

# “There Is Nothing so Whole as a Broken Heart” Reflections on “The Practice of Repairing Vessels in Ancient Egypt” (NEA 79.4 [2016]) by Julia Hsieh

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While reading Julia Hsieh’s (2016) short but very nice piece on how vessels were repaired in ancient Egypt, the famous saying of the Hassidic Rabbi, Menachem Mendel of Kotzk, most often known as the Kotzker Rebbe (1787–1859 C.E.; see Fox 1988), “There is nothing so whole as a broken heart,” came to my mind.

As Hsieh aptly demonstrated, the practice of repairing vessels, using several techniques, was well-known in ancient Egypt, during many periods. While she did not mention this, it should be stressed that similar methods of mending pottery vessels are known from many cultures, both from those more familiar to the readers of *NEA*, such as in the Bronze and Iron Age southern Levant (e.g., Ziffer 1990: 40\*–41\*; Artzy and Beeri 2005: 1; Daviau 2016), as well as from many other further afield (e.g., South 1968; Williams 1988; Cook 1997: 240; Young and NAGRANT 2004; Rotroff 2011; Bilde and Handberg 2012).

The reason that I decided to write this brief note was not to bring additional parallels to the custom of repairing pottery vessels in sundry ancient societies, but rather to provide an additional perspective, and perchance, in certain cases, a possible explanation, for the ancient custom of pottery mending.

Hsieh and most other scholars explain the custom of the ancient mending of pottery as being related to several possible reasons: (1) the personal, emotional value of the broken vessel to its user; (2) the vessel’s retail value, and; (3) the socio-economic level of the owner. In all these cases, once mended the repaired vessel, while still used, is of lesser value than the unbroken original state, at least from an economic point of view. Or, in modern terms, the repaired pottery is related to as a “second.”

I wonder though whether this is always the case. The Kotzker Rebbe’s adage hints at the direction that I am going; in short, I believe support for the valuing of repaired

vessels can be found in a type of mending of pottery known from ancient Japan, known as *kintsugi* (“golden joinery”) or *kintsukuroi* (“golden repair”; see Hammill 2006; Bartlett 2008). In this method, broken pottery vessels are mended, but the joins are accentuated with a gold, silver or platinum colored lacquer. Accordingly, the repair is not hidden or regarded as being less aesthetically attractive; rather, the repair is seen as an integral part of the object’s life history. In this view, breakage—and repair—are part of the normal life cycle of an object. Moreover, the enhancement brought about by the refined mending is even seen, to a certain extent, as an improvement to the original object.

And here, the Kotzker Rebbe’s adage—“There is nothing so whole as a broken heart”—fits in so well!

Without a doubt, this explanation is not relevant in all (and in fact, in most) cases of mended pottery from antiquity. That said, I believe that this perspective, clearly documented from ancient Japan, should at least be kept in mind when scholars deal with the reasoning behind the repair of vessels in ancient societies.



A bowl mended using the *kintsugi* method. Image from Wikimedia Commons.

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