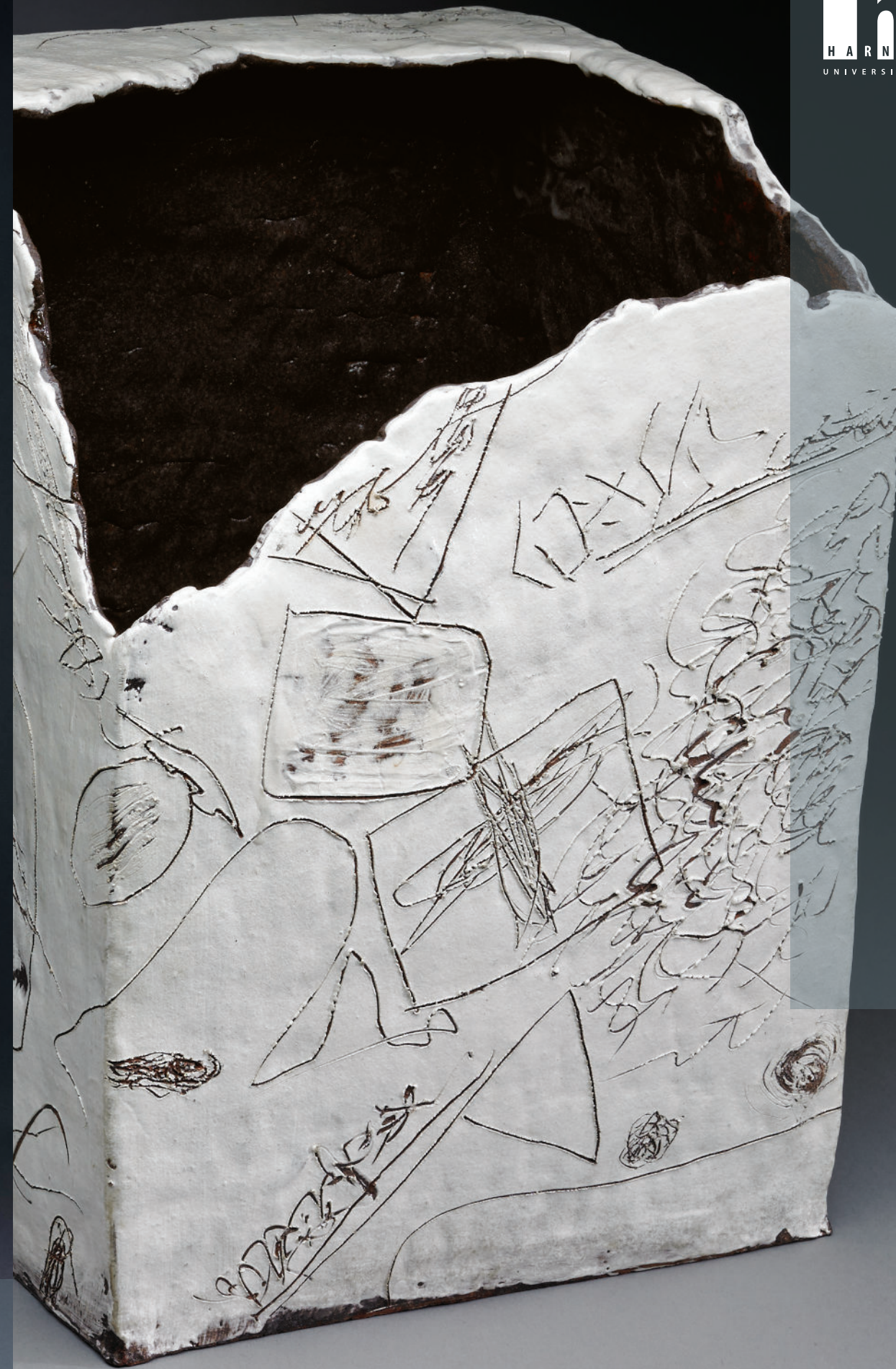




Koike Shōko, *Shiro no Shell (White Shell)* (detail), 2013, on loan from the collection of Carol and Jeffrey Horvitz



