The Beauty of Everyday Things

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THE BEAUTY OF MISCELLANEOUS THINGS

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Introduction

There was once a man, poor and uneducated, who was a person of deep faith. Although he found it difficult to explain what he believed in or why, in his simple words there was something luminous, something surprisingly brilliant arising from his experience. He had no personal belongings worth mentioning, but he possessed a deep understanding of what it meant to believe. Without knowing it, he knew God. As a result, he possessed unwavering strength.

I can say somewhat the same thing about the plate now before me. It is nothing more than a simply made object of the type often looked down upon as common and coarse. It displays no overweening pride, no flashy effects. The artisan who made it gave little thought to what he was making or how it would come out. Just as a Buddhist devotee will continually repeat a religious chant as a means of achieving salvation, an artisan will repeatedly turn a potter's wheel and make identically shaped pieces. Then the same pattern is repeatedly drawn on each piece and the same glaze repeatedly applied. What is beauty? What is the art of the kiln? The artisan knows nothing of that. Still, without knowing all that there is to know, his hands continue working swiftly in the process of creation. It is said that the voice chanting for salvation is no longer that of the believer, but that of Buddha himself. In the same way, the hand of the artisan is no longer his or her own hand, but the hand of nature. The craftsman does not aim to create beauty, but nature assures that it is done. He himself has lost all thought, is unconsciously at work. Just as faith appears of its own accord from ardent belief, beauty naturally appears in works unconsciously created. I never tire of gazing at this plate in front of me.

I

When I refer to the beauty of ordinary everyday objects (*zakki*, or ‘miscellaneous things’), you may think I am being intentionally eccentric or perverse. In order to forestall erroneous views and associations like this, I will here list a few cautionary notes. *Zakki* basically refers to the various utensils and tools made use of by the great mass of common people. As such, they could be called *mingu*, ‘people’s implements’. They are ordinary things that anyone can buy, that everyone comes regularly into contact with in their daily lives. They cost very little and can be procured almost anywhere and at any time. They are familiarly referred to as *temawari no mono* (the handy), *fudan-zukai* (the ordinary), or *katte-dogu* (kitchen implements). They are not meant for display or decoration; they are seen in the kitchen or scattered here and there throughout the house. They are plates; they are trays; they are chests; they are clothing. Largely they are things for family use. All of them are necessary for everyday living. There is nothing unusual or rarefied about them. They are things that people are thoroughly familiar with, that they know through and through.

II

However, there is one thing that never ceases to amaze me. Though these objects are the most familiar to us throughout our lives, their existence has been ignored in the flow of time, because they are considered low and common. It is as though these beautiful objects had no redeeming features. Even historians, who should be telling their story, are silent. Here I will take up the tale of these common, intimate objects. This will mark, I am sure, the beginning of a new chapter in aesthetic history. Some people will think this endeavour strange and outlandish, but by shedding new light on these objects, the clouds that now obscure the subject will be swiftly swept away.

This raises the question of why these miscellaneous objects have been so long ignored. It is said that someone living in proximity to a flowering garden grows insensitive to its fragrance. Likewise, when one becomes too familiar with a sight, one loses the ability to truly see it. Habit robs us of the power to perceive anew, much less the power to be moved. Thus it has taken us all these years, all these ages, to detect the beauty in common objects. We cannot be entirely faulted for this failure, however, for we didn’t possess the proper distance from these objects to see them for what they were; we were

too taken up in simply living among them, too busy in creating them. Conscious appreciation requires a historical hiatus, an interval in time for looking back. History is a record of the past; critical evaluation is retrospection.

The times are now moving rapidly in a new direction. There has perhaps never been an era marked by such radical change. The times, our hearts and minds, and things themselves are flowing by us and hurrying into the past. The weight of custom and convention has been lifted from our shoulders. All before us is becoming new. The future is new and the past is new. The world we were so accustomed to has become an unfamiliar, strange place. All before us, all we see, has become a subject of re-evaluation. It is as if a mirror has been carefully cleaned and now reflects everything in pristine clarity. The good and the bad all appear as they are, with no distortions. What is beautiful and what is not, the advent of this new age enables us to make that distinction. This is an era of critical evaluation, an era of conscious awareness. We have been given the fortunate role of acting as judges. We should not squander this opportunity.

