

***When Japan's Tea Ceremony Artisans Meet Minpaku's Collections: Creative Art in Perspective.* The National Museum of Ethnology (Minpaku). March 12, 2009-June 2, 2009.\***

Reviewed by Claire Cuccio

The National Museum of Ethnology (Minpaku) rewarded those visitors who wound their way to its secluded site in Osaka's Expo Memorial Park (Banpaku kinen-koen) with an exhibition highlighting both tea ceremony artisans of the Sen family and artifacts from other cultural traditions in Minpaku's permanent collection. Just how the Kansai-based cultural anthropological research center and museum finessed the merging of local artisans with artifacts of other cultures reveals the genius behind the exhibition. Hinging on Minpaku's proposal to open its entire collection to ten artisans highly skilled through traditional family transmission (Senke jisshoku), the artisans were invited to create new tea utensils based on inspiration from objects they personally selected from among Minpaku's artifacts. In a groundbreaking effort to turn exhibition methodology on its head, the creative vision and practiced sensibilities of the artisans themselves determined what viewers saw both in terms of their final selections from Minpaku's collection and the objects they created in response to their findings.

The challenge facing curators was how to display the objects in such a way as to reveal the creative processes that inspired their convergence. Strategies were multiple, but the most striking include grouping the Minpaku objects each artisan chose in clusters, nestling among them the artisan's own creation, and setting off the fluid display with a statement by the artisan explaining the unifying principles behind his or her approach to conceiving of a new object upon the inspiration from the selected artifacts. The displays opted against conventional labeling, as if to seize on the floating signification of the objects themselves and diffuse immediate association with their cultural historical identification (the catalogue, however, provides documentation).<sup>1</sup> At its core, the exhibition examined the fundamental human process of creative production through the cohesive, transferable aesthetic articulated by the artisans and the triumvirate of inspirational object, resulting creation, and artist's conclusive statement. The exhibition prefaced this crowning project with a section featuring tea utensils of uncommon brilliance, including objects on display for the first time, and closed with a section calling attention to the physical and technical processes critical to creative production, such as casting, molding, bending, bonding, cutting, and stitching.

The effect of the exhibition confronted head-on what is typically the subtext of more mainstream exhibitions: before the polished aesthetic, there is the human idea; before the total object, there is the raw material; and before the honed technique, there is the meticulous process. This exhibition privileged all three.

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## **Note**

1. The exhibition catalogue, rich in articles and full-color images documenting the artisans, their crafts and tea ceremony utensils, is available in Japanese text only through Minpaku's Museum Shop, <http://www.senri-f.or.jp/shop/index.html>, accessed February 22, 2010.

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