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## CONTEMPLATING TEA BOWLS AT THE HEISEIKAN

### IN TOKYO

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*By Paul Schollmeier*

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Tea bowls are alive! Were I to assert this proposition in causal conversation with you, you might well think that I had been imbibing something a wee bit stronger than tea. But I have not been indulging or overindulging. Mind you, I am not a teetotaler. But I consume alcoholic beverages rather infrequently and hardly ever immoderately, I assure you.

I did in fact declare that tea bowls were alive to a Japanese woman whom I happened to meet in Tokyo. She was sharing a table with me at lunch. Sharing café and restaurant tables in Japan is quite acceptable and much more common than in the United States. The woman, who spoke excellent English, laughed at my statement about tea bowls, and I took her laughter for the enlightened laughter of the cognoscenti. But I soon noticed that she had changed the topic of our conversation, and not long afterwards she took her leave of my table after finishing her beer.

Yes, she was having a beer for lunch, and she was a diminutive thing, too. I had asked her if she was going to have something to eat, and she replied that she would not. A beer would be sufficient because it was so very hot, she said. Indeed, it was a very hot and, I would add, a very humid summer day. I am not sure, however, that it is a common custom in Japan to lunch on beer only.

We were seated at the sidewalk café in the courtyard of the Tokyo National Museum. The café is in front of the Toyokan building at the museum. Unfortunately, it offers only rice balls and sandwiches and sundry beverages for lunch. So I was munching on a sandwich and having a glass of milk. A restaurant attached to the Toyokan does serve a proper lunch featuring Japanese cuisine. But it was very busy with a long waiting list. I had decided not to spend my precious time at the museum waiting for a bite to eat.

The Toyokan houses the Asian collection of the museum. When I was there, it had on display, among many admirable things, some Chinese scrolls from the Ming dynasty. These scrolls caught my eye because of how the Chinese painters were able to create immense pictorial spaces without using the lines of perspective so common in European art. Their spaces were actually of differing kinds. They constituted a single plane at times, and at times they constituted several planes.

Directly opposite the Toyokan is the Hyokeikan. Between these two buildings there is a large courtyard with a very tall shade tree and a lily pond. The pond does not appear to have any



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ornamental carp, though most ponds in Japan do. The Hyokeikan had a special exhibit devoted exclusively to French ceramics and its Japanese influence in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But I did not contemplate tea bowls there. I was, alas, unable to visit the exhibit. There was neither time enough nor energy enough.

The Honkan, which is the main building of the museum, lies at the head of the lily pond, the entrance to the museum being at the foot. The Honkan houses the permanent collection of Japanese art, including objects of archeological interest. At the time of my visit there were on exhibit, among many other objects, historic Buddha statues and Japanese scroll and screen paintings.

This building also had an exhibit of Korean tea bowls. These bowls date from the fifteenth century. The Japanese imported their tea bowls from Korea before they began making them for themselves. They were common ordinary bowls, which had delightful, rustic, imperfections. I did not have time to analyze them in any detail, and hence they are not the subject of my tale either. But I shall have a word or two to say about them later.

There is one more building that completes the museum. The Heiseikan is to the left of the Honkan as you face it, and to the right of the Hyokeikan. If the Honkan and the Hyokeikan were the sides, the Heiseikan would be in the corner of a rectangle, though it is set slightly back. The reflecting pool in front of it would make the corner. A passageway connects the Honkan with the Heiseikan. If it is raining, you may go from the one building to the other without getting rained on. But the museum does provide umbrellas if you prefer to venture outside.

In this passage way you will find an area with overstuffed chairs, and you will often see exhausted patrons catnapping in them. Yes, sleeping in public places is quite acceptable in Japan. And it is quite safe, too. You can even see businessmen and businesswomen asleep on the subways during their commutes. Most museums, in fact, have a lounge off in a corner with comfortable chairs in which tired museum-goers can take a short snooze. I took good advantage of this custom more than once, especially when I was jetlagged.

The Heiseikan houses special exhibits only. The exhibit during my visit was entitled, somewhat provocatively, *Dueling Geniuses*. The subtitle was more descriptive, *The Greatest Highlights of Japanese Artists*. The exhibition included at least ten National Treasures and some forty Important Cultural Properties. It covered eight centuries and was organized around twelve pairs of artists, who were often in competition with each other, at times spiritedly. Here is where I had my unexpected encounter with tea bowls and where I attained my subsequent enlightenment.

