

The Tea Bowl as a Meditative Device

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The Tea Bowl As A Meditative Device

G. B. Sansom has written that Teatism is "a subject upon which Japanese and foreign authors alike have written a great deal that is partial or exaggerated or merely foolish."¹ The "foolishness" of the enthusiast often rises from a tunnel vision that sees only the secular and aesthetic aspects of Tea; Arthur Sadler, who assiduously catalogs the paraphernalia of Tea, arrives at the anemic and misleading conclusion that Teatism is a religion because its end is manners and contentment with one's lot.² The "foolishness" of detractors often rises from an ignorance of the metaphysical basis that inspired *cha-do* ceramics. Captain Frank Brinkley, in 1902, execrated tea wares on the grounds that their "general character is repellent homeliness... They admirably illustrate the morbid aestheticism and perverted tastes of the tea-clubs."³ To Brinkley, the only propitious aspect of the cult of tea was that it induced Japan to look to the ceramic centres of China and Korea for relief in the proprieties of porcelain; Brinkley further believed that the influence of the West would supply standards of excellence.

Modern visual taste, weaned on the sculptural Impressionism of Bourdelle and Rodin or on the painterly abstractions of Pollock and Dubuffet — that is, trained to accept the semiotic language of organic process — can more easily embrace the "accidental" attributes of Raku, Iga, Bizen, Shigaraki, Karatsu, and Tamba glazes. Such mid-twentieth century propensities are insufficient, however, not only for the correlation of tea wares with other genres of Japanese art but also for the understanding of the metaphysical rationale that subsumes and transcends the *wabi, sabi, shibui* mystique. Indeed, more ceramic catastrophies have been perpetrated in the West in the name of Raku than Captain Brinkley would have imagined in his deepest nightmares.

I would like to suggest an interpretation for the appearance of tea ware glazes based upon a belief in the semiotic consistency of Japanese art and that the signifiers, or physical properties, of the *cha-wan*, and its signifieds, or aesthetic ideals, can be assessed by a correlation with other aspects of Japanese art, e.g., garden design, *bon-seki, sumi-e*. Tea bowl glazes, especially Raku (Fig. 1), Shino, and Iga, but also the associated wares of Bizen, Shigaraki, and Seto, were not merely developed and cherished for their lack of ostentation, their aura of rusticity, their demeanor of humility, and their connotations of poverty, but were so produced and perfected, at least at the height of *cha-do* inspiration, because they provided a meditative ground for what was essentially a meditative practice. That is, the glaze on the *cha-wan* provided a visual field upon which the tea-master could gaze, and in so doing, practice and experience the contemplative acts and responses for which *cha-no-yu* strove. These equivocal meditative grounds usual-

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1. G. B. Sansom, *A short Cultural History of Japan*, New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1962, 397. The present paper was delivered to the Canadian Society for Asian Studies in May, 1972. A few Japanese terms are used herein: *cha-wan* may be translated as "tea bowl," *cha-jin* as "tea master", *cha-do* as "tea ceremony", and *cha-no-yu* as "the way of tea."
 2. Arthur L. Sadler, *Cha-No-Yu*, Tokyo: J.L. Thompson, 1934, 2.
 3. Capt. Frank Brinkley, *Keramic Art*, Boston: J.B. Millet Co., 1902, 51.



FIGURE 1. Raku tea bowl called "Fujisan," by Homani Koetsu. Sakai Collection, Tokyo.

ly lacked descriptive symbols, the "signifiers" which we seek for some clue to the "signified:" yet it was this very equivocal ground which offered ready fields for reveries upon the equivalence of macrocosm and microcosm, and enabled the accomplished *cha-jin* gradually and ultimately to recognize and to repose in the Void.

To a small hut in the midst of a secluded garden, the devotee comes to sit, drink tea, and meditate. The actual preparation and consumption of the tea has been codified to the highest degree; one manual enumerates thirty-seven steps, each with precise subdivisions, that must be followed in the performance of the ritual. This ritual preparation has too often been taken both by annotator and practitioner to be the *summus bonus* of Teatism. Today, when the tea ceremony has become for most a finishing school grace, the perfection of procedure receives perfunctory homage, but it is dangerous to view such perfection of a ritual an example of a mere "art of living," in which the simplest functions have been made an object of beauty. Thus, in saying, as does the English potter Bernard Leach, that "*cha-no-yu* may

be defined as an aesthetic of actual living, in which utility is the first principle of beauty,"⁴ one prevaricates the spiritual goals of ritualization of function.

