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Collector's Notes: THE TOSHIKO TAKAEZU PAPERS

Author(s): JASON STIEBER

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## Collector's Notes

# THE TOSHIKO TAKAEZU PAPERS

Toshiko Takeazu (1922–2011) spent her long and distinguished career breaking down the aesthetic and technical barriers of American fine art ceramics, but her beginnings were modest. Born in Pepeekeo, Hawaii, into a large Okinawan family of limited means, the young Takeazu helped her father and uncle farm watercress and raise honey bees. She left high school early to help support her family, and during World War II found work at the Hawaii Potters' Guild making functional vessels and keepsakes using press molds. While auditing courses at the University of Hawaii, Takeazu became acquainted with ceramic and glass artist Claude Horan, who was impressed by her talent and energy. Horan pushed Takeazu to study on the mainland.


She matriculated to Cranbrook Academy of Art in 1951, attracted to the work of Finnish ceramicist Maija Grotell, who was teaching there. In addition to burnishing Takeazu's talents at the wheel and in the classroom, training at Cranbrook deepened her interest in weaving as a supplement to her primary artistic practice in clay. After a year-long stint at the University of Wisconsin-Madison to replace Harvey Littleton during his sabbatical, she took a full-time teaching position at the Cleveland Institute of Art. She quickly established what was to become her lifelong reputation as a teacher of both uncompromising rigor and generosity.

A grant from the Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation in 1964 allowed Takeazu to break from full-time teaching and take a studio in Clinton, New Jersey. She said in her

Opposite page:  
Toshiko Takeazu  
throwing and coiling a  
pot, 1974. Photograph  
by Evon Streetman.  
Toshiko Takeazu  
Papers, Archives  
of American Art,  
Smithsonian Institution.

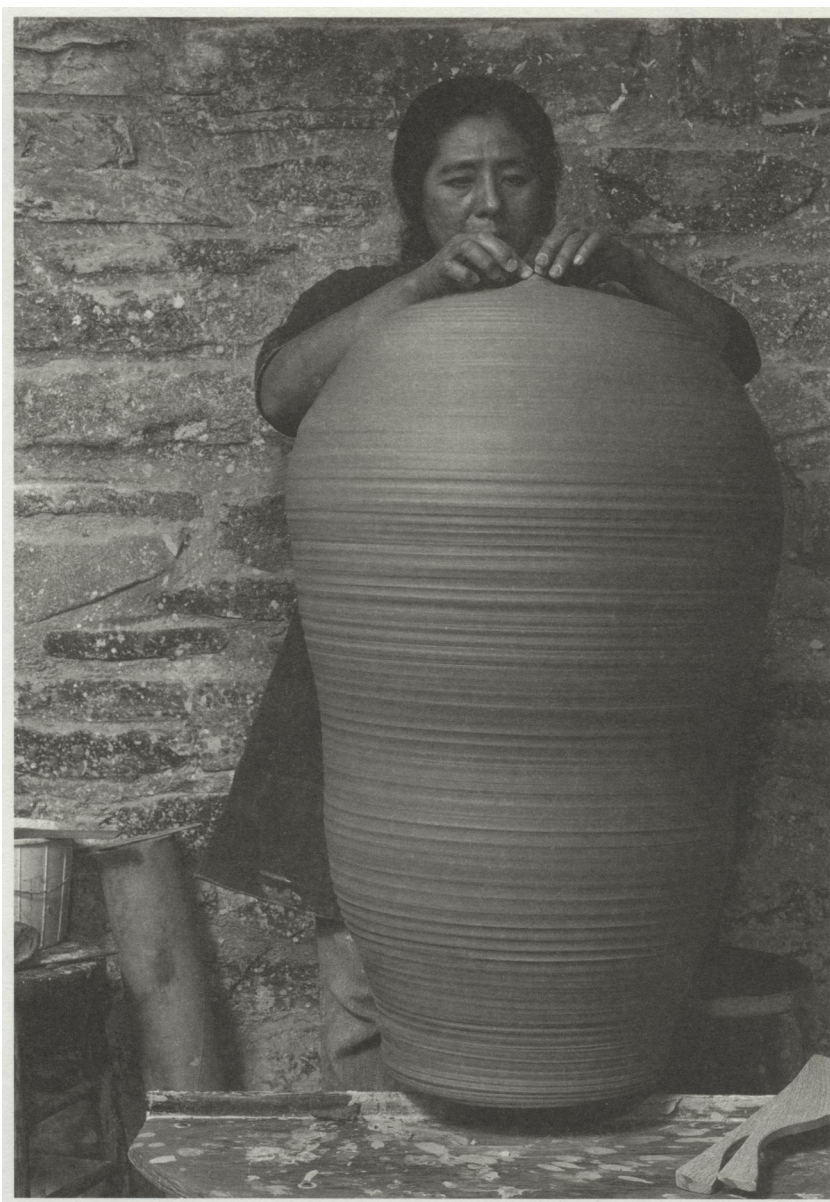


2003 oral history interview with the Archives of American Art that the spot was ideal for her because it was “far away from New York City but not that far.”<sup>1</sup> Perhaps sensing an opportunity in her proximity, Princeton University offered Takaazu a teaching position. This job sustained her past the Tiffany grant and gave back to her the time she needed for her own work and to take on apprentices.

In the mid-1970s Takaazu bought a larger house in nearby Quakertown, New Jersey, where she set to work designing and building an innovative kiln that would serve the growing scale of her ambitions for clay. Letters, drawings, and notes from the Takaazu papers, now housed in their entirety at the Archives, detail the process. Takaazu enlisted the help of Dick Hay from Indiana State University to build the 270-cubic-foot, two-chamber, cross-draft kiln of industrial grade refractory material, much of it donated. The kiln’s capacious bisque and glaze firing chambers and its moveable roof allowed Takaazu to work at a scale rarely attempted. She met this challenge readily, producing the enormous hand-built closed forms and “Tree” pieces, some taller than seven feet, which characterize her later output. 

## NOTES

- 1 Oral history interview with Toshiko Takaazu, June 16, 2003, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, accessed February 5, 2014, <http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-toshiko-takaazu-12097>.



Left and above:  
Toshiko Takaazu, 1974.  
Photograph by Evon  
Streetman; vessels  
in outdoor setting,  
Toshiko Takaazu  
Papers, Archives  
of American Art,  
Smithsonian Institution.

Opposite page:  
“High Pose Playgirl”  
Bird Millman, *Playboy*:  
*A Portfolio of Art  
and Satire*, no. 9,  
1924. *Playboy*:  
*A Portfolio of Art  
and Satire*, Archives  
of American Art,  
Smithsonian Institution.