

## CULTURE &amp; ARTS

# Ceramic artist bridges cultural gaps with pottery

AMANDA SIERADZKI  
COUNCIL ON CULTURE & ARTS

When artist Mikiko Tanaka first arrived in the United States, she felt the windows to her life in Japan close tightly shut. In their stead came linguistic and cultural barriers as she navigated her new surroundings. She taught Japanese language at schools in San Diego, California, and Cleveland, Ohio as she had back in her home country for over 20 years, but felt lost when it came to communicating in English.

While living in Ohio, her husband, a professor at the University of Akron

at the time, encouraged her to continue her studies as a way of bridging her understanding. Consequently, Tanaka enrolled in a ceramics course with professor Donna Webb and began throwing the windows to her past wide open.

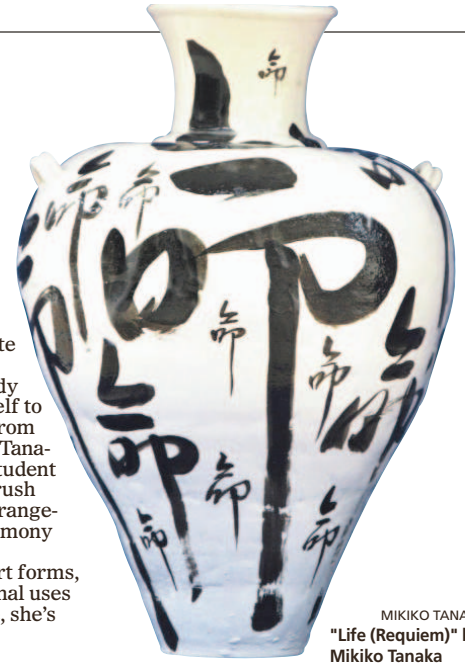
"When the teacher gave an assignment to make three tea bowls, I made 10," recalls Tanaka, whose studiousness overpowered hurdles with verbal instructions. "I didn't understand many words, so I'd say, 'Please show me.' If advanced students were throwing, I would ask to watch."

She learned a variety of clay techniques, from throwing on the wheel to

slab and coil building by hand. Though she started late in ceramics, her wealth of knowledge and years of study in the Japanese arts lent itself to her pottery. With a degree from Kyoto Women's University, Tanaka had been a teacher and student in calligraphy (shuji), ink brush painting (sumi-e), flower arrangement (ikebana) and tea ceremony (ocha) for many decades.

Through these cultural art forms, Tanaka found many functional uses for her pottery. In her home, she's

**See Pottery, Page 5D**



MIKIKO TANAKA  
"Life (Requiem)" by  
Mikiko Tanaka



The work of ceramics master Mikiko Tanaka is included in the "Creative Tallahassee" exhibit at City Hall Art Gallery.

## Pottery

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surrounded by her work on shelves, walls, and inside cabinetry. Her garage houses the electric kiln where she fires her pottery, and rooms overflow with tea ceremony settings, rice bowls, mugs, sake bottles, and containers for flowers.

"The first time I made a big pot, everybody said I could fit inside it," laughs Tanaka. "The teacher said it was too big to occupy one kiln with so many other students in class. I waited one year to dry it out before firing."

Some of her work utilizes symbols related to Buddhism and Shintoism, paying homage to her family traditions. As a child, she often made origami dolls. The first time she encountered clay in a junior high art class, she hand-built a small frog. The teacher was so impressed that she kept the work, a proud moment emblazoned in Tanaka's memory.

In her current artist's statement, Tanaka describes being able to visualize each item emerging from the red and white clays she uses. She views mistakes as opportunities to deepen her understanding and skills, and reflects on her work with due diligence.

"I find great pleasure in every step of making pottery, from forming to glazing, and to firing," writes Tanaka. "I even enjoy loading and unloading my work in and out of the kiln. At the same time, however the perfectionist in me makes me very critical and careful of every step I take."

Her intricate pottery designs are linked to her paper and ink skills, earning her the highest certificates from the Nihon Shuji correspondence program and the Enryakuji Gakuen and Ikenobo Gakuen schools in Japan. As far as ceramics, she continued studying under Kirk Mangus and Eva Kwong at Kent State University, before moving to Pensacola where her work was awarded in the Student Art Show at the University of West Florida.

