

Report: Alice and Halsey North's Contemporary Ceramics Collection, Japanese Art Society of America (JASA) Newsletter SUMMER 2012 pages 4-5

From Joan Baekeland

JASA Board member and former President

Frederick and Joan Baekeland are leading dealers in Japanese paintings and modern ceramics who introduced us all to modern Japanese Ceramics through the book and exhibition "Modern Japanese Ceramics in American Collections," New York: Japan Society, Inc., 1993.

On Saturday February 11, 2012, Alice and Halsey North hosted two groups of JASA members to see and hear about their collection of contemporary Japanese Ceramics. I attended the afternoon session and it was a treat in every way from beginning to end. I had seen the collection before on several visits and at several different venues including the MFA Boston and at Japan Society in New York. As with all ongoing collections there is always something new, and a piece you passed your eye over quickly on one visit can be riveting another time, even if it is in the same place.

The visit started with Alice and Halsey's introduction to the potters who formed the avant-garde Sōdeisha group after World War II and its place in the world of Japanese Ceramics. We then heard briefly about eleven artists in whom they have a particular interest and about the history of their pieces by them. Always well organized and interested in sharing their collection, they had made up leaflets for everyone with photos and brief biographies of those artists. Alice and Halsey took turns talking about them in two different rooms and then we were free to see the rest of the collection all over the apartment. Joan Mirviss, Joan B Mirviss LTD, and Joe Earle, Vice President, New York Japan Society, were also there and talked about the collection and answered questions.

Even a large apartment has limited surfaces for display and the Norths have devised ingenious shelving all over the place. A board across a line between windows gives a chance for architectural pieces to be seen against the sky – a great view of the city with the pots' shapes vying with the neighborhood buildings. In general, crowding lots of pieces together is not a good way to see pots, but a long, narrow shelf over a desk with many little sake cups and bottles lined up tightly together makes you want to look at each one separately.

An unusual point about their collecting is that they have visited and become friends with most of the contemporary artists whose work they own. Their taste is very broad, but in general they prefer contemporary, strong and unusual shapes to "classical" ones and prefer natural and monochrome glazes to decorated porcelains, but they have something of everything.

We had tea from lovely cups made by American potter Warren MacKenzie who studied with Bernard Leech and Shoji Hamada. They love "Japanese" ceramics, wherever they are made. It was also interesting to hear about the unusual and unique techniques used by some of today's artists.

This is one of the best, if not the best, private collections outside of Japan. Their passion is strong and they are eager to share it. Proselytizing at its best! When we came in everyone was asked to introduce themselves, and I am sure that the JASA members who said they didn't know about ceramics went home with a new interest and appreciation for this wonderful, exciting field. It was a most enjoyable and very stimulating afternoon. We are very grateful to the Norths for their warm hospitality.