THE NAEJ COLLECTION: BAMBOO CULTURE IN JAPAN

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1 Sculpture, *Bridge*, Yonezawa Jiro (born 1956), circa 2010, bamboo, cedar and lacquer, 103 x 13.8 cm. JB001

IN THE UNIVERSE of Japanese bamboo, nature, society, craft, utility and tradition are intertwined, forming a cultural vessel woven from a multitude of diverse strands. This formation has taken place slowly, over thousands of years, and only during the last two centuries has Japanese bamboo at last attained its full creative and aesthetic potential. In still more recent decades, connoisseurship, collection, publication and exhibition have begun to play an important role in enhancing our appreciation and understanding of this noble art form. The nearly 1000 carefully selected baskets in the Naej collection have, in particular, made an unrivalled contribution to this process, offering an encyclopaedic overview of a lesser-known aspect of Japan's material culture. The collection also serves not only as a standard bearer for the talent and energy of contemporary Japanese bamboo artists, but also as an assertion of the growing importance of bamboo today as a fast-renewing, resilient and abundant resource, with the potential to make a significant contribution to the future well-being of our planet (1).

As well as being an important food source, bamboo has been integral to Japanese culture over many millennia as the preferred material for a vast range of applications, encompassing structural components for architecture (and the scaffolding necessary for building work), blinds, water pipes and roofing; practical containers for a myriad of purposes from the roughest agricultural work to the delicate display of seasonal flowers; tools for some of Japan's most respected crafts, including ceramics, textiles, lacquer, painting and woodblock printing; everyday domestic utensils such as chopsticks, fans or serving dishes; and equipment for many unique performative or physical disciplines, from the tea ceremony, to the playing of the *shakuhachi* and other bamboo flutes, to the martial arts.

This last aspect is central to my own experience of Japan. I lived in the country between the impressionable ages of twelve to sixteen and forty-five years later remain fluent in written and spoken Japanese. I continue to pursue my passion for the traditional martial art of kendo, having risen to the humble rank of seventh dan *kyoshi* (black belt, second level). Respect is central to any kendo lineage, not only towards one's teachers and adversaries in the *dojo* (martial arts hall), but also towards the essential implements and furniture of the art form. This martial art stems from the culture of the samurai—Japan's warrior class—whose main tool, the sword, is understood to be imbued with *kami* (god, spirit, divinity) and thus worthy of the highest regard. The *shinai*, written with characters meaning literally, "bamboo sword", is kendo's substitute for the samurai *katana* blade, forged from many layers of folded steel. Embodying the same ideas, mores and etiquette as the *katana*, the *shinai* is made of lengths of *madake* (*Phyllostachys bambusoides*), often translated as "timber bamboo", which is abundant in Japan and a mainstay of Japanese basketry.

