

SEITO TAMURA

Kutani brush-writing micro calligraphy

March 2022

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW WITH SEITO TAMURA

We had an exclusive interview with Seito Tamura, a fourth generation Kutani brush-writing micro calligraphy artist, in preparation for her solo exhibition to be held from April 1.



Incense burner of overglazed in red with Japanese poem from Manyoshu

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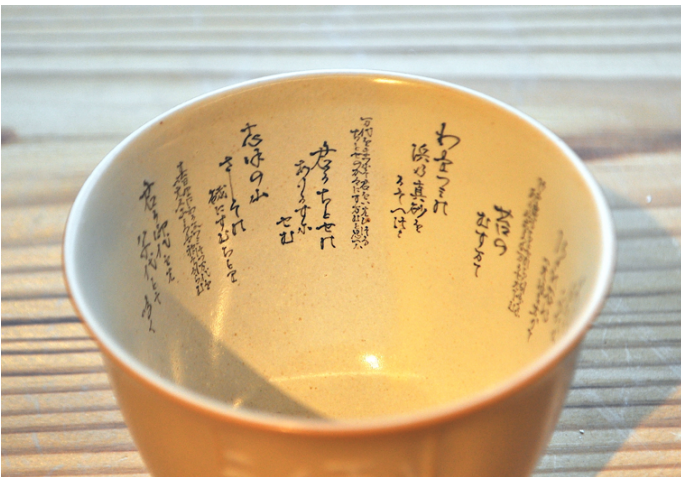


Seito Tamura

- 1980 Born in Komatsu city, Ishikawa prefecture
- 2004 Graduated from University of Tsukuba, International Comprehensive Studies
Studied under Keisei Tamura
- 2007 Completed the practical training course at the
Ishikawa Kutaniyaki Technical Training Institute
- 2010 Open a studio in Komatsu City, Ishikawa Prefecture

—What is the origin of Kutani brush-writing micro calligraphy

Tamura : Although the technique of writing fine characters is also found in China and Kyoto, and the characters are much larger than the ones I am writing now, writing characters on tea bowls itself has been done for a long time. This technique was introduced to Kutani, and the first generation of Seizan Oda began to write waka poems inside of tea bowls in even finer characters, which was the beginning of Kutani brush-writing micro calligraphy.



(Pic: Kokinshu -Tea cup)

—You are now the fourth generation of this tradition. What motivated you to take over the Kutani Brush-writing micro calligraphy?

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Tamura: Strangely enough, there was no pressure to take over the family business. My father used to say to me, "No one knows if you can do this job if you are told to take it over. The minimum requirement is that you decide for yourself" Nowadays, there may be a glamorous image of a craftsman having a private exhibition where his work is shown to customers, but what I had seen was my father silently writing letters on vessels from morning to night in his workshop at home, so I never thought, "I want to do that too" I wanted to enter a more glamorous world, so after graduating from college, I went to Tokyo and worked in sales. I thought sales itself was a very rewarding job, but I wanted to leave something visible and tangible in the world as my life's work, so I talked to my father about it, and he told me what he was doing was exactly that kind of job, and that was when I decided to give it a try.

—How was it to actually study under your father? Was your father strict?

Tamura: Not at all! My father was basically a man who let me do anything. However, he told me, "This is not a hobby or an artistic activity, but rather a job as a craftsman to make a living, so just make sure you have the basics down. He let me do whatever I wanted, and that hasn't changed.

—How many years did it take you to actually be able to write well?

Tamura : It took time not only to learn how to write characters, but also to study classical literature to write in, to study a type of calligraphy called kana-sho, and to study Kutani Yaki as a pottery. I started at the age of 24, and I was 31 when I exhibited my first piece with Kutani fine characters, so I had been in training for seven years until then.

—Did you ever feel like you were going to falter during those seven years?

Tamura : There were many times when I thought it would be difficult. But once I started carrying on the family tradition as my job, quitting because I couldn't do it well was no longer my option. If you ask me if I am still satisfied with my writing, I would say that I am not there yet. But on the contrary, I think that is the reason I am able to continue.

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—Please tell us about the brushes you use.

Tamura : The brushes are custom-ordered with black raccoon dog hair. The brushes are also handmade and vary from person to person and it is difficult to be used as they are. So I cut and adjust the amount and length of the bristles myself and also use different brushes depending on the size of the characters to be written. Of course, brushes are consumable, so I replace them with new ones, but I still use the same type of brushes that I have used since my great-grandfather's time.

