

## Contemporary Japanese Women Potters and their Prehistoric Muses

by Susanna Brooks, Curator of Japanese Art Morikami Museum & Japanese Gardens

Most people know that the clay arts, along with cave painting, are the earliest forms of artistic expression by human beings, but many are surprised to learn that the oldest pottery shards in the world were discovered in Japan. [i] And that these first potters were women. [ii] For thousands of years Japanese women muddied their hands with clay; modeling, pinching, and forming pots for storing and cooking food, and crafting elaborately decorated vessels for sacred rituals. But pottery-making has always been more than a means of producing utilitarian and ritual objects. As the pottery featured in the exhibition *Soaring Voices: Contemporary Japanese Women Ceramic Artists* demonstrates, clay-making is the earliest mode of female self-expression. Ensuing from the dialogue between the clay and the clay-maker, pottery-making precipitated a distinctive artistic female culture.

*Soaring Voices* features clay-works made by twenty-five of some of the most accomplished and innovative female ceramicists working in Japan today. These imaginative women-artists approach traditional Japanese clay-making through a revisionist's lens; reviving ancient pottery techniques and rediscovering the process of pottery-making as an expression of female creativity and community building.

As ceramicist Kyo Tsuji notes, the process of pottery-making was one of the earliest modes of female socialization. When I think about the distant primeval era when communication through the written word was not widespread, there is no doubt that a wordless response to the world was adequate. [iii] Tsuji believes the medium of clay functioned metaphorically as the artist's voice, with each piece being an expression of the potter's own feelings, "conveyed to people in ways which naturally encapsulated the intrinsic qualities of their time." [iv]

While the term Contemporary denotes modern-day, some of these potters experiment with mixed materials and various glazing and firing techniques to achieve the look and feel of prehistoric artifacts, though not necessarily ancient clay objects. The *Shell Vessel* of Shoko Koike (Fig. 1) and *weathered White Sand Bible* of Takako Araki (Fig.2) are two such examples. Yet, there are several *Soaring Voices* artists who dig further into Japan's clay-making past, and employ the hand-formed coil-building techniques that defined the pottery of the Jōmon Period (c. 11,000 – 400 BCE).



**Fig. 1 Shoko Koike, *Shell Vessel*, 1997**



**Fig. 2 Takako Araki, *Bible of White Sand*, 1989**

But what do we know about the pottery-making culture of these ancient peoples? And what were the methods Jōmon potters used that inspire these women ceramicists today? Jōmon, which means "cord-patterned," was the name given to the era that dates from approximately 11,000 to 400 BCE (Before Common Era), which is defined

by the abundant amount of rope-impressed pottery that is believed to have been made at that time. Pottery shards unearthed at various sites in northern Japan, where the Jōmon peoples are believed to have lived, indicate that these cord-impressed pots were small with round bases, making them portable in keeping with the Jōmon peoples' nomadic lifestyle. Pottery-making reached its zenith in the middle Jōmon phase (2,500 – 1,500 BCE) with the production of large ritual vessels with the rims adorned with sophisticated projections, similar to the one in the collection of the Morikami Museum (Fig. 3).



**Fig. 3 Jōmon Vessel, Bisque Fired Earthenware  
Middle Jōmon period 2500-1500 BCE  
Museum purchase funded in part by Mr. and Mrs. Fulton**

Jōmon-period pots were formed by coil-building, a method consisting of hand-rolling clay pieces into a number of thin strands or coils and layering them, one on top of the other, to build up the vessel. Kyoko Hori calls this process *shintasei*, or “physicalisation,” a term she says means “becoming one with the clay.”<sup>[v]</sup> Hori uses her hands and fingers to engage with the work, pushing and pinching the clay until the form grows and develops organically.

When I use this technique of coil building I get the strong sense of a living entity gradually developing, and the slowness of the hand-building method also accords with my own internal rhythms. [I get] the realization that I too have certainly inherited this graceful power. <sup>[vi]</sup>

Jōmon potters used their bare hands to decorate their vessels, sculpting small bits or strands of clay and then attaching them to the pots. To achieve a variety of textures and surface designs potters impressed the wet clay with strands of rope, twigs and other natural materials before firing the piece over open flames.

Nanako Kaji proclaims she finds meaning in the “shapeless chaotic universe” by hand-forming her clay works. <sup>[vii]</sup> Her Vessels of Memory are deliberately misshapen and fragmented with a coarse surface texture, giving the impression of freshly unearthed relics. Kaji says making her rough fossil-like pots not only pays homage to the ancient pottery traditions of her ancestors, but affirms her existence in the world and her place in history as well.

Human beings alive today are different and varied because we are a product of our own personal history, interwoven with other people’s histories, the history of the Earth, and that of the universe which contains it. <sup>[viii]</sup>

Using the coil-building technique, Kyoko Tokumaru incorporates plastic tubing to create exuberant plant-like forms (Fig. 4). Her works reflect some of the most daring and imaginative clay possibilities. Conversely, Junko Kitamura meticulously impresses the entire surface of her minimalist clay forms with a stamp-like tool. This technique, known as *mishimade*, allows Kitamura to create exquisitely textured patterns and designs that give a gentle yet definitive nod to the ancient Jōmon tradition (Fig. 5).

The vast and varied range of remarkable ceramics comprising *Soaring Voices* is a testament to the strong female clay-making culture that developed in the Jōmon-period and grew to encompass generation upon generation of Japanese women potters. By employing the hand-formed coil-building techniques of their Jōmon ancestors, these modern-day ceramicists entreat the pulsating rhythms of their own bodies to engage in a dialogue with the clay, embedding their own thoughts, feelings, dreams, and desires into the clay itself. Summoning the spirit of the potters before them who laid the solid, artistically fertile foundation on which they stand firmly upon today, these women ceramicists transcend timelines, soaring freely and giving a voice not only to themselves, but also to those who came before them and those who will follow.



**Fig. 4** Kyoko Tokumaru,  
*Hatsuga – Germination*, 2007



**Fig. 5** Junko Kitamura,  
*Vessels*, 2006-2007

---

[i] Penelope Mason, History of Japanese Art (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson/Prentice Hall, 2005), 13-21.

[ii] Louise Allison Cort, "Women in the Realm of Clay." In Soaring Voices – Contemporary Japanese Women Ceramic Artists, exh.cat., 68, Shigaraki, Japan: hus-10, Inc., 2007.

[iii] The Shigaraki Ceramic Art, ed. Soaring Voices – Contemporary Japanese Women Ceramic Artists, exh.cat., 7, Shigaraki, Japan: hus-10, Inc., 2007.

[iv] Ibid.

[v] Ibid., 36

[vi] Ibid., 37.

[vii] Ibid., 38.

[viii] Ibid., 40.