

Object art

A ceramic love affair dating back to the 19th century

The current craft boom in the West coincides with a surge in Japan

Ever since the 19th-century English designer Christopher Dresser picked up a deliberately rough Japanese tea bowl and wrote in ecstasy about the beauty of its texture compared with the sleek industrial finish of Western ceramics, there has been some understanding in the West of Japanese ceramics. This is growing now, fuelled in part by the strong market for sculptural ceramics ("craft" is a word best avoided) in the US and Europe. *The Art Newspaper* talked to the New York dealer Joan B. Mirviss, who began by dealing in the 1970s in Japanese antiques, but quickly branched out into contemporary Japanese ceramics.

The Art Newspaper: What is it that makes you think Japanese ceramics are outstanding?

Joan B. Mirviss: I believe the contemporary ceramic world in Japan is top of the field on the global stage. Japanese artists are the most highly trained, the most broad-minded, the most independent, while being grounded in tradition. They are able to carry hundreds of years of tradition yet reinterpret those traditional aesthetics into unique visions of their own by challenging themselves year after year. I really don't see any depth or range or brilliance in this field in any other culture besides Japan at this point in time. You have over 10,000 clay artists there making a living and having solo shows at museums and galleries. Put the rest of the world together, and you don't have 10,000 artists working in clay and making a living.

TAN: Are there so many artists because there is more interest in the work?

JM: It's definitely a bigger industry. There are more people buying the material. If you're having a major event in your family, or your temple is having a major ceremony, you commission an artist to make new vessels. Or for a New Year's party, you as the host might get new dishes to celebrate that occasion. There is no feeling in Japan that all dishes have to be by the same artist in the same pattern or colour as in the West, when a bride registers at Harrods or Liberty and gets her china. People will constantly add and mix and match sets and they're by totally different artists

with different glazes and different aesthetics. Ceramics have been a treasured medium forever in Japan. You have a whole wing of the Tokyo National Museum that focuses on clay.

TAN: Why has it been able to survive?

JM: It's affordable but it's also functional. The art itself is compelling. In the last ten to 15 years, there has been the slow growth of the market in Japan whose focus is contemporary clay. Now, in places where there are traditional ceramic centres that trace their roots back 500 years, there are museums devoted to the contemporary scene: one in Hajime, one in Mino where Oribe ware is made, and now they are building a new contemporary ceramic museum in Hagi. So there's a big movement in Japan to enable living artists to have museum recognition, as makers not just of functional vessels but works of art. And artists are starting to look at their own production in this way too.

TAN: What about lacquer?

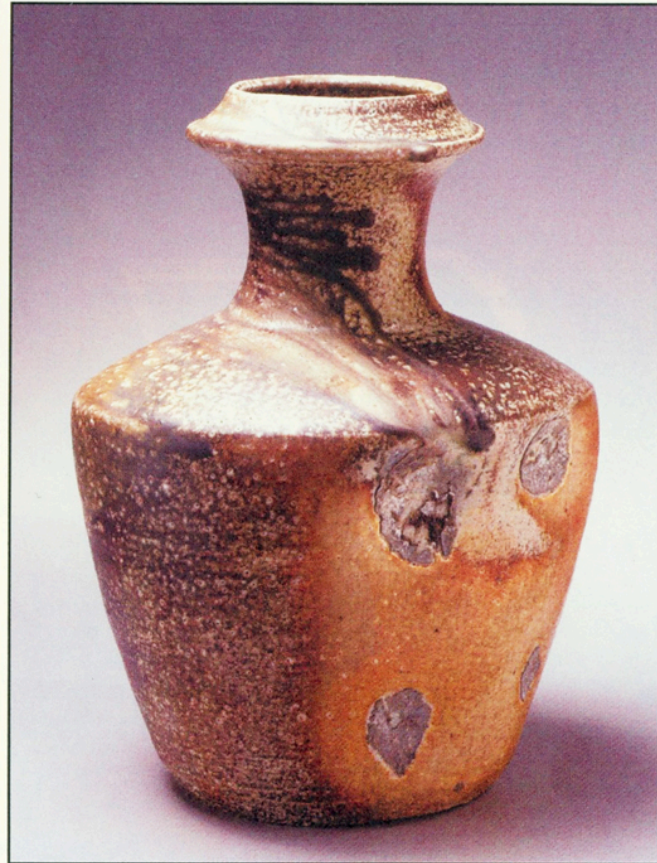
JM: It's very painstaking and a dangerous process. Not many young artists are going into that field. They're having a hard time finding rising young stars in that field.

TAN: Do you think works with such slow processes are at risk commercially?

JM: I think they are, because with the cost of living and materials the end product becomes very expensive. The same is true with metalworkers. In Japan, when you go to a craft show, by far the largest representation is by clay artists. Year after



Joan B. Mirviss



COURTESY JOAN B. MIRVISS GALLERY

year it seems to me that the basket makers and the lacquer artists and metal workers are becoming fewer and the prices for their goods are much higher because the process is so time consuming. Some of my artists actually use techniques that are equally time-consuming, but they support themselves by making other types of work that can be commercially released. ■

Interview by Helen Stoilas

Shimaoka Tatsuzo (b.1919), stoneware vase with natural ash glaze, 1987

Where to see contemporary Japanese objects

In Japan, the **Mitsukoshi** department store has been celebrating its centenary this year with shows of works by Living National Treasures, the craftspeople awarded this accolade for their mastery of a traditional craft. The **Victoria & Albert Museum** is making a point of collecting contemporary Japanese craft, while the **Metropolitan Museum** has just entered the field. **The British Museum** is currently showing an exhibition of Japanese craft put together by the Sainsbury Institute for the Study of Japanese Arts and Culture.

Anita Besson Gallery, London

Specialises in one-person ceramic shows by international artists. An exhibition of the Japanese artist, Shozo Michikawa, has just ended.

Katie Jones, London

Has been dealing in Japanese art for 25 years. Travels to Japan to find the ceramics, glass, metalwork, fibre art, ceramics and lacquer in which she now trades. By appointment.

Lesley Craze Gallery, London

Deals in contemporary jewellery, including pieces by Japanese artists.

Tai Gallery/Textile Arts, Santa Fe

Represents over 30 Japanese bamboo artists. There is a strong market for bamboo baskets in the US, and the Asian Art Museum, San Francisco, was recently given an outstanding collection of Japanese baskets by Lloyd Cotsen.

Joan B. Mirviss Gallery, New York

Has been dealing in Japanese antiques and contemporary ceramics for 30 years. From being a private dealer, she has just opened a gallery.

Lesley Kehoe Galleries, Melbourne

Specialises in Japanese screens, ceramics, jewellery, metalwork, works on paper and glass.