Originally, the step-by-step codification had a greater aim more in line with the perennial philosophy. Only when all actions in the functional process are perfected can attention be released from its concern over these acts. The mind's higher capabilities, which must not be a slave to procedure, can only be released and made spontaneous when its lower operational habits have been ordered. As in Yoga, the body releases the mind only after long, arduous training of physical habits.

The transcendence of technique via strict codification of techniques has often been enshrouded in the mystification of simplicity. Rikyu stated the following secret of tea: "You place the charcoal so that the water boils properly and you make the tea to bring out the proper taste. You arrange the flowers as they appear when they are growing. In

4. Bernard Leach, *A Potter's Book*, London: Faber and Faber, 1962, 8.

summer you suggest coolness and in winter cosiness. There is no other secret." When a pupil replied that he easily understood the secret, Rikyu retorted that if anyone knew the secret, he himself would become his pupil.⁵ The lesson teaches neither dilettante aestheticism nor Zen obfuscation; it suggests that complex definitions only yield false limitations, and simple definitions often hide more subtle goals. The Zen tradition has, of course, always scoffed at man's ludicrous attempts to trap truth by mechanical means; at the same time, it has consistently taught (a paradox in itself) the necessity of mastering mechanical processes. The requirement that Kamakura and Ashikaga samurai lay down their swords in a special shelf before entering (on their knees) the tea hut symbolized more than the acculturation of these warriors into Kyoto society, for the aim of martial training was the simultaneous metaphysical and practical realization that "not to *use* the sword but to *be* the sword was the ideal of the Ashikaga knight."⁶ Like the procedural steps of the tea ceremony, the art of swordsmanship, as of archery, demanded perfection to the point of artlessness, where there was total identification with and transcendence over technique. The laying aside of the sword, therefore, was a recognition of the samurai's perfected inner power now to be utilized in another mode and in another ambience, the psychosphere of the tea-house.

Once freed from concerns over the utilization of apparatus, the direction of thought of the devotee pointed toward a consideration of the relationship of man to universe, a consideration of what Comaraswamy called *natura naturans*. The *cha-jin's* meditation on his proper relationship with the universe meant meditation on the existence and habits of the natural scene. The signifiers thus were derived from nature while the signified involved a noesis ill-defined but impressively potent; the term *yugen*, translated by Toshimitsu Hasumi as "spiritual depth existence."⁷ offers a close approximation. In the ambient of the tea room and in the presence of allied arts, we realize clearly Levi-Strauss's systemization of the convergence of magic and art, wherein the culturalization of the natural (humanization of natural laws) and

the naturalization of the cultural (naturalization of human actions) are integrated.

Ostensibly, we can point to the tea-hut being in a garden, to the use of flowers in the *tokonoma*, to the insistence on natural elements of construction for all architectural structures. Yet the culturalization of nature in the ambient of the tea ceremony finds more subtle play and intent. The following description by Hasumi connotes more than the simple metaphors suggest. "The tea experience," Hasumi says, "is a miniature world-experience taking place in the tea room. There we revere the poverty of man, the harmony of the world and the incompleteness of nature. In the noise of the boiling water we hear the living strength of the sea; in the steam rising from the tea we catch the scent of pines on a distant hill. The flowers in the corner point to the beauty of modesty and the joyous reflection of life."⁸ The manifest evidence of nature thus serves three purposes: one, delightfulness in that which exists, e.g., boiling water offers a pleasing sound. Secondly, that sound is Beautiful because it represents a *natural* phenomenon. Thirdly, these natural aspects take on symbolic



FIGURE 2. Round *tsukubai* from Katsura Residence, Kyoto.

5. Sadler, *op. cit.*, 102.

6. Kakuzo Okakura, *The Ideals of the East*, New York: Dutton, 1920, 161.

7. Toshimitsu Hasumi, *Zen in Japanese Art*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962, 42.

8. *Ibid.*, 85.



FIGURE 3. Stones in the Sampo-in, Daikaku-ji, Kyoto.

meaning; they serve as connotative links with the cosmic unity in a dynamically balanced telescoping between macrocosmic and microcosmic insights; e.g., boiling water recalls the ocean's surf.

