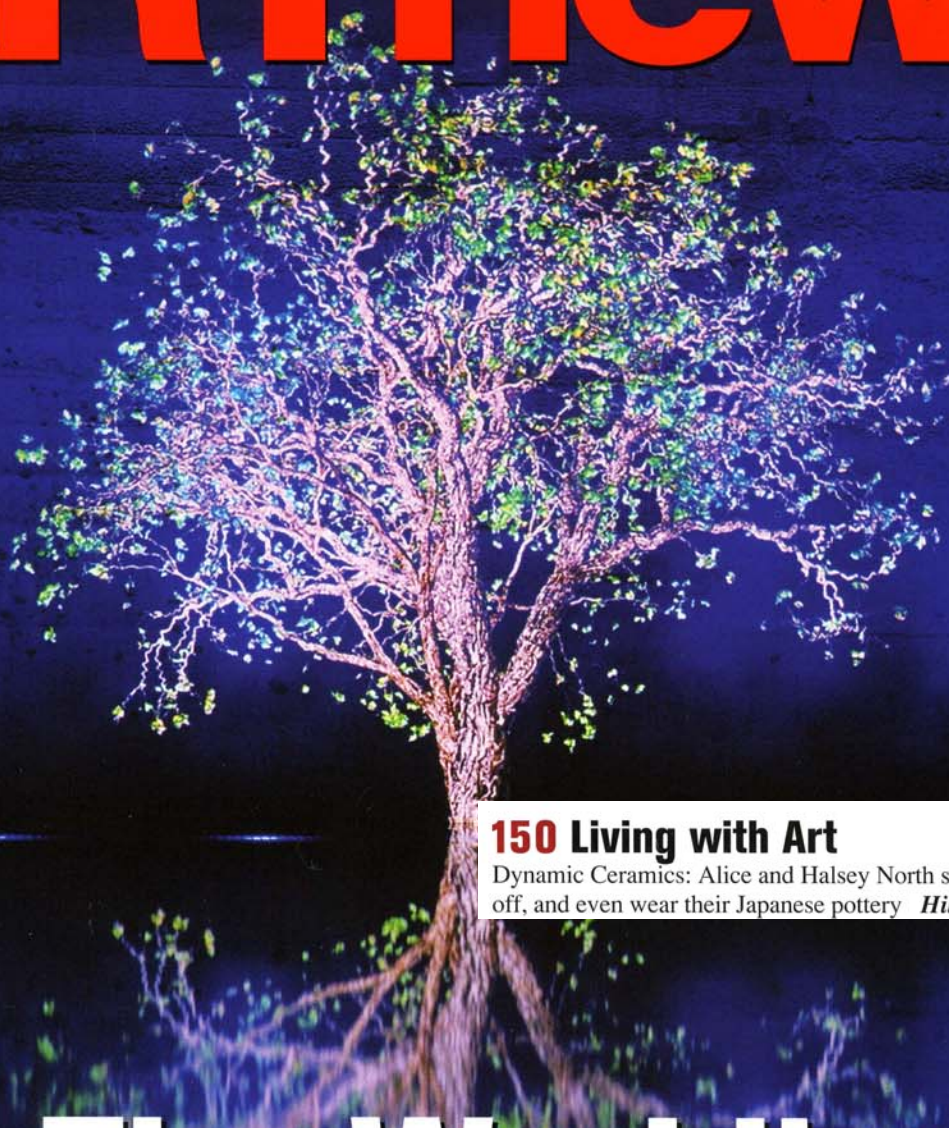


ARTnews

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Dynamic Ceramics

*Alice and Halsey North
serve from, eat on, and
even wear pieces from
their collection of avant-
garde Japanese pottery*

BY HILARIE M. SHEETS

PHOTOGRAPHS BY
JEN FONG



Halsey and Alice North, pioneering collectors of contemporary Japanese ceramics. Alice wears a porcelain pin by Fukami Sueharu.

Halsey and I were on the New Jersey Turnpike, we were turning 40, and on a little piece of paper we wrote down what we wanted to do with our lives,” says Alice North, sitting with her husband of 35 years in the living room of their airy Upper West Side apartment, which is ringed by their astounding collection of Japanese and American ceramics. “We said, ‘We want to work together, and we want Japan back in our lives.’”

So in 1987 Alice—who had worked in banking since graduating from college—took an approved leave of absence from her job at the First National Bank of Chicago in New York and teamed with Halsey, who had led the North Carolina Arts Council and managed corporate contributions for Philip Morris. Together they started the North Group, which assists performing-arts organizations across the country with fund-raising and long-term planning. And the Norths, who had met at Earlham College in Richmond, Indiana—known for its Japan Studies program—began traveling extensively in Japan. Over the past 20 years they have become pioneers in collecting contemporary Japanese ceramics.

