

Presence and Remembrance: The Art of Toshiko Takaezu

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Figure 1. Toshiko Takaezu, American, born 1922. *Moon*, 1987–88. Stoneware, h. 55.8 cm. Princeton University Art Museum, gift from members of the Class of 1969 (y1990-61); *Night*, 1990s. Stoneware, h. 146.4 cm. Princeton University Art Museum, gift of the artist (2008-8). All subsequent figures are by Toshiko Takaezu unless otherwise noted.

Presence and Remembrance: The Art of Toshiko Takaezu

CARY Y. LIU

One of the attributes of Toshiko Takaezu's ceramics for which she is best known is the closing of the vessel form. By bringing together the mouth of a traditional cup or vase, leaving only a pinhole to allow heated gas to escape during firing, the utilitarian vessel is rendered useless and forced to be perceived as an object for art's sake. This seemingly simple manipulation of clay had a significant role in transforming ceramics from a practical craft to a practice of art, and Takaezu's work was at the vanguard of this revolution, which for the artist may have had Asian roots. In Zen Buddhist and Daoist thought, it is in emptiness that usefulness is found. A ceramic bowl in and of itself is useless; only its empty center, where substances can be collected and shaped, provides function. If an open bowl is a paradigm for this way of thinking, closing the top is transformative. Once closed, the emptiness is sealed inside the form and thereby rendered useless, whereas the form gains presence and becomes useful as a sculptural work of art (figs. 1–15, 19 right, 22).

It seems fitting, then, that the act of closing is ritualized in Takaezu's working process. Before closing a form, she inserts a piece of clay wrapped in paper into the vessel's interior. During the firing process, the paper burns away and the clay nugget hardens, becoming a rattle inside each form. Although this acoustic element cannot be experienced in museum exhibitions or in photographs—also true of the tactile feel of her ceramics or the intensity of glaze colors after an outdoor rain—it is a remarkably intimate feature of her ceramics. In July 2007 I visited Anne d'Harnoncourt (1943–2008), director of the Philadelphia Museum of Art and a champion of Takaezu's art. On the windowsill in front of her desk was one of Takaezu's closed-form ceramics. With Anne's permission, I picked up the form and shook it to hear the rattle sound. The jingle brought immediate delight to us both. Later that day we found ourselves standing in front of a large closed form, about five feet in height. We looked at each other and wondered with a laugh whether it would rattle if we could even manage to lift it. I am glad to have shared those moments of joy and mirth in appreciation of this artist.

One of eleven children, Takaezu was born in 1922 in Pepeekeo, Hawaii, to immigrant parents from the Japanese town of Gushikawa on the island of Okinawa. Introduced to pottery while working at the Hawaii Potter's Guild, she

enrolled in 1948 at the University of Hawaii, where she studied ceramics under the tutelage of Claude Horan (born 1917). She continued her studies in 1951 at the Cranbrook Academy of Arts in Michigan, mentored by the influential Finnish ceramist and teacher Maija Grotell (1899–1973).¹ After becoming Grotell's assistant, Takaezu also began her teaching career, instructing summer courses at the Cranbrook Academy.

In 1955 Takaezu pursued her interest in ceramics by traveling in Japan for eight months. She absorbed Japanese culture by staying at a Zen Buddhist temple, studying the tea ceremony, and visiting the studios of famous potters, among them Kitaōji Rosanjin (1883–1959) (fig. 16), Hamada Shōji (1894–1978) (fig. 17), and Kaneshige Toyo (1896–1967). The connection to Japan's artistic tradition was to remain a cornerstone in Takaezu's art. She reaches back to traditional forms and techniques, as well as to the social context of the Japanese *mingei*, or "arts of the people," movement. The *mingei* movement, which had developed during the 1920s and 1930s, honored the beauty in everyday and utilitarian objects made by unknown craftsmen. Takaezu and others, such as her friend and fellow American artist Peter Voulkos (1924–2002), embraced this aesthetic sensibility and incorporated it into contemporary American ceramics. A remarkable artist and influential teacher, Takaezu is recognized as one of a number of ceramic artists in the 1950s and 1960s, including Voulkos, who were instrumental in moving the practice of ceramics beyond a commercial trade to become a form of artistic expression.

