

An Interview with Joan B. Mirviss

On 17 September, Joan B. Mirviss, a well-known private dealer in Japanese art, is opening a gallery at 39 East 78th Street in New York. The inaugural exhibition of around 55 works, 'Views from the Past, Visions of the Future: Masterworks of Japanese Art', will be on view until 15 October. Displayed will be screens and paintings, many from old Japanese private collections, as well as woodblock prints and a range of ceramics, both from the second half of the 20th century and contemporary works created specifically for the show. On behalf of *Orientalism*, Margaret Tao interviewed Mirviss about the Japanese art field and her new gallery.

Margaret Tao: After 30 years as a private dealer, what prompted you to consider a public gallery when so many other dealers are 'going private'?

Joan B. Mirviss: My goal is to achieve broader accessibility to Japanese traditional art and contemporary clay art, with an eye towards diversification later. Particularly in the area of contemporary ceramics, existing collectors have increased their purchasing at an exponential rate, and they are now also being acquired by museums both in the US and Europe. In the last two months alone, I have managed to place the work of emerging women artists in two East Coast museums, but it still needs greater exposure. The ceramicists themselves have been encouraging me to open a gallery so as to have a good US venue that can exhibit their work in depth. I have maintained good relationships with many of them for decades, and feel a responsibility to move in this direction; if I don't, someone else will.

Over the past six years, I have presented solo exhibitions at SOFA and the IAAF; but the space is limited, the venues short-term, and they are only held once a year. I have also organized exhibitions at Barry Friedman, a leading dealer in New York of modern and contemporary art, but as ceramics are not his principal interest, they have been held only biennially. Now we will have the luxury of showing new talent and creating thoughtful, unusual thematic shows on a wide variety of subjects, perhaps combining antique and contemporary art, on a regular basis.

Another factor propelling the move is space. With three employees and a large dining room filled to the ceiling with boxes of ceramics, it is time to move. I had to double my staff to keep up with the demands of this burgeoning market, and Laura Mueller, a PhD candidate at the University of Wisconsin who has worked for me at fairs for the past four years, is now our gallery director; she will be focusing on Japanese paintings, screens and *ukiyo-e* prints, her speciality. I still plan on maintaining a showroom at home for private visits from long-standing clients.

MT: What are your views on the Japanese art market, particularly for contemporary ceramics?

JBM: While I have been selling contemporary ceramics since 1984, they have represented only about 10 per cent of annual sales during most of those years. However, over the past six years, that percentage has grown to nearly half my annual business in value and probably double in terms of volume. New collectors, both American



Joan B. Mirviss

and European, have been approaching us, especially through the Internet – as there are no issues with condition, authenticity or provenance with contemporary clay, this has become an irresistible resource as quality and taste can be perceived from photographs. People are purchasing ever more sophisticated pieces, in the five-figure range. Nevertheless, modern and contemporary Japanese ceramics is still one of the most affordable and accessible fields.

I believe the Japanese art market is now at a crossroads. Over the past decade, there have been much less significant works offered at auction. This unfortunate situation is also mirrored in the academic world in the New York area: there were no Japanese art historians at either

the Institute of Fine Arts of New York University or at Columbia University for about two years, and there have been no graduate students starting in the field at these universities. The trickle-down effect will have a lasting impact. The position of Gallery Director at the Japan Society was empty after Alexandra Munroe's departure for the Guggenheim, and more recently, Miyeko Murase retired from the Met. The Japanese curatorial and academic world in New York has been in complete flux. Some positions are now being filled, with the most welcome arrivals of Joe Earle at the Japan Society and Matthew McKelway at Columbia. The city does, however, have a strong contingent of serious dealers in Japanese art, with more than ten offering good-to-excellent material in a variety of areas. But curators, academics and dealers are all dependent on one another.

MT: How do you select the contemporary ceramicists you work with?

JBM: My aim is to enable people to look at art in areas with which they are unfamiliar, and to challenge them aesthetically. I feel I have a good overall picture of the field of modern ceramics – its history, its diversity and even its weaknesses. I go to Japan two to four times a year, and try to see as many of the large invitational competitions and group exhibitions as possible. Three years spent living there enabled me to learn how the artists are trained, supported, marketed and promoted. I not only cemented relations with long-established artists, but was also able to scout out new artists even in remote locales. I continue to search for someone whose work is fresh and has the potential to develop, or a seasoned artist doing something startling and compelling. I look for clay artists who are technically superb and well trained, whether at their father's knee or at a more formal ceramics institution. I am drawn to ceramicists

who are grounded in traditional Japanese aesthetics as well as techniques, and who are inspired and motivated to recast those traditions in a thoroughly modern and challenging mode. Potters who simply recreate old forms and masterfully produce new versions of established traditions are not of interest to me.

It often takes several visits to an artist's studio to see a wider selection of their current work, plus their earlier material, before I decide whether to introduce their art to the US. To make this sort of commitment, there has to be evidence that their talent will grow and the art mature as we work together.

