This past new year’s eve I participated in my first tea ceremony, at the Senbon Yenmado tea room in Kyoto’s Injoji Temple. I must admit that I accepted this generous invitation with much trepidation, since given my almost total ignorance of the Way of Tea, I didn’t want to risk troubling the proceedings. Thus, rather than experiencing the sense of peace, harmony, equilibrium, and distance from the cares of the world that one should have when entering a Japanese tearoom, I was filled with anguish. Only my epistemophilia saved me. As I watched the splendid gestural choreography of the tea mistress from the school of Ura Senke, I realized that all I need do was observe others to learn at least the rudiments of the proper gestures. As the superb antique Karatsu bowl was handed to the first guest, I studied his attitudes, gestures, and reactions, and when the bowl was then passed around for admiration, I offered my best silent appreciation. It is said that it takes over thirty years to learn the profundities of tea. But having calculated that this first bowl of tea took upwards of ten minutes to be made, drunk, and examined, I felt relieved—as the ninth of eleven participants, I would have over an hour to learn enough to offer at least a vague simulacrum of the proper behavior.

However, my entire system of self-education soon broke down, for this was but a semiformal tea where the mistress would make only the first bowl. A host of young assistants immediately entered the room and one by one placed an already prepared bowl in front of each participant. Within thirty seconds a bowl was set before me! Looking around for help, I realized that the person from whom I sought guidance was himself looking elsewhere, and so forth. It turned out that was only one true tea aficionado among us. I acquitted myself rather well, I suppose (nothing broken, nothing spilled), though I learned less about tea than about the differences between observation and participation, the formal and the informal, the ritualistic and the quotidian. In any case, I’m a wine drinker rather than a tea drinker, and as I sipped on a cup of sake later that evening, I relished the relative casualness. While there are an estimated ten million practitioners of tea worldwide, there are many, many more sake drinkers. Yet tea has been the subject of endless commentary, aesthetic and otherwise, while the study of sake drinking has basically remained the domain of sociology. I would thus like to offer a few reflections.

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 absolutely clear crystal. The purist will even frown upon the finest cut glass, as the added sparkle denatures the visual experience. That is why drinking from the rarest vessel, be it a Tiffany Favrile floriform goblet or a Gallé cameo glass beaker, a silver chalice or the Holy Grail itself, is oenologically superfluous, even counterproductive. Such beautiful glasses are too fragile, too rare, too decorative. Their particular beauty detracts from that of the wine, such that their use is pure ostentation. In Japan, the opposite is true, for it is that country’s wine, sake, that is crystal clear, giving center stage to Japanese drinking vessels, most notably the traditional pottery sake cup guinomi, and the smaller shot cup, choko.

The guinomi shares most of its aesthetic characteristics with its larger and more famous counterpart, the chawan (bowl) of the tea ceremony. The fundamentals of tea, couched in a centuries-old system of highly codified, almost choreographed, Zen-inspired ritual, are harmony, respect, purity, and tranquility (wa-kei-sei-jaku), which guide all considerations of beauty. These are codified according to three central notions: wabi (transquility, unobtrusiveness, humbleness, asymmetrical harmony, elegant rusticity), sabi (patination by age and use), and shibui (incompleteness, imperfection, understatement, restraint, refined simplicity, noble austerity). The tea ceremony fundamentally seeks a state of mind guided by these factors and circumscribed by centuries of ritualized gesture. Since Zen Buddhism is at the core of Japanese culture, and since tea is one of the ceremonial keys to Zen, the tea bowl is at the height of the Japanese aesthetic hierarchy, making it an object of the utmost prestige.
Though the guinomi is often referred to as a mini-chawan, its use is neither codified nor ritualized, governed not by arcane ritual refined over centuries but by the commonplace rules of quotidian etiquette and politesse. Removed from the aesthetic expectations demanded by the tea ceremony, the guinomi is less bound to tradition and thus more amenable to experimentation. In behavioral and gestural terms, sake drinking is a secular activity circumscribed by the contingencies of the gastronomic context. One might add that the intoxicating effects of sake are most certainly deritualizing, to say the least. The guinomi exists as an individual entity (and not as a type, as is most often the case for Western wine glasses), which makes all the more unfortunate the recent trend of serving sake in Western-style colored crystal shot glasses. 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, light green, powdered tea particular to the ceremony (thus limiting the acceptable chromatic spectrum), the colorless transparency of sake—permitting all forms, motifs, and colors—makes of 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?3

Certain philosophers would insist that to fully grasp any single object, one must know the entire universe. This holistic approach is central to Japanese aesthetics, where each and every art form shares certain central principles, most notably a strong link to the seasons. Each season, divided into several equal parts for added refinement, is figured by highly coded norms of motif, color, and form, often expressed in the most subtle allusions, metaphors, and correspondences. To begin with a guinomi in the palm of one’s hand and end up imagining a garden, poem, or painting reveals the richness inherent in Japanese aesthetics.

