







# PERFECTION REPAIR AND USE

By Megan Fizell



With the cup moving from the table to the shelf, the focus of ceramic production has shifted from utilitarian to decorative. The art market's continual search for perfection has stripped bowls, cups, and plates of their personal history. Utilitarian objects carry the story of their use in chips and stains that are deemed imperfections by collectors and investors. It is within these cracks that the user experience is recorded, and an art form with many identical multiples (a set of plates in a dinner service for example) is able to assume an individuality between pieces. The idea that use is damage has been taken up by contemporary ceramists and explored within a temporal context.



For example, British artist Bethan Laura Wood ([www.woodlondon.co.uk](http://www.woodlondon.co.uk)) has designed her bone china cup series titled *Stain* to improve through use. Each cup is treated so that areas are susceptible to stain in a predetermined pattern. Through use, the pattern is revealed and the user's individual drinking habits are built up over time. In her work, the history of the teacup, as denoted by the stain, becomes its defining factor. Temporal time is measured through the strength and saturation of the individual stain on the cup, and the decorative detail of the stain emphasizes user experience. The stain shifts from being an element that is typically restored to an item of beauty, thus challenging the assumption that use is damaging or bad.



Rather than recording use, Reiko Kaneko's work ([www.reikokaneko.co.uk](http://www.reikokaneko.co.uk)) freezes a moment

Bethan Laura Wood, *Stain*, with Spot (right) & Willow (left) patterns, hand-finished bone china, 2006.





Reiko Kaneko's *Lip Tease* and *Drip Tease* teacups, 4 in. (11 cm) in length each with handle, 24k gold on fine bone china.

in temporal time through the use of 24k gold. In both of her works *Lip Tease* and *Drip Tease*, a moment in time is frozen in the form of a blemish. *Lip Tease* glorifies a lipstick mark on the rim of a delicate teacup, while *Drip Tease* depicts what the title suggests, tea drips down the side of a cup. According to Kaneko, "The design suggests its future and its purpose as well as being an anchor point to compare your own marks to the existing ones." And so, like Wood's work, the emphasis is on user experience. The precious gold becomes a way to glorify patterns of use upon the surface of the teacup.

Kaneko takes this idea one step further with her *Crack of Thunder Plate* (see page 57), which incorporates a delicate gold crack running through the center of the plate. The gold places the mark of damage at the initial point of production, turning it into a decorative form. Typically, when there are delicate rivers of gold running through the body of a vessel it is the mark of restoration.



Andy Brayman, *Gold Lined Cup with Concealed Decoration*, 4 in. (10 cm) in diameter, porcelain, 23k gold, platinum, 2007.





Reiko Kaneko's *Crack of Thunder Plate*, 10 inches diameter, porcelain, 24k gold on fine bone china.

Appearing in two different forms, gold lacquer repair is either a bonding adhesive holding together the cracked body of the vessel or a filler for missing portions of the rim or footing. Both methods employ a similar methodological technique of heating gold until it is liquid and either running it through the cracks to hold them together or molding lacquer to fill a gap and then applying gold leaf over that.

Essentially, by adding this precious metal to the chips and cracks, the negative is turned into a positive. The delicate gold cracks create beauty out of a damaged product and circumvent the problems of discoloration and precise color matching.

The idea of documentation of personal use is manifested in the work by ceramic artist Andy Brayman ([www.matterfactory.com](http://www.matterfactory.com)) as well. His porcelain cup titled *Gold Lined Cup with Concealed Decoration* (see page 55) is just that, a cup with a band of gold positioned where the user would hold it. Over time, the gold wears away through use and a message is revealed. Each cup is unique and, furthermore, each pattern of wear would be unique as it is based on the individual's specific cup-holding habits.

Whereas *Stain* tracked temporal time through the additive nature of staining, Brayman reverses this by applying a precious metal to mark time through a reductive process. As mentioned earlier, traditionally, gold lacquer was used to repair cracks and chips in porcelain. By using a material that was commonly used as an additive for repair and reversing it to be a reductive agent to

document wear, Brayman effectively glorifies the use of his cup.

The ultimate celebration of imperfection through use is a series of work titled *The Ornamented Life—Crackery-Crockery* by Joana Meroz ([www.joanameroz.com](http://www.joanameroz.com)). Reclaiming cast-off dishes, she gilds and fills in cracks and chips in the style of gold lacquer repair of old and then paints delicate flowers and plants sprouting from the damage. Meroz turns trash into usable art and incorporates the gold lacquer filling into the decorative ornamentation. The previous history of the discarded plate is embraced and its usability is restored for the story to continue.

Ceramic artists have to be many things at once: sculptors who create elegant forms, painters who create enticing images, and experts in the sciences to successfully glaze and fire their creations. Even though ceramics is such a technical and complex art form, these artists have created work that celebrates the original conceptual use of the everyday bowl, plate, or teacup. They have moved away from the idealized perfection commanded by art market collectors. Although the form and decoration on these works of art are beautiful, it is exciting to see work that encourages use and records personal history like a visual diary, marking moments and meals over a lifetime.

**the author** Megan Fizell is an art specialist and writer of the art/food blog *Feasting on Art*, <http://feasting-art.blogspot.com>. She is currently a gallery associate and a freelance photographer in Sydney, Australia.