These many proficiencies aid in Tanaka's a personal style, using calligraphy and sumi-e paintings as decoration. Her work "Life (Man and Woman)," exhibits these techniques, and was installed for a time at the Pensacola airport gallery. Now sitting in her Tallahassee home, the two figures not only represent a Japanese idiom, but also showcase Tanaka's depth of process.

"That space is important," says Tanaka, pointing to the gap that symbolizes the valleys and peaks of one's life journey. "You're born at the bottom, and they're touching there, meaning the heart is complete. It was too big to fire in one piece, so I cut and fired them separately and afterwards connected pieces together."

Tanaka continues tying together her artistry with traditional Japanese tea ceremonies and flower arrangement. In Ohio, she was part of the Ikebana International association, crafting flower arrangements with both traditional bamboo and metal containers as well as her own pottery, and using flowers from her own garden. She continues to give lessons in the Tallahassee community, as well as hosts an annual tea ceremony at the LeMoyné Center for Visual Arts.

Planting many of the seeds she comes across in her yard and extending the lives of bouquets gifted to her on anniversaries and birthdays, Tanaka incorporates designs from the natural world in her work. Other inspirations include monthly ceramics and fashion book subscriptions, as well as museum and art exhibition visits. Her practice is all consuming, and often she doesn't feel time passing by.

"Ceramics was the first time I had a teacher," says Tanaka, whose self-study and home-practice expanded after leaving Japan. "After I moved, I spent a lot of time thinking and doing by myself. When I was tired of language, I would look at pictures in books, and sometimes watch Japanese television programs on traditional ceramics or tea ceremony."

Mostly, Tanaka likes to stay busy, teaching once a week as an affiliated artist with LeMoyné, privately tutoring in Japanese, calligraphy, and flower arranging, and preparing for upcoming shows like Chain of Parks. Tanaka is especially looking forward to being a part of COCA's annual Creative Tallahassee Exhibition at the City Hall Gallery.

In the juried exhibition is her vase titled, "Life (Requiem)," which serves as a tribute to Japan's Tsunami and Earthquake in 2011. The calligraphy on the surface of container uses the character "inochi," or life, in various sizes to represent life lost in the natural disaster. In addition to the art, Tanaka and her husband raised funds for the Japanese community shortly after the catastrophe.

"The following year we showed our appreciation for the people of Tallahassee who donated," says Tanaka. She and her husband planted eleven cherry blossom trees at the local Lake Elberta Park. "Already they're blooming and have grown 30 meters."

The Consul-General of Japan in Miami has commended Tanaka and her husband's efforts in promoting Japanese culture in the Tallahassee area, an honor listed in Tanaka's greatest accomplishments. Among her achievements are the students who continue to show a deep appreciation and investment in learning the cornerstones of her culture.

Ultimately, Tanaka's interests spiral outwards and return to pottery, the connections seen clearly from



"Life (Man and Woman)" by Mikiko Tanaka

MIKIKO TANAKA



### If you go

**What:** COCA's annual Creative Tallahassee Exhibition 2016  
**When:** 8 a.m.-5:30 p.m., Monday through Friday until April 18; Public Reception & Awards Ceremony on March 25 at 6 p.m.  
**Where:** City Hall Gallery, 300 S. Adams St.  
**Cost:** Free  
**Contact:** For more information, contact Amanda Kariath Thompson at 850-224-2500 or visit <http://www.cocanet.org/city-hall/>.

the mixed-media diorama celebrating Japan's Girls' Day that sits alongside a tea set with each utensil in its precise place—the tea jar, waste jar, water jar, and bowls, all uniform in color and design. Her first large pot continues to be utilized as it sits proudly in the entryway of her home, textured with fish-like scales.

"Ceramics is my main art form, but they all are connected inside of me," reflects Tanaka on finding this accessible interconnectivity. "The choice to create a piece of art from clay has infinite possibilities, the freedom of which gives me a deep sense of happiness."

Amanda Sieradzki is the feature writer for the Council on Culture & Arts. COCA is the capital area's umbrella agency for arts and culture ([www.tallahasseearts.org](http://www.tallahasseearts.org)).

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