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TASTE

Japan's Glass Revolution

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Ceramics, bamboo, lacquerware -- these are quintessentially Japanese materials. But Japan is quickly gaining a reputation for being at the cutting edge of an entirely different medium: glass art. Top U.S. galleries routinely include Japanese works in their glass shows and serious glass collectors worldwide are steadily adding Japanese artists to their collections.

This may come as a surprise, not least because glass art has a relatively short history in Japan. The Japanese have historically viewed the transparent, hard material as foreign and somewhat exotic, and they have only recently made utilitarian glass part of everyday life. The Portuguese introduced glassblowing to Japanese craftsmen in the 18th century and, although Nagasaki glassblowers made highly prized vessels, larger-scale production only sprang up in the 19th century, laying the groundwork for top-quality cut glass in the early 1900s.

This sense of "otherness" has worked in the medium's favor. In the 1920s and 1930s, an artist named Toshichi Iwata was among the first in Japan to see glass as an artistic medium, creating fluid, color-rich vessels. Another prominent glass artist, Kyohei Fujita, developed under Iwata's tutelage and earned international fame for glass boxes whose gold and red surface patterns are reminiscent of Japanese lacquerware. Not long after U.S. artists launched the contemporary glass movement in the 1960s, Mr. Fujita and 50 other artists established the Japan Glass Artcrafts Association headed by Hisatoshi Iwata (son of Toshichi Iwata). Since 1972, the Association has brought artists together, staged exhibitions and disseminated information about this art form.

In addition to the Association, Japan today boasts 16 glass art programs -- many in universities -- along with workshops in institutions like the Niiijima Glass Center south of Tokyo. Regular international exhibitions have also imported American, European and Australian glass artists to lead classes and demonstrations.

This has resulted in an expanding population of energetic Japanese glass artists, attracted in part by the medium's lack of long-standing traditions and the creative freedom this affords. A tally by Atsushi Takeda, author of "Contemporary Glass Artists in Japan" (Asahi Glass Co., 2003), lists some 300 artists currently active, many of them women. The range of work is astonishing. Kazumi Ikemoto covers every millimeter of his vessels with surreal scenes, while Toshio Iezumi's abstracts refract light through laminated plate glass, drawing lyrical plays of line. Artist Michiko Miyake creates tightly patterned wall installations, a far cry from Takeshi Fukunishi's textured,

often eruptive sculptures in cast glass.

This creativity isn't generating many sales yet in Japan, but it is exciting collectors and museums in the U.S. "All of a sudden it seems there is a lot of strong work coming out of Japan. I feel that in Japanese glass now there is a strong, original voice," says Tina Oldknow, curator of contemporary glass at the Corning Museum -- one of the world's most comprehensive glass collections, based in Corning, New York.

Others echo this high praise. Jutta Page, glass curator at the Toledo Museum of Art in Toledo, Ohio, regards Japanese artists as "a lot more adventuresome" than their counterparts elsewhere. And when the Pittsburgh (Pennsylvania) Glass Center showcased 17 emerging Japanese artists, members of the International Glass Art Society responded with surprise and wonder -- and opened their wallets. "Everything was unique," says Randi Dauler, co-founder of the Pittsburgh-based Contemporary Glass Collectors. At the show, she bought a vessel by Yasuko Kita, and Ms. Oldknow added an abstract work by Yoshiaki Kojiro to her museum's collection.

In Japan, at least one curator shares this enthusiasm. At the Hokkaido Asahikawa Museum of Art in Hokkaido, Yoriko Mizuta curated two landmark glass shows in 1997 and 2003 and has juried countless competitions in Japan. Still, public appreciation for glass is low there and "the number of collectors has not grown so much."

Economic stagnation is partly to blame, but there is another, more fundamental explanation: "Maybe Japanese prefer clay rather than transparent, brilliant glass," she says in a telephone interview from Hokkaido. This deep-seated preference may explain why Japan never developed as consistent a tradition of glassmaking as it did ceramics. Two leading glass galleries in Tokyo, Gallery Nakama and Gallery Kai, are dropping art glass this year, according to Ms. Mizuta. And while glass curators like Ms. Oldknow and Ms. Page are bolstering their collections of Japanese art, Ms. Mizuta has not been able to secure financial support for additional shows.

Ms. Mizuta believes younger generations, living in the glass and metal environments of modern cities, may be developing "a sympathy for contemporary glass objects." But "younger people are not so rich." So while the quality of Japanese glass "has grown very much," it still lacks an appreciative audience.

In the U.S., on the other hand, "we have a wonderful base of glass collectors and many sizeable collectors' groups," says New York gallery owner Alice Chappell, who began showing Japanese glass art over two decades ago. Collectors' groups organize lectures, demonstrations, studio visits, trips, hands-on workshops -- all to educate members on the medium. This, in turn, fosters appreciation and the willingness to pay thousands of dollars for works that show innovation, creativity and mastery. Which explains why many American collectors today are setting their sights on Japan.

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