Above, Left to Right: Shimizu Yasutaka (Kyoto) 1.5”h x 2.25”w x 2.25”d; Koie Ryoji (Shino) 2.38”h x 3.25”w x 3.25”d; Kimura Nobuyuki (Kyoto) 2.25”h x 2.38”w x 2.38”d.

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4 Above, Left to Right: Shimizu Yasutaka (Kyoto) 1.5”h x 2.25”w x 2.25”d; Koie Ryoji (Shino) 2.38”h x 3.25”w x 3.25”d; Kimura Nobuyuki (Kyoto) 2.25”h x 2.38”w x 2.38”d.

Photograph by Sylvia Lachter © 2009
Japanese cuisine reached its peak in the kaiseki meal, which was originally part of the tea ceremony, and which consequently evolved into the haute cuisine of Kyoto. Kaiseki is a multicourse meal whose complexity, always attuned to the locale and season, offers a microcosm of Japanese cuisine. It will typically include dishes representing all styles of cooking (boiled, braised, sautéed, fried, grilled, steamed), all modalities of rawness (simpliciter, dried, smoked, salted, sugared), and all sources of food (mountain, field, ocean). As in all Japanese art, such meals take part in a complex representational matrix, suggesting the landscape, season, climate, and even time of day by a subtle yet codified set of analogies and juxtapositions. The perfection of each element (food, sake, pottery, etc.) is made even more complex by the dynamic and nonhierarchical relationships among the varied elements. This culinary aesthetic is manifested, in a highly condensed version, in the Japanese lunchbox (bento), which in its most sophisticated examples features kaiseki cuisine. The holistic-cosmological symbolism of the bento is evident in its form, as is attested to by the shokado lunchbox, whose square shape with four equal compartments approximates the Chinese ideogram for the rice paddy, the core of Japanese agriculture. Sometimes the representational allusions are purely metaphorical, sometimes literal, as in the sashimi served in the Kyoto restaurant Karyo-an one evening in December 2007, which arrived in the form of a winter landscape, igloo and all. The guinomi is an integral part of such culinary scenography; ideally, each is chosen to function within such wonderfully complex sets of elements. 

This sense of microcosm, of aesthetic condensation, is perhaps best expressed by Hannyabo Tessen, an early chief priest of Ryoan-ji, who, in a remark that stresses the essential intertwining of representation, miniaturization, and abstraction in the Zen garden, claimed that “Thirty thousand leagues should be compressed into a single foot.” This passion for the diminutive is typical of Zen-inspired aesthetics, where the cosmos can be compressed into the form of a small garden, the garden reduced to the disposition of food on a plate, and the plated “landscape” represented by the patterns on a guinomi, whose constituent features derive from the macrocosmic five elements of the Shinto and Buddhist cosmos: fire (kiln), wood (ash), earth (clay), metal (glazes), and water. Representation implies both abstraction and metaphorization, such that the profundity of metaphor depends upon both the specific beauty of each of the terms and the vast range of qualities that simultaneously link and separate the terms—just as the qualities of each morsel on a plate are enriched by its relation to adjacent foodstuffs. That said, the appreciation of the guinomi must begin not in metaphor, but with its uniqueness as an object. It might seem superfluous to stress that the guinomi has a front, back, lip, interior, and foot. But since the particularities of Japanese aesthetics, especially in relation to pottery, diverge greatly from Western forms of connoisseurship, these terms take on different significance in each context. If the conventions of aesthetic judgment are different in the West and in Japan, so too are protocols of etiquette. In the West, it is generally considered ill-mannered to turn over the dinner plates in order to investigate their mark of origin, and to refrain from commenting on the table setting is in many circles considered a mark of refinement. In the tea ceremony, to the contrary, close observation is part of...
to be primarily visible, most Japanese pottery is created to be seen from every possible angle. Furthermore, tactility is of the essence, a fact well expressed in Cees Nooteboom’s novel Rituals, where one of the characters obtains an extraordinarily precious tea bowl by a potter of the famed Raku dynasty, only to ultimately smash it to smithereens and commit suicide in an immaculately decorated all-white room destined for this event. As he first handles the bowl in an antiques shop, he explains to the protagonist: “There are also rules about the shape, all of which were drawn up by Rikyu, how the bowl should feel when you hold it, its balance, the way it feels to the lip… and of course the temperature. The tea must not feel too hot or too cold to your hand when you hold it, but exactly as you would like to drink it.”