More than 60 of the most innovative and dynamic works from their collection were recently on view in a show at the Japan Society in New York. “Contemporary Clay: Japanese Ceramics for the New Century” (which also included works from other collections) tracked

the influence of artists in the avant-garde Sodeisha group, which broke with centuries-old traditions in pot making after World War II and began crafting purely sculptural pieces that reflected international trends in modern art.

Indeed, Katsumata Chieko’s voluptuous, coral-like sculpture coated in tiny balls of fired clay colored an iridescent yellow recalls the work of Anish Kapoor. A piece by Yamada Hikaru (a founding member of Sodeisha), consisting of torn pieces of clay glazed in gold and suspended on twine in a loose grid, shares a sensibility with the works of Eva Hesse. The playful red geometric pattern on a vase by Morino Taimei has the feel of a Keith Haring.

Even with those beloved ceramics on leave from their apartment, the Norths were still surrounded by more than 1,000 pieces, which include sculptural works in addition to the functional ones they use every day. Halsey, who has a gracious, master-of-ceremonies demeanor and is the cook in the family, slips out of the living room for a moment. He returns with a fruit salad presented in a small, asymmetrical bowl resting on top of a rec-

tangular plate by Ito Keiji. Water arrives in a clay vessel with sedimentary bands of blue, green, beige, and pink by Miyashita Zenji, who also made the large sculptural piece with colors stacked like receding mountains that sits on the windowsill.

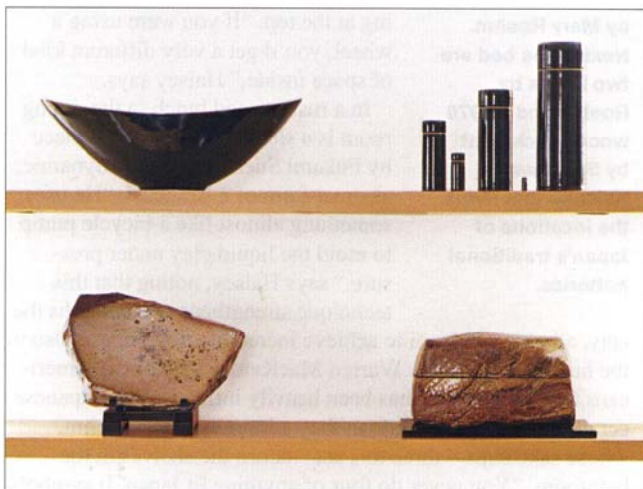
The Norths are giddy about their hobby. “We live with all our pots. We never thought they would be displayed,” says Alice. “We bought them because we love the work and love the artists. We’re crazy! If you talk to any collector, you know it’s an addiction.”

Each brings unique expertise to the enterprise. Alice had an early fluency with Japan’s language and culture, having lived with a family in Sendai as an American Field Service exchange student during high school. She studied Japanese at Earlham and spent her junior year at Waseda University in Tokyo. Halsey’s sensitivity to the visual and the tactile seems to be in his bloodline. His father manufactured ceramic tiles, which Halsey played with as a child, and his grandfather Robert North was an architect and painter. “We’ve had a Fifth Avenue gallery owner say that if you can get all his paintings, there would be a huge market

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FROM TOP RIGHT *Chairman of the Board and Mrs. Just Bored*, a painting by Robert North, Halsey's grandfather, hangs above a dark-glazed vessel by Nagayoshi Kazu, a cup by Leila Philip, a vase by Rob Barnard, and two sculptural forms by Toshiko Takaezu. The table is set with four bowls and plates by Ito Keiji and a platter by Sakiyama Takayuki. On the sideboard sits a bottle by Shimaoka Tatsuzo and a plate by Randy Johnston. The cabinet contains, top to bottom, a porcelain and cast-glass sculpture by Tashima Etsuko, a porcelain sculpture by Fukami Sueharu, and a bowl by Ōno Kōtarō.



ABOVE, TOP SHELF Bowl and nesting sculpture by Yagi Akira. BOTTOM SHELF Sculpture and lidded box by Kaneta Masanao.

RIGHT, TOP SHELF Sculpture by Takiguchi Kazuo. ON THE COUNTER, LEFT TO RIGHT A white sculpture by Kiyomizu Rokubei VIII, a cubic sculpture by Morino Hiroaki Taimei, a blue sculpture by Miyashita Zenji, a plate by Katsumata Chieko, a sculptural pyramid by Kiyomizu Rokubei VIII, a sculpture by Akiyama Yō, and a bowl by Kitamura Junko. SMALL TABLE AT LEFT Sculpture by Mishima Kimiyo.