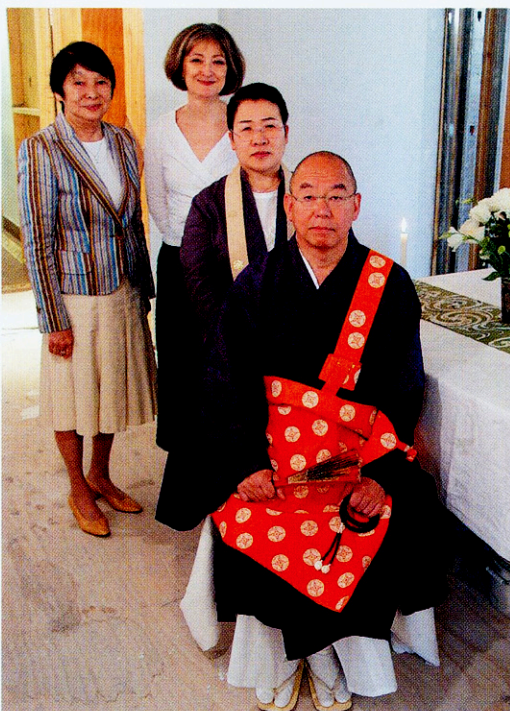
MT: Is there an interest among young collectors? Would you encourage them to look at art as an investment?

JBM: There is a high level of global interest in contemporary ceramics, fuelled by a stream of articles in publications such as *Art and Antiques*, *Veranda* and *Vogue Italia*, plus important exhibitions around the world. This has stimulated interest among new young collectors in Japan, who are increasingly looking to non-functional, sculptural forms.

I never use the word 'invest' – I encourage people to buy what they love. They should look at the best within the oeuvre of a particular artist. Some of my oldest clients remain passionate about what they have acquired and continue to collect. They typically choose to sell merely to upgrade.

MT: Do you believe Japanese art is undervalued?

JBM: Yes, without a doubt. For example, a superb painting in fine condition by Maruyama Ōkyo, a tremendously influential late 18th century artist, can be acquired for under US\$100,000. *Ukiyo-e* woodblock prints are probably the most widely collected area of Japanese art, and yet they have weathered ups and downs in the market through the years. Despite the international demand, there are



From left: Miyeko Murase, Joan Mirviss, Sekiguchi Keika and Sekiguchi Wakō, abbot of Rinnō-ji Temple, Nikkō, at the blessing ceremony held at the construction site of the Joan B. Mirviss gallery, 25 July

several areas that are remarkably overlooked by current collectors, most prominently, prints from the late 18th century by celebrated artists such as Utamaro and Sharaku. But it is essential that the collector search out the finest impressions that are in the best condition possible.

In contemporary ceramics, there are so many excellent artists of different ages, and so many exhibitions throughout Japan every year, that the prices are fixed and regulated by the market. There is an established price for each artist based on their training, age, skill, how much they have exhibited and where, and what prizes they have won. It is possible for me to attend an exhibition of a ceramicist whose work I have not seen before, and after reading the biography, guess the prices within 10 per cent. I strive to keep my prices as close to those in Japan as possible, despite additional transportation expenses. For quality, power, sophistication and impact, this very affordable art

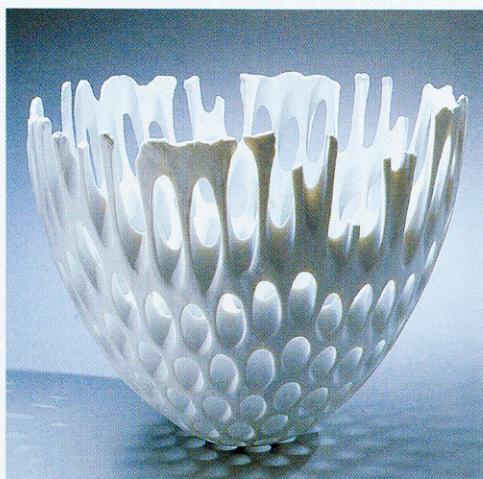
form is increasingly attractive for young collectors as well as museums, especially those with limited resources.

MT: Do you think museums can do more to inspire new collectors?

JBM: I have worked with many museums that are building collections, often in conjunction with their patrons. By displaying these works, they are inspiring new collectors, particularly in the field of contemporary ceramics. Even institutions as important as the Met collect in this area, rotating their display.

MT: As a long-time participant in the IAAF, can you discuss changes there and how they reflect current trends? How do you see the future of the fair and the profile of Asia Week in New York?

JBM: As an original participant and co-chairman of the vetting committee for several years, I have witnessed many changes at the fair. Clearly, the roster of dealers has gone through numerous dramatic shifts, presently towards a far stronger presence of contemporary art and, I believe, a greater representation of Japanese art, mostly from the 19th and 20th centuries, corresponding to a diminishing number of specialists in antique Chinese art. Current market factors and politics explain much of that. In my case, our show at the fair last year was the most successful ever! For Asia Week 2008, I am planning three shows simultaneously: at the Barry Friedman Gallery, I am organizing our third solo show of the magical ceramics of Kondō Takahiro; at the new gallery, we will have our third exhibition of the intricate and sculptural work of Kishi Eiko; and finally at the IAAF, we will feature the hugely popular ceramics of Sakiyama Takayuki, whose works in the past three years have entered the collections of more than a dozen American museums. So, clearly I remain quite optimistic about the strength of Asia Week in the coming year.



Vertical Flower
By Sakurai Yasuko
(b. 1969), 2007
Porcelain
Height 45 cm
Joan B. Mirviss
gallery, New York