Returning from Japan, Takaezu joined the faculty of the Cleveland Institute of Art, where she taught until leaving in 1965. During this period she experimented with functional ceramic forms by closing the mouth of vessels, converting them into non-functional sculptural forms. This was a transformative moment in the development of ceramics as an expressive art in America. Having established a studio in Clifton, New Jersey, she began teaching ceramics in 1967 in the Program in Visual Arts at Princeton University, where her close association with the University was born. Eventually, she relocated to Quakertown, New Jersey, where she also moved her studio. The move afforded the opportunity to install larger kilns that allowed her to fire new forms and bigger works, some as tall as six feet.



Figure 2. Three untitled forms, 1960s. Stoneware, h. 20.0 cm.; h. 50.4 cm.; h. 50.2 cm. Princeton University Art Museum, gifts of the artist (2006-494; 2006-487; 2006-490).



Figure 3. Two untitled forms, 1970s. Salt-fired stoneware, h. 19.4 cm.; h. 23.4 cm. Princeton University Art Museum, gifts of the artist (2006-493; 2008-14).



Figure 4. Four untitled forms, 1970s. Stoneware, h. 25.6 cm.; anagama-fired stoneware with waddle, h. 66.9 cm.; anagama-fired stoneware, h. 27.5 cm.; anagama-fired stoneware, h. 16.3 cm. Princeton University Art Museum, gifts of the artist (2006-491; 2006-485; 2006-492; 2006-496).

