

CERAMIC TRADITIONS OF KYOTO

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More often than not we walk through exhibitions like *Kyoto Ceramics* without really seeing or questioning the work. Because of the circumstances and surroundings, we automatically accept these ratified antiquities as important and significant art. This predisposed attitude on our part can lead us to erroneously confer equal value and significance to all the work in an exhibition such as this, but more importantly, it keeps us from seeing the best of it for what it really is: potent, thought-provoking work that asks as many relevant and pertinent questions of us today, as it did of those at the time it was made.

*Kyoto Ceramics* is a rather small exhibition with large implications for contemporary ceramic artists. It was in Kyoto during the early part of the 17th century that potters began to shed the anonymity of workshop production for distinctive personal styles. It was, in essence, the beginning of the artist/potter tradition in ceramic history. When we understand this, the 25 pieces in the exhibition take on a greater dimension.

Kyoto potters, to a large degree, set standards for style and craftsmanship in 17th-century Japan. They were among the first in Japan to master overglaze enamel decoration, and the motifs derived from their selective and sophisticated interpretations of styles and techniques of other periods and cultures is still mimicked by potters in Kyoto today.

Represented in this exhibition is work by one of the most famous and influential potters from this early period, Nonomura Ninsei. Ninsei was an expert craftsman and a decorator of extraordinary ability, but more than that he was an artist who used these skills without becoming a slave to them. His work bears closer study, especially by those ceramists who refer to themselves as "vessel makers." Today's "vessel makers" believe that utility is the enemy of creativity, and that even though function may be referred to metaphorically, in a practical sense it must be banished. One has only to look at Ninsei's amazing versatility and the breadth of his aesthetic achievements to see that it is not utility that is the enemy of creativity (for all of Ninsei's work was made for specific use), but an artist's narrow-minded sensibility to and perceptions of the world around.

We do ourselves a disservice by not applying the same standards of judgment to historical pieces, such as those in *Kyoto Ceramics*, as we do to contemporary art. If we did, in many cases we might find that the search for aesthetic truths, by artists like Ninsei offer insight into our own aesthetic dilemmas.