From the dusty, disregarded corners of life a new world of beauty has unfolded. It is a world that everyone knew, but a world that no one knew. It is my task to speak of this world of miscellaneous beauty, to see what we can learn from it.

III

Things that are used on a daily basis must stand the test of reality. They cannot be fragile, lavishly decorated, or intricately made; such objects will not do. Thick, strong, and durable, that is what is needed. Things for everyday use are not averse to rough handling, and they stoutly withstand extremes of heat and cold. They cannot be flimsy or frail in nature; neither can they be overly refined. They must be true and steadfast to their use. They must be ready for any type of handling, for use by any individual. Pretentious ornamentation is not permitted; dishonesty of any type is rejected. They must bear every trial and test. Things that don’t conform to the rule of utilitarian honesty cannot be called ‘good’. In these simple miscellaneous objects, handicrafts are divested of every subterfuge, of every dissembling mask.

This is the world of utility. There is no avoiding reality, no way of escaping it, for the sole purpose of these objects is to serve people's needs. But to think of them as nothing but physical objects would be an error. They may simply be things, but who can say that they don't have a heart? Forbearance, wholesomeness, and sincerity – aren't these virtues witnesses to the fact that everyday objects have a heart? They are rooted in the earth, deeply tied to the earthly life of honest, hardworking people, the recipients of the blessings of heaven. The world of utility and the world of beauty are not separate realms. Who is to say that spirit and matter are not one?

Since these utilitarian objects have a commonplace task to perform, they are dressed, so to speak, in modest wear and lead quiet lives. In them one can almost feel a sense of satisfaction as they greet each day with a smile. They work thoughtlessly and unselfishly, carrying out effortlessly and inconspicuously whatever duty comes their way. They possess a genuine, unmovable beauty. On the other hand, of course, there is also delicate beauty, beauty that quakes at the slightest perturbation. Yet isn't beauty that remains unfazed by a hard knock or two all the more amazing?

Moreover, this type of beauty grows with each passing day. Utilitarian craftwares become more beautiful the more they are used, and the more beautiful they become, the more they are used. Users and the used have exchanged a vow: the more an object is used the more beautiful it will become, and the more the user uses an object, the more that object will be loved.

These commonplace objects are indispensable to daily life. They are, in fact, our loyal companions, our faithful friends, willing to help out when help is needed. There is not one of us who doesn't rely on them throughout the day. The beauty we see in them is honest and sincere, an expression of humility. Today, when everything is trending toward the frail and sickly, the beauty we see in these common objects is both a blessing and a joy.

IV

In this beauty there is neither inordinate colouring nor notable decoration. The shape of the objects is simplicity itself, and they are decorated with only two or three patterns done in the most unpretentious manner. They contain no intellectual ambitions or attempts to be stylish. There is not the least effort to

surprise or astonish, no straining to overachieve or striving for a particular form; they are simply quiet, calm, and tranquil. On occasion these crafts seem to possess an almost humble, artless mien. They don't try to intimidate or coerce. In a day when the trend is toward showy display, we cannot help but feel a certain fondness for these simple, naive objects.

Most of these handicrafts were produced in obscure, remote villages, or in grungy workshops in the dim backstreets of small towns. They were most frequently seen in the call0used hands of the poor. These are simple things, made of rough material. They are sold in small shops or from straw mats on the roadside. They are used in cluttered rooms, scattered about. But providence works in strange ways. These same factors have assured these objects of amazing beauty. It is the same with religion, which reveres the virtue of poverty and remonstrates against the sin of pride. This is how such amazing beauty came to reside in such humble objects.