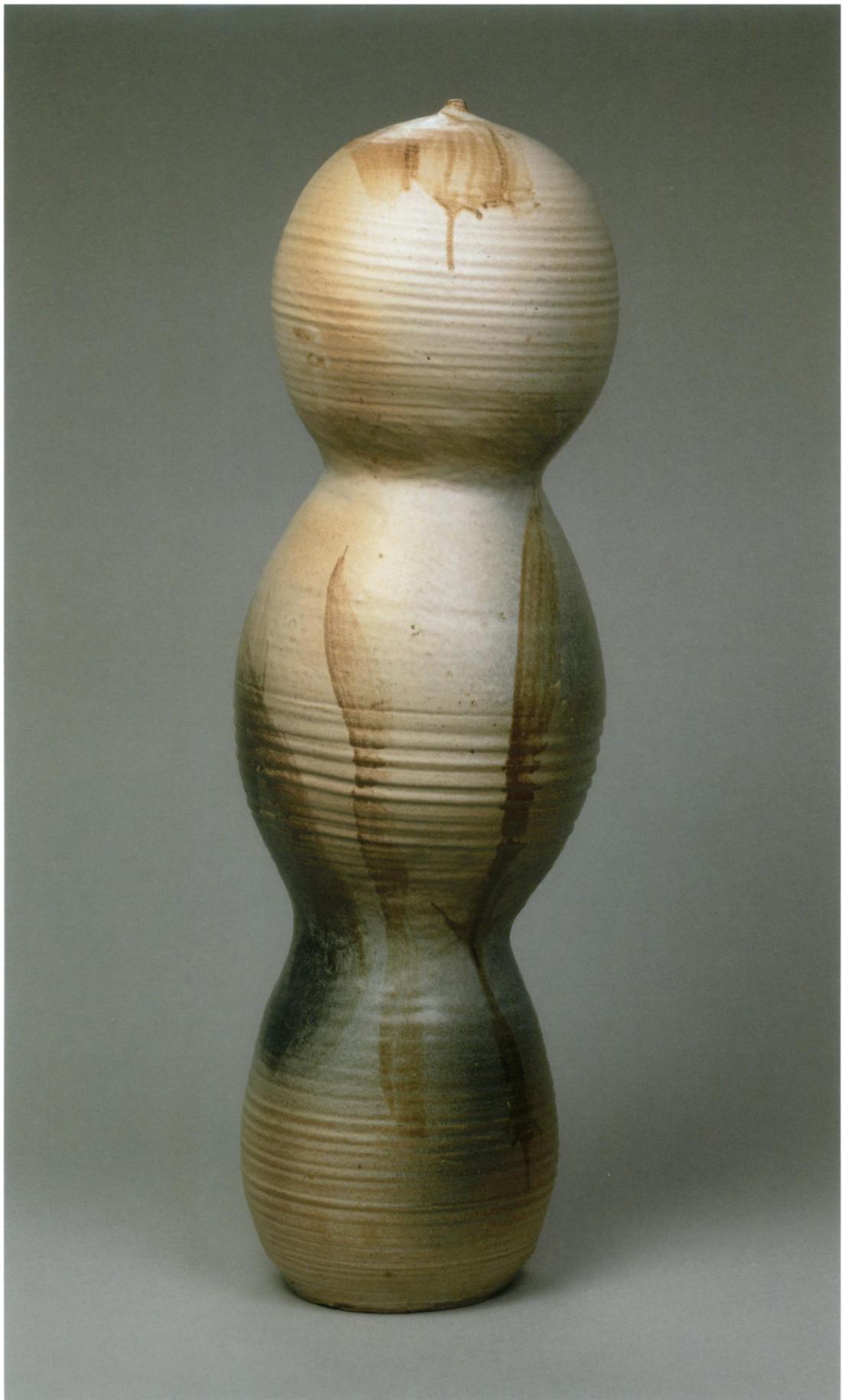


Figure 5. *White Tamarind*,
1970s. Stoneware, h. 89.0 cm.
Princeton University Art
Museum, gift of the artist
(2008-13).



Figure 6. Two untitled forms, 1980s. Porcelain, h. 14.8 cm.; stoneware, h. 16.4 cm. Princeton University Art Museum, gifts of the artist (2006-495; 2006-499).



Figure 7. Two untitled forms, 1980s. Stoneware, h. 17.9 cm.; h. 14.7 cm. Princeton University Art Museum, gifts of the artist (2006-502; 2006-501).



Figure 8. *Sunrise Egg*, 1980s, with later reglazing. Stoneware, h. 84.2 cm. Princeton University Art Museum, gift of the artist (2008-16).



Figure 9. Two untitled forms, 1980s. Stoneware, h. 52.0 cm.; h. 20.4 cm. Princeton University Art Museum, gifts of the artist (2006-486; 2006-498).



Figure 10. *Torso, Blue Black*. Stoneware, h. ca. 55.8 cm.
Princeton University Art Museum, gift of the artist (2008-17).

In a review of decades of Takaezu's output, one perceives a unique dialogue between the artist and her work. The clay forms are carefully thrown on a wheel, built by joining coils or slabs, or shaped by hand modeling, and decorated by brushing, spraying, or dripping glazes onto the surface. The connection between the artist and her ceramics is expressed not only in the potted forms but in the way she builds each piece in an additive organic manner. The surgical removal of pieces of clay is rare in her post-1960s work. The invasive use of a knife or tool to carve openwork or incise designs is absent in her maturity. What speaks loudly in each creation is the dialogue between the artist's hands, the careful working and nurturing of the clay, the dance of glaze and colors, and the magical whim of fire. Some have noted that Takaezu's adaptation of traditional Japanese ceramic forms and techniques serves as a foundation for innovation in her work. Although I agree, in my opinion it is really the organic approach to building each vessel that unifies her work over decades. This characteristic distinguishes her creativity from that of most contemporary ceramic artists.