An anecdote concerning Rikyu is significant. In the garden surrounding his tea-house, Rikyu arranged a special surprise for his guests. When the guest bent down to wash his hands in the *tsukubai*, or cleansing basin (Fig. 2), he would glance up and observe — then and only then — the sea beyond the trees. In his bowed position, he would suddenly realize the relationship between the scoop of water and the expansive bowl of the sea, between himself and the universe.⁹ The insight of the scalar relationship initiates a cosmic consciousness which can be intimated from the opposite end of the telescope as well:

Though I sweep and sweep,
Everywhere my garden path,
Though invisible,
On the slim pine needles still
Specks of dirt may be found¹⁰

9. Jiro Harada, "Japanese Art," in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, New York, 1933.

10. Sadler, *op. cit.*, 105.

Other verses by the renowned *cha-jin* Rikyu (Basho would, of course, serve as well) suggest this creative meditative practice, creative because it depends upon the human mind to conjure appropriate connections:

When you take a sip
From the bowl of powder tea
There within it lies
Clear reflected in its depths
Blue of sky and grey of sea.

When you hear the splash
Of the water drops that fall
Into the stone bowl
You will feel that all the dust
Of your mind is washed away.¹¹

Such meditation upon metaphoric relationships in art between microcosm and macrocosm indicates clearly that man was not the measure of all things but only the sensitive mediator.

The signifiers of all of the art modes accompanying *cha-no-yu* strove to heighten the subliminal awareness of this transportive geometry. In the *tokonoma*, the only "decorative" elements in the tea-house can be found, and these too are chosen for their power to sensitize the predisposed mind. A *sumi-e*, and especially an *haboku* style, landscape, or in the simplest case, a floral arrangement, focuses the occupant's attention on the pervasiveness of nature. Jiro Harada suggests the following *tokonoma* arrangement and stresses the associations that must be evoked: under a *kakemono* depicting a waterfall, a hibiscus blossom may float in a vase so cold that beads of water drip down the front, pooling on the lacquered board on which the vase stands. "Thus the guest is brought to feel the very spray from the waterfall."¹² This degree of *Einfühlung* it Rikyu had in mind when he wrote:

Flowers of hill or dale
Put them in a simple vase
Full or brimming o'er,
But when you're arranging them
You must slip your heart in too.¹³

Sometimes, instead of a floral arrangement or a hanging scroll, the tea-master would place in the *tokonoma* a tray on which might be arranged a stone landscape (*bon-seki*), a sand and moss landscape (*bon-kei*), or a potted dwarf tree (*bon-sai*). Each of these minor arts sought to present a selec-

11. *Ibid*, 106-7.

12. Harada, *op. cit.*, 50.

13. Sadler, *op. cit.*, 106.

tive arrangement of clues or signifiers which, in the imagination of the viewer, would carry import as a macrocosmic statement. Occasionally, individual stones (Fig. 3) would be exhibited on a little dais in the *tokonoma* so that "the gazer may be led into reveries by the fancies their shape suggests... A stone with a white streak may suggest a waterfall, the sound of which may be heard, or rather felt, in the momentary solitude of one's room."¹⁴ The arts of *bon-kei* and *bon-seki* differ very little from the larger meditational garden displays at Daisen-in or Ryoan-ji, whose long rear wall, discolored by time, is so reminiscent of the most respected Raku glazes.

Sitting in his tea-house, the *cha-jin*, should he choose to slide open one of the rice-paper walls, looked out upon a garden which also had been established as a nature-symbol (Fig. 4). In the history of Japanese garden planning, all gardens did not serve the same end; those gardens which served *cha-do* at its height, however, sought to present a visual field amenable to mental expansion via the

scalar telescoping described above and the garden is to be regarded as a representation in miniature of visible nature in its entirety. Rikyu believed that in the garden the taller trees should be in front and the smaller trees behind;¹⁵ the result of this arrangement would exaggerate the sense of distance within a given area and provide an expansive feeling. Although one cannot here go into the rich varieties of garden design, one can certainly allude to the high selectivity of motifs in garden planning, motifs which always sought to suggest forms, vistas, and processes beyond their own mundane compactness; the range of mental challenges was wide. In the garden, the Japanese acted out the search for the secrets of infinity learned from Southern Sung repudiation of elaborate depictions of the laws of nature.

