

Yomiuri Shimbun – October 18, 2009 (Sunday)

IN MEMORIAM

Yasokichi Tokuda: Master Kutani Porcelain Craftsman, died on August 26 at 75 from pneumonia.

Always pushing the limits

A kutani is valued for its colors

Purple, yellow, green and blue...the basic four colors of kutani porcelain glazes are transformed into over 70 color shades to create beautiful gradations. Fired at high temperatures, the glassy kutani shines like a jewel to the amazement of all who look upon it. “The value of a kutani is measured by its colors, not its design,” said Master Tokuda who constantly pushed the limits of color transformations and contrasts without any pictures or patterns. He was born in a distinguished family of kutani craftsmen active since the Meiji Era in the historic town of Komatsu in Ishikawa Prefecture on the coast of the Sea of Japan.

His grandfather, Yasokichi I, taught him the art of making “kokutani,” a popular type of porcelain in the beginning of the Edo Period centuries earlier. At 22, when Master Tokuda began to make kutani as the third generation in his family, his aging grandfather showed him a secret glaze preparation method that was not passed on to his father, Yasokichi II. This method is the origin of Master Tokuda’s color palette.

In his youth, Master Tokuda’s style at times lacked a central theme, going from “kokutani” recreations inspired by his grandfather, to modern artworks. A turning point in his life came at the 1975 Japan Traditional Arts & Crafts Exhibition. Master Tokuda contributed a plate decorated with a Persian pattern and a glaze pot designed with blue gradations, the latter of which was praised by Master Koichi Tamura (1918 to 1987), human national treasure for underglaze iron art, with the words “this one shows your unique style.” Such works had hitherto been widely criticized as “not kutani.”

Looking back, long-time ally and fellow kutani human national treasure Master Minori Yoshida (77) described this affirmation as “the moment that likely deepened his conviction that it is color that determines a kutani’s value.”

Photo of Master Tokuda creating beautiful gradations on a vase using glazes made by his secret preparation method (2000)

Ever since then, he unleashed kutani works from his quiet mountain atelier called “Yosai” (*Splendid Colors*) applauded the world over. He was also a skilled angler, dancer and shogi chess player. Whenever he caught a big fish, he would make an ink rub print of it and take great delight in showing it off to visitors. Even after being designated a human national treasure for colored glaze porcelain, he remained humble and never took on airs.

In December 2007, he was hospitalized for a stroke and was back home again one month later when he decided to teach his eldest daughter, Junko (48), a ceramic artist, how to prepare glazes. His brown leather notepad inscribed with valuable color glaze mixture proportions was always at hand.

“The time had come for the next generation to take over,” said Junko of the time she decided to use her inherited knowledge of glazes for the first time in June of that year and make a kutani plate. Master Tokuda, stricken with pneumonia, reentered the hospital right after.

Junko’s works were selected to be showcased at this year’s Japan Traditional Arts & Crafts Exhibition on August 25 and, when she reported this to Master Tokuda laying on his hospital bed, he smiled and congratulated her and, half an hour later, quietly took his final breath.

“His 75 years on earth went by quickly...he had a happy life,” eulogized Junko at his funeral. She will take on the title of “Yasokichi IV” next spring, inheriting the colors of Yasokichi III with a brown leather notepad heirloom at her NETWORK CO.,LTD side.

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