

ART

In Kyoto, Practice the Fine Art of Taking Your Time

A writer discovers the transformational power of craftwork and ancient traditions while exploring Japan.

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MOST READ ARTS

PERFORMANCE

CHERRY BLOSSOMS ARE beginning to unfold across the spring-green mountains when I arrive at my hotel on the outskirts of Kyoto. Exquisitely pruned kitayama cedar trees dot the LXR Roku's property, a former artists' colony known as the 1600s birthplace of what we now call the Rinpa school of painting. It feels like a fitting place to begin my week of craft workshops in Kyoto.

Crafts, by nature, are not mass-produced but are made by hand

PERFORMANCE

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Choreographer Fatima Robinson is the dynamic force behind a generation of...

ARTS

Bright Lights

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MUSIC

This Land Is Your Land

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Crafts, by nature, are not mass-produced but are made by hand using materials from the environment. Found across all social classes, they are intended to be used, not just displayed. In this way, they tell the story of the artistic heritage of a place and its people. Making things with my hands has long been my reprieve from the digital demands of my working life. I do this not so much for the finished product, but for the transformation that comes from working at a slower speed.

Porcelain Pots

The hotel arranges a car to take me to a house in the historic Higashiyama district for the handcraft porcelain-making workshop available to guests. A slight, 70-something man bows and ushers me inside, where I'm hit with the intoxicating scent of fresh lilies and orchids. Earthenware pots line the room and overflow with flowers so fresh that I wonder if I'm in a florist shop. The man leads me through several long, narrow rooms, an architectural style known as *unagi no nedoko*, "a bed for an eel" – something akin to a New York City railroad apartment that runs two blocks deep. Finally, I reach the last room: a kaleidoscopic cocoon of patterns and colors splashed across a congregation of every kind of porcelain vessel imaginable – cups, bowls, plates, and vases of all sizes. I've never seen so much porcelain in my life.

Sitting at a low table in the center of the room, a translator is waiting, along with a younger man who hands me a printed curriculum vitae with Kano Shokoku written at the top. It lays out an astounding list of awards and work in public collections including in the National Museum of Modern Art, Kyoto; Kyoto City Kyocera Museum of Art; and the Kyushu Ceramic Museum. I realize the man I assumed was a florist is the master ceramicist himself. This nationally renowned, decorated artist will be teaching me how to make a pinch pot.



Master Shokoku hands me a dish with a plum and pine leaf motif, its glaze gray and crackled. My fingers tremble when he tells me the dish I am holding was made over 400 years ago. He lays out other artifacts, introducing various Edo-period pottery styles and the work of Kenzan Ogata, whose brother Kōrin is credited with founding the Rinpa school over 300 years ago. I will hear their names often in the following days, coming to recognize the traditional and modern references to their work throughout the city. Master Shokoku then places a newer, but almost identical, plate next to the first dish. “My creation,” he says. He lights up while explaining that his clay is prepared using earth from the grounds where his pieces will live. It dawns on me that all the clay I have ever touched has come from a box or a bag. Although I know where clay comes from, I haven’t, until this moment, connected clay with being *of the earth*.

Grinning, he brings me a folded newspaper that he unwraps to reveal brilliant green powder he has ground from a chunk of malachite. The translator leans over and tells me that most artists do only one thing — make the clay, or make the mold, or mix the paint pigments, or do the painting, but, she says, “Kano, he does everything, all of it, himself.” To become a master writer in the way he is a master porcelain artist, I would need to make my own paper, sculpt my own pens and pencils, and learn bookbinding.

Master Shokoku lays out 12 of his teacups and says, “Japanese people are very shy. I like to make pieces that break the ice and invite conversation between guests.” On each of his teacups is a design that portrays a month of the year. Shokoku explains that, when he pours tea for guests, he likes to serve each person’s tea in a cup either related to their birthday or to an important date for them.



Master ceramicist Kano Shokoku, pictured here in his studio, has works displayed in public collections around Kyoto.

A younger man, Master Shokoku’s son Tomoo, enters the room with a plastic bag of clay and works the clay in his hands. Master Shokoku then shows me a technique for creating a long coil of clay that will wind up around the base to form the bowl. It looks so easy, but my coil flattens in my clumsy palms. I remember making a pinch pot in kindergarten and having no feeling whatsoever about whether it was “good.” Now, here I am all grown up with an ego, looking at the beautiful pieces surrounding me and trying too hard. How much pressure to place on the clay between my fingers? What direction to push it into the base while smoothing out the seams? At this

point, I don’t really want to make a bowl. I’d rather look through all of Master Shokoku’s creations and learn more about him. I start laughing at myself. I don’t want him to catch on to my internal meltdown, so I ask Master Shokoku about the flowers in the entryway. His son answers that Master Shokoku’s wife, Tomoo’s mother, passed away a few weeks earlier. Shokoku points to the apron on my lap, “My wife made that,” he says. Then he sits beside me and fixes my flat coil, rolling it perfectly with his hands. He works slowly and with focus, his breathing calm, as he pinches it into a shape. He encourages me to try again without aiming to make it perfect, adding that it should look handmade, that what my hands produce will be unique and beautiful. With this, I relax, and somehow end up creating a shallow dish with the help of the master’s hands.