This exhibit was indeed a special exhibit. When I arrived at the entrance of the museum to buy my ticket, I sensed already that the exhibit might be a cultural event of some importance. The Japanese patrons were waiting in lines long before the museum opened. And when sales begin, they were avidly buying tickets and hurrying off to the Heiseikan. I followed with heightened curiosity.

My curiosity was soon rewarded. As I entered the exhibit, I found myself in a room crowded with patrons before two Buddha sculptures from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The one, by Unkei, was seated, and the other, by Kaikei, was standing. They were each most lifelike. The one appears as if about to awaken out of a deep and enlightened meditation into the world, and the other appears as if just awakened from meditation into an ordinary, workaday, world. They are both apparently returning from an encounter with the infinite to an experience merely finite.

I was simply astounded. But I was hardly alone. Even the Japanese patrons often betrayed astonishment in their faces. There were also in the exhibit many paintings on scrolls and screens, several prints, and some ceramics, of course, as well as sculpture. The screen paintings, which were very large, most often on two screens, especially attracted my attention. They confront one

with incredibly immense spaces, again created without lines of perspective or with perspectival lines in a very minor role only.

Consider *Birds and Flowers of the Four Seasons* by Toyo Sesshu. Sesshu portrays a throng of living beings, birds and flowering trees, on the right and left sides of two very large screens. These creatures appear to be in the foreground of the painting. But with a few simple lines he defines a foreground even closer to his viewers and a background at a very great distance from us. The effect is that a plethora of plants and animals appears to inhabit only the mere margins of an infinite and unfathomable emptiness.

I would mention only two more screen paintings that would have been sure to attract a European eye. The first painting, from in the sixteenth century, is *Pine Trees* by Hasegawa Tohaku. This work could easily be taken for an impressionist painting from the late nineteenth century. On two large screens Tohaku uses deft monochrome lines of differing intensities to represent a copse of pine trees in a deep mist. The trees seem to possess a primordial existence in a primeval space. You become another pine tree in the mist, said the exhibit label. Indeed, you almost do.

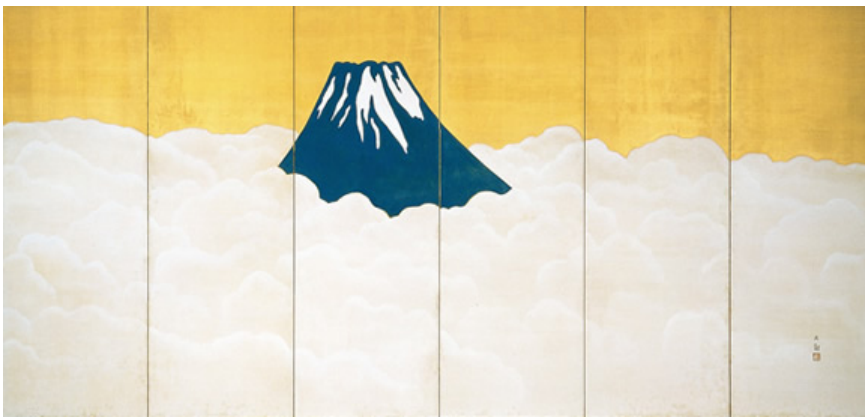


*Pine Trees* by Hasegawa Tohaku, Azuchi-Momoyama Period, 16th century

DIMENSIONS: 156.8 x 356.0 cm (each)

Collection of Tokyo National Museum

The final screen painting of the exhibit was also a *tour de force*. This piece is *Mt. Fuji above the Clouds* by Taikan Yokoyama and is from the twentieth century. It presents a synthesis of a traditional Japanese genre and technique with modern elements of abstraction. The painting is again on two very large screens. But Yokoyama fills this immense space with only three objects in three colors. A sky above is gold, a sea of clouds below is a white somehow diaphanous, and the mountain arising out of the clouds a stolid blue accented with white snow fields. When you look at it, you cannot but feel as if you yourself might be a mountain, less majestic to be sure, arisen out of the formless flux of prime matter.



*Mt. Fuji above the Clouds* by Taikan Yokoyama, Collection of Tokyo National Museum

About a third of the way through the exhibit I encountered the tea bowls. I have to admit that my first thought was, Why are there tea bowls in an art exhibit? We Europeans are hardly accustomed to seeing them exhibited with fine art. One usually finds tea bowls and tea cups relegated to the decorative arts. But there they were, and they were undeniably there. I was, I confess, tempted to pass them by. But then I thought, Why not do tea bowls? I ought at least to be courteous enough to have a look at them. When in Asia, should I not do as the Asians do? Or, at least, make the attempt?

