"Ingestion" is a column that explores food within a framework informed by aesthetics, history, and philosophy. / "Inventory" is a column that examines a list, catalogue, or register. / "Object Lesson," a column by Celeste Olalquiaga, reads culture against the grain to identify striking illustrations of a historical process or principle. / "Colors" is a column in which a writer responds to a specific color assigned by the editors of *Cabinet*.

INGESTION / GUINOMI

ALLEN S. WEISS

In the West, wine drinking is a transparent affair. The enthusiast well knows that in order to appreciate the color of the wine, the only acceptable glass is one of clear crystal. The purist will even frown upon the finest cut-glass, as the added sparkle denatures the visual experience. In Japan, the opposite is true, for it is their wine, sake, that is crystal clear, allowing their drinking vessels to take part in that penumbral world celebrated by Junichirō Tanizaki throughout *In Praise of Shadows*. (While there exist sparkling sakes, unfiltered sakes of milky opacity, and even red sakes, they constitute a small minority.) Though these days sake is often served in small one-sip cups (*ochoko*) not unlike Western shot glasses, in small colored cut-glass beakers, or in square wooden boxes (*masu*) that originated as units of measure, the subject of this essay is rather the traditional pottery sake cup (*guinomi*), which shares most of its characteristics with its larger and more famous counterpart, the bowl (*chawan*) of the tea ceremony.

The Japanese tea ceremony is a Zen-inspired practice perfected by Sen no Rikyū (1522–1591). Fundamentally, the tea ceremony is nothing but *cha-no-yu*, "hot water for tea," suggesting that this art exists not in the object, nor in the gesture, but as a form of appreciation, an intuition. It is of sacred origin, highly ritualistic, with codified behavior and a thematic aesthetic, such that the sundry objects of the ceremony (including flower arrangements, scroll paintings or calligraphic poems, and the tea bowl itself) all subtly allude to a particular theme and a specific season. As Zen Buddhism is at the core of Japanese culture, and as Tea is one of the ritual keys to Zen, this ceremony may be seen as a condensation of Japanese aesthetics, to the point that a Japanese proverb claims "Zen and Tea are one." The tenets of the tea ceremony are harmony, respect, purity, and tranquility, which guide all considerations of beauty. But it is here that specifically Japanese aesthetic notions, untranslatable into English, complicate the issue, as the forms taken by such consummate beauty proffer particular characteristics: *wabi* (quietness, tranquility, astringency, humbleness, unobtrusiveness, solitude, asymmetrical harmony, elegant rusticity); *sabi* (patination through age and use, a prime aesthetic sensibility in Japan); and *shibui* (incompleteness, imperfection, understatement, discrimination, serenity, restraint, modesty, formality, quiet taste, refined simplicity, noble austerity). The tea ceremony seeks a state of mind guided by these factors and circumscribed by centuries of ritualized gesture.

The top, bottom, and sides of a *guinomi* made by Jeff Shapiro. Private collection. Photos Ryo Manabe.

