

Cup of Immortality

by

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During the Muromachi period in Japan, under the Shogun Yoshimasa (1436-90), the tea ceremony reached its highest expression and most sublime aesthetic form. Among the ceramic utensils used for the ceremony, the Raku teabowls stand out as masterpieces created according to the spirit of this rite, and to quote Daniel Rhodes, “they might be said to be its most perfect embodiment in pottery”.¹ Thus infused with spiritual qualities, Raku teabowls are more than just functional or aesthetic objects; they are the worthy recipients of the spirit of tea.

To fully appreciate their inherent qualities, it is necessary to understand the religious foundation and guiding principles of the tea ceremony, or *Cha-no-yu*. During the middle ages, Chinese Zen Buddhism and the use of tea were spreading all over Japan. But long before that, the Taoists in China employed tea as one of the means to attain self-realization.² Thus, the Zen Buddhist monks of southern China, who had been influenced by Taoist doctrines, introduced tea into their religious practices. Gathering around the image of Boddhidharma, they drank tea from the same bowl “with the profound formality of a holy sacrament”.³ This rite laid down the basis for the tea ceremony in Japan.

But it is not only the combined spirit of Taoism and Zen Buddhism that constitutes the whole foundation of the tea ceremony: there is also the influence of Shintoism, the ancestral religion of Japan, that is rooted in this ritual. In the tea ceremony, the Zen principles of simplicity and poverty, combined with the Taoist ideals of beauty and equilibrium, integrate readily with the knowledge and love of nature that are so prominent in Shinto. Thus immersed in naturalness, and by the practice of virtue and meditation, “tea in a humble room consists first and foremost...[in] attaining Buddhist truth according to Zen”.⁴

1. Daniel Rhodes, *Clay and Glazes for the Potter* (Pennsylvania: Chilton Book Company, 1974), p. 295.

2. Kakuzo Okakura, *The Book of Tea*, ed. Everett F. Bleiler (New York: Dover Publications, 1964), p. 15.

3. Herbert Sanders, *The World of Japanese Ceramics* (Tokyo, New York and San Francisco: Kodansha International, 1967), p. 227. (The quote is originally from Okakura.—Ed.)

4. Charlotte F. Speight, *Hands in Clay: An Introduction to Ceramics* (California: Alfred Pub Co, 1979), p. 76.

One essential quality that sustains the tea ceremony is *wabi*, or poverty, which regulates the formal plane—tea house and objects—as well as the attitude of the participants. Poverty, or non-possessiveness, is like humility, or non-assertiveness, which allow no pride or egoism. Poverty resembles the empty cup which, analogically speaking, is like the formal expression of the humble soul open to receive illumination and bliss.

The spirit of *wabi* was infused by the potters, with the guidance of the tea masters, into the Raku bowls. This quality was achieved by the natural and simple appearance of the bowl, effects deliberately created by means of the Raku method, which was specially conceived to make tea-ceremony ware. To make the bowl, an ordinary clay body was used that could stand the suddenness of the firing and cooling process, which produced its rough texture. The bowl was hand-made, thick walled, and irregularly shaped, so that it would fit comfortably in the hands. Three types of glaze were employed: black, red, and white, purposely applied in an uneven way. By this process, cracks, scratches, and spots appeared on the bowl, giving it the look of an object found in its natural state.

Another important aspect of the tea ceremony is the ideal of beauty, or *shibui*, defined by Clark (quoting Bernard Leach) as a “profound, unassuming and quiet feeling”.⁵ The ceremony itself is related to the beautiful by its extreme simplicity and immaculately natural form—if such an expression can be used. Like a veiled woman, beauty is suggested through the rusticity and smallness of the tea house, the arranged naturalness of the garden that surrounds it, the simplicity of the objects used, and the austerity and cleanliness of the interior decor. So, poverty or *wabi* is thus intimately related with this aesthetic ideal and, to follow Clark in quoting Leach again, what is “possessed in some manner of the virtue of poverty has an indescribable beauty”.⁶ That is how the beauty of the Raku teabowl resides in its irregularity, simplicity and natural look.

Poverty and beauty shine throughout the four guiding principles of the tea ceremony: Harmony, Respect, Purity, and Tranquility.⁷ On the external plane, Harmony—the first principle—is achieved by balancing the irregular and the asymmetrical aspects of the few elements that come into play, thus imitating nature’s spontaneity; nothing is rigid, yet everything has its place. Respect—the second principle—is due to the participants as well as to the objects of the ceremony. All men are equal in the tea room;⁸ once they lower themselves to enter it through the three-foot square door, they leave behind all worldly possessions and pride. And that is related to Purity—the third principle—for it is also emptiness; the guests wash their hands and mouths before approaching the tea house, thus cleansing the body and the soul. As the author of *The Book of Tea* says, “until one has made himself beautiful, he has no right to approach

5. Garth Clark, *Ceramic Art: Comment and Review, 1882-1977* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1978), p. 66.

6. Ibid.

7. Hari Prasad Shastri, *Echoes of Japan* (London: Shanti Sadan, 1961), p. 34.

8. H. Paul Varley, *Japanese Culture: A Short History*, 2nd ed. (New York: Praeger, 1977), p. 89.

beauty”.⁹ And Tranquility—the fourth principle—means that once all worldly concerns are left behind, only harmony and peace reign undisturbed.

The tea ceremony is thus governed by strict spiritual rules, applied not only to the participants, but to the objects as well. That is why, as Okakura Kakuzo comments: “the tea-masters guarded their treasures [objects for the tea ritual] with religious secrecy...rarely was the object exposed to view, and then only to the initiated”.¹⁰ Most of the tea masters were Zen Monks, and the tea utensils used by them are considered sacred, like the relics of saints.¹¹ And among these utensils, the tea-bowl (*chawan*) is a central object, for it symbolizes the humble heart open to receive the gift of immortality.

The tea ceremony is thus the embodiment of the highly contemplative and subtly beautiful Japanese soul, which an ancient Raku teabowl quietly suggests.

9. Okakura, *Book of Tea*, p. 61.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 46.

11. *Ibid.*, p. xvii.