But in no place, it is here suggested, have the Japanese found a better field of vision, a meditative ground attuned to the Universal, than in the glazes of the tea bowl. On the pockmarked surface

14. Harada, *op. cit.*, 47.

15. Sadler, *op. cit.*, 28.

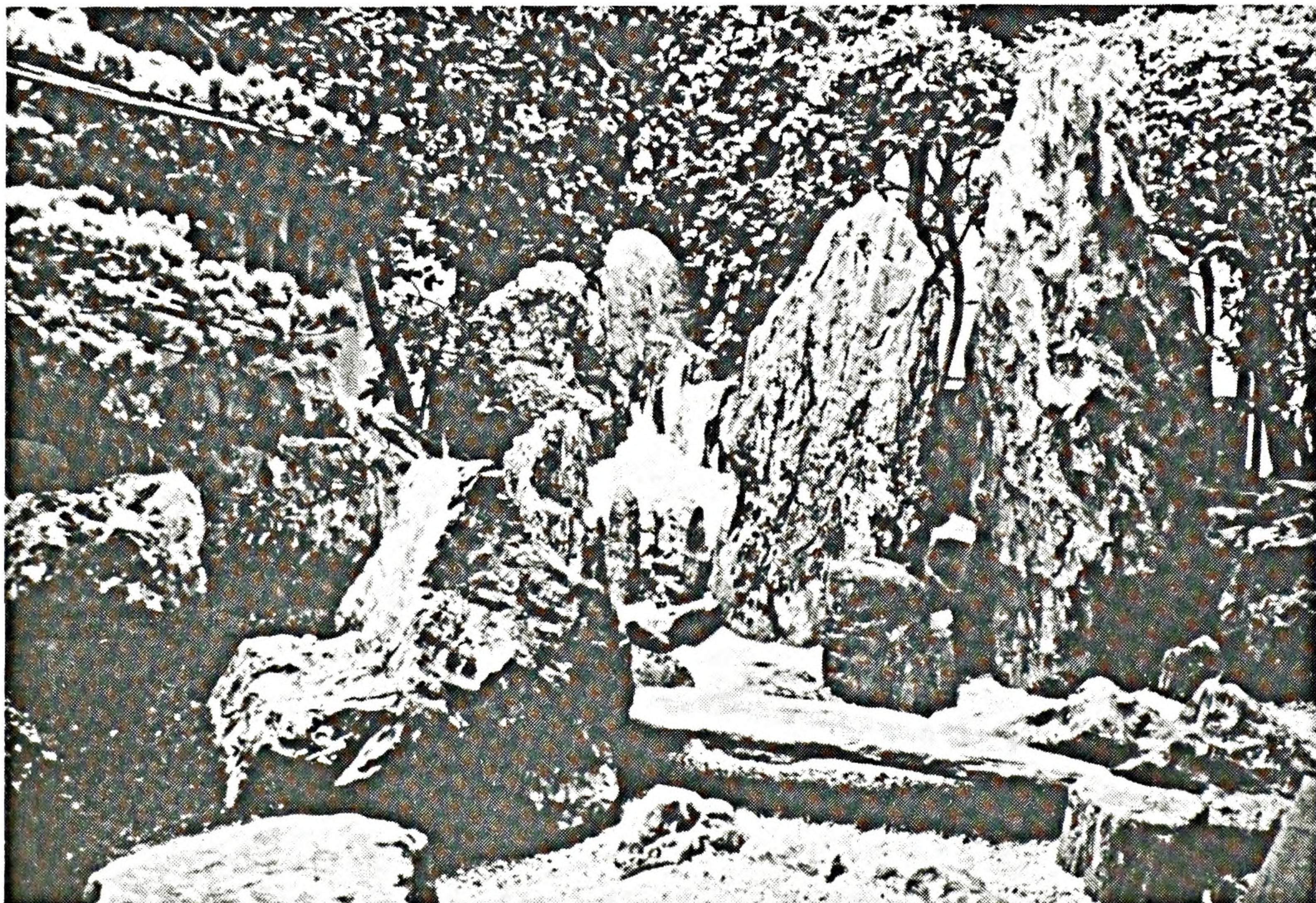


FIGURE 4. Daisen-in, Daitoku, Kyoto.

