



Japanese Studio Craft at RAM

February 18 – June 10, 2018

Focusing on how tradition can impact contemporary makers, **Japanese Studio Craft at RAM** is an exploration of small-scale craft—art jewelry, ceramics, baskets, fiber, glass, and wood—from artists with Japanese heritage.

What is Japanese studio craft? Studio craft is most simply distinguished from the traditional version by intention. Where traditional craft has historically been used for necessity or ceremony, studio craft has emphasized artistic investigation or aesthetic contemplation. Significantly, studio craft may—or may not—be functional or be intended for practical use.

Since the later twentieth century, Japan—steeped in strong historical traditions that include woodworking, metalworking, fibers, lacquer ware, and more—has seen a greater focus on the development of craft-oriented studio practices that emphasize the artist's interests rather than function. This has come in part from Japanese artists studying abroad who have been impacted by theories of making that have developed in places like the United States and Western Europe.

Contemporary artists—such as **Kyohei Fujita** who crafted patterned glass boxes, **Keizuke Mizuno**, who creates ceramic sculpture, and **Hisako Sekijima**, a self-described basket maker—have aspects of their work that can be traced to their connections to Japan. In addition, they expand on time-honored concepts by experimenting with materials, challenging form and scale, or investigating theoretical issues.

Featured Artists

Junichi Arai was born in 1932 in the Japanese town of Kiryu, a city with a long history of textile manufacturing. Arai joined his family's silk weaving business after graduating from high school. By the mid-1960s, he held 36 industrial patents for the production of unusual fabric finishes and had won the Minister of International Trade and Industry Award at the **1st Chemical Textile Grand Fair**. After extensive world travel, Arai became involved in high fashion. By the 1970s, he was working with top Japanese fashion designers like **Issey Miyake** and **Kansai Yamamoto**. Arai's fabrics were also used by haute-couture label **Comme des Garçons**.

In the 1980s, Arai pioneered combining traditional techniques with new computer-based technologies to further diversify and expand the artistic and aesthetic possibilities of fiber. In 1984, he co-founded the NUNO corporation with Reiko Sudo (nuno is Japanese for cloth or fabric).

Still based out of his hometown, Kiryu, Arai has received the 1st Mainichi Grand Special Prize and the Textile Design Medal from the Textile Institute. He has also been named an Honorary Royal Designer for Industry by the British Royal Academy of Arts.

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Kyohei Fujita was born in 1921 and attended the Tokyo Academy of Art (now the Tokyo University of Arts) with a focus on metalsmithing. At the age of 26, he went to work for the Iwata Glass Company. After only two years with the company, Fujita became an independent glass artist and is credited with starting the studio glass movement in Japan. In 1973, he debuted his signature “ornamental boxes.” Now called **Luili** boxes (luili meaning “crystal art”), this pairing of Japanese aesthetic and contemporary form made Fujita famous. Combining a variety of techniques, his use of gold foil drew heavily on traditional Japanese paper art practices. Fujita studied for a time in the 1980s in Venice, Italy, where he began creating larger scale works. In 1989, he was accepted into the Japan Art Academy, becoming their only member who worked in glass.

Fujita has inspired many artists across the world, including **Loretta Hui-Shan Yang** of Taiwan, who started **Luiligongfang** in 1987, a contemporary Chinese crystal company and Asia’s first *Luili* workshop. An entire museum in Japan is dedicated to Fujita’s work; the Kyohei Fujita Museum of Glass in Japan is home to over 100 of his pieces.

Glass artist **Makoto Ito** was born in Dalian, Manchuria, China, in 1950 to Japanese parents, and was raised in Japan. Certain areas of craft—such as textiles and ceramics—have a long history in Japan. However, according to **Yoriko Mizuta**, Curator of the Hokkaido Museum of Modern Art, Sapporo, Japan, “glass was considered a rare, exotic, and new material up until the beginning of the 20th century.”¹

Mizuta also indicates that Ito “joined a glass factory not as a designer but as a craftsman, because he wanted to touch and form the glass with his own hands.” Immediately after graduating from the Tama Art University in 1964, where he had studied painting, Ito began working for Kagami Crystal Works as a glass blower. After six years with the company, Ito left to become an independent glass artist. He returned to Tama Art University in 1975 to start the first university glass program in Japan. Ito was chair of their glass department until his retirement in 2008 and has also taught at the Pilchuck Glass School in the US.