As the complexity of the preceding translations suggests, these principles diverge greatly from Western aesthetics. This may be illustrated, for example, by noting the strong, ancient, and indeed essential Japanese sense of what the structuralists of the 1970s termed "the materiality of the signifier," foregrounded in pottery by the favored technique of leaving exposed small areas of clay from under the glaze, slip, and ash, to reveal the "clay flavor" (*tsuchi-aji*). Another aspect of this aesthetic is the varied role of chance in Japanese aesthetics, be it partially controlled or totally serendipitous. Manifestations of materiality and chance are often linked, as when a spontaneous, unintentional crack reveals the interior of the clay. Aleatory and partially indeterminable firing effects, and even certain damages occurring after centuries of use, are thus considered to be aesthetic (and not merely contingent) effects. This is stressed by the fact that repairs on pottery are often not made with the invisible mends required by Western restorers, but rather with a filling of *urushi* lacquer mixed with twenty-three-karat gold dust, which highlights the crack. For example, in the famous *Seppō* tea bowl, created by the legendary calligrapher and potter Kōetsu Honami (1558–1637), one can see not only a spectacular fissure but also where the gold-lacquered repair itself has cracked over time. One wonders at the aesthetic profundity of this crack upon a crack. Pottery specialist Robert Yellin recounts: "I've seen many a sixteenth-century Momoyama period *guinomi* repaired with gold and/or lacquer and often such pieces are very expensive. I had a client once who purchased a Shigaraki *guinomi* and loved using it. However, one day he dropped it while rinsing it and it shattered into many pieces. He was distraught, yet I told him not to frown and send the pieces to me. He did and I then sent them to my fabulous craftsman restorer and in a few months' time the *guinomi* was sent back with brilliant gold threads bonding it. Upon seeing this, the client was overjoyed, saying it was even more beautiful than before and now he was going to intentionally break all his collection! Of course I advised him against that."[1] This might well lead us to imagine a catalogue of imperfections that could inspire a room in a "Museum of Accidents and Incidents": finger impressions, spur marks from stacking, scratch marks, ash deposits, firing cracks, fusings from adjacent pottery, fire flash marks, breaks caused by tooling, glaze drippage, running slips. Indeed, some styles seem to be but a compendium of accidental possibilities. The great twentieth-century potter Shōji Hamada observed: "If a kiln is small, I might be able to control it completely, that is to say, my own self can become a controller, a master of the kiln. But man's own self is but a small thing after all. When I work at the large kiln, the power of my own self becomes so feeble that it cannot control it adequately. It means that for the large kiln, the power that is beyond me is necessary."[2]

In behavioral, gestural, and ritualistic terms, sake drinking, contrary to ceremonial tea drinking, is a secular activity linked to the contingencies of the gastronomic context. It is governed not by arcane ritual refined over centuries, but by the commonplace rules of etiquette and politesse. That said, pottery sake cups share all the aesthetic principles of the tea bowl, though to different effect. While the value of a tea bowl is in part determined by the manner in which it highlights the color and texture of the frothy, bright-green powdered tea particular to the ceremony, the colorless transparency of sake, with its slightly distorting optical qualities, makes it the ideal liquid to reveal the beauty of the cup itself. The *chawan* is best admired empty; the *guinomi* is most intriguing half-full. Are we not at the center of a Zen paradox, where the same aesthetic reveres both the opaque and the transparent, the brightly tinted and the colorless, the stimulating and the intoxicating, plenitude and the void?

If ceremonial protocols are different in the West and in Japan, so too are the conventions of aesthetic judgment. In the West, turning over the dinner plates in order to investigate their mark of origin is considered ill-mannered, and refraining from comments on the table setting is in many circles a mark of refinement. In the tea ceremony, to the contrary, close observation is part of the ritual, and to neglect to do so would be disrespectful. Politeness demands detailed, prolix examination and praise, not silent appreciation. Every aspect of the *chawan* must be observed and commented on, which is why the foot (*kōdai*) and the interior (*mikomi*, pool) are such important features of Japanese pottery. The aesthetic of tea bowls and sake cups demands total visibility. The Japanese tea aesthetic demands panopticism and even pansensorialism, of the sort only available through manipulation of the object. Thus tactility is of the essence. There is a "beauty of intimacy" exemplified by the fact that the tea masters "embraced the shape and kissed the thickness" of the *chawan*.[3] Here, the effects of *sabi*, patination by long use, determine aesthetic value: not only visually, not only for the implied sense of longevity connected with the passage of time and history, but also to indicate that a tea bowl was adoringly caressed by the lips and fingers of a great tea master, which adds immeasurably to the value of the piece. This occurs differently than in the Western collector's experience, where provenance adds mainly to the monetary, not the aesthetic, value of a work. *Sabi* implies that use value

augments aesthetic value: the more famous the user, the more refined the ceremony, the more acute the aesthetic intuition, thus the more valued the cup. Consequently, the use of priceless vessels is not a sign of conspicuous consumption, but of aesthetic delectation.

