

## It's Like Poetry: Building a Toshiko Takaezu Archive at RAM

*When working with clay, I take pleasure from the process as well as from the finished piece. Every once in a while—very seldom—I am in tune with the material and I hear music and it's like poetry. These are moments that make pottery truly beautiful for me.*

—Toshiko Takaezu

While unassuming in her disposition, **Toshiko Takaezu** (1922-2011) was a bona fide ceramic superstar. She created work—paintings, prints, fiber, and cast bronze in addition to her well-known ceramic pieces of varying sizes—that embodied a poetic balance between art and life. Racine Art Museum (RAM) has been acquiring a range of pieces by Takaezu—from individual forms to multi-part installations—and establishing an archive that documents this significant artist who pushed the boundaries of clay in the late twentieth century.

Born in Hawaii to Japanese immigrants, Takaezu eventually studied ceramics at Cranbrook Academy of Art in Michigan with **Maja Grotell** (1899-1973). Grotell encouraged an approach to making that emphasized technical accomplishment and individual expression—tenets Takaezu adopted in her practice. Often described as blending principles of so-called Eastern and Western thought, Takaezu did spend some time in Japan, learning about her heritage, its pottery traditions, and approaches to holistically blending art and life.

Takaezu held a variety of different teaching positions in her lifetime, including a year-long stint at University of Wisconsin-Madison while **Harvey Littleton** (then associated with clay not glass) went on sabbatical. She looked at teaching as both a way to guide students and a way to discover more of herself as an artist. Personal friend **Joan Mondale** said of Takaezu as a teacher: “Her students are in awe of her. She requires the students to be orderly in the workshop and she forbids idle chatter, conducting class as an honorable teacher in Japan would do.” Takaezu would often have apprentices who would work closely with her as well as on their own with her guidance and influence. Her legacy is a complex mix of her work, the ideas she shared with others, and her aura. Takaezu had the capacity to inspire and motivate people, and making her own work did not detract from her empowering teaching style.



(above)

**Toshiko Takaezu**

*Enclosed Dark Form*, ca. 1990, Glazed stoneware  
Racine Art Museum, Gift of the Artist  
Photography: Jon Bolton

(bottom left)

**Toshiko Takaezu**

*Mondo*, 1989, Glazed stoneware  
Racine Art Museum, Gift of the Artist  
and Karen Johnson Boyd  
in Memory of Samuel C. Johnson  
Photography: Michael Tropea, Chicago



Takaezu was inspired by nature and the environment, noting the early influence of her home state, Hawaii. She combined this with an interest in surface and color—a rich blue becoming a signature tone (Makaha blue) but far from the only one she employed. She was an artist in tune with concepts of balance and harmony—interior/exterior, planning/unpredictability, calm/tense, large/small. The factors that contributed to the “Takaezu Mystique,” a phrase coined by **John Perrault** in his essay for **Toshiko Takaezu: Heaven and Earth**, encompassed her character, working methods, aesthetic choices, and reputation as a teacher.

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While she was private about how exactly her work was glazed, it is often said that she used glaze like paint—brushing it, spraying it, and sometimes, pouring it. She found a closed neck form that she experimented with throughout her career. While not the only shape, it is one particularly associated with her works. Takaezu often created pieces with surfaces that reflected her touch, that made others want to touch. The interplay between exterior and interior was magnified by Takaezu’s practice of dropping a small ball of clay into her forms before closing them off. The ball, wrapped in paper, would not meld to the interior. After the paper burned off and the clay hardened, the ball would make noise—not unlike a bell or rattle—when the form was moved. It is a tangible yet poetic reminder that space is being contained. Takaezu would use a potter’s wheel or build with coils or slabs, or combine these techniques when scale and scope of the work demanded. She played with, and revered, the unpredictability of introducing her unfired pieces to the kiln.

*You are not an artist simply because you paint or sculpt or make pots that cannot be used. An artist is a poet in his or her own medium. And when an artist produces a good piece, that work has mystery, an unsaid quality; it is alive.*

– Toshiko Takaezu

In the 1960s, when Takaezu taught at the Cleveland Institute of Art, a conversation about the boundaries between art and craft, or lack thereof, began to gain momentum. Takaezu, with her play between sculptural—closed forms, installations—and functional—bowls, vessels, garden seats—and her treatment of clay and its surfaces, was recognized as a leader in new approaches to the medium. Her work was featured in *OBJECTS: USA*, the ground-breaking traveling exhibition that introduced a wide range of artists to audiences around the world. For the next four decades, Takaezu taught and worked in her studio—there seemed to be no separation between art and the “rest” of her life. While this seems very intense, the reality also has an endearing side. There are anecdotes about the volume of her production and how—in her later years—her home and studio were filled with work, crowded into all possible storage spaces, including the kitchen cabinets and oven.



(top left)

**Toshiko Takaezu**

*Purple Closed Form*, 2005, Glazed stoneware  
Racine Art Museum, Promised Gift of Johnson Bank,  
Trustee of the QTIP Trust for Bill Boyd  
u/a Karen Johnson Boyd 1996 Trust  
Photography: Jon Bolton

(above right)

**Tom Grotta**, *Toshiko Takaezu Outside  
with Some of Her Tall Vessels*, 1998  
Image Courtesy of brownrotta arts,  
Wilton, Connecticut

(bottom left)

**Toshiko Takaezu**

*Moon*, ca. 1985, Glazed stoneware  
Racine Art Museum, Promised Gift of Johnson Bank,  
Trustee of the QTIP Trust for Bill Boyd  
u/a Karen Johnson Boyd 1996 Trust  
Photography: Jon Bolton

Takaezu made work of all sizes. While a few shapes appealed to her, including rounds and tall slender closed-off forms in particular, she didn’t shy away from notably large and small work.



She created multi-part installations at a time when it was unusual within the ceramics field and, in so doing, further pushed the boundaries of the material. RAM’s archive—which to-date numbers over 30 works—includes small bowls, toasting goblets, platters, two-foot high closed pieces, and large spheres, as well as Takaezu’s most expansive grouping, the installation comprised of 14 “human-sized” forms, the *Star Series*. Significantly, RAM’s holdings span the range of Takaezu’s working career—with a double-spouted pot from the 1950s being the earliest and the *Star Series* (1999-2000) being the latest. There are also drawings and prints—works with forms that echo the shapes of Takaezu’s three-dimensional pieces while also reflecting her sensitivity to shape and color.