



7731 Kazuo Yagi (1918 - 1979)

"WATER IS"

A black clay ceramic plaque, mounted in a Perspex box frame

Signed K. Yagui

Japan, circa 1978*

Dimensions:

Ceramic plaque: H. 15cm x W. 18cm (6" x 7¼")

Frame: H. 31cm x W. 30cm x D. 5cm (12¼" x 12" x 2")

Special fitted box inscribed:

Toban (ceramic plaque). Yagi Kazuo

The geometric forms of the triangle, circle and square are universal and have been used to convey symbolic meanings throughout the ages. The three symbols were immortalised in a painting by the

Japanese Zen monk Sengai Gibon (1750-1837). Sengai's simple painting of three fundamental forms has been interpreted as the embodiment of the universe and the essence of Zen enlightenment. These simple geometric forms can be read as the symbols of emptiness, void and infinity.

Together with Earth, Fire, Air and Void, Water is one of Godai (Five Elements) that form the Universe – the belief originated in ancient India and has been incorporated into Japanese Buddhism. This philosophy has also been adapted to Buddhist architecture in Japan. For instance, a number of gorintō (five-ringed towers), the stupas that consist of the basic five sections: the earth ring (cube), the water ring (sphere), the fire ring (pyramid), the air ring (hemisphere) and the void ring (jewel-shape), can be found in Japanese Buddhist temples and Zen gardens.

According to Laozi: “Water is fluid, soft, and yielding. But water will wear away rock, which is rigid and cannot yield. As a rule, whatever is fluid, soft, and yielding will overcome whatever is rigid and hard. This is another paradox: what is soft is strong”. Water changes its form depending on where it is and where it goes, fits in any space, say, triangle, circle or square, even it can be ice or vapour.

This work by Yagi with an incomplete sentence “WATER IS” followed by the symbols of the triangle, circle and square is enigmatic, as if it is asking the viewer to complete its meaning or make their own interpretations like a koan, a question or dialogue used in Zen practice to provoke enlightenment.

Kazuo Yagi was born in Kyoto as the son of ceramic artist Issa Yagi (1894-1973). He studied sculpture at Kyoto City University of Arts and then ceramics at Shokosho Tojiki Shikenjo (Ceramic Institution of the Ministry of Commerce and Industry). From 1937 Yagi joined Nihon Tocho kyokai (Japan Ceramic Sculpture Association) and started exhibiting work at exhibitions including the Nitten (The Japan Fine Art Exhibition). In 1948 along with other like-minded potters including Osamu Suzuki (1926-2001) and Hikaru Yamada (1923-2001), he founded the influential avant-garde ceramic group, Sōdeisha (Crawling through Mud Association), a name which refers to a Chinese term meaning 'glazing flaw'. In 1973 he was awarded the Golden Prize of Japan Ceramic Society.

Yagi is one of the pioneers of new ceramic movements, being one of the first to incorporate inspiration from Western art into practical Japanese vessels. From the mid-1950s his ceramic work became less practical and more sculptural and was referred to as Objet-yaki (Ceramic Art Object), this new concept

was starkly different from traditional Japanese ceramic vessels. A perfect example being, Zamuza-shi no sanpo (Mr Samsa's Walk), a cylindrical work with the mouth closed and added tubular decorations, first exhibited in 1954 and now in private collection is regarded as a pivotal work in the history of Japanese ceramics. Although he brought new perspective to the ceramic world, he continued to honour the tradition of Japanese ceramics, making tea ceremony ware along with more avant-garde object works. With or without utility, Yagi's work shows the artist's creativity backed by his wit and humour.

Works by the artist can be found in the collections of many museums including: Victoria and Albert Museum, London; Museum of Modern Art, New York; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; Freer Sackler, Washington; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; Minneapolis Institute of Arts; Museo Internazionale delle Ceramiche, Faenza, Italy; The National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo; The National Museum of Modern Art, Kyoto; National Museum of Art, Osaka; Suntory Museum of Art, Tokyo; Hyogo Prefectural Museum of Art; Hiroshima Prefectural Art Museum; Niigata Prefectural Museum of Modern Art; Kyoto Municipal Museum of Art; Aichi Prefectural Ceramic Museum; Mie Prefectural Art Museum; Museum of Modern Art, Wakayama; Museum of Modern Ceramic Art, Gifu.

*For another, almost identical example (entitled "Water is", 1978) from the same series, see National Museum of Modern Art, Kyoto, et al. eds., Kazuo Yagi, exhibition catalogue, (Japan, 1981), no. 163.

Selected exhibitions:

- 1950 Japon : Céramique Contemporaine, Musée Cernuschi, Paris, November 1950 – February 1951
- 1951 Contemporary Japanese Ceramics, Museo Internazionale delle Ceramiche, Faenza
- 1954 Genbi-ten (Modern art exhibition), Kyoto City Museum
- 1959 2nd International Ceramics Exhibition, Ostend, Belgium (winning a grand prize)
- 1959 Gendai Nihon no Toge (Contemporary Japanese Ceramic Art), National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo
- 1961 Kyoto-Paris Kokan Toge, Kyoto Municipal Museum of Art, Musée national de céramique Sèvres, Sèvres, France
- 1962 3rd International Ceramics Exhibition, Prague, Czechoslovakia (winning a grand prize)

- 1963 Survey of Contemporary Japan Ceramics, National Museum of Modern Art, Kyoto
- 1964 Gendai Nihon no Togeï (Contemporary Japanese Ceramic Art), The National Museum of Modern Art, Kyoto
- 1965 New Japanese Painting and Sculpture, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, USA
- 1966 1st Japan Art Festival, New York, Chicago, Pittsburgh and San Francisco, USA
- 1968 The New Generation of Contemporary Ceramics, National Museums of Modern Art, Tokyo and Kyoto
- 1970 Contemporary Ceramics: Europe and Japan, National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo and Kyoto
- 1971 Contemporary Ceramics: the U.S., Canada, Mexico and Japan, National Museums of Modern Art, Kyoto and Tokyo
- 1976 Japanese Ceramic Masterpieces, Rostock and Dresden, Germany
- 1977 Japanese Contemporary Masterpieces, National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo
- Celebrating Thirty Years of Sodeisha Exhibition, Kyoto Municipal Museum of Art, Kyoto
- 1993-94 Modern Japanese Ceramics in American Collections, Japan Society, New York; New Orleans Museum of Art, New Orleans; Honolulu Academy of Art, Honolulu
- 2003 Isamu Noguchi and Modern Japanese Ceramics: A Close Embrace of the Earth, Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C.; Japan Society, New York; National Japanese American Museum, Los Angeles
- 2005-07 Contemporary Clay: Japanese Ceramics for the New Century, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; Japan Society, New York
- 2008 Modern Ceramic Art from an International Perspective, Aichi Prefectural Ceramic Museum
- 2014-16 Into the Fold: Contemporary Japanese Ceramics from Horvitz Collection, Samuel P. Harn Museum of Art, University of Florida, Gainesville
- 2015 Ancient to Modern – Japanese Contemporary Ceramics and their Sources, San Antonio Museum of Art, Texas
- Unfolding Worlds: Japanese Screens and Contemporary Ceramics from the Gitter Yelen Collection, Houston Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

