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The Shifting Cultural Journey of Japanese Ceramics

Posted on **November 25, 2020** (<https://artswestchester.org/art-matters/the-shifting-cultural-journey-of-japanese-ceramics/>) by **Leigh Taylor Mickelson** (<https://artswestchester.org/profile/ltmickelson/>)



SHINGŪ SAYAKA (b. 1979) *Erosion*, 2014 Colored stoneware 7.8 x 16.5 x 14.3 inches © Shingū Sakaya, photograph by Yuko Weiner, courtesy Dai Ichi Arts

Rooted in rich traditions, yet freed from political constraints, the artists in Katonah Museum of Art (KMA)'s *Hands & Earth: Perspectives on Japanese Contemporary Ceramics* exhibition represent a wide range of innovation. On view through January 24, 2021, the show features 41 pieces of contemporary Japanese ceramics drawn from one of the largest and most prestigious private collections of modern and contemporary Japanese ceramics outside of Japan – the Carol and Jeffrey Horvitz Collection. Collected over a period of ten-to-fifteen years from galleries and artists around the world, the gathering of objects in this exhibition reveals not only the breadth and depth of what clay can do, but it also shines a light on the shifting cultural journey that Japanese ceramic artists have taken over the past seventy years.

Though the exhibition spans seven decades and shows a huge diversity of form, color, surface and content, it is the thread of a common culture and history that connects all of the works. This strong thread makes the fact that the exhibition is separated into four sections hard to see at first. The transitions are seamless. In the right-hand gallery, KMA's Assistant Curator of Exhibitions and Programs, Emily Handlin, made a bold move and placed the most contrasting groups of objects together: "On the Shoulders of Giants" showcases all the functional *mingei* and pre-21st century ceramics, while "Non-Traditional Forms" features the most recent and innovative sculptures. The similar color palettes and a consistent reference to nature is what makes the works belong together in the same room.

The mengei movement of the 1920s and '30s is considered to have “set the stage for the modern era” in Japanese ceramics. Artists of this era revitalized ceramic traditions that were on the verge of extinction. A giant in this movement, Hamada Shōji, whose unassuming though glorious iron-glazed jar sits quietly amongst other early functional vessels in the exhibition, attained unsurpassed recognition at home and abroad for his simple approach to functional ceramics. Hamada influenced hundreds of Western potters and his legacy continues to do so today.

Andrew Maske, Associate Professor of Art History at the University of Kentucky, declares in his *Hands & Earth* catalog essay that “the end of World War II truly marks the beginning of contemporary ceramics in Japan.” Newly exposed to influences from around the world, Japanese artists felt they had the freedom to think and work differently. We see evidence of this in the “Non-Traditional Forms” section of the exhibition. The wall text reads: “Unconstrained by tradition or the need to balance form and function, artists working today view clay as a radical medium for experimentation and expression.” Five of the ten artists in this group happen to be women, who had been largely excluded from the history of ceramics in Japan until recently. Futamura Yoshimi’s *Big Birth*, a large stoneware sculpture with porcelain slip, reigns in the room and brings to mind a mighty tree that is about to bring forth some form of life, while also unveiling the primal properties of the material itself. That strength and earthiness is contrasted by the delicacy of Shingu Sayaka’s flower sculpture, which is so intricate that it is hard to believe it is made of a material that is dug from the earth.

In the left-hand gallery is “Modern Interpretations of Traditional Regional Ceramics,” which includes functional vessels by craftsmen who are working today but still use traditional methods and materials. In this section are the crusty yet undeniably beautiful wood-fired works that revel in the imperfect and the unpredictability of the material, often described by the Japanese aesthetic *wabi-sabi*.

Then, *Modern Uses of Traditional Glazes* features artists who create non-functional, sculptural work with interesting, modern forms but use traditional glazes like celadon. One of the most exquisite works in the exhibition is by the youngest artist. Born in 1987, Kino Satoshi’s *Fall Wind-Eye*, a celadon-glazed porcelain feat that defies gravity, sits nearby Yagi Akira’s celadon nesting bowls, which are technically functional, but the smallest bowl holds less than a teaspoon. One sculptural, the other functional; both are a study of precision and abstraction rooted in Japanese tradition and aesthetic.

As a whole, *Hands & Clay* uncovers the breadth of what is happening in contemporary ceramics in Japan. It helps its viewers to understand a place in which clay has been rooted in the culture for generations, revered for what it is today and always has been – a marvel.



HAMADA SHŌJI (1894-1978) Untitled, ca. 1960 Amber iron-glazed stoneware 11.25 x 11 inches © Hamada Shōji, photograph by Richard Goodbody, courtesy Joan B. Mirviss

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A version of this article first appeared in the July issue of ArtsNews, ArtsWestchester's monthly publication. ArtsNews is distributed throughout Westchester County. A digital copy is also available at artsw.org/artsnews (<https://artswestchester.org/news/arts-news/>).

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