Miscellaneous handicrafts are devoid of ambition. Their purpose is to serve the needs of the people, not to achieve renown. Just as construction workers who have built a wonderful highway don't sign their work, neither do artisans append their names to their ware. From beginning to end, without exception, such handicrafts are made by nameless craftsmen. It is this lack of desire for personal recognition that produces their flawless beauty. Almost all artisans in the past were without academic training. What beauty was, how it came about, they knew nothing of this. They learned the tried-and-true ways of the past and patiently employed them without the slightest hesitation. There was no need for theory, no need to indulge in sentimentality. The beauty of miscellaneous handicrafts is the result of this single-mindedness, this unconscious devotion.

Since these craftspeople didn't sign their work, it is impossible to trace their history. They weren't artists working on their own but ordinary people, part of the undistinguished masses. That such beautiful objects should appear from the great unwashed, what does this tell us? In the past, beauty was shared by all, not the domain of a few. In the name of the era in which we live, in the name of the country we inhabit, we must commemorate this wonderful work. The ignorant masses, inferior in understanding, were superior in the ways of creation. Now only the individual artist is alive; the age of shared beauty is dead. Previously it was the era that lived, and the individual that concealed his existence. Beauty then was not the province of a

few artists, but the home of countless artisans. The miscellaneous things they created became *mingei* – folk craft.

V

Particular attention should be paid to the material used, for good craftsmanship is built on natural foundations, and nature assures the material's quality. Rather than the craft object finding the most suitable material, it can be said that the material finds the right object. Folk crafts are invariably the product of a local environment. When a certain locality is rich in a certain raw material, that material gives rise to a certain craftware. It is these resources, the gift of nature, that are the veritable mother of craftwork. The natural environment, raw materials, and production, these three are inseparable. When they are as one, the resultant craftwares will be natural and free-flowing, for they are the products of nature.

When raw materials dwindle and disappear, there is little choice but to close up shop. Nature is unforgiving when materials are stretched beyond reason. And if material is not available close at hand, how can crafts be produced in mass, both cheap and durable? Behind each object there exists a certain climate, temperature range, and soil quality, as well as other physical conditions. It is this that adds flavour and colour to provincial crafts, being products of multiple factors. Crafts that adhere to nature receive the blessings of nature. When natural conditions are not satisfied, craftwork becomes weak and dull. The rich quality of common handicrafts is a gift of nature. To see its beauty is to see nature's spontaneous workings.

But this is not all that material affects. It extends its influence to all shapes and all patterns, between which there is an inseparable bond. A good cosmetic finish is not simply applied to an object, but submits to its natural needs. Raw materials must not be thought of as merely physical matter, containing as they do the will of nature. Nature tells us the shape and pattern a material should assume, and nothing good can be achieved by ignoring its dictates. A good artisan seeks nothing that nature does not seek.

This, I believe, is a view worth taking to heart. When one becomes a child of God, the flames of religious faith burn brightly. When one becomes a child of nature, one is encompassed by a natural beauty that only nature can give. The more one returns to the bosom of nature, the more intense that beauty

becomes. In the beauty of common craftware I can't help but find a preeminent example of this precept.

VI

Since these are objects for daily use, they are not hard to find but always available in local markets. Should they get broken, they can be easily replaced by something identical. For that reason they are cheaply produced in volume. Volume you may think unimportant, but actually it has a crucial effect on the beauty of these handcrafted objects. While it is true that mass production may occasionally lead to slipshod work, without it the particular beauty of folk crafts would never be born.

Repetition is the mother of proficiency. Large demand calls for massive supply; massive supply requires repetitive production; repetitive production eventually results in technological perfection. This is particularly true with division of labour, where one skill can be polished to consummation. The process of manufacturing consists chiefly of this simple cycle, drawing over and over the same pattern, forming over and over the same shape. Those who have mastered these skills are no longer aware of the techniques they use. They have become one with the task at hand, free of all self-awareness and thoughts of artistic manipulation, effortlessly applying themselves to the job at hand. They may be cheerfully talking and laughing as they work, but most surprising is their speed. Speed is necessary if they are to make a living. Thousands of times, tens of thousands of times, it is this repetition that frees their hands from thought. It is this freedom that is the mother of all creation. When I see them at work in this way, I am astonished beyond words. They have complete faith in the power of their hands. There is not a smidgen of doubt. The free flow of the brush, the dynamic formation of the shape, the natural unshackled aura … Their hands appear no longer to be their own but under the sway of some external force. This is the secret of their craft. Its beauty is the necessary result of mass production.