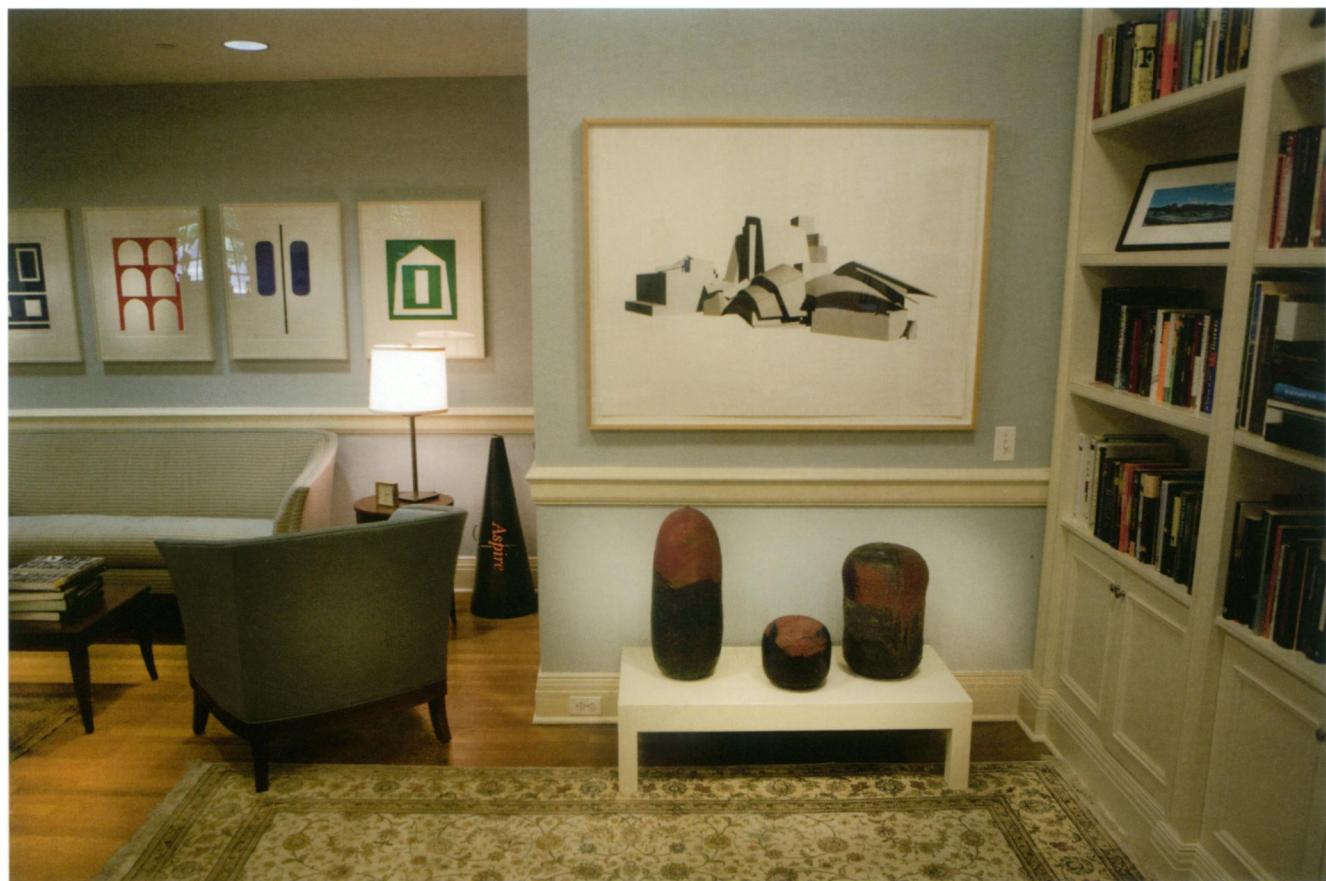


Figure 11. *Nickel Pink*, 1980s. Stoneware, h. ca. 55.9 cm.; *Nickel Pink*, 1980s. Stoneware, h. ca. 22.9 cm.; *Nickel Pink*, 1980s. Stoneware, h. ca. 43.2 cm. Princeton University Art Museum, gifts of the artist (2008-10; 2008-9; 2008-11).

Figure 12. Three untitled forms. Porcelain with blue glaze, h. ca. 45.7 cm., ca. 66 cm., and ca. 15.2 cm. Program in Visual Arts at the Lewis Center for the Arts, Princeton University, anonymous gift in memory of John F. X. Pozzi, Class of 1978.



Figure 13a,b. Two untitled forms, 1990s. Stoneware, h. 78.0 cm.; h. 72.8 cm. Princeton University Art Museum, gifts of the artist (2006-483; 2006-484).





Figure 14. *Dark Moon*, 1990s. Stoneware, h. 66.8 cm. Princeton University Art Museum, gift of the artist (2008-7).



Figure 15. Four untitled forms, 1990s. Porcelain, h. 19.3 cm.; h. 20.0 cm.; h. 57.1 cm.; h. 42.6 cm. Princeton University Art Museum, gifts of the artist (2006-497; 2006-500; 2006-488; 2006-489).



Figure 16. Kitaōji Rosanjin, Japanese, 1883–1959. Brazier with grass decoration. Stoneware with ash glaze and underglaze designs, h. (without lid) 21.7 cm., diam. 21.5 cm. Princeton University Art Museum, the John B. Elliott, Class of 1951, Collection (1998-827 a,b).



Figure 17. Hamada Shōji, Japanese, 1894–1978. Plate. Mashiko-style stoneware, diam. 27.5 cm. Princeton University Art Museum, gift of Tajima Mitsuru and Hamada Shinsaku (y1989-37).

