



## The Kizaemon Tea-bowl

THIS SINGLE TEA-BOWL IS CONSIDERED to be the finest in the world. There are three main kinds of Tea-bowls, those originating in China, Korea, and Japan, respectively. The most lovely are from Korea, and men of Tea always give them first place. Of these, there are many varieties, such as *Ido*, *Unkaku*, *Komogai*, *Goki*, *Totoya*, etc. The one considered most aesthetically satisfying is the *Ō Ido* ("Great" *Ido*). Again, there are varieties of *Ō Ido*: *Ko Ido*, *Ao Ido*, *Ido Waki*. The finest are called *meibutsu Ō Ido*, *meibutsu* signifying the particularly fine pieces. There are twenty-six bowls registered as *meibutsu*, but the finest of them all, and the one of which I shall write here, is that known as *Kizaemon Ido* (Plate 1). This bowl is said to contain the essence of Tea.

It is not known whence the word *Ido* derives; it was the name of the place where these pots came from in all probability. *Kizaemon* is a man's name—Takeda *Kizaemon*, a merchant of Osaka, who owned the bowl. A *meibutsu* has to have a pedigree [like an English racehorse]. *Honda Tadayoshi*, lord of Noto, possessed this bowl at the beginning of the seventeenth century. In 1634 it passed into the hands of *Nakamura Sosetsu*, a Tea master of Sakai. In 1751 it went to *Toshi Ieshige*, then in 1775, approximately, it became the property of Lord *Matsudaira Fumai* of Matsue, who was a great collector of Tea-bowls, at a price of 550 *ryō* (an immense sum). *Fumai* was exceedingly fond of it and kept it by him constantly. In 1818 he gave it to his son *Gettan* with the injunction, "This is one of the finest pieces in the land; you must treasure it always".

But this Tea-bowl got the reputation of bringing sickness and death to its owner. There was once a dilettante who owned this particular bowl.

He came down in the world and finally ended up as a groom for visitors to the Shimabara gay quarters in Kyoto, but he clung to the bowl without selling it. And the unhappy man was stricken with boils and died. From this time legend had it that a curse was associated with the bowl. It had this repute before Lord Matsudaira bought it, and he himself twice fell ill with a plague of boils. His wife begged him to get rid of it, but he refused, and his son Gettan inherited it in due course. Thereupon Gettan got a plague of boils, and the family gave it into the keeping of their priests in the Kohō-an, a subsidiary establishment of the Daitoku-ji temple in Kyoto, the site of the family graves. One can still see, hung up at the entrance to the temple, the palanquin that is said to have been used to bring the bowl in 1804. Before the Meiji era nobody could see it without the permission of the Matsudaira family. It is one hundred years since Matsudaira died; men die, but the bowl is as it always was.

In 1931 I was shown this bowl in company with my friend, the potter Kanjirō Kawai. For a long time I had wished to see this Kizaemon bowl. I had expected to see that “essence of Tea”, the seeing eye of Tea masters, and to test my own perception; for it is the embodiment in miniature of beauty, of the love of beauty, of the philosophy of beauty, and of the relationship of beauty and life. It was within box after box, five deep, buried in wool and wrapped in purple silk.

When I saw it, my heart fell. A good Tea-bowl, yes, but how ordinary! So simple, no more ordinary thing could be imagined. There is not a trace of ornament, not a trace of calculation. It is just a Korean food bowl, a bowl, moreover, that a poor man would use every day—commonest crockery.

A typical thing for his use; costing next to nothing; made by a poor man; an article without the flavour of personality; used carelessly by its owner; bought without pride; something anyone could have bought anywhere and everywhere. That is the nature of this bowl. The clay had been dug from the hill at the back of the house; the glaze was made with the ash from the hearth; the potter's wheel had been irregular. The shape revealed no particular thought: it was one of many. The work had been fast; the turning was rough, done with dirty hands; the throwing slipshod; the glaze had run over the foot. The throwing room had been dark. The thrower could not read. The kiln was a wretched affair; the firing careless. Sand had stuck to the pot, but nobody minded; no one invested the

thing with any dreams. It is enough to make one give up working as a potter.

In Korea such work was left to the lowest. What they made was broken in kitchens, almost an expendable item. The people who did this were clumsy yokels, the rice they ate was not white, their dishes were not washed. If you travel you can find these conditions anywhere in the Korean countryside. This, and no more, was the truth about this, the most celebrated Tea-bowl in the land.

But that was as it should be. The plain and unagitated, the uncalculated, the harmless, the straightforward, the natural, the innocent, the humble, the modest: where does beauty lie if not in these qualities? The meek, the austere, the unornate—they are the natural characteristics that gain man's affection and respect.

More than anything else, this pot is healthy. Made for a purpose, made to do work. Sold to be used in everyday life. If it were fragile, it would not serve its purpose. By its very nature, it must be robust. Its healthiness is implicit in its function. Only a commonplace practicality can guarantee health in something made.

One should correctly say, perhaps, that there is no chance for it to fall sick; for it is a perfectly ordinary rice bowl used every day by the poor. It is not made with thought to display effects of detail, so there is not time for the disease of technical elaboration to creep in. It is not inspired by theories of beauty, so there is no occasion for it to be poisoned by over-awareness. There is nothing in it to justify inscribing it with the maker's name. No optimistic ideals gave it birth, so it cannot become the plaything of sentimentality. It is not the product of nervous excitement, so it does not harbour the seeds of perversion. It was created with a very simple purpose, so it shuns the world of brilliance and colour. Why should such a perfectly ordinary bowl be so beautiful? The beauty is an inevitable outcome of that very ordinariness.

Those who like the unusual are immune to the ordinary, and if they are aware of it at all, they regard it as a negative virtue. They conceive active beauty as our duty. Yet the truth is odd. No Tea-bowl exceeds in Ido bowl in beauty.

All beautiful Tea-bowls are those obedient to nature. Natural things are healthy things. There are many kinds of art, but none better than this. Nature produces still more startling results than artifice. The most detailed human knowledge is puerile before the wisdom of nature. Why

should beauty emerge from the world of the ordinary? The answer is, ultimately, because that world is natural. In Zen there is a saying that at the far end of the road lies effortless peace. What more can be desired? So, too, peaceful beauty. The beauty of the Kizaemon Ido bowl is that of strifeless peace, and it is fitting that it should rest in that chapel, the Kōho-an, for in that quiet place it offers its silent answer to the seeker.

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