And these common so-called miscellaneous craftworks are fully mature. They are the technical consummation of years of endeavour, hard-earned sweat, and endless repetition. This is how their freedom was won. Rather than the products of human hands, they should be viewed as works of nature. Look at the design called *uma no me* ('horse's eye'). No artist, no matter how

great, could replicate its easy, free-flowing swirls. They are wonders to behold. In the near future, when everything is made by machine, people will marvel that the human hand was capable of such astonishing feats.

VII

Folk art is necessarily a hand craft. Aside from the hand of God, there is no tool as astonishingly creative as the human hand. From its natural movements are born all manner of beauteous things. No machine, no matter how powerful, can match its freedom of movement. The hand is nature's greatest gift to humankind. Without it, beauty could not exist.

Now, unfortunately, for economic reasons, almost all manufacture is relegated to machines. From these machines there may appear a kind of beauty, which we shouldn't dismiss out of hand. But this beauty has its limits. We shouldn't rely on it unreservedly, without careful thought. What machines produce is standardized beauty, calibrated and fixed, and beauty built to a standard will remain merely that. Mechanization constitutes a kind of aesthetic strangulation. When machines are in control, the beauty they produce is cold and shallow. It is the human hand that creates subtlety and warmth. How could a machine give birth to the subtle surface elegance that is the lifeblood of folk craft, emerging during forming, trimming, and painting by skilful and experienced hands? Machines only know what has been predetermined, not creative imagination. If the present situation continues, machines will eventually rob work of its freedom, divest it of its joy. In the past, human beings held sway over their tools, and it was this dualistic hierarchy that fostered the crafts and raised them to ever greater heights.

Nowadays, with the era of handmade crafts coming to an end, the miscellaneous things that our forebears created have become precious artefacts. Folk art as a handicraft is slipping into the past, with daunting conditions blocking its re-emergence. Once folk art has fallen out of favour, the senseless momentum of our times will stand in the way of it regaining its former glory. Only the provinces continue to tread the true path of handicrafts, supported by a small number of fervent individuals. The call to 'return to the handicrafts' will undoubtedly never fade. For it is in the handicrafts that ultimate creative freedom exists, where true beauty is possible. The day will come, I firmly believe, when the miscellaneous things

that were formerly the most common craftware will be looked back upon with love and affection. History may falsify, but true beauty can never be false. Rather, with the passage of time, it will shine ever more brightly into the future.

VIII

In the world of folk art, the attitude of the artisans, the quality of the things they make, the techniques they employ, all are extremely simple. This simplicity is required by the character of the things being made. But ‘simplicity’ must not be understood as being rough and unrefined. It is this simplicity, in fact, that forms the backbone of folk art. There has rarely been a well-made craft object that was not simple. There are fewer that are complex. True beauty is not possible devoid of simplicity. We call them miscellaneous things, but their simple forms embody genuine beauty. To study the principles of beauty, it is necessary to come to this world, the world of ordinary things known to everyone.

Those who have achieved an enlightened state of mind are free of distracting thoughts; they are at one with their work. Objects crafted in this state of being, where all is entrusted to nature, exist in a liberated zone. There are no unbreakable rules for experienced artisans. Everything is left to the flow of nature, adhering only to the dictates of the object and the heart. Every shape, colour, and pattern is free for use. As for which to choose, there are no fixed rules. Neither are artisans concerned about the exact nature of the beauty that will be the result. And yet there are no mistakes. The choices to be made are not made blithely by the artisans; the free flow of nature does that for them.

