

Modern Ceramics

By Iseki Masaaki

It is common knowledge that Japanese ceramics are more than vessels used directly for the dining table, but have a long history of being applied for practical use in the tea ceremony and flower arrangement. Formed in different shapes and decorated with a wide variety of colors, the tableware expresses a special aesthetic sense of the Japanese and has attained a unique development among the world's industrial arts. At times though, some of the ceramic pieces go beyond the worth of practical use and can become more valuable than precious stones. For example, during the Warring States era comes the story of a single tea bowl used in the tea ceremony being traded for a daimyo's castle. This is something unheard of in the history of other countries.

Meanwhile, it is self-evident that as

an art of earth and fire, ceramics, given the materials and modern technology, are not only limited to tableware use and vases, but can be used independently for three-dimensional molding creations as well. This may have much to do with the fact that since the beginning of the 20th century, contemporary art has become detached from Naturalism and many artists were finally able to express themselves more straightforwardly. Similar to what occurred in the field of sculpture and following the world trend at the time, potters in Japan, especially in the postwar era, despite strong traditional pulls, were swayed by the international artistic atmosphere to strive for a non-practical and more sculptural approach. It was in this atmosphere that artists who treated ceramics as molding came into being. And they called their works "clay works."

This phenomenon of reinterpreting the meaning of ceramics began in the latter half of the 1950s, with Yagi Kazuo's establishment of Sodeisha. With the group's activities, ceramics took on the definite direction of non-practicality. And today, from the school of Sodeisha comes the development of ceramic molding works touched with a unique sense of form and coloring setting them largely apart from existing sculpturing art. And much like the impact the Gutai Group had on postwar painting, Sodeisha school ceramics can be seen as forming a base for modern avant garde Japanese art.

The pioneer artists of Sodeisha tended to emphasize in their works the quality that is peculiar to earth. They engaged in a constant quest for new molding possibilities that might be achieved from the works of earth and fire. From



Above: *Arawareru Mono (Appearance)* by Tokumaru Kyoko, 1990. From the *International Exhibition of Modern Ceramics*.

Right: *Karaori Tsuiso—Tofuku-ji Ko (Brocade Memory—Thinking of Tofuku-ji Temple)* by Tsuboi Asuka, 1990. From *NHK Kobo Tanken-Tsukuru 12*



the '60s through the '70s, in keeping pace with European and American trends, non-practical clay works with an element of wit and humor were added. Soon a wide variety of color and decorative images were incorporated in the pursuit of new expressions.

When the '80s arrived, however, new changes occurred. Rather than emphasizing the shapes of the molds, there was a tendency to stress image. In other words, the visual effect of various possible molding forms was accentuated.

In part this was due to yielding to the metamorphosis of the international ceramics world, but in Japan in particular, there emerged a reevaluation of the aesthetic sense of Japan's traditional ceramic arts. This was not merely a call to return to practicality, but an abstract form that projects the image of practicality. This call came from the reconsideration that when ceramics departed from the functional form to become an abstract, three-dimensional object, there was little difference between ceramics and sculptural arts. For this reason, ceramics must rediscover its identity as an art form in its own sake.

This is not to say that all ceramic artists think along this vein. While there are artists who devote themselves fully to producing ceramic pieces for practical use, there are also those who aspire to create abstract pieces through the works of earth and fire. The result is that modern Japanese ceramic art encompasses a wide variety rarely seen in other nations.

I shall mention a few contemporary artists who have made great contributions to ceramic arts both in terms of color and form: Koie Ryoji, Nakamura Kimpei, Matsumoto Hideo, Kiyomizu Rokubei, Suzuki Osamu, Akiyama Yo, Miwa Ryusaku, Tsuboi Asuka, Tokumaru Kyoko, etc. There are many others and their styles are all different.



Ikoji ni Kuroi Ishi (Obstinacy's Deep Black Rock) Nakamura Kimpei, 1988. From To Vol. 15

But they all, through their own activities, seek to seriously pursue the meaning of society, that of man, or that of the relationship between the two, communicating to us a message through their attempts with ceramics.

Put another way, the metamorphosis of today's Japanese ceramics is such that it is not simply the dismantling of forms,

but an unending pursuit for a dialectic solution between practical ceramics and sculpture by way of creations of new forms.

Iseki Masaaki, who specializes in the history of Japanese and Western modern art, is curator at the Hokkaido Museum of Modern Art.