

r o b b a r n a r d e s s a y s

JAPANESE CERAMICS TODAY

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The recent exhibition titled *Japanese Ceramics Today* at the Smithsonian's Museum of Natural History (soon to be at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London), was financed and organized by Madame Kikuchi, Tomo, a collector and dealer in contemporary Japanese ceramics. Madame Kikuchi began collecting ceramics in 1970. Since that time she has become one of the major power brokers in that arena. It was her considerable personal fortune more than her sensibilities that define and shape the character of this exhibition.

On the surface this exhibition reflects the dramatic range of visual and technical directions existing in Japanese ceramics. If one were to apply the "I've never seen this before," or the "I wonder how that was done" scale of judgment, this exhibition would be considered a milestone in ceramic art. However, once one has digested the variety of images and the consummate technical skill exhibited in the work, there is little left to sustain interest or involvement in this exhibition. With few exceptions, the works lack the kind of conceptual depth that would elevate them from being merely decorative to the category of serious and viable ceramic art.

This is disturbing because Japanese ceramics has been a major influence in contemporary ceramic art throughout the world. This influence, however, stems not from the decorative tendencies so prominent in this exhibition but from the esthetic concepts put forth by tea masters in the Momoyama Period (1573-1615) and the pottery that embodies the essence of that esthetic. Madame Kikuchi herself calls this period "the golden age in the history of Japanese ceramics."

It was during the Momoyama period that the Japanese rejected the classical beauty of the technically superior Chinese wares in favor of the simple, direct and sometimes crude work from local kilns. Beauty for beauty's sake and technical achievements were repudiated. What became important was a quality in work that went beyond taste and intellect that transcended the ordinary controversies of art and released the viewer from everyday concerns and preconceptions. The static rules previously used to determine beauty were obliterated and artists were forced to rely on personal vision and intuition as a way of perceiving and creating work in this new esthetic climate. Like any viable movement in art the esthetic concepts of that period not only reshaped the thinking then, but continue to do so at the present in Japan as well as in the United States.

The quality, which distinguished the early work of the Momoyama Period, is alarmingly absent in the majority of the work in this exhibition. There are visual references to this early esthetic, but on close examination one sees that while in some cases all the irregularities in form and surface have been faithfully reproduced, the end result is not the astringent, austere, and artless effect of the earlier work it emulates. In fact, it is almost entirely the opposite; it appears cloying, indulgent, and self-conscious.

We can say perhaps that this exhibition does outwardly represent the trends in contemporary Japanese ceramics; it simply does not represent the best from the majority of those trends.

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Considering Madame Kikuchi's relationship to many of the artists in this exhibition the choices of the work are understandable. She is not an uninterested observer of contemporary Japanese ceramics, but a dealer actively supporting her artists. And it is important to be aware of this when viewing this exhibition.

If the "second flowering of ceramics in Japan, comparable to the Momoyama Period" is to occur in contemporary Japanese ceramics as Madame Kikuchi believes, it must go beyond or at the very least prove to be equally as strong and tenacious as the work which embodied the esthetic concepts of the Momoyama Period, its self-acknowledged mentor. Unfortunately that is not the case with most of the work in this exhibition.