Broken Porcelain Repair

I don't like it when things break, especially sentimental things: my high school Levi's, my favorite coffee cup. And I feel bad when my clumsiness banishes objects to a landfill. So, when I first heard of *kintsugi*, the art of repairing broken pottery, I loved that it metaphorically gave me permission to hang on to my broken things with a sustainable solution. At the suggestion of Nico Black, the manager of the [Ace Hotel in Kyoto](#), I registered for a kintsugi workshop at Pieces of Japan Studio and packed into my suitcase a tiny, broken ceramic salt bowl made by a friend and my flame-colored Le Creuset French press with its broken handle.

POJ Studio was founded by Tina Koyama and Hana Tsukamoto to preserve specialized Japanese arts and craftsmanship and is housed in a 100-year-old Kyoto-style *machiya*, a traditional wooden townhouse, tucked at the end of a narrow lane. Kintsugi originated in the fifteenth century using *urushi*, a poisonous tree sap that seals cracks by growing harder and more resilient with time, rendering any restored object stronger than it was before being broken. The application of gold, silver, or platinum, to coat the urushi once the repair is complete, effectively celebrates the cracks, chips, and breaks.



Porcelain repair, or kintsugi, involves diagramming the pot's fracture points, painting over them with a poisonous tree sap, and then sealing them in gold. The resulting pot is stronger than before it was broken.

Momoko Nakamura walks us through diagnosing and diagramming my and my fellow attendees' damaged wares. We feel the edges of our broken pieces and sketch their breaks, chips, and cracks in our notebooks. Next, she gives us 5-millimeter-wide *washi* tape, a decorative adhesive similar to masking tape, to secure the pieces back together. Wrapping the washi tape around the break sites requires the patience and soft touch one would use to put a bandage on a child's boo-boo. Handling a delicate, broken object, I am amazed at the tenderness that pours out of me. It is emotional. The attention I give makes me feel useful, effective. I have a level of calm that

doesn't come as naturally when I am tending to my own broken places, but put me in a hospital ward for porcelain and I guess I have a healing hand.

I expect to emerge from the workshop with my handle sealed in gold, my salt bowl functional again, but healing takes time. While I complete the initial steps to repair my pieces — mixing and applying the first coat of urushi paste — my pieces will remain at POJ for a few weeks, then will be shipped to me along with a kit and instructions to finish their repair, a process which can take weeks or months.

It makes me think of my own body, particularly the damage I experienced during an emergency surgery last year. While my body healed from the incisions, I hate seeing those scars. In repairing my ceramics, I see an opening in misfortune for transformation. I notice that I don't look for what those pieces were before they were broken; I see them in their present state. Maybe it's possible to stop wishing I could return to pre-accident me, and instead embrace the present version of myself. The one where time and care redefine the cracks, affirm my existence and leave me somehow more resilient.

Papermaking

I check in at my next hotel, The Ritz-Carlton, Kyoto, where I booked a *Kyo-karakami* workshop. Kyo karakami is a type of paper that is hand-printed using patterns carved into magnolia woodblocks. Prized by the aristocracy, karakami was originally used for printing poems, then for designs on *fusuma* (opaque sliding doors) and *shoji* (paper sliding doors). I noticed Kyo karakami throughout Kyoto, in traditional temples and modern interiors alike.

At the Maruni showroom and studio for my workshop, I learn that the pigments karakami artists use don't come from a tube of paint, but from combining *funori*, a glue made from dried and boiled seaweed, with either mica (for a pearly finish) or *gofun*, made from ground shells (for a matte finish). I'm offered a selection of blocks to print postcard-sized paper, then invited upstairs to try making a larger one using one of the screen-sized panels. For woodblocks, I'm given the *sakura* — cherry blossom — and the dragon, which is my Japanese zodiac sign. Making a complete print requires two rounds of color application. Here is where human error comes in: If the paper is not held in place while applying the second round, the pattern will blur. Making one section of one sheet with precision was challenging enough for me, but the measuring and perfect positioning required to print an entire screen — 12 times the size of my single sheet, with 24 total prints — seemed like a herculean task. Still, the process fills me with delight: Handling these hand-carved pieces of wood, printing with them, and thinking of all the screens they made over two centuries is mesmerizing.



Kyo-Karakami is a printing method that uses hand-carved magnolia wood blocks to make traditional patterns passed down from ancient times. ..⁷

Throughout Kyoto I saw beautiful, thoughtful visual expressions of history, the seasons, and nature. The sakura blossoms in peak bloom star in their seasonal show. Even on a weekday, it seemed like the whole city was outside, drinking among the trees, celebrating spring with friends, family, children, food, and wine. I still had a couple of days before heading home but wasn't ready to leave this party. I wanted to practice the things I was learning, learn more, stop, savor, repeat. Time was the elusive ingredient. While I could have visited one of the 2,000 temples in Kyoto or any of its many art museums, I ended up under my own cherry-blossom tree, petals falling, watching children chase a pink kite along the Kamo River. A crane strutted past me, stopped, turned, and looked me right in the eye as if to say, *Snap out of it; look where you are!* I called an expat friend in Tokyo, who laughed at this "problem" I was having. "You're having a moment of *mono no aware*," he said. "Feeling the bittersweetness of how temporary everything is. The ephemeral nature of joy." As Kyoto showed me at every turn, time — slow, at the speed of one's hands — is the key to mastery. ●