It is interesting to compare and contrast Takaezu's work to, on the one hand, other contemporary ceramic artists working inside and outside Asia, and, on the other, to traditional Japanese potters. Many contemporary ceramic artists have perfected techniques that they choose to vary for visual and conceptual purposes. Some manipulate clay to imitate the appearance of leather, wood, paper, cloth, or other materials. Some develop a personal idiom through the use of a particular technique or glaze, which becomes their signature style. Still others use clay to create abstract sculpture or to manifest a concept. In each case, while they may exhibit technical virtuosity and high artistic quality, when compared to the work of traditional Japanese potters, contemporary works often fail to reflect a living dialogue between the artist, clay, glaze, and fire, which embodies an artist's working process and approach to the art of living. What distinguishes Takaezu's ceramics is an ability to combine the traditional spirit of working with the material and being able to reshape it as contemporary art. The link between the artist, clay, glaze, and fire seen in Takaezu's work is a lifestyle, an approach that subsumes her art. While many contemporary ceramic artists envision a final form that they strive to attain through technical mastery, a crucial traditional component of Takaezu's art is the unpredictable effects of firing. Firing cracks and glazing accidents are as much a part of her art as design, and it is in the balance—the essential dialogue—and consistency of approach as a way of living that makes her art distinctively humane, natural, and spiritual.

That Takaezu also works in bronze is not surprising, as bronze casting is essentially a ceramic art form, and both depend on the element of fire. A positive form is first modeled in clay, sometimes with high-relief ribs and dripped glazes to create a richly textured surface. Molds are then made in which to cast the bronze. Many of Takaezu's bronzes are related in form to her ceramics, but there are departures—she explores structural characteristics that could never be fabricated in clay. In some ways, the open-bottomed bells, with their useful sound-generating emptiness, can be likened to her closed-form ceramics with interior rattles. The bronze bells resonate in a rich sonorous tone suitable for remembrance and commemoration. Whereas her hidden rattles anticipate private discovery, the open bells are meant to be sounded with public participation.

In 2003 a bronze bell cast, dated, and inscribed in 2000 by Takaezu was erected in a memorial garden on the west side of East Pyne Hall, where it connects with Chancellor Green (fig. 18a,b).² The bell, garden, and thirteen metal stars set in a circular formation on the ground memorialize the thirteen Princeton University alumni who tragically lost their lives in the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001: undergraduate

