

## Antiques

Wendy Moonan

### Optimistic Dealer Decides to Gamble On Japanese Art

Joan B. Mirviss calls herself a contrarian. So perhaps it is not surprising that she has just opened a gallery in Manhattan, even as rising rents increasingly cause antiques dealers to close their shops and sell privately.

For the last 30 years Ms. Mirviss has been a pioneering dealer in Japanese fine art and antiques. She has also been the curator of several museum exhibitions on Japanese art, including one in 1995 at the Phoenix Art Museum showing Frank Lloyd Wright's collection of surimono, privately published woodblock prints.

Her new gallery, Joan B. Mirviss Ltd., at 39 East 78th Street, will sell antique Japanese screens, woodblock prints, hanging scrolls, bronzes, baskets and contemporary ceramics. (The Metropolitan Museum of Art last year purchased four pieces of contemporary Japanese ceramic art from her.) The gallery's prices range from \$350 for a sake cup to \$200,000 for a painting.

"The Japanese ceramic field has grown so exponentially, I needed to do more than I could do at fairs at the Armory," said Ms. Mirviss, who has a master's degree in Japanese art history from Columbia. "I like to do exhibitions."

The gallery's inaugural show includes 55 works of art, two-thirds of which are contemporary ceramics. A few of the artists, like Kawase Shinobu, Kondo Takahiro and Shimaoka Tatsuzo, are already represented in the collections of the Met and the Brooklyn Museum.

The most dramatic examples of painting on view adorn a pair of six-fold screens from the 19th century, each depicting larger-than-life peacocks in springtime (the cherry trees are in bloom and there are blossoming pink-and-white tree peonies).

Both screens have gold-leaf backgrounds. On one the regal male bird proudly perches on a gnarled, wind-bent tree trunk. A diagonal line, formed by the bird's iridescent turquoise-and-green body feathers and tail plumage, bisects the tree trunk.



JOAN B. MIRVISS

White chrysanthemums with fence by Kamisaka Sekka.

This X-shaped composition looks almost modern, it is so radical.

The paintings, dated 1826, are by Hara Zaichu, the founder of the Hara school of painting and an influential early-19th-century artist in Kyoto, Ms. Mirviss said.

The price for the pair is \$118,000. "It's museum quality and in perfect condition," she said. "Things like this were put in warehouses and left there. They were looked at infrequently. Wealthy families took them out only on special occasions."

On another wall is a two-fold screen depicting highly stylized white chrysanthemums against a gold silk background. Kamisaka Sekka, an early participant in Japan's modern art movement, painted the screen about 1910.

"Sekka was a painter and famous textile designer who came from a long line of textile designers," Ms. Mirviss said. "Typically chrysanthemums, imperial flowers associated with the month of September, are painted with a bamboo fence. Instead of painting the fence, Sekka designed a woven bamboo fence. It's a pun. He made the fabric the subject matter."

She said the screen, acquired

from a man in Kyoto whose grandfather had commissioned it, is "an exceptional example of Sekka's highly decorative style." Its price is \$75,000.

Nearby are two hanging paper scrolls made in the 1760s by Maruyama Okyo. Delicately drawn in ink and brush, they depict classic Chinese stereotypes, a tiger and a dragon. This dragon, however, unlike his prototype, is nonthreatening, while the tiger wears a beatific expression. "He's not fierce and snarly," Ms. Mirviss said. "He is feline."

The price for the two scrolls is \$87,000. Ms. Mirviss said the paintings were rare early examples of Okyo's art. "Okyo in his time was at the same level da Vinci was in his day," Ms. Mirviss said. "He changed the course of Japanese painting."

Ms. Mirviss is not the only Japanese-art dealer on the move in Manhattan. Koichi Yanagi Oriental Fine Arts, founded in 1991, will open his new space in mid-November at 17 East 71st Street with an exhibition of new acquisitions.

Scholten Japanese Art, at 145 East 58th Street, went private a few years ago but still organizes some public exhibitions, current-

ly "Chato: Ceramic Teaware" through Sept. 27. The gallery's director, Katherine Martin, organized the show, which focuses on tea ceremony ceramics from the Momoyama (1568-1615) and Edo periods (1615-1868), with another private dealer, Ryo Iida.

Erik Thomsen, at 224 East 83rd Street, is celebrating his first anniversary in New York with a show of contemporary and classic works, including screens, scrolls and lacquer boxes.

On Oct. 18 Mika Gallery, at 41 East 57th Street, will open an exhibition on kimonos. And kimonos will also be featured in a show of Japanese masterworks (Oct. 18-21) at the Ukrainian Institute, 2 East 79th Street. It is a collaborative effort by the Japanese Art Dealers Association, which includes the private dealers Sebastian Izzard and Leighton R. Longhi as well as Mika Gallery, Mr. Thomsen and Mr. Yanagi.

"Because all the great things are being sold more quietly and privately these days, we thought it was important to show the public there are some real masterworks out there that still can be bought," said Mr. Longhi, the president of the association. "This exhibition will be like a minimuseum show."

Ms. Mirviss decided to locate on the Upper East Side because "my collectors are up here," she said, adding, "My home is up here, and the museums are up here."

When it came to its design, she asked Jane Sachs, a potter turned architect at Hut Sachs Studio in New York, to create three spaces: a main gallery, a library office for the staff and a private office for her.

"Rather than imitating Japanese architectural language, the gallery reflects Japanese spatial concepts," Ms. Sachs said. The walls are lined with weathered barn board, the windows are frameless and the floor is recycled pine.

"I believe in recycling because of the art I sell," Ms. Mirviss said.

Before the construction was finished, Ms. Mirviss asked a feng shui expert to conduct a blessing ceremony. That may not be a common practice among dealers, but Ms. Mirviss goes her own way.