YAGI KAZUO (1918-1979)

Born in Kyoto on July 4, 1918, Yagi Kazuo was the eldest son of ceramist Yagi Issō (1894-73), who excelled at works inspired by Chinese Song Dynasty ceramics. After graduating from the sculpture department of the Kyoto Municipal School of Arts and Crafts, Yagi Kazuo became a student at the Ceramic Research Institute in Kyoto and in 1946 took part in establishing the Young Pottery-makers’ Collective, which was disbanded in mid-1948. Later that year, he co-founded the avant-garde group Sōdeisha as a vehicle for expanding the expressive possibilities of clay.

Yagi focused on the creation of “objets” — neither pure sculpture nor simply vessels. In 1954 at the Form Gallery in Tokyo, he exhibited his now iconic work “Mr. Zamsa’s Walk,” which marked his radical repositioning of the potter’s wheel as a mere mechanical tool instead of the determining factor in the forming process. However, like his Sōdeisha colleagues, Yagi began with utilitarian vessels inspired by modern Western art. In 1962, together with Yamada Hikaru, he established Mon Köbō (“Corner Workshop”), in which Yamada was responsible for the functional forms and Yagi for the surface patterning. Yagi was quite comfortable producing sculptural forms and utilitarian vessels simultaneously and respected them equally. He was also the first artist to incorporate smoke-blackened ware into the modern ceramic vocabulary, starting in 1957. This manner of treating the surface allowed the original sharpness of the sculpted clay form to remain visible; moreover, it remained unassociated with any prior Japanese ceramic tradition.

With broad interests in poetry, music and photography and known for his sarcastic wit and intellect, Yagi inevitably became Sōdeisha’s spokesman. Over time, as its central figure Yagi also assumed the mantle of standard-bearer for contemporary ceramic art in postwar Japan.

1918 Born in Kyoto
1937 Graduated in sculpture from Kyoto Municipal College of Art and Craft
1938 Enlisted in the army
1940 Discharged from the army due to tuberculosis
1943 Became an art teacher at the Chūgū Elementary School in Kobe then at the Second Ritsumeikan Junior High School
1946 Resigned from teaching
1948 Co-founded Sōdeisha
1950 Works included in exhibition at and acquired by the Museum of Modern Art, New York
1952 Co-organized Gendai Bijutsu Kondankai (Genbij) (Contemporary Art Discussion Group)
1957 Became an adjunct instructor in sculpture, Kyoto Municipal College of Fine Arts
1965 Works included in the traveling exhibition, New Japanese Painting and Sculpture that toured the US, including the Museum of Modern Art, New York
1971 Appointed professor at Kyoto Municipal College of Fine Arts
1973 Designed the front of the Olympic medals for the Sapporo Winter Olympics
1976 Sent to Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iran as the leader of the Silk Road Research Group of the Kyoto Municipal College of Fine Arts
1978 Exhibited FIAC at Grand Palais, Paris
Awards:

1948  Kyoto Mayor’s Prize at Kyōten exhibition
1959  Grand Prize, Second International Congress of Contemporary Ceramics, Ostend, Belgium
1962  Gold Medal, Third International Academy of Ceramic exhibition, Prague, Czech Republic
1973  Japan Ceramics Society Award

Solo Exhibitions:

1954  Kyoto-fu Gallery, Kyoto
       Form Gallery, Tokyo
1955  Umeda Gallery, Osaka
1956  Takemiya Gallery, Tokyo
1963  Fujikawa Gallery, Osaka
1964  Beni Gallery, Kyoto
       Ginza Matsuya Art Gallery, Tokyo
1966  Yamada Gallery, Kyoto
       Feigen/Palmer Gallery, Los Angeles, CA
       Kyoto Municipal Museum of Art, Kyoto
1969  Ichibankan Gallery, Tokyo
       Shinjuku Isetan Gallery, Tokyo
1971  Tenmaya Art Gallery, Okayama
1972  Isetan Gallery, Tokyo (also in 1977)
1974  3D Iteza Gallery, Kyoto
1975  Masudaya Gallery, Tokyo
       Heian Gallery, Kyoto
1977  Kasahara Gallery, Osaka
1978  Yagi Kazuo – 60th Anniversary of his Birth, Isetan, Tokyo
       Yagi Kazuo Ceramic Sculptures (Haiku series), Kasahara Gallery, Osaka exhibit in FIAC Grand Palais, Paris, France
1981  Yagi Kazuo, National Museums of Modern Art, Kyoto and Tokyo sponsored by Nihon Keizai Shimbun
2004-05  Yagi Kazuo ten (Yagi Kazuo - a Retrospective), National Museum of Modern Art, Kyoto;
           Hiroshima Prefectural Museum of Art, Hiroshima; Ibaraki Ceramic Art Museum, Ibaraki;
           Tokyo Metropolitan Teian Art Museum, Tokyo; Museum of Modern Ceramic Art, Gifu