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Front: Hoshino Kayoko,  
*Yakishime ginsai bachi*  
(*Unglazed bowl with silver glaze*) (detail), 2009, on loan from the collection of Carol and Jeffrey Horvitz

Back: Yagi Kazuo,  
*Kakiotoshi hoko* (*Square vessel with etched patterning*) (detail), 1966, on loan from the collection of Carol and Jeffrey Horvitz

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#### About the Author

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## Understanding Contemporary Japanese Ceramics

Tomoko Nagakura





# Into the Fold: Contemporary Japanese Ceramics from the Horvitz Collection

October 7, 2014 – July 15, 2016

## Historical Background

When Japan opened its doors to the rest of the world in 1854, following nearly three hundred years of seclusion, a new era began to slowly unfold for many of the country’s disciplines. The field of art was no exception. Under the new Meiji government’s (1868 – 1912) policy promoting industrialization and westernization to compete with the West, people in Japan began to gain access to Western ideas and technology through publications and study abroad.

Inspired by modern art and aesthetics of art introduced from the West, artists began to reconsider traditional forms of art, including ceramics. Indigenous ceramic production in Japan dates back to Neolithic times, and the different types of wares developed through close contact with Korean and Chinese pottery since the 5th and 8th centuries, respectively. Ceramics were regarded as products of skilled artisans and craftsmen, who for the most part remained anonymous.

Tomimoto Kenkichi (1886 – 1963) was one of the leading artists who approached ceramics with new eyes during this era. He learned design in England, and upon his return, became interested in ceramic production and founded a kiln in 1915. Not born into a lineage of potters, he was considered an outsider. This allowed him to explore the complex relationships between the form, glazes, and motifs that composed a ceramic work in its totality. With his knowledge of Western concepts of art and design, Tomimoto came to define ceramic making as an “engendering process of a three-dimensional object into space” and ceramics as *objets d’art* or “the ultimate abstract art form.” This conception of *objet d’art* prefigured that of later avant-garde ceramic art movements, such as the Sōdeisha in the years after World War II.

Following seminal decades of modern ceramic production during the Meiji (1868 – 1912), Taishō (1912 – 1926), and early Shōwa (1926 – 1989) eras, the art of Japanese ceramics reached a pinnacle of production during the postwar years. The following key terms help to convey the significance of ceramic art production in Japan from modern to contemporary times.



## Mingei

The Mingei (Folk Art) movement was formed officially in 1926 against both modern views of art, which emphasized individual self-expression by artists, and rapid changes in society caused by modernization and industrialization. The founding members of the Mingei movement included the philosopher Yanagi Sōetsu (1889 – 1961) and ceramic artist Hamada Shōji (1894 – 1978). Inspired by the Arts and Crafts Movement in England and interactions with Western artists such as Bernard Leach (1887 – 1979), Mingei members valued utilitarian and humble objects associated with daily life and saw beauty in works created by anonymous artisans. They promoted this aesthetic in their modern craft movement. As epitomized by their expression *Yō no bi* (“beauty of necessity” or “beauty of usage”), Mingei movement members sought harmony and beauty in the utilitarian functionality of everyday ceramics. Mingei became a dominant aesthetic and philosophical mode and remains one of the major expressions of ceramic making in contemporary Japan. Mashiko, where Hamada founded his kiln and residence in Tochigi Prefecture, is still the center of the Mingei movement, and artists there continue to produce pottery for daily use in the Mingei spirit.

Hamada Shōji, *Hakuyū kokuryū gaki ōzara*, 1974  
On loan from the collection of Carol and Jeffrey Horvitz

## Living National Treasures

At historically important kiln sites such as Shigaraki, Seto (in Aichi Prefecture), Mino (in Gifu Prefecture), and Bizen (in Okayama Prefecture), artists from the prewar years were engaged in rediscovering and reviving traditional ceramic-making techniques, such as the firing system, and glazing, by studying examples from archaeologically excavated kiln sites. For example, Arakawa Toyozō (1894 – 1985) strove to revive Mino wares from the Momoyama period (late 16th to early 17th centuries), which would otherwise have been lost. Inspired by antique ceramics that he encountered through cultural networks, Kitaōji Rosanjin (1883 – 1959) began experimenting by reinterpreting various vessel forms and traditional glazes such as Oribe and Shino wares from Gifu Prefecture. He introduced such works to the coterie of intellectuals that would gather at his prestigious members-only restaurant. Although such efforts were interrupted during World War II, belief in the importance of preserving the tradition and passing it on to the next generation was reinvigorated after the war and evolved into the system of designation of “Living National Treasures.”

