

Natural connection at the Mingei Museum

Dual exhibits offer fresh take on ancient Japanese artistry

By Pat Sherman SPECIAL TO THE U-T noon Sept. 15, 2012

Visitors to the Mingei International Museum in Balboa Park might reasonably view one of its current exhibits — an assortment of finely detailed Japanese vessels, cups and platters — as an extension of the institution’s vast collection of ancient folk art.

However, while many pieces bear the seeming patina or texture of age, they are a contemporary, 20th century compendium bringing the fire of Japan’s ancient kilns to the present, replicating techniques carried down through centuries by the country’s master craftsmen.

These mingei, or objects of use, are on display through Jan. 19.

Longtime museum benefactor Gordon Brodfuehrer, whose collection of contemporary Japanese ceramics comprises the exhibit, said each bears a “profound connection to and dialogue with nature.”

This natural inspiration is further evoked by the landscape imagery of photographer and ceramics dealer Taijiro Ito. The photographer and museum staff carefully paired each piece with a print to highlight its wabi-sabi, a Japanese aesthetic emphasizing the beauty and acceptance of the transient, imperfect or incomplete.

“It’s not meant to be literal, but wonderful suggestions” of nature, said the Mingei’s director, Rob Sidner, standing before a vase inspired by the Kegon Falls in Nikko National Park.

“It evokes in pottery the dynamic cascade of water down the rock wall,” he said.

The piece, by Kaku Hayashi (one of Japan’s few female kiln leaders) is one of several highlighting the pottery’s functionality through the use of ikebana, the Japanese art of flower arranging.



Yukiya Izumita (b. 1966)
Sekisoh Flower Vase, 20th c.
Japan, stoneware
Ken Kondo

“We wanted to show again that these are vases,” Sidner said, noting another loose interpretation of a vase that resembles two tectonic plates coming together. “Sometimes the Japanese don’t really think a vase is complete until it’s being used.”

Brodfehrer, who is vice president of the San Diego Museum of Art’s board of trustees, will travel to Japan in October for his fourth visit in five years.

He said he became an “obsessive collector” of Japanese lacquer art and ceramics after viewing a large-scale installation of Japanese ceramics in the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art’s Japanese Pavilion.

“I was absolutely struck by these things,” Brodfehrer said. “I’m blessed with having two experienced dealers in Kyoto and two or three in Tokyo (who are) very, very helpful.”

Brodfehrer prefers to visit Japan in autumn, when it is cooler and the maple leaves change color, providing one of the world’s foremost “visual delights,” particularly when illuminated at night by the glow of the country’s more than 1,000 Buddhist temples. The deep aubergine of the changing leaves is replicated in some of the Bizen ware pottery on display, while the pinkish hue of certain glazes mirrors cherry blossoms in spring, he said.

While there last fall, Brodfehrer visited several of the renowned potters whose work he’s amassed over the past few years.

“It was such a pleasure to see them create works before my very eyes,” he said. “It was a remarkable experience, almost embarrassingly sensual, to see them (craft) this exquisitely beautiful form beneath loving hands.”

One of Brodfehrer’s favorite pieces in the exhibit is a dazzling blue and gold coiled vase by ceramist Hoshino Sei. White thumbprints cover the piece, evoking snow captured in rock crevices during the first dusting of spring.

Sidner’s eyes sparkled as he walked to a glass display case full of ornate cups and pots known as the “Sake Aquarium,” containing vessels for tea and sake — Japan’s revered, fraternal drink of fermented white rice.

One set of sake cups, also known as *guinomi* or *ochoko*, is in the shape of spiny sea urchins, while a Bizen ware sake flask, also known as a *tokkuri*, mirrors the supplicant form of a geisha (“*Kimono Glad Girl Leaning Forward to Pour*”).

“It’s so natural, unforced,” Sidner said. “These are great masters, they really are.”

Print traditions

A companion exhibition of contemporary Japanese prints, on loan from the collection of Maurice Kawashima (a former men’s fashion designer and friend of the *Mingei*), features the work of Yoshitoshi Mori (1898-1992) and Masaaki Tanaka (b. 1947).

Mori's stencil prints veer toward whimsical, almost cartoonish, characterization, including depictions of a Kabuki actor, craftsmen dying textiles in a river and a "Man Attacking With Umbrella."

Another group of prints represent the months of the year, each one conveying a corresponding festival or holiday from that month, such as the Japanese Doll Festival, or Girls' Day (March 3) and Boys' Day (recently renamed Children's Day), in which various colored carp banners are used to represent members of a family.

Another stencil print captures the ancient practice of cormorant fishing, in which metal rings are attached to trained sea birds' necks, preventing them from swallowing larger fish, which are retrieved from the birds' mouths.

The prints depict scenes from both daily life and cultural festivals, such as Tanaka's 1981 silk-screen prints "Hand-Carrying Fireworks Festival" and "Puppet Show in the Air," the latter showing a crowd gazing skyward as a demonic, fireworks-shooting figure is hoisted aloft via wires.

"Isn't it a powerful one, so vital," Sidner enthused.