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for them,” says Alice, gesturing to the landscapes and humorous portraits by the Buffalo-based artist, hanging all over the apartment. “We said, ‘Sorry, the family will always keep them. It’s fine he’s not famous.’”

Both have to agree on acquisitions, but it was Halsey’s eye that prevailed when they visited Katsumata’s studio on a 2004 trip to Japan and saw the undulating yellow piece, *Untitled (Mudai)*, 1998, that later graced the banner of the Japan Society show. Alice admits to having had doubts initially but today thinks it’s a standout in their collection. The conservators at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, where a smaller version of the show opened in 2005, were too nervous to take responsibility for the work because its textured surface, covered with tiny clay balls called grog, is so fragile. “We said it had to be in the



show, so we drove it up and I held it on my lap,” says Alice. “We walked into the MFA, they had the case all ready, we unpacked it and put it in, and they closed the case. We said, ‘So some grog falls off. The whole reason why the piece was made was to be seen.’”

The Norths personally know all the living artists represented in their collection and delight in the history and culture of ceramics, one of the highest art forms in Japan. “Because of the tea ceremony, ceramics was elevated to being as valuable as jewels,” says Alice. “We just heard this story about a warlord who traded the city of Kyoto for tea ware,” says Halsey. Alice recounts the tale of the 15th-century Japanese ruler who invited all his lords to bring their best bowls to a tea ceremony and then confiscated them. “No, he thanked them for the gifts of the bowls,” corrects Halsey with amusement.

Given the generations of family workshops in Japan, the Norths explain, it was all the more revolutionary for artists like Yagi Kazuo, another Sodeisha founder, to break with tradition after the war and absorb ideas from Picasso, Miró, Klee, and Noguchi, whom Yagi met in 1954. Yagi and his group, in turn, disseminated their new sculptural approach as teachers in universities, where women—who historically had not been allowed near the kiln because menstruation was considered bad luck for the ceramics—were for the first time able to choose those programs. “Today the women are really leading the

way,” says Halsey. “They aren’t constrained by being 15th-generation anything.”

In the living room, he points to a piece called *Shell Vessel* (2004) by Koike Shoko, one of the first woman potters in Japan to make a living from her work, in the late ’60s. It looks organic, like a marine creature, full of light and implied motion. Even more atypical is a piece hanging in Halsey’s office by the woman ceramicist Mishima Kimiyo, who transformed a New York restaurant guide that the Norths had given her into a remarkable facsimile in silk-screened stoneware. Their other Pop art-influenced pieces by Mishima include a crumpled *New York Times* wrapped in string and a Del Monte packing box, both hyperrealistically crafted from clay and featuring photo transfers.

Technical innovation is a hallmark of many works in their collection, including a biomorphic vessel by Takiguchi Kazuo that sits like a stone walrus in the living room. Halsey describes how the artist rolls out the clay on a room-sized piece of canvas and, with a pulley system, gathers the corners of the cloth together. Then he gently paddles the hollow form into a seamless shape with a little torn opening at the top. “If you were using a wheel, you’d get a very different kind of space inside,” Halsey says.

In a rustic wood hutch in the dining room is a sleek celadon-glazed piece by Fukami Sueharu with the dynamic, abstract form of a Brancusi. “He uses something almost like a bicycle pump to mold the liquid clay under pressure,” says Halsey, noting that this technique strengthens and smooths the

clay, allowing Fukami to achieve incredibly thin edges. Also in the hutch are plates by Warren MacKenzie, one of the Americans they collect who has been heavily influenced by Japanese ceramics. Another American they admire is Mary Roehm, whose sake cups—three to a set—adorn the shelves in the bathroom. “You never do four of anything in Japan. It symbolizes death,” says Alice, who adds that she and Halsey like to give sets of Roehm’s cups to potters they visit in Japan.

Although their collecting is highly focused, the Norths do have the oddball or sentimental object here and there, including a small piece in the bathroom by Ed O’Reilly, who taught Demi Moore how to pot for the movie *Ghost*. On the shelves in their bedroom is a small green pitcher by Joan Mondale—wife of former vice president Walter Mondale—who pots with MacKenzie on weekends. “Joan was probably the most exciting person we’ve ever had near the White House in terms of the arts,” says Alice. “She commissioned crafts and served all her meals from them.”

From a small corner cupboard made by Alice’s grandfather, Halsey pulls a green pot with a little face bulging out from the side. “I bought this piece at Earlham College in the student gallery in 1971 and gave it to Alice as our engagement present,” he says. Alice moves her husband’s face into profile to show the similarity of his chin to the one on the pot. “See,” she says, “we started with ceramics.” ■