

Sakai Hiroshi

酒井博司



We interviewed Sakai Hiroshi (Graduate of the 26th year at Ishoken), who exhibited at the Ishoken gallery in 2022.

— There are only a few days until your exhibition starts at Ishoken Gallery, how do you feel about it so far?

I am feeling quite satisfied. I wanted to exhibit my best work, so I've brought out my favourite pieces that I have withheld from collectors and selected the pieces that fired well. I'm not used to exhibiting in a white space and felt a bit unsure about the outcome. But once I laid out my work the atmosphere together with my work turned out better than I expected. Also, the comments I heard from people around me as I was installing were positive and gave me confidence.



Exhibition at Ishoken gallery (2022)

— Was there anything you had to prepare differently for this exhibition?

I usually exhibit at department stores and they require more pieces but this time called for only 9 pieces, so I brought in the ones I feel most confident about. It's rare for me to have an exhibition with many large-scale pieces so I put a lot of effort into it.

— Is there anything you would like the students to consider through your exhibition and lecture?

I consider my works to be "Shino," however, my works are quite different from the general understanding of "Shino" from the Momoyama Period. I would like the students to think about which aspects of "Shino" I have incorporated into my works.

— What led to your fascination with "Shino" ?

It was the work of National Living Treasure Kato Kozo. I went to see their solo exhibition at Matsuzakaya department store during the summer vacation of my fourth year at university. When I saw the work in front of me, I was moved and imagined how happy I would feel if I could create such a work with my own hands. At the same time, I also thought that it could help my family business and make good money.

In those days, I wanted to be an apprentice somewhere for the sake of my family's ceramics business, so I enquired via an acquaintance to become an apprentice under Kato Kozo. When I think about it now, rather than wanting to learn Shino in the true sense of the word, I may have chosen my apprenticeship more for the experience. However, I can't forget the excitement I felt at that time, Kozo-sensei's "Shino" was always in me and I am feel connected to it now.



Sakai Hiroshi giving a class to students

— So, 40 years have passed since you first encountered Kozo-sensei's work.

That's right. That was the summer I was 22, and I'm 62 now... Almost 40 years!

— It's amazing how you've been so passionate about ceramics for 40 years.

To be honest, I wasn't all passion the whole time. During my apprenticeship, there were times when I was fed up and felt like quitting. Originally, I had no ambition to become a ceramic artist; I just thought it would help the family business. In the end, I couldn't endure the training any longer and I concentrated on my family business and stopped making my personal work.

— How did you get back into making your own ceramics after that?

When I was about 30, my former teacher Nakashima Harumi invited me to an exhibition, saying, "Let's all do an exhibition together!" I thought of giving it a go and raised my hand. At the time I was more excited about the delicious drinks and food with everyone afterwards and took the exhibition itself with a grain of salt!

— How is your work lately?

I am 62 years old now, and I really feel like I have been able to let go of a lot of things throughout the years. I had been fixated on the idea of being highly regarded, of having soldout shows and being flattered by everyone.

Looking back now, I feel like a can forgive myself for having those thoughts. Now, I can make the way I want to. Especially in the last 2 years, I have been able to focus on my work without hesitation.

— Is there anything you keep in mind when you work?

Since I started, I have tried to maintain my motivation by remembering my ambition to "make." Since I am the kind that gets bored very easily, I try not to get too excited feeling of "I'm going to make it!" But at the same time, I try not to keep too excited so I don't burn out. Maintaining that balance could be the reason why I have been able to practice for 40 years. I've always been the type of person who finds joy in improving my skills, so I have been concentrating on improving my skills on the wheel day by day.

— I feel your strong commitment to the wheel. Why is that?

Yes, I agree. You have to focus when you are on the wheel and it feels comfortable to focus. No matter what the outcome is, if you are not focused at the end of the day you won't feel the accomplishment. It is a real pleasure when you focus and hold your breath and throw. I don't know of any other art form that requires you to hold your breath when making forms. But these days my body can't keep up and it's probably because of my age. It is quite labour-intensive and tough so before I start I don't feel like throwing, but once I put out that clay on the wheel and start throwing I get right back into it.

— I also feel that you are very particular about the crazing in the Shino glaze (Kairagi). How do you approach this?

I believe that throwing on the wheel is 'technique,' but glazes and firing are 'knowledge.' So I did a lot of experiments and testing to archive these results.

— There must have been a lot of time spent to get these results.

Yes, that's right - it took a long time to get the glaze I wanted. As soon as I got the glaze close to what I was looking for, I wanted to fire the kiln and experiment more; but to fire more meant I needed to have more work. I also didn't want to fire the kiln with only test pieces, so I made sure that each firing had my best work in there just in case I got a very beautiful glaze result.



Exhibition at entrance of Ishoken gallery (2022)

— Looking back over the past 40 years, is there anything that stands out to you?

When I look back, those times when I didn't have confidence shook me. When I lacked confidence, I wanted accolades and wanted my work to sell. Maybe this was me wanting more confidence. When I was awarded the silver award at the International Ceramics Competition Mino in 2002 I was at my most vulnerable and self-doubting. My wife and Nakashima Harumi were getting worried about me and even suggested having a break or even quitting. Thankfully, with the support around me, I was able to hang in there and now looking back I am appreciative of the hard times and glad that I continued.

— I see that you remained close to your classmates during your time at Ishoken?

Yes, only they knew how I felt. At first, nobody understood what I wanted to do and looked down on me. During hard times, it felt like only my mates from Ishoken and my wife were there to support me.

