



A Bizen tea caddy by LNT Yamamoto Tōshū

FABIAN KOMMOSS

Galerie Kommoß, based in Berlin, is Germany's leading gallery entirely devoted to Japanese art with a focus on painting and calligraphy (screens and hanging scrolls) and traditional ceramics, but also including important works of lacquer, bamboo basketry and sculptures.

Established in 2012 by Dr. Fabian Alexander Kommoß, the gallery represents expertise, depth of knowledge and passion for Japanese art. Fabian Kommoß has completed studies in Japanology, East Asian art history and philosophy and doctoral studies with a double degree in East Asian art history and art history at the Universities of Zurich and Potsdam. As an international scholar for Zen Buddhist art and Japanese visual culture, he lived and lectured in Germany, Switzerland, China, Taiwan, Korea and Japan. With the aim to broaden the knowledge and awareness of Japanese art and cultures as well as East Asian Buddhism, Fabian Kommoß has also worked for a long time in the educational sector of the Asian Art Museum Berlin, offering guided public tours and theme specific excursions, especially to school classes.

Being involved in the academic and museum's context as well as in the gallery business, we feel a strong responsibility for both, the desires of our globally increasing numbers of private clients for decorative Japanese art as well as for the preservation of cultural and historical artifacts and their accessibility in the public. We dedicate our work to source, sustain and provide highest quality works of art in all their facets and to convey Japanese culture to a broader audience. Galerie Kommoß holds regular exhibitions throughout Europe and participates in international art fairs such as Cologne Fine Art & Design and Asian Art in Brussels.

Contact:

+ 49 (0)30 9854 1123

info@galeriekommoß.com

www.galeriekommoß.com



Gallery booth at Cologne Fine Art 2019 with Shintō hanging mask and a screen by Nakagawa Wadō.

YOUR THESIS “VISUALIZING THE INVISIBLE – STRATEGIES OF VISUALIZATION IN ZEN BUDDHIST ART” IS ABOUT TO BE PUBLISHED IN OCTOBER 2021, RIGHT? CAN YOU TELL US MORE ABOUT IT?

Yes, my dissertation with the original title *Die Sichtbarmachung des Unsichtbaren. Visualisierungsstrategien zen-buddhistischer Kunst* will be published this October by J.B. Metzler publishing. It has been funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG) and was finished in a *cotutelle-de-thèse* agreement between the Universities of Potsdam and Zurich. My book deals with the topic how invisibility or the impossibility of visualization is made evident in and through images. This is a previously neglected quality of images and is often the central subject of a special art that has developed in the context of East Asian Zen Buddhism. The study presents key works from the art historical canon as well as unpublished works from Japanese Zen temples and analyzes and contextualizes them in a new groundbreaking way in their genuine visual structures. The study shows how the impossibility of showing has been a central issue for centuries in Zen Buddhist art production and within this framework I am discussing how there were developed certain pictorial strategies which are reflecting both, the limits of representations and the limits of the viewer's perception.

YOU ALSO WORKED SOME YEARS AT THE STAATLICHE MUSEEN ZU BERLIN, SO YOU HAVE A VERY ACADEMIC PROFILE. DO YOU CONSIDER IT AS AN ADVANTAGE?

I absolutely do. I worked as a guide for the Asian Art Museum in Berlin for many years but also have some experience as a tutor and lecturer for students of East Asian art history. That is why teaching Japanese art is one of my passions. While studying East Asian art history, you inevitably learn about the transcultural complexity of the Asian region and start to see things as a whole and not just as 'this is Japanese' or 'that is Chinese'. Also, you learn to raise questions and re-

flect on topics which are considered to be common knowledge. More often than not, people try to explain Japanese art in certain terms that seem to overshadow everything that is 'Japanese'. However, the notions of 'zen' and 'wabi-sabi', for instance, are mostly modern constructions of the early 20th century. They cannot be used as simple descriptions of Japanese art without a proper discrimination of the historical, cultural and social contexts. Therefore, one of my intentions with the gallery business is to raise the awareness for and to deepen the understanding of Japanese art in its many facets.

WHEN DID YOU DECIDE TO SET UP THE JAPANESE ANTIQUE BUSINESS – AND WHY?

Already as student, when I lived in Japan for a while, I started to collect small objects and began soon to notice my talent in picking the 'right' work from a pile of possible items. At that time, just to give one example, I went to the flea market in looking for some inexpensive tools for the Japanese tea ceremony and chose a *chaire* (a ceramic container for powdered green tea) for very few yen. This work was praised by my tea teacher at that time and I learned that the tea caddy was in fact a very valuable masterpiece by the Bizen potter Yamamoto Tōshū (1906-1994), who was appointed a Living National Treasure by the Japanese Government in 1987. Then, back in Germany, I launched my first website in 2012 and started my business as an art dealer. Many things have changed since that very beginning, but I have kept my interest in Japanese tea ceremony and a gallery's focus on the tools for this special art form.

YOU STARTED YOUR BUSINESS JUST A FEW YEARS BEFORE THE PANDEMIC. YOU PARTICIPATED IN COLOGNE ART FAIR IN 2018 AND ASIAN ART IN BRUSSELS IN 2019. WHAT WAS YOUR EXPERIENCE? WILL YOU TAKE PART IN OTHER FAIRS NOW IT SEEMS THE WORLD IS SLIGHTLY REOPENING?