The artists who created the tea bowls, which were raku bowls, were Tanaka Chojiro and Hon'ami Koetsu. Chojiro and Koetsu both lived in the sixteenth century. Chojiro was in fact the inventor of the raku technique, and he made many bowls for an early master of the tea ceremony. Koetsu was from a family of sword makers, and he was a master not only of ceramics but of lacquer boxes and of calligraphy. Examples of these latter were also in the exhibition.

There were seven tea bowls in all. Three were by Chojiro, and four by Koetsu. The bowls all had names, but how each acquired its name I am not sure. One bowl by Chojiro and two by Koetsu were displayed in separate cases that stood away from the wall so that one could walk around them and view them from all sides. The remaining four bowls were displayed in a case built into a wall, and one could admire them only from one side, unfortunately.

When I begin to contemplate these unanticipated objects, I was soon struck by the thought that a tea bowl defines a space as surely as does any sculpture or painting. This reflection is obvious enough, I suppose. A tea bowl defines within itself a space intended to hold tea. But then I also realized that a tea bowl defines a second space without itself, so to speak. This space is a space of its very own, which it occupies vis-à-vis the world. Its own space distinguishes a bowl from everything else.

Both spaces are admittedly rather tiny spaces in the grand scheme of things. A solitary tea bowl, after all, constitutes a rather small portion of the entire universe. The space within the tea bowl is sufficient only to hold a serving of tea for a human being to drink. The space of the tea bowl within the universe is adequate only to enable the bowl to be held by a human being who wishes to drink tea.

But then I realized that these spaces are both infinite even in their tininess. There are indeed two infinities, one defined by the inside of the bowl and another defined by the outside. But how can a space so tiny be infinite? you may ask. Each tiny space is infinite, I would reply, in that it is complete or perfect all by itself! By itself the one is a complete tea space, and the other by itself is a complete bowl space.

I am speaking now of infinity in a sense other than the usual. An infinity of the kind I have in mind can be quite finite, to put the matter paradoxically. A finite infinity contains all of what it is for a thing to be what it is. There is nothing lacking within what it is. A finite infinity also

contains nothing of what it would be for a thing not to be what it is. That is, there is nothing extraneous within it. A finite thing is infinite, one might say, when it is what it is and is not what it is not.

What might I mean? Any infinity is literally a quality or quantity without bounds. The infinity of a tea bowl is without bounds because the bowl sets its own bounds for itself. That is to say, it has no bounds in the sense that it is bounded by itself only and not by another thing. It has an identity of its very own, and this identity defines for it what it is for it to be what it is. Its identity makes it an entity not subject to any limits in the sense that something else sets limits for it.

The universe obviously presents an entity infinite in this sense. Many philosophers have in fact so argued. The universe contains all there is and nothing more. In fact, there can be nothing more. Nothing can exist outside of the universe, and there can be nothing extraneous inside of it. Anything seemingly outside the universe, if there possibly were something of this sort, would be merely a part of the universe, which would have turned out to be larger than what we had thought it to be.

But human beings, too, are possessed of an infinity in the sense that we set our own limits. At least, we can set our own limits if we so choose. Our infinity is most obvious in our self-conscious activities, whether of contemplation or of action. Perhaps contemplation is most obviously infinite when we direct our thoughts to our own thoughts. The ancient philosophers thought consciousness of this kind to be the highest form of human existence and an existence akin to the divine.

Asian philosophers have hardly failed to grasp this philosophical fact. Buddhism, I am given to understand, regards pure self-consciousness as an empty nothingness that is nothing less than nirvana. We Europeans prefer that our self-consciousness have content, and thus it must be less than pure. Our infinity is a plenum, we might say, but theirs a vacuum. The one is something, the other nothing. Hence, the many paradoxes of Buddhist thought.

Any organic being, possessed of a life form within itself, is infinite in this very same way. Its life form set its bounds for itself. A tiger, for example, though most likely not self-conscious, possesses a tigerness that defines what this magnificent animal is and what its fierce activities are. A lotus flower has a plant nature that enables it to rise out of mud and to flower in a most beautiful blossom.

A tea bowl obviously cannot be infinite in the usual sense. No bowl can possess an unbounded extension. Philosophers traditionally define an infinity of this kind by addition or division, either of which can go on without end. One can always add to a thing to make it larger or divide a thing in half to make it smaller, and one can continue indefinitely with either procedure. But a thing infinite in this way can have no identity and is unable to define itself. It is merely a passive entity, if an entity at all.

