

***Yūri-kinsai* Underglaze Gold Leaf**

Yūri-kinsai is a relatively new underglaze technique for ceramics in which designs are created with pieces of cut gold leaf and gold paint. It was designated an Important Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2001.

Gold has long been used to decorate ceramics. Overglaze gold paint (applied after firing) was used in China as far back as the Song dynasty (960–1279). Examples imported to Japan in the seventeenth century led potters in Arita (in what is now Saga Prefecture) and Kutani (in present-day Ishikawa Prefecture) to incorporate gold paint into their designs. Over time, the practice evolved to use gold foil, instead, in a technique called *kinrande*, or “gold brocade.”

Gold has a tendency to melt or distort at the high temperatures most ceramic glazes require for proper vitrification. That is why gold decoration like *kinrande* is usually an overglaze technique, applied as the final step and sealed with a lower-temperature firing. However, this means the gold remains near the surface and is prone to wearing off over time.

In the early 1960s, Ishikawa potter Takeda Aritsune (1888–1976) developed a new technique called *yūri-kinsai*. It involves sandwiching the gold leaf between two layers of transparent, low-temperature glaze; this protects the gold from damage and gives it a softer sheen.

The *yūri-kinsai* process begins with a ceramic vessel fired with a high-temperature glaze. Then, the artist draws the design on tracing paper, figuring out how best to cut the necessary pieces from gold foil sheets measuring roughly 11 square centimeters. Each piece is given a number corresponding to a place in the design. The delicate gold leaf, usually around 1/10,000 of a millimeter thick, is placed between two thick sheets of paper onto which the design has been copied. The pieces are then cut out by hand. More complex works may require hundreds of small shapes. Next, the artist prepares the ceramic for application, dabbing on a thin layer of low-temperature glaze as adhesive and transferring the pattern from the tracing paper. The tiny pieces of gold leaf are applied one by one using tweezers. Even a stray breath can be enough to damage the fragile material, so the process requires the utmost care and concentration.

Once the gold leaf has been applied, details can be added with gold paint or powder and by scratching lines through the gold with a needlelike tool. After drying the design, the artist paints the surface with a transparent low-temperature glaze, taking care not to displace any of the gold pieces, and sends it to a final firing.

Artists can achieve varied expressions with *yūri-kinsai* by using silver and platinum leaf, by overlapping sections of leaf, or by using gold leaf of varying thickness to create different textures and opacities.

Another Ishikawa artist associated with the *yūri-kinsai* technique is Yoshita Minori (1932–), who was designated a Holder of Important Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2001.