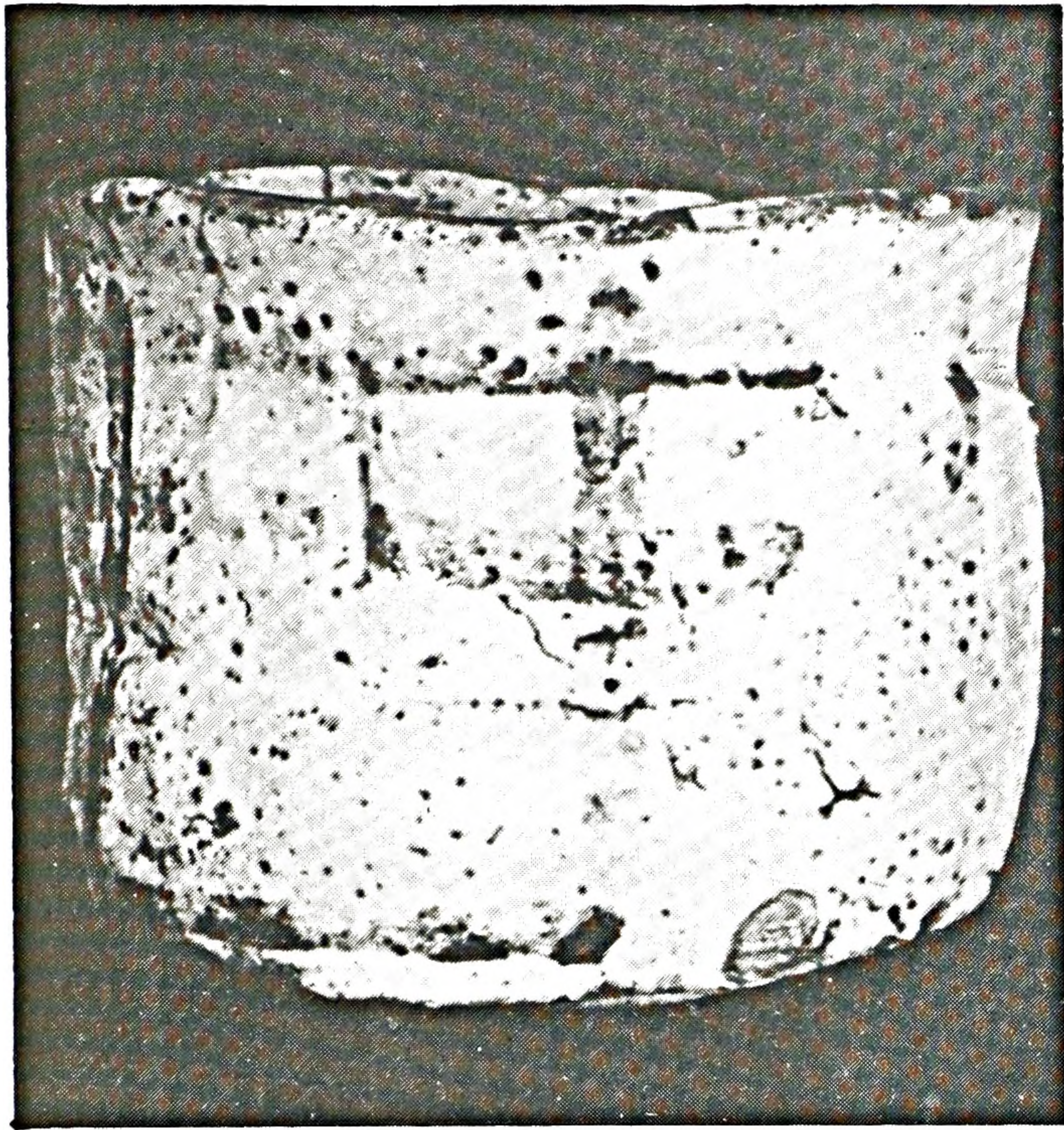


FIGURE 5. Shino tea bowl called "U-no-hanagaki." Takahiro Mitsui Collection, Kanagawa.

of Shino, in the rutted roughness of Iga, in the enigmatic permutations of Raku's colors, and even in the dappled oil-spots of Temmoku, the *cha-jin* could find the perfect non-programmatic field conducive to mental leaps from microcosm to macrocosm.

Perhaps the ideal example of this functional aestheticism, metaphysical at root, is Honami Koetsu's justly famous Raku tea bowl (Fig. 1), now in the Sakai Collection, Tokyo, called "Fujisan." Declared a National Treasure, this unassuming ceramic piece, with its spontaneous merging of hues, is one of the zeniths of Japanese art. Yet what is this cup but a severe, geometrically ambiguous ceramic piece covered with grey, brown, black, and white glazes arranged in no formal order, but penetrating freely into one another? Yashiro Yukio says that the "simple form lacks all pretentiousness, and yet it possesses the dignity of nature's own work."¹⁶ The fact that the bowl has been called "Fujisan" is as important as the bowl's rusticity, for it indicates the *proclivity to seek form in the most abstract visual field*. In a way, of course, the very formal naming of the bowl — giving abstraction a definition — is destructive to the creative, contemplative spirit which discovers possibilities at each viewing, but such names, even if probably eschewed by the purest-minded monks, do indicate for us the mental, associative process.