It is this freedom that is the mother of all creativity. The great variety and variation found in miscellaneous things is an accurate reflection of this fact. Contrived artificiality does not produce such variety, but rather shackles it. The moment everything is left in the hands of nature is the astonishing moment when creativity begins. Contrived technique cannot give rise to that feeling of freedom; neither can it give birth to such variation. This is not a meaningless cycle, not mere duplication. Each piece is the beginning of a new world, fresh and vivid.

Look at the small cups for dipping buckwheat noodles. The various patterns with which these cups are decorated reach into the hundreds. Who can deny their marvellous brushwork? Even with the ubiquitous stripe-patterned cups, it would be difficult to find two exactly the same. The world of folk art is a world of freedom, a state of imaginative creation.

IX

Since miscellaneous things were made for everyday use and roughly handled, not many of them have survived from the distant past. Those that have survived are confined to a very few types. It has only been in the last two or three centuries, mostly in the Edo period (1603–1868), that folk art has become diverse. This, of course, includes not only lacquerware and woodwork, but also metalwork and dyeing and weaving, as well as ceramics. These crafts were adapted for use in various types of utensils, furniture, and other furnishings. It was halfway through the Meiji period (1868–1912) that the quality of miscellaneous things began to decline and the true handicraft tradition fell into desuetude. However, in remote provincial areas the traditional techniques and styles are still alive, with not a few artisans still adhering to the ways of the past. Most of the surviving miscellaneous craftware originated in the Edo period and are fairly rich in variety and number.

The culture of the Edo period was dominated by the commoner classes. This is as true of literature as it is of painting. Miscellaneous things were one aspect of this remarkable culture. Like ukiyo-e prints, they weren’t delicate, aristocratic works of art but simple common wares with a provincial flavour. They might not be graceful and refined, but they had the quality of a trustworthy companion. Living with them day in and day out, they took on a warm familiarity. Surrounded by them, people felt comfortably at home.

In general, the history of art began to decline during this period. Works comparable with those of the past became rare. Technique became meaninglessly complicated. Struggling under this burden, handicrafts overall gradually lost their liveliness. They were still meticulously and carefully made, but their heart, the core of beauty wrapped in simplicity, had been destroyed. Trust in nature had fallen under the boot of mechanized technique, and beauty had begun to wither. In the midst of this sad decline there was one

art that didn’t fall victim to the widespread depredation, the craft of miscellaneous things. Here there were few sources from which the insidious disease could spread. Since miscellaneous things were considered to be outside the realm of art, artisans need not concern themselves with aesthetic concepts. Even in the last stages of this general artistic decay, this craft was the only one in which healthy, wholesome art could still be found. The pieces themselves might appear rather nondescript on the surface, but they had a presence, an aura, that could rival any finer art. As a test, pick up a miscellaneous piece of pottery and look at its raised foot. Only here will you find a base comparable in strength to that of Chinese and Korean pottery. There is no weakness here. Weakness cannot withstand the rigours of daily use.

X

But this is not the end of the story. Miscellaneous things represent the most original of Japanese arts. In painting and sculpture Japan boasts some masterpieces of which it can be immensely proud, but in general there are few works that have escaped the influence of China and Korea. Rare is the work that can compete successfully in terms of strength and profundity. In the face of the magnificence of Chinese art and the elegance of the Korean, there is nothing that we can unhesitatingly hold up for comparison.

However, when we come to the craft of miscellaneous things, we meet with an exception. Here we find something particularly Japanese. Here we find solid reliability, overflowing freedom, and unfettered creativity that is neither duplication nor imitation. Among the arts of the world, we can proudly say that this is Japanese. Miscellaneous things are a clear expression of the climate and customs of Japan, its sensibility and way of thinking. They have their own particular Japanese raison d’être.