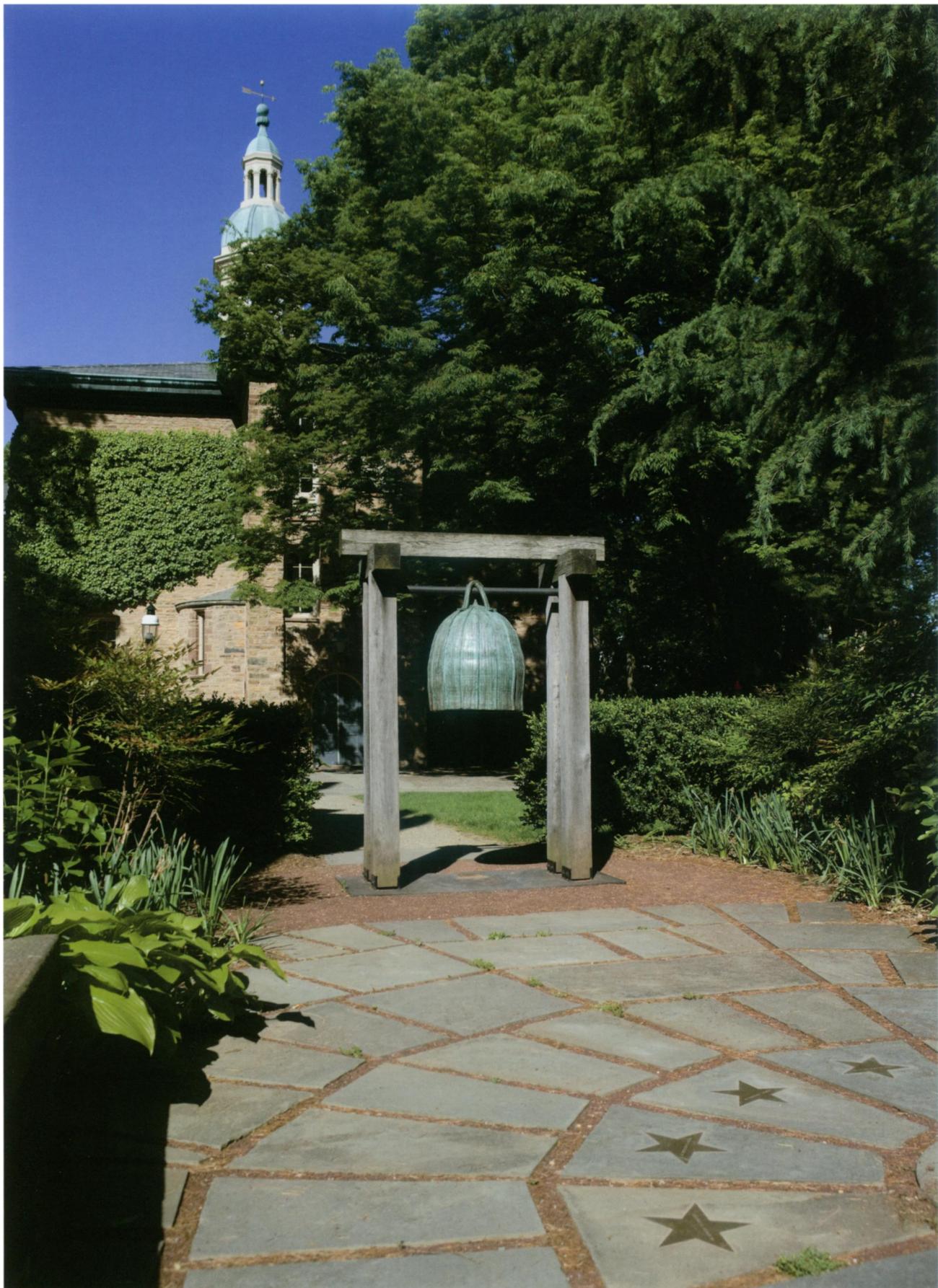


Figure 18a. *Remembrance*, 2000. Bronze, h. ca. 80 cm. Princeton University (PP638).



Figure 18b. *Remembrance*, detail.

alumni Robert Cruikshank '58, Robert Deraney '80, Christopher Ingrassia '95, Karen Klitzman '84, Catherine MacRae '00, Charles McCrann '68, Robert McIlvaine '97, Christopher Mello '98, John Schroeder '92, Jeffrey Wiener '90, and Martin Wohlforth '76; and graduate alumni William Caswell *75 and Joshua Rosenthal *81. Each star is inscribed with the name of one of these alumni, who are memorialized each time the bell is sounded. Selected with the participation of University President Shirley Tilghman, the bell was named *Remembrance* at the garden's dedication ceremony on September 13, 2003. On that occasion the bell was rung thirteen times.

Takaezu's ceramics have contributed greatly to the acceptance and development of ceramics as an expressive art form. Her closed forms have significantly elevated ceramics from being perceived as merely utilitarian craftwork to being recognized as works of art. Having studied in the United States and with master potters in Japan, she bridges Asian and Western cultures in her work. In 1993 she was an artist-in-residence at the Shigaraki Ceramic Cultural Park in Shiga prefecture, and in 1995–98 a major retrospective exhibition of her work in ceramic and fiber traveled to several museums in Japan and the United States. The retrospective exhibition of Takaezu's work was held in 1995 at the National Museum of Art in Kyoto after opening in Okinawa, where Takaezu's parents had lived before moving to Hawaii. After its successful reception in Kyoto, it traveled

to regional museums throughout Japan. Although described as an artist still known to only a select few in Japan, she was recognized as one of the most important artists in the development of American contemporary ceramics.

Over the years, Takaezu has retained a close connection to her birthplace (in 1987 she received Hawaii's Living Treasure Award). The Hawaiian Islands remain a source of artistic inspiration, and she returns each year for two months during winter. Some glaze colors on her ceramics reflect her sense of that place, and some new ceramic shapes, such as the "tree" form (fig. 19), recall charred tree trunks standing in a barren lava field after a volcanic eruption. Her home in New Jersey offers a different environment. A visit to her Quakertown studio—with the pots and bells placed in the garden, on outdoor decks (fig. 20), or throughout her house—reveals a life of art and an art of living: "In my life I see no difference between making pots, cooking, and growing vegetables. They are all so related. However, there is a need for me to work in clay. It is so gratifying and I get so much joy from it, and it gives me many answers in my life."³

In addition to her contributions as an artist in clay, fiber, and bronze, Takaezu's importance and influence as an artist cannot be separated from her commitment to teaching for more than five decades. Generations of students have been trained under her guidance, and even after retiring in 1992, after twenty-five years at Princeton, Takaezu continues her role as a teacher, training and nurturing what has been a long line of studio apprentices. For her many contributions to the arts as well as her dedication as a teacher, Princeton University awarded Takaezu the Behrman Award for Distinguished Achievement in the Humanities in 1992, and an honorary doctorate of humane letters in 1996. At the time of the exhibition *The Poetry of Clay: The Art of Toshiko Takaezu* at the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 2004,⁴ she returned to Princeton as a Belknap Visitor in the Humanities to speak about her life and career.