Since respect for the equipment of kendo, especially the

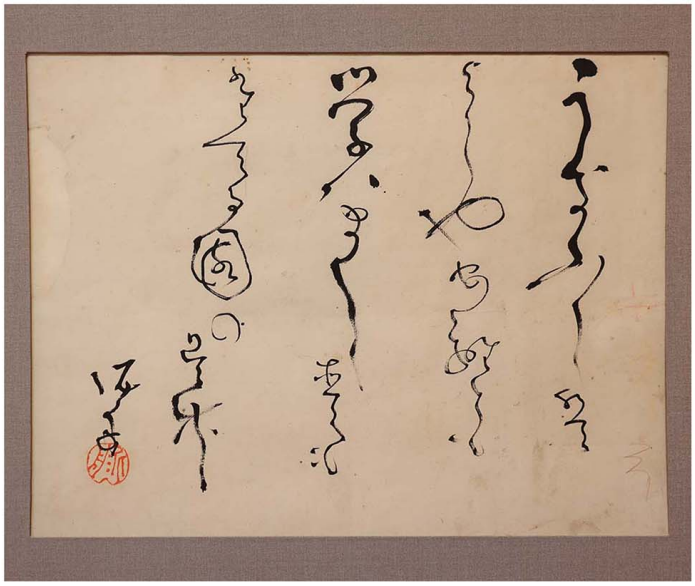
shinai, is an essential part of my practice, knowledge of bamboo and its care is ingrained in my being. Bamboo artisans, no less than *kenshi* (kendo practitioners), must immerse themselves completely in the materials they use in their chosen art form, making bamboo a common ground shared by both kendo and Japanese basketry. I can also appreciate the audible and tactile qualities of bamboo in the rhythmic clacking of *shinai* in *kirikaeshi* (repetitive reciprocal side-striking practice) in kendo: when a group of twenty to thirty *kenshi* engage in *kirikaeshi*, the sound and feeling of the bamboo is like a large thicket of bamboo rustling in the wind. Strong, flexible and yielding appropriately without breaking, since early times bamboo has been admired in both China and Japan as the perfect symbol of an upright, learning, striving human being. The rustle of a bamboo forest in the wind evokes a visceral response in me, reminding me of a poem by Takahashi Deishu, one of my heroes, a kendo master much admired for his skill with the *yari* (spear), who lived during the turbulent Meiji era (1868–1912), when Japan made the transition from semi-isolation and feudalism and emerged onto the world stage as a modern nation state: "Many hardships / are given us in life / but if we learn from them / we will grow straight and strong / as a sturdy bamboo planted in a garden" (**2**, **3**).

These qualities of bamboo-like flexibility—willingness to learn and resilience in the face of criticism and adversity—lie at the heart of all Japan's noblest cultural traditions, not least bamboo basketry itself, whose leaders have faced formidable odds in elevating their practice from a rural craft to a sophisticated fine art form in just 200 years. Their efforts quickly attracted the admiration of Western institutions and individuals from the closing decades of the 19th century. Christopher Dresser, the British critic, for example, opined in 1882:

> The Japanese are the best basket-makers in the world, and they alone have raised the manufacture to an art industry. They make baskets which are not only useful but beautiful, and many of them must be classed as true art objects … As I write I have by my side a number of baskets from Japan, China, Formosa, India, Jamaica, Ceylon, Java, Haiti, Spain, and Algeria, but none of them are comparable as works of art with those from Japan.[1]

During this period, World's Fairs held in major cities, including Paris, Philadelphia, Chicago and St. Louis, featured large Japanese sections, while within Japan, the internationally minded leaders of the reforming Meiji government organised Domestic Industrial Expositions, starting in 1877, in preparation for each of those international events. Hayakawa Shokosai I (1815–1897), the important early master, was a regular exhibitor at the domestic expositions and, between 1885 and 1898, the Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe in Hamburg systematically collected no fewer than sixty of his baskets (they were not rediscovered in the vaults until 1984). In 1891, Edward C. Moore, chief designer to the firm of Tiffany & Co., donated nearly eighty baskets to The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

While there was little organised Western collecting activity during the early 20th century, elite awareness of the sophistication of Japanese bamboo art was stimulated by the Paris exhibition of 1925 (discussed below) and by the distinguished German architect, urban planner and design theorist, Bruno Taut, who travelled to Japan in 1933, taking a particularly keen interest in the work of three leading contemporaries: Tanabe Chikuunsai I (1877–1937), Iizuka Rokansai (1890–1958) and Yamamoto Chikuryosai I (1868–1945). From the later decades of the 20th century, large collections of Japanese bamboo art have been formed outside Japan, starting



2 Poem on bamboo, Takahashi Deishu (1835–1903), circa 1868–1903, ink on paper, 23 x 30 cm

[1] Christopher Dresser, *Japan: Its Architecture, Art, and Art Manufactures*, London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1882, pp. 454–455.