— When was the toughest time for you?

Probably about 10 years after I started. I fired kiln after kiln and when I would accidentally get the result I wanted and show people they would say, "So...what is that?"

— Did you continue to make work even after the negative feedback?

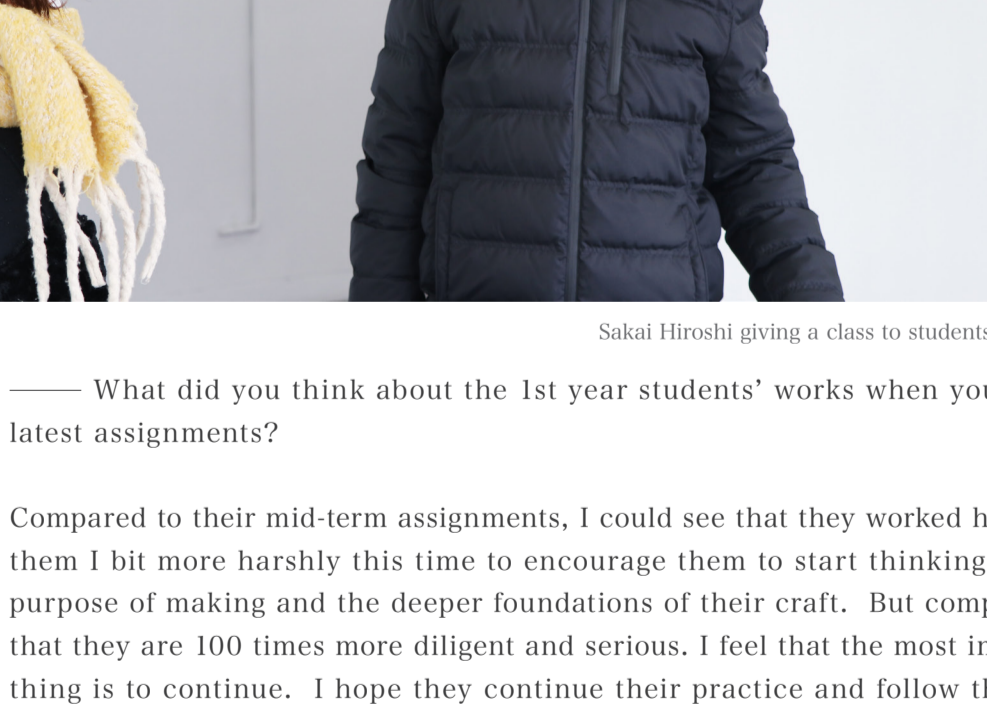
Yes. When I first started out I applied to many different types of ceramics competitions and tried to fit my work to the competition's brief, but it never went too well. As a got more experienced I thought that my works were more appropriate in the traditional craft genre, so I started to only apply to the traditional craft genre competitions. My desire to also be recognised by the traditional craft scene became stronger, even after was dropped from these competitions about 9 times and was told, "normally people would quit by now if they didn't get selected 9 times."

— 9 times is harsh...

I had been kindly told by an elder, "You won't be selected if you call your work Shino." When I was told this I felt my stubbornness kick-in. I thought there wouldn't be any point if I didn't do it my own way and my obsession with "Shino" got stronger.

— Do you have goals for your works or practice?

Not anymore. When I first started out I was imitating my teacher Kozo Kato's pieces and I found myself happy making imitations. But when I started working on this blue Shino, I didn't know which direction to take it, since there were no examples to copy. From there, I worked with the inspiration that came from my everyday practice and those, "Aha!" moments to guide my next work. Slowly, step by step, I have been making adjustments to my work throughout my years of practice.



Sakai Hiroshi giving a class to students

— What did you think about the 1st year students' works when you critiqued their latest assignments?

Compared to their mid-term assignments, I could see that they worked harder. I critiqued them I bit more harshly this time to encourage them to start thinking about their own purpose of making and the deeper foundations to their craft. But compared to me I see that they are 100 times more diligent and serious. I feel that the most important ceramic thing is to continue. I hope they continue their practice and follow their dreams.

— What was the decisive factor in the selection of the "Sakai Award" for the assignment?

I couldn't decide for a while. I know that the assignment was "rice bowls" and the students were supposed to think about how to express their individuality in a simple form. However, in the end, it came down to what work I liked the most. I thought the work had carefully designed lines and the glaze was well thought out.

— Finally, do you have a few words for the students' careers?

Let's keep it going!
The best is to stay in there and continue. I'm sure it's not just smooth sailing, but I want you to try your best to continue for as long as possible and to make a piece that you can be proud of and say, "This is my work." That's what I am aiming for as well.



藍色志野壺 (2019)



Sakai Hiroshi

Born in Toki City, Gifu Prefecture in 1960. In 1983, he graduated from Nagoya Institute of Technology. In 1985 he graduated from the Ishoken (Tajimi City Pottery Design Institute) and studied under National Treasure Kato Kozo.

He is currently a regular member of the Japan Kogei Association and a permanent secretary of the Japan Ceramic Art Association.

Although he uses traditional Mino pottery "Shino" techniques, he creates contemporary "Shino" derived from his own sensibilities.

His works have been highly acclaimed both at home and abroad, and are housed in many collections, including the Japan Foundation of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the World Ceramic Exposition Foundation, the National Museum of Ceramic Art in Faenza, the Yingge Ceramic Museum in Taipei, and the Museum of Modern Ceramic Art, Gifu.