This is why Eurocentric aesthetics are ill-equipped to interpret Japanese art. Consider, for example, Pierre Bourdieu's *La distinction*, which distinguishes between the aesthetic sensibilities of the learned (*docte*) and the worldly (*mondaine*), played out in terms of dichotomies: scholar/connoisseur, acquired taste/ inherited taste, comprehension/appreciation. The ceremonially necessary physical contact with a tea bowl greatly complicates these issues, thus in regard to the *chawan*, beauty and use value are inextricable. Mastery of the tea ceremony is a rite of passage into the world of *chawan* connoisseurship, where erudition is concomitant with worldliness, and where tea bowls are at the summit of the Japanese aesthetic hierarchy, unlike the lowly pottery relegated to the realm of "craft" in Western aesthetics. Sōetsu Yanagi, founder of the *mingei* (folk art) movement in the late 1920s, wrote: "If we want to see a thing well, we must use it well."[4] This is Nietzsche's "gay science," a term that would be an oxymoron for Bourdieu.

Ever since the advent of postmodernism, Western aesthetics has been suspicious of representation, unless the mimetic is accompanied by a high dose of irony. Not so for most Japanese art, where a certain level of representation is always operative. The closest one comes in Western aesthetics to such a densely interlinked system of resemblances and allusions is in Baudelaire's notion of correspondences, a sensibilization to the intricate and infinite play of relations that link all arts, all senses, all images. Consider an extreme example, typical to pottery. Given the extent to which the aleatory is valorized in Zen-inspired aesthetics, it is often difficult to determine whether mimetic effects are established by creative premeditation or through retrospective observation. A crack or a slip or a glaze may well be seen to represent a mountain or a cloud (as in the Chinese dreamstones or those prized *pierres paysagées* in European cabinets of curiosity). Whence the tradition of naming tea bowls according to such resemblances, for example the celebrated *Fujisan*, also created by Kōetsu and one of eight *chawan* designated as a national treasure, where a subtle effect of slip and ash vaguely resembles Mount Fuji. It is precisely in this "vaguely" that the complex effects of Japanese aesthetics are apparent. The potter Jeff Shapiro explains: "As with calligraphy, we in the West appreciate it in a different way, purely abstractly. Japanese people, even if they do not completely understand or comprehend the meaning of a particular calligraphy, do have the understanding that the brush strokes are representing a meaning. We non-Japanese only relate to the beauty that is seen in the result of the artist's confidence shown in bold and yet delicate strokes and lines that play across the surface of the paper. This is a valid way to appreciate, just different from the Japanese perception."[5] The resultant equivocation between abstraction and figuration is of the essence. On the other hand, a crack may be just a crack, though some cracks are more perfect than others—a perfection determined, it must not be forgotten, by the complex terms of *shibui*.

The *guinomi* by Jeff Shapiro pictured here was chosen for several reasons. It's a great drinking cup, with just the right heft, lip, thickness, volume; the metaphoricity is striking, as the bottom of the half-filled cup appears as the grainy sea-bottom upon which rests a mysterious object, like an arrowhead or primeval creature, an effect accentuated by the shells incrusted into the foot of the piece; the inside is particularly dynamic, not animated by the classic spiral found in so many *chawan* interiors, but by a much less common figure, an off-center white-on-black circle-within-a-circle, intersected and further destabilized by a third, liquid circle, that of the vacillating surface of the transparent sake. This inner dynamism is doubled by an outer one, effectuated by the dripping of the white glaze, in turn highlighted by the deep black ash glaze. It is thus easy to imagine the temptation of the *guinomi*: an aesthetic that begins with something that can fit in the palm of the hand and which, through spiritual intoxication and poetic correspondence, brings us to all the arts, to nature itself, and to the garden of metaphysical delights.

1 Email communication with Robert Yellin; see his extremely rich site on Japanese pottery <www.e-yakimono.net>.
2 Cited in Sōetsu Yanagi, *The Unknown Craftsman*, adapted by Bernard Leach (New York: Kodansha International, 1972), p. 224.
3 Ibid, p. 193.
4 Ibid, p. 178.
5 Email communication with Jeff Shapiro. For more information, see his site <www.jeffshapiroceramics.com>.