3 Basket for flowers, *Samurai*, Tanabe Chikuunsai IV (born 1973), 2012, bamboo, rattan and lacquer, 14 x 70 cm

4 Basket for charcoal with a hanging ring, China, 17th–18th century, bamboo and lacquer, 17.5 x 17.1 x 18.1 cm

5 Wrapper for basket (**4**) with drawing and inscription, Hayakawa Shokosai III (1864–1922), 1909, ink on silk

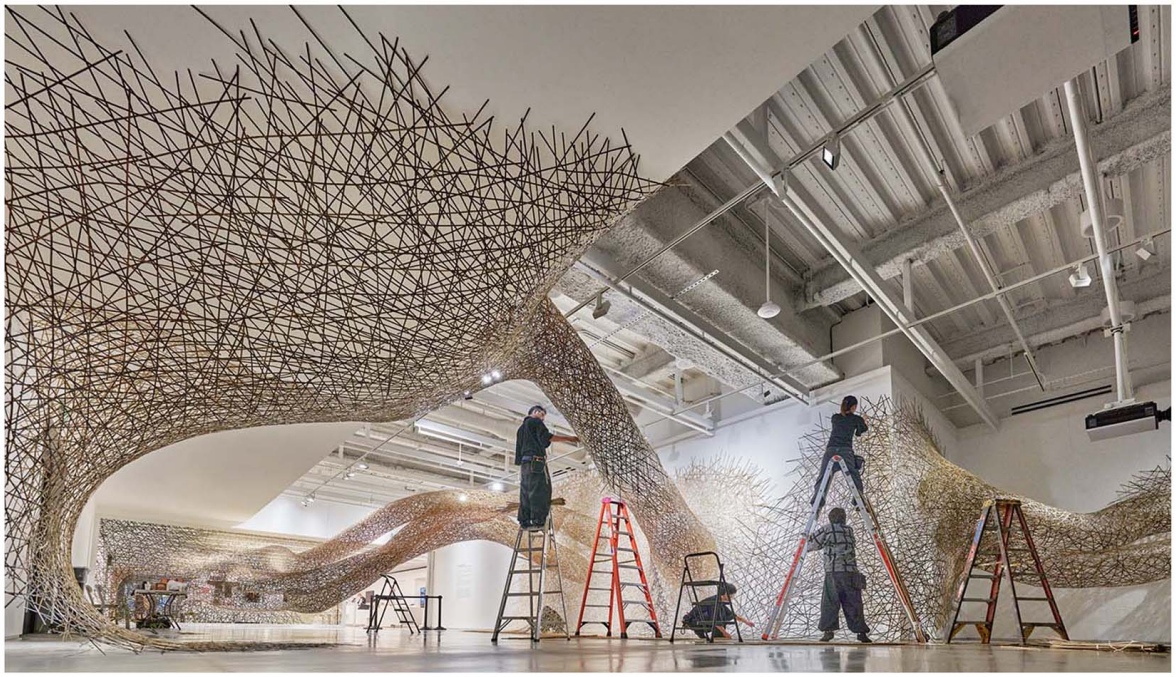
7

Sculpture, *Two Dragons*, Tanabe Chikuunsai IV (born 1973), 2018, *hobichiku* bamboo, bamboo root and rattan, 103 x 51 x 51 cm and 81 x 51 x 51 cm

6 Handled basket for tea utensils, Hayakawa Shokosai I (1815–1897), second half of the 19th century, bamboo and rattan, 17 x 15 x 17.5 cm

with that of the philanthropist, Lloyd Cotsen, Chairman of Neutrogena Corporation, who donated almost 900 baskets to the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco in 2002, followed by Diane and Arthur Abbey, whose collection was shown at (and promised to) The Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2017 and toured to several institutions in Japan in 2019.