What I discovered, then, was that the tea bowls define a humble space within themselves, and they define a humble space within the universe itself. But I also discovered that both these decidedly finite spaces are infinite because the tea bowls are perfect and complete in that they are simply what they are. The tea bowls are, I would even venture to assert, embodiments, though metaphorical to be sure, of our universe itself and of our very humanity.

But my reader may hesitate. A tea bowl no doubt is what it is. But does the fact that it is what it is make it perfect? That it might do so is not obvious. A perfection or completeness of this kind can be only conceptual. But a particular tea bowl can be only perceptual. We can see it, and we can, if permitted, hold it in our hands. But can there be perfection or completeness in a perceptual object? No, there cannot. In perception there is no perfection. Everything sensible has an undeniable incompleteness or imperfection.

This reservation I happily accept. We ought not to forget that these infinities remain finite. Only a noetic object can be perfect or complete. A tea bowl is infinite in concept only. In perception a tea bowl can be only finite. An aesthetic object, which is existent, is always lacking in some aspect. What existent thing is not? A sensible thing can be only imperfect and incomplete. It can never be quite what it is, and it is ever so slightly what it is not.

But we can now grasp the silent secret of the tea bowl. Only in a finitude can an actual tea bowl present its infinitude. Chojiro and Koetsu, I cannot but think, were aware of this secret, and they learned from it how to bring a tea bowl to life. Perhaps I ought now to speak more literally. A tea bowl in the hands of an artistic genius can take on an organic form that enables it to approach life itself so closely that it can very nearly but not entirely come to life.

Indeed, the creators of these tea bowls all but breathe life into their tea bowls in two ways. Chojiro fashions tea bowls that are striving to come to be bowls, but Koetsu makes tea bowls that are struggling not to cease to be bowls, we might say. The bowls of the one are endeavoring to attain their existence, but the bowls of the other are attempting to retain their existence.

The difference between the tea bowls of Chojiro and those of Koetsu are, I admit, quite subtle. But once attuned to the details of their bowls, one can see that the difference is undeniably there. The Chojiro bowls present a harmony with a balance all their own. They are properly and pleasingly proportioned, and they appear to be, if not static, quite stable. They almost proclaim that they are tea bowls. And yet they are not quite the tea bowls they claim to be.

The Koetsu bowls present a harmony, too, but their harmony is at best unstable. It seems almost to be a fortuitous event, and it all but threatens to dissipate. The bowls are pleasingly proportioned, too, but their balance seems to be rather perilous. They appear to be as if in unsteady motion. They intimate that to be a tea bowl is a precarious matter at best. And yet tea bowls they are.



"Shukan" ( Tokio National Museum)

Consider, for example, the tea bowl by Chojiro, called "Shukan," in the photograph. The base of the bowl, which you can see underneath it, is centered under the bowl. The sides of the bowl are of similar shape and symmetrical. The lip forms a uniform circle. But the bowl presents obvious imperfections. The lip is uneven, almost rough, and it has an indentation that faces the camera. The sides appear to have many small pits in their surfaces, some discolored. The facing side has a largish groove in it, partly obscured by shadow.

We might say that this bowl is conceptually perfect but perceptually imperfect. But what is the nature of its imperfections? The concept of a tea bowl is not quite embodied in the perceptual bowl. Or, perhaps more appropriately, the imperfections of the perceptual bowl prevent it from attaining the perfection of the conceptual bowl. Hence, I would say metaphorically that the bowl is striving to become a bowl.



"Shigure" (Tokio National Museum)

Now consider a bowl by Koetsu, called "Shigure." Where is the base of the bowl? It is off-center under its left side in the photograph. The bowl appears to be off-balanced as if it should tip over to the right. But the right side of the bowl at the bottom is higher than the bottom of the left side. This side thus seems to help the bowl keep its balance. It seemingly lifts the bowl up in a circular motion from the lower to upper right to the upper and lower left. The left side bulges slightly in the lower portion as if compressed by the motion. The lip echoes the motion because the right side is slightly higher than the left. The surface irregularities in the right side also assist with the upward motion.

This tea bowl, too, is conceptually perfect and perceptually imperfect. But its imperfection turns on its apparent instability. The concept of the bowl is again not quite embodied in the perceptual bowl. But the imperfections of the perceptual bowl draw our attention more toward its perceptual imbalance and compensating motion. The bowl even seems to twist slightly counterclockwise. Its lip is disproportionately lower in front, suggesting an upward motion that twists slightly toward the right.

