RISING DRAGON
Tokuda Yasokichi IV
Tokuda Yasokichi IV, recognized today as a remarkable figure both in Japan and internationally, is one of few female leaders of a traditional pottery family in Japan. With this being her first solo exhibition outside of Japan, Tokuda offers visitors stunning ceramic works polished to perfection, with displays of challenging conceptions in ceramic artistry that showcase sleek lines and shimmering surfaces throughout each piece.

Born in 1961, Tokuda Yasokichi IV succeeded her father, Tokuda Yasokichi III, in 2009, who was a revered Kutani potter and one of Japan’s “Living National Treasure” artists. Tokuda inherited from her father the techniques and methods of their Tokuda family style of Kutani porcelain production that features saigai glazing. The arrangements and gradations of color play a central role in the ornamentation, rather than the usual pictorial designs of birds, flowers, and figures seen in conventional Kutani ware. Tokuda’s personal sensibility as a female artist lends her a unique perspective on the tradition that is reflected in her diverse choices of color and unique interpretations of form.

Tokuda is one of few female heads of a traditional potting lineage in Japan. In traditional art families, the one who succeeds as head of the family is typically determined at birth, and is most often male. Since her father did not have any male successors, he decided to pass on the family’s name and practice to one of his daughters. Although it was a challenge to make a place for herself as head artist of the family tradition in a still male-dominated social structure, Tokuda has defined her own signature ceramics and creative voice apart from that of her father. This solo show highlights her impressive achievements.

“Rising Dragon,” a delicate yet powerful vessel emanating grace and beauty, is inspired by Tokuda’s feelings towards her father, a dragon and the central figure in her life as both father and master artist. This image of a rising dragon came to her when she recalled how her father used to gaze at the river in front of the Tokuda Yasokichi studio, which has also been her favorite place to visit since she was a little girl. Today, Tokuda imagines a dragon, her father, ascending from that river to the sky. “Rising Dragon” (one of a series) was acquired by the British Museum in 2014.

Tokuda’s works are featured in a number of museums around the world including the British Museum (London, UK), Ishikawa Prefectural Museum of Art (Kanazawa, Japan), Indianapolis Museum of Art (Indiana, US), and Art Complex Museum (Massachusetts, US). And, in fall of 2017, Onishi Gallery helped to arrange a PBS television program about female artists who lead the traditional art world in Japan. One of the artists introduced was Tokuda Yasokichi IV. The program will air on all PBS stations throughout the year beginning late spring 2018.

Displaying her mastery working with the porcelain form, her initiative as a female leader of this traditional art, and her vision as an innovative artist with an inherited legacy, Tokuda has shaped Japanese traditional ceramics in profound and lasting ways.

Nana Onishi
Owner and Director, Onishi Gallery
When Y asokichi III was 50 years old, this technique was named based on the vivid color glazing used (of Kokutani coloring and unique to Y asokichi III. While the technique is commonly known as "saiyu" color glazing, when Y asokichi III was 50 years old, this technique was named based on the vivid color glazing used (yosai) that brought forth numerous prestigious pieces.

The creation of this expression via glazing was actually due to a firing mistake. When Y asokichi III began using an electrical kiln for use in his work, on one occasion, he forgot to turn off the kiln. The temperature exceeded the melting temperature of yosai glazing and in doing so, the glaze was liquefied. This was considered a mistake, Y asokichi III saw beauty in that liquefied quality. Triggered by this one accident, after repeated efforts to turn the accidental into the intentional, Y asokichi III was able to bring forth his unique glazed porcelain ware. And this glazing technique had then been handed down to Y asokichi IV.

In March of 2010, Tokuda Junko succeeded the name of Y asokichi IV. Prior to the succession, Junko was creating works of her own compositions and colors that she learned at a technical training institute. However, in 2008, she received the family secret of the glazing formula from Y asokichi III and was handed down the "Colors of Y asokichi III. Given the history of the Tokudas, beginning with Y asokichi I, each had left their own mark, and fulfilled an important role within a particular era. Therefore, the task of Y asokichi IV was to make pieces that use "these Colors of Y asokichi," but are different from the works of Y asokichi III. Indicative was that the Persian blue reminiscent of Y asokichi III was not used as a main color, and that the forms incorporated a roundedness that expressed generosity.