I have made some great experiences on my first participations in Cologne Fine Art and Asian Art in Brussels. Usually, it is quite difficult for young galleries to participate in large events due to the incredible costs. But Cologne Fine Art, for instance, has a good concept for young dealers and I can say without hesitations,



Rare Shintō pilgrim mask of the "beshimi" type.

that I am kind of proud that I made my entrance at that early stage. Luckily, with a good online presence since the beginning of my gallery, Corona did not hit me as hard as some other galleries and I am now very much looking forward to future events.

THERE IS A STRONG DEMAND FOR CHINESE ANTIQUES AT THE MOMENT, BUT WHAT IS THE MARKET LIKE FOR ANTIQUITIES FROM JAPAN?

I try to avoid comparisons between the markets for Chinese, Korean and Japanese antiques, since there are different groups of interests with different economics backgrounds. There have always been ups and downs in different sections, but the Japanese market is still a steady one, which currently offers excellent opportunities for collectors: Japanese works are not artificially overpriced and due to the aging of the Japanese society and the increasing number of house clearances, there are some very interesting and rare objects appearing on the Japanese market right now.

WHAT ARE THE MOST POPULAR ITEMS WITH YOUR CUSTOMERS - IS IT SMALLER ITEMS, OR LARGER, SUCH AS SCREENS?

The most popular items in my gallery are ceramic tea caddies (*chaire*). I have some very good collectors among my clients, who are specializing on them. These tiny containers are created for holding the green tea powder (*maccha*) in the Japanese tea ceremony. Oldest examples were introduced in the 12th century by travelling Japanese Zen monks from Song-dynasty China as containers for medicine – just like the powdered green tea itself. First there were only the Chinese containers used, but as soon as the tea ceremony gained larger popularity in the late 16th century, Japanese potters started to create their own containers in the local pottery centers of which many are still working today. Once, a customer told me that *chaire* are offering the possibility to collect Japanese ceramics without having to have much space at home, yet they are "an elegant and powerful form that

commands much more visual space than is conveyed by their size." They are kind of a ceramic bonsai.

DO YOU GO OVER TO JAPAN TO DEAL WITH THE LOCAL ANTIQUES TRADE?

Yes. Before the pandemic and the travel restriction I have been to Japan regularly and have a network of local antique dealers. But I also work together with traditional restorers for hanging scrolls in Japan. If someone needs help with or advice for restoring traditional Japanese paintings, I would be happy to give advice or provide a contact.

WHAT ARE YOU COMMITTED TO WHEN YOU BUY OR SELL ANTIQUES?

Quality, authenticity, passion. When it comes to choosing a new artwork, first of all, I completely trust my instinct. Only in a second step I am judging authenticity, quality and style. This way I found some of my most interesting, unusual objects. Like the extremely rare Shintō pilgrim mask in this catalog. When I saw it, I felt instantly that I need to buy it – not knowing anything about it. I even asked some international specialists from museums, but they couldn't help, since it is a completely undiscovered field. Upon my own research I found a Hiroshige woodblock print from around 1834 with the detail of a pilgrim carrying such a mask in a portable shrine on his back – imagine the breathtaking moment I had!

IS THERE ANYTHING SPECIFIC TO THE JAPANESE SOUL/CULTURE/MIND THAT YOU ADMIRE, OR YOU HAVE ADOPTED?

With a Master's degree in Japanology, I am very careful trying not to promote the still popular assumption, that there may exist some quintessential unique cultural or psychological qualities of the Japanese. Like, for example, the stereotype of the Samurai as noble warrior, which we know – at least after watching Netflix – is the product of a stylized self-fashioning of the Samurai class while facing decline in the 19th century. Unfortunately, this is still today one of the most repeated myths about Japanese culture next to so many others.

Nevertheless, in certain fields of Japanese culture, there are some very interesting and possibly unique concepts, that, however, cannot be applied to the Japanese people in general. What attracts me most, for instance, is a

special way of seeing that is used in the *dō*-arts, like martial arts or the 'way of tea'. Being trained in Japanese archery and tea ceremony myself, I came in contact with the art of seeing which is called *metsuke* in Japanese, what can roughly be translated as 'attaching the eyes to'. *Metsuke* describes the ability, that when you fix your gaze on a concrete object or point, one is still able to perceive things close by in our peripheral vision without focusing on them. It is an incredible method to be totally aware of what is going on around you without even raising your head. In my new book about Zen art, I am giving an example where this kind of 'seeing without looking' plays a crucial role in perceiving the artwork as well. A case that has never been described before.

WHAT ARE YOUR PROJECTS FOR THE FUTURE? YOU ARE NOW WORKING ON A PROJECT IN ITALY RIGHT?

Yes, I was luckily enough to move to Italy right before the pandemic fully started and soon made Italy my second home. Living at the Riviera in the area of San Remo, Monaco and Nice, I am recognizing the big potentials of a decentralized spot for gallery activities here in the region. With the Musée Départemental des Arts Asiatiques, Nice has also a very interesting location for the Asian arts – what many people don't know. As soon as the pandemic gets better, there is more to come and I strongly recommend to stay connected on our social media platforms and our regular newsletter.



Gallery booth at Cologne Fine Art 2018 with an important pair of screens by Mochizuki Gyokkei.