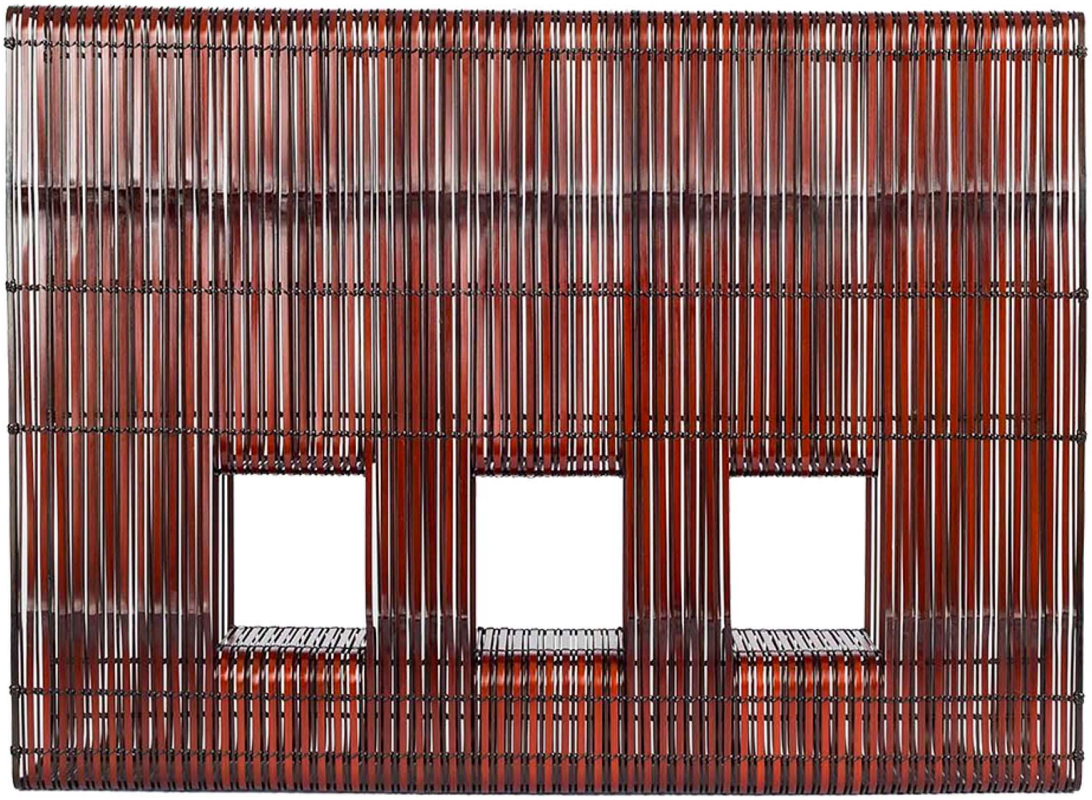
Comprehensive in its scope and depth, the Naej collection covers every moment in the development of woven bamboo over the last two centuries, showing how leading masters have raised their country's basketry to a globally admired art form. It includes Chinese pieces that directly inspired some of the early Japanese practitioners, such as a charcoal basket once owned by Hayakawa Shokosai III (1864–1922) (and accompanied by the artist's own drawing of this treasured piece) and another made by his pioneering



8 Installation, *Life Cycles*, Japan House Los Angeles, Tanabe Chikuunsai IV (born 1973), 2022, bamboo. Photo by Tadayuki Minamoto

father, Shokosai I—an early example of an almost direct copy of a Chinese original—all the way down to contemporary masterpieces, such as *Two Dragons*, created in 2018 by Tanabe Chikuunsai IV (**4**, **5**, **6**, **7**). Chikuunsai IV is famed, in particular, for large-scale installations at leading museums and institutions around the world, the most recent being *Life Cycles*, more than 20 metres long, that was on view at Japan House Los Angeles from July 2022 to January 2023 (**8**). The Naej collection is rich in other work by this international superstar (**9**, **10**).