The curiosity of a work of art whose appreciation is in part determined not just by touch, already rare in the West, but by the caress of the lip, is striking. The great specialist of Japanese folk art, Soetsu Yanagi (one of the founders of the early twentieth-century Mingei folk art movement), speaks of “the beauty of intimacy,” exemplified by the fact that tea masters “embraced the shape and kissed the thickness” of the chawan. Such intimate tactility suggests a dimension of Japanese aesthetics most distant from Western art appreciation. For after all, how many works of art in the Western canon really need to be licked in order to be appreciated?

The main tenets of tea aesthetics (wabi, sabi, shibui) articulate pottery connoisseurship, privileging certain types of material effects and representational forms, guiding both
the hand of the potter and the eye of the collector. A high point of Japanese pottery connoisseurship is the appreciation of materiality, of the varied clays, glazes, slips, and ash that are responsible for the myriad of effects and styles. Emblematic of this passion for materials is the particular importance of the favored technique of leaving exposed small areas of undecorated clay to reveal the “clay flavor” (tsuchi-aji) of the work. Yet beyond the many conscious manners of treating the clay—spinning, molding, throwing, carving, cutting, incising, texturing, inlaying, impressing, dipping, dripping, trailing, glazing, underglazing, overglazing—are those accidental features so cherished in Zen-inspired art, a perfection of the imperfect inherent in effects particular to the art of pottery, such as finger impressions, spur marks or shell imprints from stacking, scratch marks, ash deposits, firing cracks, glaze crackling, fusions from adjacent pottery, scorch and fire flash marks, breaks caused by tooling, glaze drippage, running slips.  

Aleatory and partially indeterminable firing effects are of the essence, and certain subsequent damages, even occurring after centuries of use, are often considered to be aesthetic (and not merely contingent) effects. This is stressed by the fact that repairs on Japanese pottery are customarily not made with the invisible mends required by Western restorers, but rather with a filling of urushi lacquer mixed with 23k gold dust, so as to highlight the crack. A breakage may even, in some instances, increase the value of a piece.

Matter is indissociable from form. Semiology has taught us that every trace of human activity is a gesture, a sign, a symbol. Perhaps nowhere is this taken to such an extreme as in the experience of Japanese pottery, where manifestations of materiality, chance, and symbolism are inextricably intertwined, as when a spontaneous, unintended crack reveals the interior of the clay, or suggests a kana (syllable) or kanji (ideogram), or even a landscape feature, parallel to what poet Gary Snyder suggests in a beautiful metaphor, “the gleaming calligraphy of the ancient riverbeds.” The crack (or any other surface feature) may be experienced on the empirical level, for what it explains about the materials and mode of production; or in relation to formal properties within an aesthetic context; or as a representational sign; or it may even be a manifestation of a Zen revelation. Pottery runs the gamut from simplicity to complexity, regularity to irregularity, and all combinations thereof, and each instance bears its own representational and symbolic possibilities.

Guinomi are produced by practically every one of the over one hundred major kilns (and over fifty thousand minor ones) in Japan, utilizing almost every possible technique, in traditional, folk, and experimental styles, ranging from the purely decorative and abstract through such stylizations as sharkskin, oilspot, hare’s fur, and sesame spot glazes, to full-blown figuration and calligraphy done in underglaze or overglaze painting. Following the tea aesthetic, many connoisseurs prefer works from those kilns (such as Bizen, Hagi, Shino, Karatsu, Iga, Shigaraki) that emphasize the more or less aleatory effects caused by natural ash glaze, undecorated mineral glaze, or fire on unglazed surfaces, where figuration, if any, exists in the form of the most subtle similitudes. Though the figuration and symbolism in individual cases may occasionally seem either overly simplistic or unduly remote to the outsider, it must not be forgotten that the representational value of a piece, which exists in a complex aesthetic web, is but one aspect of its existence.