Many are the ways in which the tea bowls are experienced, and the titles given can be far more imaginative than "Fujisan." In the collection of Takahiro Mitsui of Kanagawa, there is a Shino

16. Yashiro Yukio, ed., *Art Treasures of Japan*, Vol. II, Tokyo: Kokusai Bunka Shinkokai, 1960, 514.

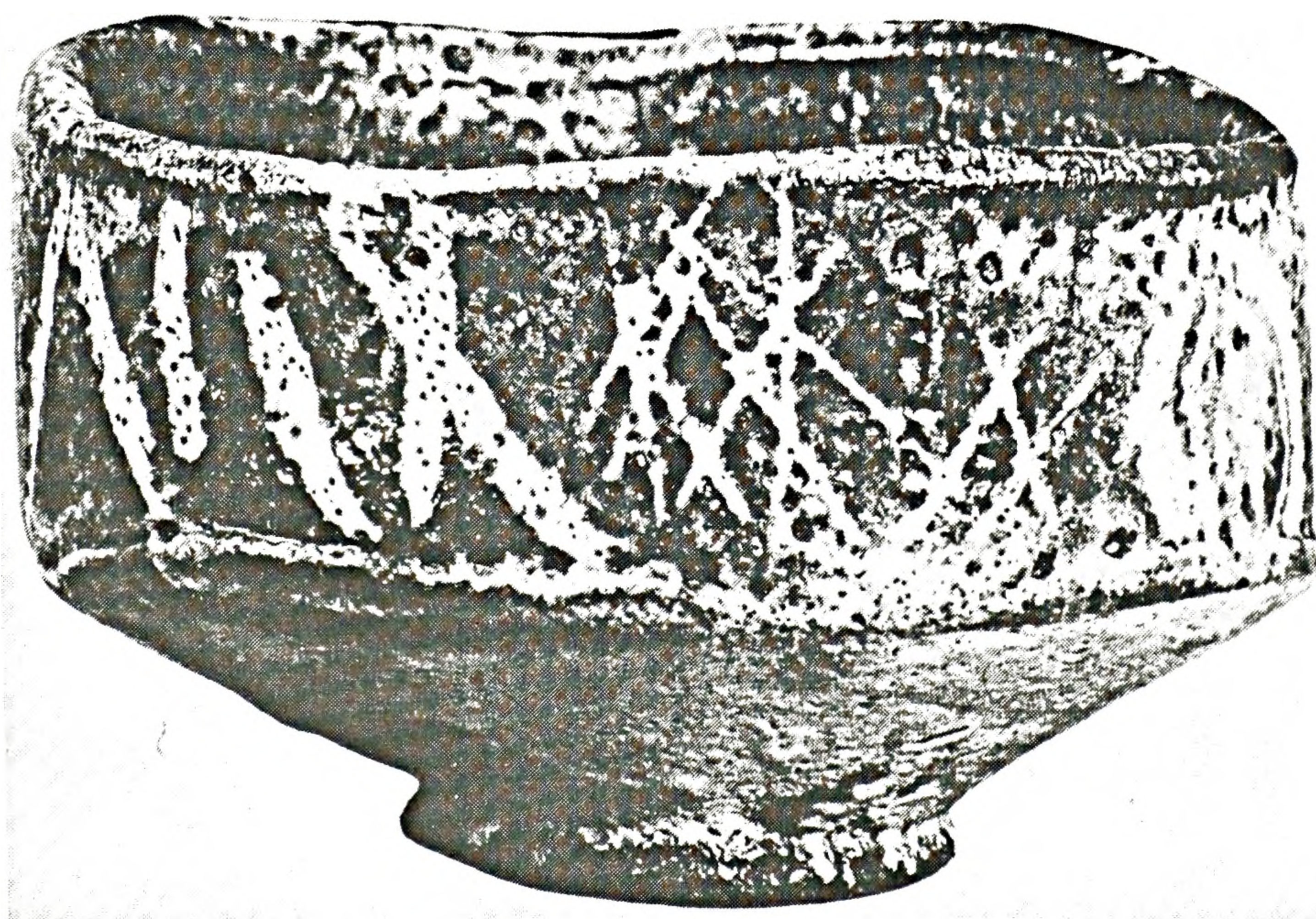


FIGURE 6. Shino tea bowl called "Mini-no-mo-moji." Goto Art Museum, Tokyo.

