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OCTOBER 2010 £3.95

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THE INTERNATIONAL MAGAZINE FOR COLLECTORS

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OCTOBER 2010



COLLECTORS' FOCUS: JAPANESE CERAMICS

Japanese porcelain with good provenance offers a prime area for collectors, while the market for contemporary Japanese ceramics is heating up.

Abby Cronin, Monday, 4th October 2010

In the 1650s the Dutch East India Company began to import vast quantities of Japanese porcelain to satisfy the tastes of the European market. Mantlepieces and shelves of royal palaces and aristocratic stately homes were adorned with Japanese porcelains: blue-and-white wares, Kakiemon, Imari and other designs. The taste for displaying and collecting Japanese milky-white translucent vases, plates, teapots and condiment dishes has endured from the mid-17th century to the present.

Throughout most of the 20th century, collectors, dealers and museums continued to prize the Japanese ceramic aesthetic and the market was buoyant. Mark Hinton, Christie's Japanese art

specialist, points to the exhibition 'Porcelain for Palaces' held in 1990 in the British Museum's new Japanese galleries: 'The exhibition gave a very good idea of what the whole of the export market is about, from the first stages right through to the use of design by European ceramics factories'. The show contained Edo-period ceramics from all of the major collections in Europe, and stimulated interest among collectors in America, Europe and Japan. But prices dived in the early 1990s when the economic bubble burst in Japan, and Japanese collectors that had sought to repatriate their heritage decreased within the market.

Today the demand for porcelain is the weakest sector in the market for Japanese art, with prices for standard examples of export porcelain, such as Arita and Imari, now fetching around half of their value before the Japanese recession. Suzannah Yip of Bonhams, London, says, 'Japanese porcelain is seriously undervalued and in my opinion presents a good buying opportunity. That said, attractively pitched estimates of private pieces with a provenance will nonetheless still ensure buyers.' In November 2009 Bonhams sold a group of Kakiemon porcelain vessels from a European private aristocratic collection for £132,000. In May this year, also at Bonhams, a large, rare and unusual Nabeshima dish, dated around 1690–1769, sold for £180,000 against an estimate of £100,000–£150,000 (Fig. 2). In the same sale, a small and charming Nabeshima wine cup comfortably exceeded its estimate to sell for £36,000. Commenting on the sales Ms Yip says, 'These would have made at least 30% more during the bubble era of Japan. Japanese-taste porcelain such as Ko-Kutani ware and Nabeshima still remain the most sought after and are hotly contested by European, American and Japanese collectors alike.'

The importance of provenance was reflected in Christie's Spencer House Sale in London this July. Two lots handsomely exceeded their estimates. A Japanese Imari lacquered garniture from the Edo period (late 17th century), comprising three oviform vases with domed covers and two trumpet vases, sold for a robust £109,250 against an estimate of £50,000–£80,000 (Fig. 4). The second lot, a rare Japanese Kakiemon porcelain bowl – again from the Edo period (late 17th to early 18th century) – more than doubled its estimate to sell for £11,250 against an estimate of £3,000–£5,000. Both items are thought to have been part of the celebrated but little-known collections of Sarah Jennings, 1st Duchess of Marlborough (1660–1744).

Contemporary Japanese ceramics form a growing core of the market. An important exhibition, mainly from the collection of New Yorkers Halsey and Alice North, curated by Joe Earle for the Boston Museum of Fine Arts in 2005, aptly demonstrated the aesthetic which is attracting collectors, and is an example of the increasing scholarship in English that is fuelling Western demand. Wahei Aoyama, director of the Yufuku Gallery in Tokyo, is a major player in this field. Mr

Aoyama describes these works as ‘sculptural...or ceramics that are freed from the constrictions imposed by functionality. These are the most sought after in the current global market. The domestic market [in Japan] is primarily functional due to Japan’s affinity towards the traditional tea ceremony.’

For the last three years the Yufuku Gallery has brought examples of contemporary Japanese ceramicists to COLLECT, the London-based event for contemporary craft. This year all their stock was sold, with particular demand for the work of Mihara Ken and Shigekazu Nagae, both of whom have held sell-out solo shows in New York in recent years. Prices span £4,000 for a small Mihara to £50,000 for a large sculpture by Fukami Sueharu. As Apollo went to press, collectors’ eyes were focused on a porcelain sculpture by Sueharu, estimated at \$20,000–\$30,000, in Christie’s sale in New York on 15 September (Fig. 3).

At this year’s COLLECT the Victoria & Albert Museum bought Large Leaves Bowl by Hitomi Hosono, an up-and-coming young ceramicist working in London, from Adrian Sassoon for £4,000 (Fig. 1). The piece will soon go on show in the museum’s Japanese galleries. Kondō Takahiro’s Mist Series was sold by the Scottish Gallery (prices range from £2,350–£9,550). **Joan Mirviss, a New York-based dealer with over 30 years experience, regards Takahiro as one of the top three Japanese ceramicists working today (prices range from £2,350–£10,500), as well as Akiyama Yō and Fukami Sueharu. Commenting on the market for contemporary Japanese ceramics, Ms Mirviss says, ‘Many people in this field have a sophisticated approach to collecting. They are not first-time collectors. I have a number of clients who are actually selling their Western ceramics to buy Japanese ceramics’.**

Asian Art in London celebrates its 13th year next month (4–13 November; see pages 28–29), at which collectors will have plenty of opportunity to find examples of Japanese porcelain. On 10 November, Christie’s hold their Japanese Art & Design sale which includes a collection of blue and white porcelain which has come back to London from a museum in Osaka. Elsewhere Bonhams Fine Japanese Art auction takes place on 11 November. Galerie Besson present an exhibition of Mihara Ken’s ceramics and Shihoko Fukumoto’s textiles, imported by the gallerist Katie Jones, from 13 October to 13 November. Prices for the ceramics range from £3,000–£8,000.

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