The owner of the Naej collection has described his early fascination with East Asian tea drinking and its numerous accoutrements, including—in addition to baskets—kettles, water jars, scoops, whisks, braziers, bowls and scrolls, both



9 Sculpture, *Central Gate*, Tanabe Chikuunsai IV (born 1973), 2015, bamboo, rattan and lacquer, 39.3 x 53.5 x 10.5 cm

10 Basket for flowers, *Wind in the Sky*, Tanabe Chikuunsai IV (born 1973), 2014, bamboo and rattan, 33 x 55 x 17 cm

pictorial and calligraphic. The aesthetics of basket weaving in Japan encompass both *wabi*, a rustic style that reflects a preference for understatement and the appearance of impermanence or imperfection and, in strong contrast, a more intricate, formal and symmetrical manner of Chinese origin (**11**). This distinction, essential to the appreciation of bamboo art, reflects the differences between two different traditions of social tea drinking, *chanoyu* and *sencha*, that co-existed during the latter half of the Edo period (1615–1868), with different baskets required for each style (**12**, **13**). The older *chanoyu* has its roots in Japan's mediaeval period, a high point of samurai culture when the country was riven by almost ceaseless civil wars and the military class embraced Zen Buddhism, with its emphasis on austere self-discipline, disregard for self, unity with nature and the *wabi* aesthetic. *Sencha*, popular among literary artistic coteries in western Japan from the middle of the 18th century, was an attempt to recreate (with imperfect information) what were believed to be the contemporary tea-drinking norms of the Confucian ruling elite in China. This coincided with a time when the shoguns—Japan's military leaders—imposed their own version of Confucianism on society at large (**14**).

A *tokonoma* (art niche), typically displaying a hanging scroll and a flower arrangement in a bamboo, metal or ceramic container, plays a central role in establishing the seasonal tone and cultural flavour of any tea gathering, whether *chanoyu* or *sencha*, and makes an essential contribution to the all-important atmosphere of thoughtfulness towards one's guests that defines the Japanese "tea ceremony", as it has

11 Basket for flowers in Chinese style, Kansai region, early 20th century, bamboo, rattan and lacquer, 27.7 x 21.3 x 18 cm

12 Hanging basket for flowers in the form of a taro tuber, *Katsura River*, Tanabe Chikuunsai I (1877–1937), 1921, bamboo, 21.5 x 20 x 20 cm

13 Handled cabinet for tea utensils, China, 18th–19th century, bamboo and wood (metal studs), 44.7 x 37.3 x 30.5 cm

14 Basket for flowers with outsize handle, Kajiwara Koho (born 1935), late 20th–early 21st century, bamboo, rattan and bamboo root, with staining, 23.5 x 35 x 33 cm (without handle)

come to be known in the West (**15**). *Sencha* tends to require traditional basket forms, that mimic the form of ancient Chinese ceramics or bronze ritual vessels; in addition, the *sencha* host needs a container to store all the essential components for a full ceremony (**16**, **17**). These time-honoured forms, either Chinese originals or Japanese copies, provided the basis for tea-related baskets until the closing decades of the Edo period when masters, such as Hayakawa Shokosai I, started to sign their work—an indication that they were beginning to regard themselves as autonomous artists rather than self-effacing artisans merely copying imported goods (**18**). Hayakawa Shokosai I did not confine himself to tea baskets, but also branched out into accessories that appealed to the more contemporary taste of some of his clients, including bamboo briefcases (for *hakama*, a traditional samurai attire also worn by Kabuki actors) and bowler hats mostly woven from rattan, the latter made for Kabuki actors, such as Ichikawa Danjuro IX, one of the leading fashion influencers of his time (**19**). Other important artists, who contributed to the evolution of basketry at this time, and shortly after, include Wada Waichisai (1851–1904) and Yamamoto Chikuryosai I in the Kansai region (Osaka and Kyoto) and Iizuka Hosai I and II in the Kanto region (Tokyo and surrounding prefectures) (**20**, **21**, **22**).

15 *Tokonoma* (art niche) for the Japanese "tea ceremony"

A key moment for worldwide recognition of Japanese basketry was the Exposition internationale des arts décoratifs et industriels modernes (International Exposition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Arts), held in Paris in 1925, where so many modernist trends in art and design gained international acclaim, and leading exponents of Japanese bamboo art not only won prizes, but also served as jurors; an outstanding recent addition to the Naej collection is an elaborate flower basket in Ryū Rikyō style, either for free-hanging or placing on the floor, made by Tanabe Chikuunsai I for that very event (**23**). Further encouragement came in 1927, when the government-sponsored Teiten annual art exhibition finally included a crafts section (having previously been dedicated solely to painting and sculpture), while leading department stores, such as Takashimaya and Mitsukoshi, started to hold regular group and solo shows of baskets. This shift provided new commercial opportunities for an increasingly sophisticated and wealthy public to indulge its taste for Japanese artwork.