tea bowl (Fig. 5) from the Momoyama period entitled “U-no-hana-gaki,” which may be translated as “fence under which bloom the *utsugi*,” the Japanese sunflower. Accompanying the bowl is a poem by Kotagiri Sekishu (1605-73) which reads: “Walking between u-no-hana gaki in a mountainside village, I feel as if walking in a snow-bound region.”¹⁷ Actually, the only “descriptive” mark on the otherwise plain white Shino surface is a quick brush configuration of crossed lines. From this, the *cha-jin* has conjured an imaginary winter scene, with fence, flowers, and feeling of solitude. Another Shino tea bowl (Fig. 6) in the Goto Art Museum, Tokyo, has been named “Mini-no Momiji,” or “maple on the ridge.” This bowl has red slip over white clay with a scratched design, over all of which a thick white Shino glaze has been spread. The rust-like scratches half-seen under the glaze are sufficient to suggest maples.

A black Raku bowl by Koho called “Kangetsu” (“cold moon”) and a red Raku by Donyu named “Jukushi” (“mellow persimmon”) are both very successful and possess names relevant to the associative process indicated herein. There is a magni-

17. *National Treasures of Japan*, Series VI, Tokyo: Benudo and Co., Ltd., 1962, 66.

ficent Chosen Karatsu bowl that has black-gray glaze briefly dripping in a very fur-like fashion down a creamy body, and on the bottom a brown underglaze can be seen. The glaze resembles neurons, or stalagmites, or perhaps the underside of a goat! It is surprising how *less* effective a bowl becomes when descriptive imagery is painted on: note, for example, an E-Karatsu *cha-wan* (Fig. 7) with a single floral design that is charming yet too limiting in its representationalism. A Shino water jar of iron-rich clay with brushed on, rush-pattern effect presents an interesting three-dimensional haze effect. One certainly cannot omit the Raku bowls of Chojiro, and his “Great Black” (“Oguro”), and other bowls in the *doge* or scorched style. A very beautiful and mysterious bowl is the “Jirobu” Raku bowl (Fig. 8) by Chojiro, in which moss-like pale green glaze, interspersed with misty white patches, allows here and there the red clay underneath to show nebulously through. Certain modern bowls continue the tradition without becoming slick.

Viewing these *cha-wan* initiates both an aesthetic and a philosophic activity, for one confronts the enigma that in the bowls one encounters Nothing — neither representationalism nor the Chinese end-in-itself perfection of finish and shape. There is Nothing there, but at the same time, as one con-