One could say, again metaphorically, that the bowl by Chojiro is a flower almost able to open itself up into full bloom, and that the bowl by Koetsu is a flower in bloom but put in a motion, gentle and yet disquieting, by some disturbance. Indeed, "Shunkan," I understand, the name of the Chojiro bowl, means subjectivity, and "Shigure," the name of the Koetsu bowl, means autumn drizzle.

More generally, we can now see how a tea bowl can be fine art of the finest calibre. These tea bowls are truly sculpture, and sculpture, if fine enough, can portray a fleeting moment of existence. The Buddha sculptures at the beginning of the exhibit, for example, capture the moment of awakening from the perfection of a meditative existence into the imperfection of a more mundane existence.

We find in a tea bowl, then, not only space but also time. We find a time qualified by the activity of a nature struggling within a world not entirely hospitable. We do not find a time quantified by a clock with its monotony.

One might even venture to say in a more philosophical language that these tea bowls appear to possess a sublimity. In these tiny tea bowls we can espy a hint of what Immanuel Kant calls dynamic sublimity. Sublimity of this kind a creature can exhibit only if it has the ability to resist and not to succumb to the all but overwhelming forces of nature. And so these humble tea bowls present us with their struggle, if metaphorical, against the inertia of clay to become and to be what they are.

I know that a professional philosopher, one enamored of Kant, might likely object to this concept of dynamic sublimity. Yes, Kant does restrict dynamic sublimity only to the will power of rational

beings, such as we are alleged to be. Only a free will, he argues, can stand up to and not be vanquished by the natural forces, sometimes violent, within which we are obliged to live.

But I would argue that a rational being has a free will that is not so unique. Our will is at bottom merely an internal cause of an activity all our own. Other creatures that are alive have a cause of this very nature, too. Their internal cause may not be rational, at least not self-consciously so. But their nature does struggle amidst natural forces, at times hostile, to realize itself in existence. Does not a deer in the forest? Does not a crannied flower?

Chojiro and Koetsu are dueling genius, to be sure. But they are dueling not with each other so much as with inorganic clay. Or, rather, they present their tea bowls as dueling with the prime matter of existence itself. The one struggles to arrive in the clay of its existence, the other to survive in its clay. Chojiro and Koetsu present us with bowls that are solitary individuals engaged in a struggle for their existential identity.

And so do we human beings struggle. Chojiro and Koetsu confront us, if my analysis has any truth, with the silent secret of human existence and of existence itself. Do we not strive to attain an identity and to retain it? I think that we all do in every waking moment of our lives.

I would now offer a word about the Korean tea bowls. They, too, are conceptually perfect bowls, and they, too, are perceptually imperfect. But their imperfections are imperfections not so much of an object as of an artist. Their artistic imperfections arise from a quiet acceptance of the imperfections of art itself and not from any lack of artistic ability. These bowls, too, are equally sublime. But their sublimity is one derived from an acknowledged finitude in art itself. And, by implication, from a finitude in our humanity as well.

Finally, I would ask you to compare these tea bowls, both Japanese and Korean, with the coffee cup that you may be holding in your hand. Does a contemporary coffee cup possess a finite infinity? Does it all but come to life? Does it struggle with its identity and its existence? I suspect that your cup is probably as lifeless as the clay from which it was made. It is a mere thing and nothing more.

A contemporary cup more likely possesses a finite uniformity. The cup does define spaces within and without it. But its spaces are mathematically precise and cold. The cup is surely finite. But its finitude is born of mass production, and its imperfections issue from an industrial mold. A coffee cup is today less a cup and more a commodity. Its imperfections are not those of an art object or of an artist but those of economic exchange.

One can yet see reflected in a coffee cup imperfections of our humanity. But these imperfections are hardly acknowledged and accepted imperfections of a finite human existence. They are imperfections of conformity, and they evince a sad compromise. Their compromise would deny us the contemplation of the finite infinities that we are and the wonderment of human identity and its struggle with existence. They are, in a word, an anaesthetic.

With cups of this forlorn sort, T. S. Elliot measured out the days of his life. And with these cups we, too, may also be so unfortunate as to measure out the impoverished days of our lives. Unless we might be so fortunate as to happen upon a tea bowl embodying in its finitude an infinitude! Perhaps then we might better see ourselves as the sublime creatures that we are in a universe no less sublime.



Of this sort, then, was my contemplation of tea bowls at the Heiseikan. I discovered in dull clay bright mirrors reflecting images of the whole universe and of our humble humanity. 🍁

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