Kiyomi Iwata was born in Kobe, Japan in 1941, but has been living in the United States since coming here to study English in 1961. In 1967, Iwata took a batik dyeing class at the Studio School at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, which sparked her interest in fiber art. She went on to attend the Penland School of Craft and the Haystack Mountain School of Crafts. When she and her family moved to New York City in the 1970s, she took more textile classes at the New School. By the 1980s, Iwata had received an artist fellowship from the New York Foundation for the Arts and a Visual Artist Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts. Iwata, who works primarily with metal leaf, silk organza, and **kibiso** (the first thirty feet or so of the silk worm’s cocoon, which is coarse and usually discarded), says she is “still surprised that her work continues to be influenced by the

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cultural traditions of her upbringing in Japan.” In recent years, she has moved back to Virginia, though she continues to teach and lecture throughout the US and in Japan. Iwata’s work was the subject of a solo show at the Visual Arts Center of Richmond, Virginia in 2015. Entitled *Kiyomi Iwata: From Line to Volume*, the exhibition honored Iwata’s fifty-year career in the city where her artistic pursuits began.

One of the younger artists in this exhibition, **Keisuke Mizuno** was born in Nayoga, Japan in 1969. Mizuno studied at the State University of New York-Buffalo before receiving his BS from Indiana State University. He went on to study at the Kansas City Art Institute, Kansas City, Missouri, and eventually earned his MFA from Arizona State University-Tempe. Mizuno currently resides in St. Cloud, Minnesota where he teaches ceramics at St. Cloud State University. Recently, his work has turned toward geometric forms. His earlier work, as shown in *Japanese Studio Craft at RAM*, was concerned with nature, the organic, and the cycles of life and death. Even in his most beautiful floral works, decay and consumption are present, usually in the form of insects or slugs. He is a two-time recipient of the McKnight Ceramic Artist Fellowship.

Like Keisuke Mizuno, glass artist **Etsuko Nishi** creates natural forms. Although the work of both artists can be described as floral, Nishi prefers abstracted organic shapes over representational vessels. Nishi, who was born in Kobe, Japan in 1955, earned her BA from Mukogawa University–Japan, before spending three years studying at the Pilchuck Glass School in Seattle, Washington. She also holds her master’s degree from the Canberra School of Art, Australia, and her PhD from the Royal College of Art, London, England. Nishi currently teaches in the Department of Industrial Design at Takushoku University, Japan.

Jeweler **Yuka Saito** graduated from Tezukayama Gakuin University in Osaka, Japan and worked as a museum curator while studying under maker **Fumiko Tsubo** for five years. She eventually came to the United States to study at the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York, New York. Known for her use of unusual materials, Saito has been working primarily in polypropylene since 1996, combining it with more traditional jewelry elements such as platinum and gold. She is concerned with how her works interact with the wearer. As a result, Saito creates colorful pieces that embody an abstract, organic aesthetic, and often have parts that move.

Fiber artist **Hisako Sekijima** is a self-described basket-maker, who first received her BA in English literature from Tsuda College, Tokyo in 1966. After moving to New York in the mid-1970s, she took up basket making. In 1978, Sekijima began studying with renowned basket maker **John McQueen** (who has 22 works in RAM’s collection, two of which are on display in the current exhibition, *Text Message: Words and Letters in Contemporary Art*). Sekijima purposefully challenges the idea of what a basket can be. She states:

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"I define a basket as an object, often a vessel shape, created in a textile structure where the dynamics of each component are visible. My expanded definition includes anything implying a relationship to basketry in its technical, aesthetic or functional terms."

Sekijima is the author of three books, *Basketry* (1986), *Shizen-wo-Amu (Weaving with Natural Materials)*, 1986, and *Basketry no Teishiki (Basketry's Formulas)*, 1988. She has also taught in the textile department of Tama Art University in Tokyo, Joshibi University of Art and Design in Tokyo, and at Kanazawa College of Art in Kanazawa, Japan.

End Note

1. <https://www.glassart.org/1998ModernAndContemporaryGlass-Mizuta.html>