

The Allure of Imperfection

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Condition is everything, including for those pieces that are purposefully restored.

By Emma Chrichton-Miller

As everyone in today's art and antiques market is aware, condition is everything. Collectors are increasingly disinclined to take on objects which are not immaculate.

A handsome degree of patina on some Georgian furniture is allowed, but otherwise gleaming perfection is the order of the day. There is one field of collecting however where there is leeway. Japanese craftsmen have long espoused the values of imperfection encapsulated in the phrase, wabi-sabi. It was the fifteenth-century Buddhist monk, Murata Shukō, creator of the Zen-influenced tea-ceremony, who is credited with developing an aesthetic of deficiency. He suggested that alongside Chinese ceramics, with their regular forms and perfect glazes, practitioners of the tea ceremony should also use humbler, rustic Japanese wares which bear the marks of their making. One quote ascribed to him, from a document now known as the Kokoro no fumi ("Letter of the heart"), is the saying, 'A moon which is not behind clouds is disagreeable.' The lesson from this is the beauty also of transience: that it is the movement of the clouds to reveal and conceal the moon as it itself moves, that makes the scene so beautiful.

At last year's Treasure House Fair there were two objects that derived directly from that tradition - the tea bowls of Raku Kichizemon XV on show at Offer Waterman. These lively, irregular raku tea bowls, though made in 1987 and 2002, reach back through centuries. The gallery explains that "the artist uses clay often prepared three generations ago by his ancestors in the creation of these rich and rugged tea bowls. It is this permanence and continuity [that] sits at the heart of the family tradition." These works also display an affinity with Offer Waterman's Modern British art works. This is partly because during the 1920s the British potter Bernard Leach brought these Eastern ideas directly into the mainstream of thinking about art, design and craft in Britain, with his writings but also with the founding of his Leach pottery in St Ives, in 1920, aided by the Japanese potter, Shoji Hamada. Offer Waterman regularly shows other potters within this Anglo-Oriental tradition - including the highly various works of Lucie Rie, which revel in the accidents of form that arise in the moment of throwing and the ebullient drips or volcanic explosions of glaze that her once-firing method encouraged.





White Raku Rekiyū type tea bowl named Ganshō (Pine Tree on the Rock), c.1987 by Raku Kichizaemon XV b. 1949. [Image courtesy of Offer Waterman.](#)

Dutch artist Bouke de Vries, who is presented by Adrian Sassoon, takes the idea of imperfection further. An expert in the restoration of priceless historical ceramics, some years ago de Vries began to make art works that emphasised rather than hiding what he describes as being the most dramatic moment in the art work's life. De Vries comments, "I was always a bit bemused by people's obsession with things being perfect. In ceramics, damage is a no no. And yet we venerate the Venus de Milo." Recognising that the fragments of fine ceramics had their own poetic power, he has used these to create a range of new vessels. Sometimes he uses kintsugi, or the art of mending visibly with gold leaf, sometimes he collages pieces together from different broken pots to create a new whole, vibrant with its own life; and sometimes he places the broken pieces of a historic piece inside a transparent glass vessel shaped to offer a ghostly match for the original form.



18th century Worcester porcelain teapot fragments with butterflies within a perspex box, 2022, by Bouke de Vries.

[Image courtesy of Adrian Sassoon.](#)

Another aspect of wabi-sabi, or the valuing of impermanence and imperfection, is a love of nature and natural processes. At last year's Treasure House Fair, Geoffrey Diner Gallery showed some of the beautiful tables by Japanese-American craftsman and designer George Nakashima. These take their form from the untrimmed shape of the original tree, whether cut length ways or across the trunk. At the root of his philosophy of making was the idea, expressed on his website, "A tree is our most intimate contact with nature."

As humans, throughout history, we have seen ourselves reflected in nature. This lies behind the traditional admiration of many Chinese and Japanese scholars for strange and marvellous twists of root or branch or stone, which tease the imagination. Dealers Patrick and Ondine Mestdagh, from Brussels, exhibitors at Treasure House Fair, have available currently a Japanese bamboo scholar's object or "okimono". Depending upon your angle of vision, this entirely natural object looks like a dragon or an insect or the branch of a tree. A Lighthouse Called Kanata is a Tokyo-based gallery committed to introducing to Western as well as Eastern audiences contemporary art works inspired by a distinctly Japanese aesthetic. One of their artists is Osamu Yokoyama, a graphic designer turned master of bamboo. He captures the wayward organic energy of the material and turns it to his own expressive purposes. As the gallery suggests: "For it is within its bends and curves, its ability to be cut, bound and stretched to its limits, that one can find the meandering, ethereal and poignant vicissitudes of life itself"





Yakinuki type black Raku tea bowl named Kikyorai (Homecoming), 2002. By Raku Kichizaemon XVb. 1949. Ceramic.

[*Image courtesy of Offer Waterman.*](#)

Raku seal impressed on the base of the bowl. Further: inscribed on the lid of the box Yakinuki Kuro (Yakinuki Black) and Kikyorai on the underside of the lid with kao cypher reading Kichi-Mitsu, as well as the inscription reading Hinoe-uma no toshi Aki (Autumn 2002), the artist's signature Kichizaemon XV (seal) on the base of the box.

[*Learn more in this video about the artist.*](#)