Some people may feel hesitant to speak of such things as being uniquely Japanese. Abolish the thought from your mind! We should take pride in the fact that the common people of Japan gave birth to these wonderful crafts. We should share in the delight they felt in living side by side with such comforting creations – creations which are not, however, individual possessions, but whose glory is shared by all. The discovery of beauty in these common things is a hard, solid fact. If that were not so, if such beauty

were not the foundation of the life of the common people, what an unfulfilling life that would be. I feel it my duty to salvage these wonderful objects from the dust of history for the glory of the Japanese people.

XI

It is one of the mysteries of the world that such great beauty should be found in such lowly objects: that they should come from uneducated hands, that they should originate in remote provincial areas, that they should be the most common type of everyday object, that they should be used in dimly lit out-of-the-way rooms, that they should be uncolourful and made of the poorest materials, and that they should be produced in great number and at low prices. What a mystery it is that the god of creativity should reside in the hearts of these ingenuous artisans possessing no artistic ambition, without intellectual pride, soft-spoken, and happy to be leading poor but honest lives. These same qualities are vividly apparent in the objects themselves.

It is truly amazing that such beauty should permeate these humble objects – objects which devote their existence to service, which sacrifice their lives to the needs of the daily round, which work in the harsh real world without complaint, which carry out their duties with a sense of wholesome satisfaction, and which aim to bring a little happiness into every life. Moreover, the heavens have ordained that these objects should attain an even greater beauty as they become worn by the handling of human hands. The religious life is also built on sacrifice and service to others. This selfless, devout service to God and one's fellow beings has its equivalent in the service of miscellaneous objects to their users. What an amazing thing it is that objects made for use in real life should possess a beauty that transcends reality.

We have a great deal to learn from those who claim to know nothing about art, who devote themselves unself-consciously to creation, who are unconcerned about renown, and who place their all in the hands of nature, as well as the extraordinarily beautiful things they beget. Just as a true believer does all in the name of God, artisans devote themselves wholeheartedly to their craft. As with the poor in spirit and the humble, miscellaneous things bring true happiness to humankind, and might be called 'children of light' or 'children of joy'. Their beauty is a gift from heaven.

Afterword

The first to recognize the beauty of miscellaneous objects was the first generation of tea masters, men of consummate taste. People have largely forgotten that most of these objects, which are now worth incredible sums of money and are known as *omeibutsu* (‘objects of great renown’), were nothing more than common, ordinary, everyday things. In fact, it can be said that it was precisely their commonness, their ordinariness, that produced the elegance of their natural flowing freedom. Without this, they would never have achieved the status of *omeibutsu*. Reflecting on the beauty of the famous *ido* tea bowls, seven particular aesthetic points were noted. Later these points came to be thought of as essential criteria for the creation and appreciation of the beauty of *ido*. But if the original artisans had been told of this development, they would certainly have been utterly amazed. Not surprisingly, there were no works of any excellence created on the basis of these rules. These later pieces had abandoned the realm of craftsmanship and become works of art. It should not be forgotten that the profound, simple beauty of *ido* tea bowls is the effortless product of common craftspeople.

Nowadays teahouses are built with an emphasis on elegance and taste, belying the original concept of the teahouse as a humble hut. Rustic homes in the countryside still have this simple, honest beauty, a quality which teahouses were meant to emulate. Now, however, teahouses have become embodiments of wealth and affluence, which are signs of present-day decadence. The true meaning of the tea ceremony is being forgotten. The beauty of the way of tea should be the beauty of the ordinary, the beauty of honest poverty.

Historians have given recognition to the most famous tea utensils in their writings, but they say little about miscellaneous things. It is as if nothing existed aside from these renowned objects. However, tea utensils, including tea bowls and other things like tea caddies, form only a small portion of the incredible number of miscellaneous things that have been produced. Their innumerable brother and sister objects, equally beautiful, are still hidden away in dark recesses, waiting to be discovered. The fact that historians ignore these miscellaneous objects shows that they know nothing about the beauty of tea utensils.

What I would like to do, if it were at all possible, would be to visit abandoned houses in the countryside, salvage their dust-covered tea bowls,

and prepare a fresh serving of tea. Doing that, I could return to the roots of tea and commune with the earliest tea masters to my heart’s content.