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The French Connection: Five Japanese women ceramists and their passion for France at Joan B. Mirviss Ltd.



Nagasawa Setsuko, Cylidrcal geometric form, 2008. Smoke-infused orange and terra-cotta clays, 8 7/8 x 8 7/8 x 17 1/4 inches. Courtesy of Joan B Mirviss, Ltd., NY. Photo: Alexëi Vassiliev.



NEW YORK, NY.- This exhibition titled *The French Connection: Five Japanese Women Ceramists and their Passion for France*, explores the dramatically increasing importance of Japanese women artists in the current ascendancy of contemporary Japanese ceramics on a global stage and focuses on how their relationships to France have influenced, and indeed enabled, the five show-cased artists to find their unique voices. Stifled at one time or another by Japan's restrictive view in the role of women and the lack of freedom with regard to their career choices, especially in the arena of ceramics, these committed female artists have successfully overturned such limitations by choosing to train/study/work/live abroad, particularly in Paris. Maintaining professional and personal contacts with both countries, they have managed to succeed in ways unavailable to their male colleagues. These women have come to this life-style via varied routes, some working exclusively in France while others have studios in both countries and still another works exclusively in Kyoto after years in Limoges. Spanning two generations, these five women reflect the changes occurring both in Japan and in the field internationally. But all are clearly pioneers especially when in viewed from an historical perspective.

Women have traditionally played only a minor role in Japan's long history in clay. Many male ceramists, particularly eldest sons, begin their ceramic education at a young age at the knee of their father as the next in a long line of potters working in a particular tradition. Until quite recently, this line of succession was unavailable to women. In part this has been due to the view that ceramics are the embodiment of the quasi-religious Asian belief in the

five fundamental elements of life: water, earth, metal, wood and fire. Since women were long considered to be impure, they were not permitted to even touch a kiln. Hence over the past few centuries, their role fell to that of organizer and administrator of her husbands' or fathers' studios— very distant from the art of creation.

Only with the post-war generation did women begin to challenge these circumscribed roles and social barriers to emerge as independent artists. In fact, nowhere in the field of Japanese art has there been as dramatic a change as the recent shift actually in favor of Japanese women ceramists in this historically male-dominated field. Emerging from centuries of obscurity and isolation, the female masters of clay are challenging the supremacy of their male contemporaries as luminaries and independent creative talents.

Given the formality within the ceramic tradition in Japan, the relative openness pervasive in the French art world and its lack of gender bias held the allure of freedom for many Japanese women artists. Of the five Japanese women participating in this show, each has emerged from a distinct background and they have traveled diverse roads through their training and artistic development, often eschewing by choice or necessity the more traditional routes open to their male counterparts. Each sought to make France a major central component in her artistic evolution and life, where she sought fair and open training that has ultimately led to international recognition.

These five women are masters of their medium. Perhaps because they are women artists in the overtly masculine world of Japanese clay, they are able to shed the particularly heavy mantle of tradition and explore the art of clay in startling new and independent ways, with a special eloquence and strength, dramatically and uniquely their own. These women are not merely confronting tradition but are rather seeking to expose the very nature of clay, exploiting its flexibility and suppleness in arresting ways. Some flaunt the limitations of their medium and see it as a challenge while others defy it altogether. As a result, they are at the vanguard of the development of Japanese ceramics in what is certainly one of the richest and most diverse periods in its long history.

These groundbreaking ceramists whose works are featured in this exhibition stand on the world stage, with their work entering major museum collections across the globe.

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