Group Exhibitions:

1939  First Japan Ceramic Sculpture Association Exhibition
1941  Sixth Rekitei Art Association Exhibition
1942  Seventh and Eighth Rekitei Art Association Exhibitions
1949  Yagi Issō and Yagi Kazuo, Asahi Gallery, Kyoto
1947  Young Pottery-makers’ Collective, Asahi Gallery, Kyoto
1948  First Sōdeisha Exhibition, Takashimaya Art Gallery, Osaka
1950  Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY
       Contemporary Japanese Ceramics, Musée Cernuschi, Paris, France
1951  Contemporary Japanese Ceramics, Museo Internazionale delle Ceramiche, Faenza, Italy
1954  Genbi, Kyoto Municipal Museum of Art, Kyoto
1955  Sōdeisha Shōhin, Kyoto Gallery, Kyoto
1957  Milan Triennale, International Ceramic Exhibition, Milan, Italy
1959  Contemporary Japanese Ceramics, National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo
1960  Tsudaka Kazuichi and Yagi Kazuo, Nakanoshima Gallery, Osaka
1961  Kyoto-Paris Kōkan Tōgei, Kyoto Municipal Museum of Art, traveled to Musée national de céramique Sèvres, Sèvres, France
1963  Survey of Contemporary Japan Ceramics, National Museum of Modern Art, Kyoto
1964  Hands and Machines on Crafts, National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo (also traveled to Kurume, Kyoto and Nagoya)
1965  New Japanese Painting and Sculpture, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, CA
1966  The First Japan Art Festival, New York, NY, Chicago, IL, Pittsburgh, PA, and San Francisco, CA
1968  The New Generation of Contemporary Ceramics, National Museums of Modern Art, Tokyo and Kyoto
1970  Contemporary Ceramics: Europe and Japan, National Museum of Modern Art, Kyoto
1971  Contemporary Ceramics: the U.S., Canada, Mexico and Japan, National Museums of Modern Art, Kyoto and Tokyo
1976  Japanese Ceramic Masterpieces, Rostock and Dresden, Germany
1977  Japanese Contemporary Masterpieces, National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo
1993-94  Modern Japanese Ceramics in American Collections, Japan Society, New York, NY; New Orleans Museum of Art, New Orleans, LA; Honolulu Academy of Art, Honolulu, HI
2008  Modern Ceramic Art from an International Perspective: Through the Collection of Aichi Prefectural Ceramic Museum, Aichi Prefectural Ceramic Museum
2011  Birds of Dawn: Pioneers of Japan’s Sōdeisha Movement, Joan B. Mirviss, Ltd., New York, NY
2014  Japan in Black and White: Ink and Clay, Joan B. Mirviss, Ltd., New York, NY
2016  Unfolding Worlds: Japanese Screens and Contemporary Ceramics from the Gitter-Yelen Collection, Houston Museum of Fine Arts, TX
Gendai Tōgei Guide, Ibaraki Ceramic Art Museum, Kasama
Craft Arts: Innovation of “Tradition and Avant-Garde,” and the Present Day, Crafts
Gallery, National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo
2017 Timeless Elegance in Japanese Art: Celebrating 40 Years!, Joan B Mirviss LTD, New
York, NY

Selected Public Collections:

Aichi Prefectural Ceramic Museum
Aizawa Art Museum, Niigata
Hiroshima Prefectural Art Museum
Hyogo Prefectural Museum of Art
Ikenobo Society of Floral Art, Tokyo
Kyoto Municipal College of Fine Arts
Kyoto Municipal Museum of Art
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY
Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan
Mie Prefectural Art Museum
Minneapolis Institute of Arts, Minneapolis, MN
Musée Tomo, Tokyo
Museo Internazionale delle Ceramiche, Faenza, Italy
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston
Museum of Modern Art, Kamakura and Hayama
Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY
Museum of Modern Art, Wakayama
Museum of Modern Ceramic Art, Gifu
National Museum of Art, Osaka
National Museum of Modern Art, Kyoto
National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo
Niigata Prefectural Museum of Modern Art
Rockefeller Foundation, New York, NY
Samuel P. Harn Museum of Art, Gainsville, FL
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, CA
Scripps College, Claremont, CA
Shigaraki Ceramic Cultural Park, Shiga (Shigaraki Tōgei no Mori)
Suntory Museum of Art, Tokyo
Takamatsu City Art Museum, Kagawa
Tokoname City Board of Education, Aichi
University of Michigan Museum of Art, Ann Arbor, MI
Victoria and Albert Museum, London, United Kingdom

References:

Cort, Louise Allison and Bert Winther-Tamaki. Isamu Noguchi and Modern Japanese Ceramics: A


