fashionable phenomenon that some people were known to smash their tea bowls on purpose to embed them with golden-veined repairs. [1]

It remains an art form today.

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1 In Make-Do Objects, Collectors Find Beauty Beyond Repair, *New York Time*s, Dec 15, 2010

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