The first piece debuting the "Colors of Y asokichi" was "In the Distance" (2009). This happened right before the passing of Y asokichi III, when the notification of the selection into The Japan Traditional Arts Crafts Exhibition was announced, and was a piece that shared the joy with Y asokichi III. After that, numerous pieces symbolizing the works of Y asokichi IV followed, among them, "Rising Dragon" (2010) which incorporates a unique ingenuity of Y asokichi IV that found an expression not seen before in the works of Y asokichi III.

"Rising Dragon" was placed upside down during the firing process, with the base pointing up, so that the flow of the glaze appears to run upwards when placed in the normal upright position after firing. While Y asokichi IV calls this technique "Upside Down Firing," the image of a dragon rising up into the sky is expressed via the glazing that runs from the bottom to the top.

Additionally, "Crystalline Green" (2011) presents the image of flowering plants and trees growing towards the sky, bathed by the sun's rays, along with the flow of pristine water, or "Pine Rhyme" which is influenced by Hasegawa Tōhaku's "Pine Trees Screen" that presents the image of the sound of the wind passing through pine trees in the woods, are examples of expressions that are apparent in the works emerging from the unique sensibilities of Y asokichi IV. Among them, "Crystalline Green" is a piece of monumental significance. It is said to show the determination of the path to be taken by Y asokichi IV after the succession of the name.

From this perspective, the work of Y asokichi IV is based on the Japanese aesthetic of a rich mind and perception, and whether a landscape, environment or event that is experienced as beauty reflects the Japanese sensibilities. It is as if witnessing what constitutes being Japanese.

Moreover in recent years, the color red, which has not been used by Y asokichi III, has become established as the color of Y asokichi IV, and with repeated endeavors towards colors and shapes, a new world of works has begun. The encounter of the Japanese expressions of Y asokichi IV with the Kokutani color "red" may lead to the creation of many new works hereafter. There is much to look forward to.
Rising Dragon, 2017
Porcelain with colored glaze (yōsai)
h. 12 1/2 x dia. 16 3/8 in. (31.5 x 41.5 cm)

Plate Shojo (Ape), 2017
Porcelain with colored glaze (yōsai)
h. 4 x dia. 18 in. (10 x 45.5 cm)
Jar Mizuho (Fresh Ears of Rice), 2017  
Porcelain with colored glaze (yōsai)  
h. 13 x dia. 14 1/2 in. (33 x 37 cm)

Bowl Suicho (Crystalline Green), 2017  
Porcelain with colored glaze (yōsai)  
h. 6 x dia. 20 1/2 in. (15.5 x 52 cm)
Vase Shoin (Music of the Wind), 2018
Porcelain with colored glaze (yōsai)
h. 21 5/8 x dia. 18 1/2 in. (55 x 47 cm)

Jar Romei (Waterfall), 2017
Porcelain with colored glaze (yōsai)
h. 19 1/2 x dia. 13 3/4 in. (35.5 x 35 cm)
Jar Romei II (Waterfall II), 2017
Porcelain with colored glaze (yōsai)
h. 15 1/2 x dia. 12 1/4 in. (39.5 x 31 cm)

Jar Shojo (Ape), 2017
Porcelain with colored glaze (yōsai)
h. 15 x dia. 14 3/4 in. (38 x 37.5 cm)
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SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

- 2018 Rising Dragon, Onishi Gallery, New York, US
- 2013–2018 Asia Week, New York, US
- 2017 The 64th Japan Traditional Kōgei Exhibition, Japan
- 2016 The 72nd Contemporary Art Exhibition, Ishikawa Prefectural Museum of Art, Ishikawa, Japan
- 2015 The Power of Colors, Musee Tomo, Tokyo, Japan
- 2013 Rising Dragon, Onishi Gallery, New York, US
- 2013 The 360th Anniversary Kutaniyaki Exhibition, Kutaniyaki Art Museum, Ishikawa, Japan
- 2012 The Inaugural Biennale of the Tea Ceremony Today – Utility and Form, Musee Tomo, Tokyo, Japan

SELECTED PUBLIC COLLECTIONS
