

The Work of Toshiko Takaezu

American Art
After 1945

Born in Hawaii in 1922 to Japanese immigrants, Toshiko Takaezu trained at the University of Hawaii and then Cranbrook Academy of Art in Michigan, where she studied under the Finnish potter Maija Grotell. Of these experiences, Toshiko said, "Hawaii was where I learned technique; Cranbrook was where I found myself." At Cranbrook she laid the foundation for a lifelong career creating ceramic forms that straddle the boundaries of pottery and sculpture, craft and fine art.

In 1956, Toshiko joined the Cleveland Institute of Art faculty, serving for nearly a decade and eventually rising to head the department. During this period, while she continued creating functional vessels, she also began to reformulate the concept of a pot. In *Multiple Spouted Bottle*, Toshiko plays with functionality by distending and fusing the bodies of four bottles while minimizing the apertures of the spouts.



Toshiko Takaezu (American, born 1922). *Bowl*, 1960. Stoneware. The Cleveland Museum of Art, Gift of the Ohio Northern Chapter of the American Institute of Decorators 1960.69.

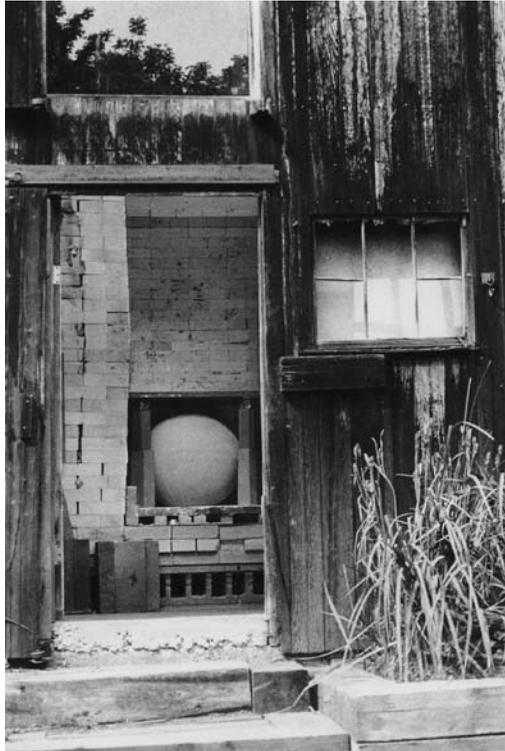
Toshiko Takaezu (American, born 1922). *Multiple Spouted Vessel*, 1958. Stoneware. The Cleveland Museum of Art, Gift of the Women's Council of the Cleveland Museum of Art in honor of William Mathewson Milliken 1958.282



Toshiko in her studio, Quakertown, New Jersey. Photograph by Andrea Baldeck.

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Toshiko's kiln, Quakertown, New Jersey.
Photograph by Andrea Baldeck.



Toshiko "paddling" a piece at Skidmore College. Photographs by J. Stanley Yake.



Throughout her career, Toshiko has continued to investigate the closed “form,” as she calls her sculptures. With a voracious interest in the techniques of ceramics, she employs various combinations of hand-throwing, wheel-building, and mold-building in her work. Her closed forms serve as volumetric canvases for her painterly applications of glaze. She employs a wide range of glazing techniques including brushing, dipping, pouring, dripping, and even manipulation with her fingers. The final magic arises in the kiln, when the sculpture “comes alive again in the finishing tour of the last firing—in the interplay of the glaze and the form.”

After retiring from Princeton University where she taught for 25 years, Toshiko moved into large-scale forms in 1992. Her studio space in Quakertown, New Jersey, was fitted with a specialized kiln. She chose to make monumental works at this time in her life because, “if I don’t make those big pieces now, I’ll never do it,” she said. “I like the idea of going around the piece and glazing—it’s almost like dancing.”

Toshiko Takaezu and the Japanese Aesthetic

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In the Japanese Shinto faith, elements of nature are thought to be embodied with spirits. This reverence for nature and the clay pervades the work of Toshiko Takaezu, the child of Japanese immigrants. When she trained at the Cranbrook Academy of Art, she took some of the black clay from her native Hawaii with her. For Toshiko, the clay “is alive and even when it is dry, it is still breathing! The whole process is an interplay between the clay and [herself] and often the clay has much to say.”

In 1955, Toshiko spent eight months in Japan where she lived in a Zen Buddhist monastery. When she studied the tea ceremony, she found a culture in which ceramics are a focal point. The host chooses all of the vessels to create a harmonious, tranquil experience for the guest. The whipped green tea, central to the ceremony, is sipped from special teabowls and the tea drinking is often preceded by a meal served upon a succession of carefully chosen vessels.

The aesthetic of tea ware leans toward the hand-formed, asymmetrical, and irregular. The ceramics often retain the process of creation on their surface, such as in her storage-jar vessels. The marks of manufacture, such as paddle marks, become an important element in Toshiko’s aesthetic vocabulary of austerity and embellishment.

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Storage Jar, Echizen Ware, 1400s. Japan, Muromachi Period (1392–1573). Stoneware with natural ash glaze. The Cleveland Museum of Art, John L. Severance Fund 1989.70



Toshiko “paddling” a piece at Skidmore College. Photograph by J. Stanley Yake.



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Toshiko Takaezu (American, born 1922). *Black Moon*, 1990s. Stoneware. The Cleveland Museum of Art, Gift of the Artist 2005.191



Toshiko Takaezu (American, born 1922). *Bottle*, 1957. Stoneware. The Cleveland Museum of Art, The Mary Spedding Milliken Memorial Collection, Gift of William Mathewson Milliken 1957.166



Water Jar with Grasses Design: Shino Ware, 1500s. Japan, Gifu Prefecture, Mino kilns, Momoyama period (1573–1615). Glazed stoneware with underglaze iron slip decoration. The Cleveland Museum of Art, John L. Severance Fund 1972.9.a

The adornment of tea ware is often fortuitous, such as in the natural glazes that form when wood ash precipitates on a vessel being heated in a closed kiln, as seen in *Storage Jar, Echizen Ware*. The result is a vessel with a luscious, tactile surface. While Toshiko has experimented with wood fires and ash glazes, her general approach to glazing also draws from the tea aesthetic. In *Black Moon*, the tantalizingly palpable glazed surface is a marriage of the forces of the artist and the kiln. Traditionally, the approach to applied glazes leans toward abstraction, as in the stylized grasses of *Water Jar*. Takaezu draws on this aesthetic in her fluid, calligraphic, minimalist approach to glazing, as seen in *Bottle*.

In her time in Japan, Takaezu visited Japanese ceramicists including Shoji Hamada, Rosanjin Kitaoji, and Toyo Kaneshige. From these masters, she found that the making of art and living life are interconnected: “It’s not the pottery, it’s just the East, its art and its philosophy.”