Takaezu's works have found homes in numerous public collections, including The Art Institute of Chicago, the Smithsonian Institution,⁵ The Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Newark Museum, National Museum in Bangkok, National Museum of Art in Kyoto, and the Philadelphia Museum of Art. The Princeton University Art Museum acquired its first Takaezu ceramic, *Moon* (fig. 1, left), in 1990 as a gift of the members of the Class of 1969. Three porcelain-thrown blue-glazed forms (fig. 12) were given to the Program in Visual Arts in memory of my classmate John F. X. Pozzi, Class of 1978, and have been on display at 185 Nassau Street.

Takaezu's gifts to the Princeton University Art Museum include ceramics representing various stages in her artistic career since the 1960s.⁶ She donated a group of twenty of her ceramics in 2006 (figs. 2–4, 6–7, 9, 13a,b, 15) and another



Figure 19. Sawada Tetsurō, Japanese, 1919–1986. Untitled. Painting in mixed media. h. 161.0 cm., w. 129.0 cm. Princeton University Art Museum, gift of Toshiko Takaezu (2008-5). Toshiko Takaezu, American, born 1922. *Homage to Sawada Tetsurō*, 1990s. Stoneware, h. 170.8 cm. Princeton University Art Museum, gift of the artist (2008-6).



Figure 20. Group of ceramics at the artist's studio in Quakertown, New Jersey, 2006.



Figure 21. Peter Voulkos, American, 1924–2002. Plate. Stoneware, h. 11.3 cm., diam. ca. 59.5 cm. Princeton University Art Museum, gift of Toshiko Takaezu (2008-15).

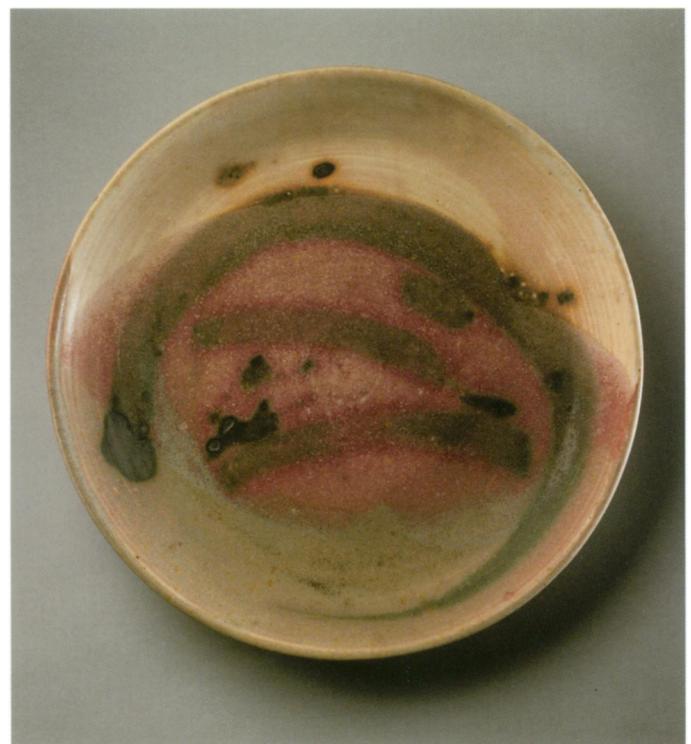


Figure 22. *Pink and Black on White*, 1980s. Porcelain, h. 4.7 cm., diam. ca. 34.0 cm. Princeton University Art Museum, gift of the artist (2008-12).

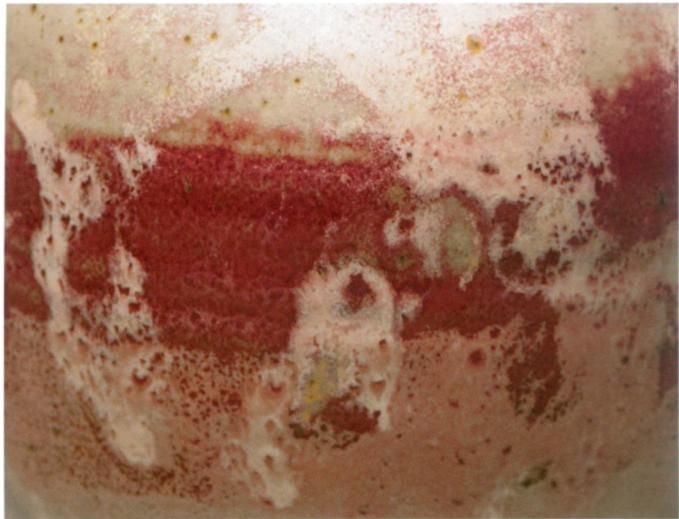


Figure 23. Detail of fig. 7, right (2006–501). The artist's fingerprints are captured in the glaze.

