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## American advocate of Japanese ceramics still unearthing talent

After 40 years, Joan Mirviss' US gallery is a game-changer for young Japanese artists

FRAN KUZUI, Contributing writer



American art dealer Joan Mirviss was inspired to represent ceramicists by the work of Shinobu Kawase. (Photo by Richard Goodbody)

TOKYO -- Joan Mirviss has always appreciated beauty found in the earth. As a five-year-old, she discovered a fossil in her yard in the U.S. state of Connecticut, and developed a yearning to study geology. A simultaneous fascination with Japan eventually led her to a different treasure from the earth: Japanese ceramics. The two interests have converged to make her one

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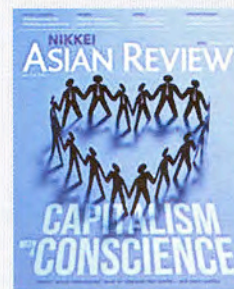
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of the leading dealers of contemporary Japanese ceramics and fine art in the U.S.

Mirviss' passion for Japan grew from a childhood interest in copying pictures of Japanese kabuki actors and women in kimonos from a book, and a weekly TV show featuring an Asian man demonstrating brush painting. In the 1970s, while still in college, she traveled to Japan on a student trip. The only excursion available covered the art of Japanese ceramics, a subject in which she had little interest. The trip took Mirviss to most major pottery centers in Japan, meeting young artists and masters.

"It was an amazing trip and the serendipitous program later proved to be a defining inspiration in my future career," she recalled over afternoon tea in Tokyo. Her subsequent journey has taken her from finding that fossil in the mud to a life divided between tours to pottery kilns in Japan and her elegant gallery off Madison Avenue in upper Manhattan, New York.



Joan Mirviss (Photo by Mee Seen Loong)

After graduating with a master's degree in Japanese art history from Columbia University in the U.S., Mirviss began selling 17th-19th century Japanese paintings, screens and *ukiyo-e* (woodblock) prints at fairs and as a private dealer in New York.

Although dealing in period art and antiques, Mirviss was simultaneously drawn to contemporary Japanese ceramics, and quickly accumulated a sizable personal collection on frequent trips to Japan to buy

art for her business. "I had developed an instinctive sense of the clay art form, and was most excited by artists who had their own very personal, yet very contemporary visions of ancient ceramic traditions," she said.

Mirviss was inspired to make ceramics a focus of her work in 1983 when she saw works by Shinobu Kawase at the Japan Ceramics Today exhibition at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. The pieces came from the Tomo Kikuchi Collection and Mirviss eagerly arranged an introduction to the well-known Japanese art patron, "Madame" Tomo Kikuchi, "who had a passion for clay that influenced me deeply."

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"I shyly asked her to introduce me to Kawase-san, the master of celadon (green glaze), who became the first ceramist with whom I had a friendship," Mirviss remembers.

Several years later Mirviss saw a show at the Tokyo Museum of Modern Art by Shoji Kamoda, a ceramicist whom she considers the greatest clay artist of the 20th century, and it touched her profoundly. "Here was an artist I wanted to introduce to America," Mirviss said. Prices for his masterworks were stratospheric, but when Mirviss' favorite piece from the show, "Purple Vase," became available a decade later she was ready.



Joan B Mirviss LTD gallery on Manhattan's Upper East Side (Photo by Richard Goodbody)



"In a boundless leap of faith, I paid what for me was a great deal of money and I realized my mind was made up. My purpose going forward would include inspiring and infusing others with my conviction and passion for Japanese contemporary ceramics. Luckily for me, my involvement with the people who create and collect ceramics happened simultaneously to a global acceptance of clay art," Mirviss said.

"In the West, dishware typically matches, and is acquired at one time from one source. In Japan, ceramics are acquired by a family over time, typically in groups of five, and never match. A host's taste and sensibility is measured by the selection, arrangement and presentation of collected pieces.



"The Purple Vase" by Shoji Kamoda (Photo by Richard Goodbody)



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