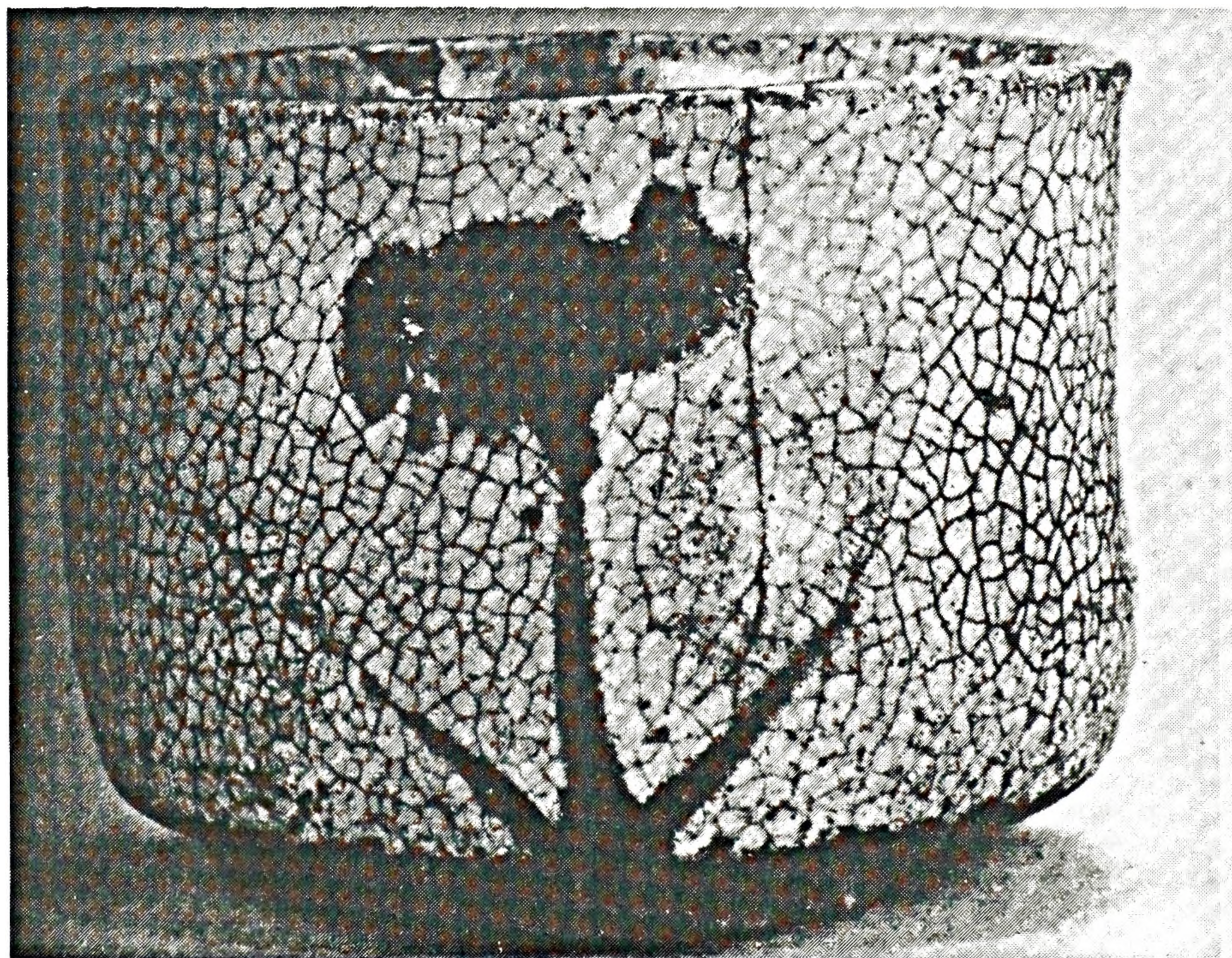


FIGURE 7. Old Karatsu tea bowl called “Ayame.” Private collection.



FIGURE 8. Raku tea bowl called "Jirobu," by Chojiro. Private Collection.

templates them, one creates out of them conjectural landscapes and the unconscious intimations of *natura naturans*. Tea bowls are sacred objects, therefore, not only because they represent Levi-Strauss's naturalization/culturalization fusion, but also because they coherently symbolize the perennial Asian insight that the Nothing and the Everything are the same.

coherently symbolize the perennial Asian insight that the Nothing and the Everything are the same.

Because the glazes of the finest *cha-wan* are so completely non-representational — even more so than garden designs or *tokonoma* embellishments — logical perception itself is helpless in solving this enigma and in leading man into the meditative world of the spirit. Hasumi says that "extremely difficult though the task is — expressing the inexpressible and giving form to the formless — that is nevertheless how the message conveyed only in hints becomes feasible and intelligible."¹⁸ Until recently, this difficulty was compounded for the Westerner since his art had been so dependent upon and was judged according to outer form. Although it is true that the Japanese do cherish the refined shapes and designs of Nabeshima or Kakiemon porcelains, they also recognize that

such *objets d'art* lead the mind neither inward nor outward. Since the process of nature is never finished, the most potently spiritual artistic works must also eschew the repressive limits of perfection and fixed representationalism and be supportive of fertile and limitless associations.

"Intuition," says Hasumi, "is the faculty of comprehending the object of the soul in its interior relation with the cosmic totality lying concealed under the variety of the world. The task of intuition is to orient the inwardness of the human soul towards the Nothing."¹⁹ The tea ceremony at its prime marked the highest training of and dependence upon intuition for those very ends. The monk sits between the Universal and the microscopic, constantly fathoming his relation to each and, ultimately, their equality. In an empty room, surrounded by artistic products which are both functionally simple and philosophically metaphoric, he raises his cup to sip his tea, and in so doing, brings a universe before his eyes.

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18. Hasumi, *op. cit.*, 19.

19. *Ibid*, x.