

The Color Gold: A Journey through Ceramics, Kintsugi, and Symbolism

By: Ben Gufford



In the world of ceramics, Japanese potter Aoki Ryota stands out as a young potter renowned for his innovative use of glazes. Through meticulous trial and error, he crafts around 15,000 test pieces yearly, constantly pushing the boundaries of texture and shade. One of Ryota's notable accomplishments includes the development of a rare golden glaze.

Meanwhile, John Britt, a seasoned studio potter and teacher residing in Bakersville, North Carolina, has dedicated over three decades to both creating pottery and conducting extensive glaze research. With his profound understanding of the renowned golden shino, Britt imparts invaluable insights into the realm of ceramics.

Akira Satake, having relocated to Swannanoa, NC, has established Akira Satake Ceramics, fully immersing himself in his passion for pottery. In 2013, he opened Gallery Mugen in Asheville's River Arts District, where he captivates enthusiasts as an esteemed instructor and lecturer. Satake is known for his relentless commitment to meticulously studying the intricacies of wood firing with the golden "yohen" shino glaze as one of his many accomplishments.

Ken Matsuzaki, a master potter from Japan, has long been celebrated for his exquisite application of the gold "yohen" shino glaze. While Matsuzaki's creations are deeply rooted in Mingei philosophy, his approach takes on a contemporary flair, focusing on oribe-style pottery adorned with yohen, shino, and oribe glazing techniques.

Delving into Japanese ceramic artistry, we encounter the ancient tradition of Kintsugi, the art of mending ceramics with gold. The technique, first seen in Ancient Greece, was customary in Japan and elsewhere. Dating back to the 15th century, this practice involves highlighting the cracks and fractures in ceramics, transforming them into cherished pieces. Legend has it that Shogun Ashikaga Yoshimasa, in a quest for repair, sent a broken Chinese tea bowl back to China, only to receive it back crudely stapled. Dissatisfied, he tasked his artisans with inventing the uniquely Japanese art of Kintsugi. Originating from the Higashiyama culture, influenced by Zen Buddhist principles, this artistic movement flourished in 15th-century Japan, fostering the development of the tea ceremony, flower arrangement (ikebana), nō theater, and Chinese ink painting.

As Kintsugi gained momentum within Zen culture, the allure of its beauty and philosophy led to unfortunate consequences. Unscrupulous collectors, captivated by its enchantment, intentionally began to break ancient Japanese ceramics, desiring their restoration with the precious touch of gold.

Symbolically, gold represents the power of the sun and exudes masculine energy. It possesses an illuminating quality, often associated with enlightenment. Throughout history, gold has been depicted as the armor of ancient Greek Gods, adorning their chariots and flowing through their golden hair, symbolizing wisdom, divinity, and all-knowing attributes. Cultures worldwide have regarded gold as a symbol of purity, divinity, and perfection. The ancient Egyptians revered it for its eternal and indestructible nature.

In Christianity, gold holds profound significance, symbolizing purity and the light of day, much like the color white is revered in ancient Korean culture. Other religions also incorporate gold into their practices, associating it with knowledge, wisdom, and learning. Similar to purple, gold represents royalty. In Buddhist traditions, it represents liberation from worldly concerns, transcending ordinary cares.

Universally, gold retains its value and association with wealth and prestige. Whether in the form of a gold bar, a gilded pen, or intricate gold artwork, it symbolizes affluence and elevated status. Success and triumph are often celebrated with gold.

