

## A Bowl of Heaven

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It took Shin Fujihira more than forty years to make a teabowl. Not that he was working on it the whole time – in fact, he purposefully avoided this most iconic of Japanese ceramic forms, feeling that the refined cult of tea ceremony (*Chanoyu*) was a “wicked world,” artificial and restrictive.

He felt this way despite his family lineage, which placed him the ceramic elite of Kyoto, a city famous for its ornately decorated and refined wares. No less a personage than Kanjiro Kawai helped foster his talent, even bequeathing him his given name, Shin. And yet he rebelled, becoming an unorthodox and individualistic talent.

In Japan, of course, unorthodoxy is its own tradition. The ideal of the Chinese *literati*, who withdrew from court intrigue to concentrate on their own artistic visions, was adopted by such figures as Matsuo Bashō, the Edo period poet, who is considered by many to have been the greatest composer of *haiku*. For example:

*A snowy morning—  
by myself,  
chewing on dried salmon.*

When Fujihira did finally decide it was time to create teabowls, he achieved just this sort of elliptical, compressed style. Handbuilt rather than thrown on the wheel, each is as eccentric as the artist himself, no one contour the same as any other.

The one I have before me has a cinnabar glaze, a pink-suffused celadon somewhat reminiscent of Chinese Song Dynasty *jun* wares. It is made of earthen materials, and its lip travels round it irregularly, like a mountain path. Yet it also contains a cloud, a gorgeous gray smudge that runs through the glaze: a portion of heaven. Bearing the bowl's light weight in the hands is pure, giddy pleasure; I can imagine it lifting of its own accord, rising to up the sky.

I can also imagine it filled with green froth. Fujihira may not have admired the rigorous conventions of *chanoyu*, but then, those conventions have themselves shifted in recent years. It's easy to imagine a contemporary tea-lover falling in love with this bowl.

For me, nothing he ever made was more poignant than this bowl. It's at once unpretentious and transcendent, like snow and salmon and everything else under the sheltering sky.