16 Hanging basket for flowers in Chinese style, Tanabe Chikuunsai I (1877–1937), 1924, bamboo, rattan and lacquer (iron fitting), 20.3 x 13 x 11 cm

17 Basket for flowers with side handles in the form of a flat-topped bronze, Suemura Shobun (1917–2000), late 20th century, bamboo, rattan and lacquer, 21 x18.6 cm

Leading artists from this period include Hayakawa Shokosai III, Maeda Chikubosai (1872–1950) and Suzuki Gengensai (1891–1950), but in terms of appreciation by today's collectors, all these great names are eclipsed by that of Iizuka Rokansai, widely considered the greatest Japanese bamboo artist (**24**–**27**). Not just an aesthetic visionary, but also a passionate advocate for his art form, Rokansai developed a theoretical basis for the appreciation of basketry, proposing a three-tier categorisation into *shin* (correct or formal), *gyo* (moving or semi-formal) and *so* (grassy or informal), mirroring similar categorisations in the respective worlds of calligraphy and flower arrangement, from formal and precise to cursive and abbreviated (**28**, **29**, **30**). The *shin* style, Rokansai maintained, is symmetrical and traditional and has a tighter weave compared to the *so* style, which has a more open appearance and is asymmetrical and almost abstract. Between *shin* and *so* is *gyo*, a transitional stage between the two.

18 Handled basket for flowers, *Six Elements*, Hayakawa Shokosai I (1815–1897), circa 1893, bamboo and rattan, 44 x 19.3 cm

19

Bowler hat, Hayakawa Shokosai I (1815–1897), circa 1880–1897, rattan and bamboo, 12.5 x 30.5 x 26.5 cm

20 Basket for tea utensils, attributed to Wada Waichisai I (1851–1901), circa 1901, bamboo and rattan (silk cord), 18.5 x 17.3 x 11.5 cm

21 Basket for flowers with wood handles, *Ho Koji*, Yamamoto Chikuryosai I (Shoen, 1868–1945), 1921, bamboo, rattan and wooden handles (iron fitting), 25.6 x 13.7 x 22.1 cm

22

Basket for flowers in Chinese style with side handles, Iizuka Hosai I (1851–1916), late 19th–early 20th century, bamboo, rattan and lacquer, 29 x 24 cm

As well as general stylistic categories, the specific subjects and materials chosen by bamboo artists play an important part in their strategies for communicating with their audience. To give just one striking example, Tanabe Chikuunsai I incorporated antique arrow shafts in several works made around the start of his mature period, including a cabinet for *sencha* utensils and a flower basket named "Daybreak over Mount Fuji" (**31**, **32**). In both these masterpieces, Chikuunsai I blended the elegance and formality of the imagined China, that lies at the heart of *sencha*, with the assertive spirit of the samurai class. In this way, he simultaneously appealed to two foundational aspects of early-modern culture—the samurai ethos and nostalgia for the

23 Basket for flowers in Ryu Rikyo style for free-hanging or placing on the floor, Tanabe Chikuunsai I (1877–1937), 1925, rattan, *susudake* bamboo, *madake* bamboo and lacquer, 58.5 x 31.5 x 31.5 cm

24 Handled basket for flowers, Hayakawa Shokosai III (1864–1922), 1920, *susudake* bamboo, 50 x 20.2 x 20 cm

Confucian scholar-recluse ideal—that continued to resonate with his audience just two generations after they had passed into history. Samurai culture continues to influence Japanese art to this day, as may be seen in its popularity as a theme in popular media, such as manga and anime.