group, of thirteen, in 2008 (figs. 1, 3, 5, 8, 10–11, 14, 19, 22). Among the gifts are meaningful groupings assembled by the artist. Some groups are composed of two or three of Takaizu's own works. Unique are other pairings in which Takaizu responds to a work by another artist (see below). Among the 2006 gifts were two untitled ceramics (fig. 13a,b) that were paired by the artist for the resonance between their forms and glazing. While each form can stand by itself, they respond to each other in a multiplicity of combinations, creating new patterns and relationships when they are rotated or moved in relation to each other. With every turn a new landscape or a new abstract composition, ever changing and infinite, emerges.

Takaizu also chose a group consisting of three red-glazed closed forms of different shapes and heights (fig. 11), which happens to echo the three blue-glazed ceramics (fig. 12) that had earlier been given in memory of John Pozzi. President Shirley Tilghman, who described Takaizu as a "remarkable lady," personally selected these red-glazed ceramics, along with that illustrated in figure 10, for display in her office in Nassau Hall.

In addition to her own works, Takaizu also gave to the Museum a stoneware plate by Peter Voulkos (fig. 21), a prodigious artist whose early ceramics began with utilitarian vessels. As his work developed, his forms became more abstract, non-functional, and sculptural through vigorous tearing, gouging, and pounding of the clay. In 1979 he began to use wood-fired kilns for many of his pieces, including the plate from Takaizu's collection. In giving this plate to the Museum, Takaizu added a small plate of her

own with pink and black glazes (fig. 22). Its smooth surface and unbroken outline contrast with her friend's plate.

Another work from the artist's collection is a large painted canvas by Sawada Tetsurō (1919–1986) (fig. 19, left). As a young man, Sawada had studied with painter and propagandist Fujita Tsuguharu (1886–1968; also known as Leonard Foujita). Many of his paintings produced before and soon after World War II reflect the style of Fujita's oil portraits. As early as 1941, however, some of his paintings begin to trend toward abstraction, which comes to dominate his work from the 1960s onward. In 1971 the Hunterdon Art Museum in Clinton, New Jersey, organized an exhibition of Sawada's painting with the assistance of a mutual Japanese friend of both Sawada and Takaizu. After the exhibition, the friend asked Takaizu to assist in donating some of Sawada's paintings to other museums, and she ended up storing many of the works that remained. Before she returned the paintings, the friend asked her to take any painting she wanted before they were shipped out. According to Takaizu, later "I made a tree [form] and it was the most unusual thing that the colors of the painting and my tree are exactly alike. So now I've named the tree, *Homage to Tetsurō Sawada*"⁷ (fig. 19, right).

Many of Takaizu's ceramics have found partners after they entered the Museum's collection. It would now be hard to imagine *Moon*, the Museum's first Takaizu piece, without *Night*, a monumental form that was among the last pieces to enter the collection (fig. 1). Each grouping, pair, or individual clay form resonates with the hand of the artist. Among all the arts, it is in ceramics where the touch of the artist is imprinted in every movement of the hand on the clay or locked in the myriad colors of the glaze (fig. 23). In Takaizu's ceramics and bronzes there is also the presence and remembrance of sound captured in the forms.

NOTES

1. Jeff Schlanger and Toshiko Takaizu, *Maija Grotell: Works which Grow from Belief* (Goffstown, N.H.: Studio Potter Books, 1996).
2. The date and artist's initials are inscribed on the interior surface of the bell.
3. Montclair Art Museum, *Toshiko Takaizu: Four Decades* (Montclair, N.J.: Montclair Art Museum, 1989), 6.
4. Toshiko Takaizu, Felice Fischer, and Darrel Sewell, *The Poetry of Clay: The Art of Toshiko Takaizu* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2004).
5. Toshiko Takaizu's papers from 1953 to 2005 and an oral history interview conducted on June 16, 2003, are currently in the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.
6. These gifts are listed as new acquisitions in *Record of the Princeton University Art Museum* 66 (2007): 44 and this issue; and illustrated in this essay.
7. Email correspondence with Karl E. Kusserow, curator of American art at the Princeton University Art Museum, November 7, 2007.