Given the potential richness of something as primary as the fissure, perhaps the zero-degree image, it is clear that...
Zen-inspired representation is a dynamic system oscillating between abstraction and figuration. The representational value of pottery depends on factors spanning the entire period from production to use: the potter’s work in conceiving and creating each piece within a specific tradition and an individual style; the kiln effects that are partially planned and partially aleatory; the potter’s choice of which pieces are worthy of display after having survived the generative violence of the flames; the collector’s vision which, through the arcana of connoisseurship, recontextualizes the work by positioning it in both everyday experience and in the never-ending history of pottery, with all the complexities of changing taste, temporary fads, aesthetic revisionism, international influences, etc. It is the collector’s vision that in great part determines the destiny of a chawan or guinomi, especially in regard to the ineluctable seasonal symbolism. Pottery specialist and collector Robert Lee Yellin describes the many surface effects that create the landscape (keshiki) of a piece: “Keshiki involves how the glaze flows, stops and pools, the color of the clay, the creating process, or how kiln occurrences play out on the surface.” Not only is there an aesthetic imperative to view certain traces within a representational framework, but many pieces are even named according to such resemblances, for example the celebrated Fujisan (one of eight chawan designated as national treasures) created by the legendary potter Koetsu Honami (1558–1637), where a subtle effect of slip and ash vaguely resembles Mount Fuji. Precisely this vagueness is the key to such a representational sensibility, exemplified by the perennial Japanese fascination with images rarified by fog and mist, smoke and shadow. One might go so far to say that Zen aesthetics is exemplified by the attenuation of the literal by the indistinct, the shadowy, the obscure, the hazy. For some contemporary examples, consider the names given by Yellin to several of the guinomi in his collection: The Cup of Humanity, named for a small crack in the form; The Grand Canyon, so called because its colors reveal those of the canyon walls at sunset; The Lizard Spirit Cup, describing a shape on the interior suggesting that of a dead lizard. The name or image of a piece, however abstruse, will often have a bearing on the choice of time of day and season in which it will be exhibited or used. The representational value of pottery fills the entire spectrum from abstraction to figuration, and each object must be considered according to the specifics of both its surface and its three-dimensional form.

Japanese conventions of viewing pottery are quite different from those in the West (where pottery is still for the most part deemed “craft”) and are made even more complex by the profound interconnectedness of all the arts in Japanese culture. While there are viewing protocols and modes of connoisseurship specific to pottery, pottery also shares, to differing degrees, viewing conventions from the other arts: painting, calligraphy, sculpture, cuisine, gardens. Although the guinomi may be appreciated as a sculptural object in itself, it often serves as a surface for painting and calligraphy: irregularities enhance figuration, curvature suggests depth, play of light evokes motion. The guinomi may reverberate with landscape allusions (both seasonal and thematic), thus playing a central role in the arts of the table by articulating food and drink, pottery and decor, ikebana and landscape.

A discussion of all the possible contexts for appreciating guinomi would fill an entire book, so a single emblematic example related to landscape must here suffice. While determinate, central, guiding perspectives constitute a major design feature of most gardens, they do not necessarily imply the primacy of a single fixed viewpoint, from which the garden would appear as a picture. In the Zen-inspired garden there exist controlled views, framed views, partial views, multiple views, counter views, hidden views, and, most famously of all, borrowed views (shakkei), which have entered garden design the world over. The borrowed or captured view is a manner of relating proximate and distant space, created by opening up a foreground or middle-ground perspective such that the distant landscape is precisely framed, and consequently integrated into the garden. In a greatly reduced sense, the guinomi “landscape” may exhibit such a “borrowed” view every time it is examined or drunk from. As the cup is raised, its lip serves as the “horizon” that links the proximate scene on the front to the “distant” landscape—beyond the lake of sake—within. That the sake is transformed into a cascade as the elbow is bent and the guinomi is tilted is rarely an unwelcome effect.

NOTES
1. While there exist sparkling sakes, unfiltered sakes of milky opacity, and even red sakes colored by a particular strain of rice, they constitute a small minority.
2. For a primer on the aesthetics of Japanese pottery, see Allen S. Weiss, “Guinomi,” Cabinet 30 (2008), 7–18, from which part of the present article is derived.


12. For a detailed illustrated list of such effects, see Robert Lee Yellin, “Keshiki: Ceramic Landscapes,” on his extremely informative Web site, e-yakimono.net. Given the types of effects and degree of metaphorization at stake, it would seem that the Gestalt theory of perception, especially where it deals with issues of pattern recognition in the hands of an art historian such as Ernst Gombrich, might serve as an extremely useful tool for the study of pottery.

13. Robert Lee Yellin, Ode to Japanese Pottery (Tokyo: Coherence, 2004); this is one of the rare texts in English devoted to guinomi and tokkuri (sake flasks).

14. We are currently in the midst of a major museological shift, in great part affected by the dissolution of hierarchies motivated by the discourse of postmodernism, where the distinction between art and craft has been considerably lessened, if not totally abolished. The result is that many museums, exemplified by the Musée d’Orsay in Paris, now exhibit “craft” and “art” side by side, to the great benefit of both. This innovation in Western aesthetics, which has greatly benefited the arts of the table, should help in our appreciation of Japanese art, where the line between art and craft has been drawn very differently, and with radically different consequences.