Looking at the stylistic trajectory of a prolific master, such as Tanabe Chikuunsai I, I am often reminded of my own lifelong progress in the traditional martial art of kendo, since both illuminate differences between Japanese and Western approaches to the processes of learning and development. Interestingly, Tanabe Chikuunsai IV (great-grandson of Chikuunsai I) titled one of his recent catalogues, *Shu Ha Ri* (2020), with exactly the same words, *shuhari*, that are used for the different stages of martial arts training. *Shu*, literally "protect" or "preserve", refers to the process of learning every element of a given tradition or lineage from the teacher. This is the longest and most laborious component of the *shuhari* process and requires

25 Basket for flowers in the form of a cluster fig, Maeda Chikubosai I (1872–1950), bamboo and rattan, 56.8 x 22.3 x 31.5 cm

26

Handled basket for flowers, *Good Omen*, Suzuki Gengensai (1891–1950), circa 1923–1950, bamboo and rattan, 58.2 x 18.3 x 20.4 cm

mastery of a tremendous amount of detail. A master-disciple relationship mandates complete focus by the disciple on the teacher's every habit, theory and process, occasionally to the extent of the student becoming a live-in apprentice. A further process, known as *shukuren*, recursive and often repeated rather than linear, is included within the *shu* component of *shuhari*. The first stage, *shu*, is learning, directly from the teacher; the second, *ku*, refers to testing and figuring out for oneself; the third, *ren*, means practice, putting the knowledge acquired through *shu* and *ku* into regular use. Then, the cycle repeats and the student returns to learning from the teacher again. Some masters make little effort to talk, but instead rely on teaching by example, making the training process even more reliant on the disciple's eagerness to learn.

The *shukuren* process can have different levels or parts and may need to be retraced in several cycles over long periods of time. Only when the student has mastered one element in this way can the next begin. A student may be adept in certain styles or techniques of their lineage and

lacking in others, making their study even longer until it reaches full fruition. In this circular pattern, learning is not just studied as a matter of theory, but is absorbed as part of the disciple's physical repertoire. As the saying goes in calligraphy, martial arts and Zen training, *jiri itchi*, "practice and theory are one". Practical knowledge is passed down from teacher to disciple in the lineage of each particular art form, a process that can take from a minimum of ten years to several decades, depending on the tradition. Returning to the broader *shuhari* sequence, in kendo as in bamboo art, *ha* (breaking away) can only be accomplished after long years of training until the disciple has equalled or surpassed the master, while *ri* (departing) refers to the development of one's own style, the full expression of a lineage enhanced by a new master's own direction and expression.

This contrasts with the Western model of learning, where technical training and the mastery of a certain style are not prized to the same extent as in China or Japan. Especially in the 20th century, the Western focus has instead been on "breaking moulds" and forming avant-gardes, with even the latest styles and forms often being rapidly discarded in favour of experimentation and novelty. This process can be positive when it results in interesting individualistic pieces,

27 Handled basket for flowers, *Rustic Fence*, Iizuka Rokansai (1890–1958), circa 1945–1950, leached bamboo, 30.5 x 35.5 x 21.5 cm

28

Handled basket for flowers, Yamamoto Chikuryosai I (1868–1945), 1921, bamboo and rattan, 35.8 x 21.7 x 27.9 cm

29 Basket for flowers with side handles, *Golden Autumn*, Nakata Kinseki (1902–1959), mid-20th century, bamboo and rattan, 27 x 22 cm

30 Hanging basket for flowers, *Cormorant Cage*, Iizuka Rokansai (1890–1958), circa 1930, *susudake* bamboo, 27.5 x 28.5 x 25 cm

31

Cabinet for tea utensils, Tanabe Chikuunsai I (1877–1937), 1920, antique arrow-shafts, bamboo, lacquer and gold leaf, 44.8 x 40 x 28 cm

but only so long as it promotes dialogue between artist and audience. For me, it is even more inspiring to see new styles created and artistic expressions developed within a living lineage developed in full knowledge of the old. This process fosters a deeper dialogue between artist and audience, forged through mutual understanding of traditional culture and enabling what was once a minor craft to evolve into a sophisticated art form of global significance.