In less than a decade following World War II, the Living National Treasure certification was formalized. Established between 1950 and 1955 as a part of newly created laws for the protection of cultural properties by the Japanese government, the system was the institutionalization of protecting tradition by a nation that experienced radical changes in social systems after the war. Bestowing the title, “Holder of Important Intangible Cultural Property,” the Living National Treasure system acknowledges mastery of particular techniques rather than the resulting works of art. Among the first to receive the designation in 1955 were Tomimoto Kenkichi, who was recognized for his polychrome porcelain painting techniques, and Ishiguro Munemaro (1893 – 1968), for his iron-glaze ceramic painting techniques. Others in later periods include Kondō Yūzō (1902 – 1985) for *sometsuke* (cobalt-glaze painting) in 1977, Tamura Kōichi (1918 – 1987) for iron-glaze painting in 1986, and Isezaki Jun (b. 1936) in 2004 for Bizen ware.



Kitaōji Rosanjin, *Oribe-fu matsu fuku bachi* (Blowing bamboo leaves dish), c. 1950, on loan from the collection of Carol and Jeffrey Horvitz

## Sōdeisha

Sōdeisha is the most recognized postwar avant-garde ceramic art association; it was formed right after World War II (1948) in Kyoto, the center of traditional culture. Along with similar associations such as the Shikōkai (founded in 1947 by Hayashi Yasuo (born 1928), Sōdeisha’s founding members, such as Yagi Kazuo (1918 – 1979) and Yamada Hikaru (1924 – 2001), challenged widely accepted ideas of the functionality and formalities of ceramics. Instead they explored new possibilities afforded by clay as a medium to pursue sculptural expression. Calling their works *objet-yaki* (object ceramic), these artists sought to bring ceramics into a wider field of fine art. To artists from the following generation such as Akiyama Yō (b. 1953), who studied with Yagi Kazuo at Kyoto City University of Arts, Sōdeisha artists were so radical and inspiring that they served as grand mentors. These paragons of postwar Japanese ceramics have continually proven to be benchmarks for subsequent artists, inspiring them to define their own paths and ceramic crafts. Sōdeisha, therefore, played an influential role and functioned as the driving force in the development of the field. For most of the younger generations of ceramic artists today, non-functional sculptural forms are taken for granted. However, without the burgeoning of the Sōdeisha movement in the trajectory of modern Japanese ceramic production, the current situation might have been completely different.



## Female Artists

The increased influence of women artists is another important dimension in the development of ceramic art in postwar Japan. After the war, secondary education was open to a wider population. Many women started to attend universities to learn ceramic arts rather than going through an apprenticeship system, which had been the common practice for pursuing a career as a ceramicist in prewar Japan. This meant that ceramic art also became open to women, who were not accepted into the male-dominated apprenticeship system and who engaged only in marginal tasks in the production process. Koike Shōko (b. 1943) was the first woman student in the ceramic course at the Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music in the late 1960s. With socioeconomic changes in women’s status in the following decades (especially since the 1980s), the number of women ceramic artists increased, and these artists have made important contributions through new approaches to the development of ceramic art. Nakaigawa Yuki (b. 1960), who began her artistic career in the 1980s, has become well known for her large-scale installation pieces. As Todate Kazuko describes in the book *Fired Earth Woven Bamboo: Contemporary Ceramics and Bamboo Art*, Nakaigawa managed to develop a method of constructing large works by using nuts and bolts to fasten small sectioned pieces into one, an unusual approach in ceramic tradition. Today, the gender ratio of enrolled students in art schools favors a greater number of women students across ceramics and other media. As a result, more women artists are now engaged not only in ceramic art creation but also as faculty members, teaching the next generations of artists.



Below: Katsumata Chieko, *Akoda Pumpkin*, 2013, on loan from the collection of Carol and Jeffrey Horvitz