This is exactly what has happened in the case of Japanese bamboo art, as became clear to me several years ago when I was fortunate to take a tour with Tai Modern Gallery to Beppu (Oita Prefecture), which became a flourishing tourist centre in the late 19th century thanks to its natural *onsen* (hot springs). Blessed with abundant bamboo of the highest quality and a ready market for souvenirs, Beppu developed into a hub of the basket industry and, as early as 1902, the city set up the Beppu Municipal Technical Apprentice School, which has nurtured many bamboo craftsmen. Today, the Beppu City Traditional Bamboo Crafts Center and Oita Prefectural Art Museum both house magnificent basket displays. As well as studying those, I was able to talk with many of the artists and learn how they use traditional techniques and forms as their vocabulary and yet are constantly striving to apply those techniques to new modes of expression. In addition to Oita, the major cities of Kyoto, Osaka, Tokyo and Nagoya have developed as important markets and centres of bamboo art. Other hubs of production today include Niigata Prefecture (together with Sado Island) and Tochigi Prefecture (birthplace of Iizuka Rokansai).

I recently had the chance to ask the owner of the Naej collection about his thoughts on baskets and the collecting process. He explained that his appreciation of the tea ceremony has taught him that, even when a basket no longer serves its original purpose, it can still stand on its own as a piece of fine art that transcends considerations of use, equal to all other Japanese media as a living form of expression that never grows stagnant or old. His collection covers the full history and evolution of bamboo art, but since the publication of his first catalogue, he has become particularly interested in the origins of various basket types and the search for the key innovators within the tradition. Fascinated by the way that baskets have evolved from their early craft roots into the sophisticated art form of today, he is especially eager to see where new generations of artists can take the Japanese bamboo tradition.

Collectors and enthusiasts love to search for the best places to see basketry and bamboo art, new and old. Currently, rich centres of basket and bamboo art include: Beppu, with its multiple bamboo-related venues and the Oita Prefectural Museum; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco; the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris; and, of course, great bamboo installations, such as Chikuunsai IV's recent one at Japan House Los Angeles. Naej enjoys visiting knowledgeable dealers, such as Masami Oguchi of Hanabako in Tokyo and others, who exhibit during Asia Week in New York and London. His suggested reading material includes *Baskets: Masterpieces of Japanese Bamboo Art 1850–2015*, a catalogue of the first part of his collection published in 2018; a further volume that will appear in 2023; Melissa Rinne, *Masters of Bamboo: Artistic Lineage in the Lloyd Cotsen Japanese Basket Collection* (2007); Monika Bincsik, *Japanese Bamboo Art: The Abbey Collection*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin, 2017; and *Fendre L'Air: Art of Bamboo in Japan* (Musée du Quai Branly-Jacques Chirac, 2018).

32 Basket for flowers with natural bamboo handle, *Daybreak Over Mount Fuji,* Tanabe Chikuunsai I (1877–1937), 1921, bamboo, rattan and split arrow shafts with gold leaf and red and black lacquer, 39 x 23.5 x 23.5 cm

Thanks to the Naej collection, Japanese bamboo art is now emerging onto the international stage after undergoing many changes over the centuries. It continues to evolve where other traditions have given way in the face of modern "progress", preserving old ways, yet adapting to changes in global culture, driven forward by the process of *shuhari*, a training philosophy deeply embedded in Japanese society and tradition. In a turbulent world of resource depletion and climate change, bamboo culture stands strong against the winds of adversity, resilient as a lesson in traditional harmony with nature. With artists, scholars, curators and collectors now collaborating in the formation of a new bamboo culture of greater global significance, the Naej collection is a wonderful expression of this most vital, current and living fine art form. Just like that sturdy, resilient plant celebrated in Takahashi Deishu's poem, Japanese bamboo culture and art seem destined to be with us for many centuries to come.