—I understand that the process of modeling has been done since your generation. Do you have an image of the finished product in mind when you are creating?

Tamura : Yes, I also do modeling, but not all of them, and some of them use molds. When I want to make many pieces of the same mold, such as sake cups and coffee cups, I ask a wheel thrower to make them for me. On the other hand, if it is difficult to ask a wheel thrower to do the particular shape with very detail, I start from the molding process with an image of the finished product.

—Where does the inspiration for your work come from?

Tamura: Basically, it comes from waka poetry. The content of the waka poem is used to create an image of the work.

—I think that the fact that your works have letters in them allows us to bring a special time not only looking at them, but also reading them. By considering that fact, what do you think about the vessel with letters?

Tamura : Very interesting point. There are very few pieces of pottery that include letters, and I don't think there are many people who include letters in all the pieces they make. There are some cases where letters are included like patterns, but basically, if you can read kana script, you can read the letters. Unlike patterns, I think that letters, although detailed, have a strong message and presence. For example, in the season of cherry blossoms, there will be a scene where you drink sake while viewing cherry blossoms, and as soon as you pick up the sake cup and put it close to your mouth, you will see the painting of cherry blossoms and the waka poem on it. I would like to

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create a work that gives the reader a special time and meaning through the text, not necessarily all of it, but in a good balance.

—What criteria should be used to distinguish between a tightly written composition, such as the Hyakunin Isshu, and a design with sparsely arranged letters?

Tamura : I think if you write detailed characters a lot, the sense of presence becomes too strong, and it is not appropriate for vessels used in daily life. The ones that write letters in a tight space are often incense burners and flower vases that are placed in formal occasion. On the other hand, there are also pieces where the letters are quietly placed in the vine part of Tessen(The name of Japanese flower) these design which is normally seen for the daily use coffee cups and plates.



(Pic: Coffee saucer which waka poem is written on the vine of the flower)

The amount and placement of letters were changed while keeping in mind the design and purpose of the product. At first, it was very difficult to balance the shape, pattern, and position of the letters without discomfort, and to place all of them with a sense of inevitability. A waka poem is approximately 31 characters long, but there is a limit to the number of characters that can be included in the place, and it is not allowed to have more space or less.

—The incense burner you sent me ahead of time (Please refer the photo below), how long would it take just to write the letters in?

Tamura :There are three frames written on this entire incense burner, and each frame takes about three hours. I don't have an exact measurement, but the amount of time I can concentrate on writing in a day is about 5-6 hours, so I try to finish one frame on the same day.

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(Pic: Incense burner of overglazed in red with Japanese poem from Manyoshu)

—Will writing letters be a one-shot deal?

Tamura : It is possible to erase this part only, but if I do so, I can see the unevenness from a distance and the work becomes very messy, so I try to concentrate on writing all the way through to avoid mistakes.

—Did you often make mistakes in the beginning?

Tamura : It's not so much that you get the letters wrong but line of a waka poem have to be written, for example, in a square frame with the top and bottom sides aligned but if you make a mistake in the size of the first letter at the start, you won't end up where you thought you would. Also, as I wrote 20 or 30 lines in a row, not all of them were 31 characters long because they were written in a mixture of kanji and Hiragana, so if a character was missing in the end or did not fit, it would not line up perfectly with the underline of the square frame, and I had to redo it. I was struggled a lot in the begging. This cannot be done without memorizing the waka. So memorizing it and learning with you body by making a mistake little by little.

—Please tell us more about the English-language works you are producing.

Tamura: The reason why I originally started creating English works was that Japanese kana characters can only be written vertically, so there is inevitably limitation on the design. Since the object to be written on is a three-dimensional object, I wanted to develop the letters horizontally, which led me to start writing in English. It is not necessarily more difficult to use Japanese or

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English, but the impression of the design is very different, so I keep that in my mind and use them differently.

—Your works have received high acclaim overseas as well. Are there characteristics of different countries?

Tamura : Of course, it varies from country to country and region to region, but the most popular pieces in Europe and the United States are white pieces sprayed with glaze that look like Japanese paper than colored painting works. This Washi series is a completely original series that I started with the intention of making it look good with flowers and food, and to blend in with the scenery even if it contains text. My impression is that Westerners purchase crafts with the expectation of integrating them into their everyday space. Therefore, this series is easy to use and has a bit of Japanese taste, which I think made it popular. In Asia, the more elaborate works with a lot of detailed letter are more popular, but in large cities such as Beijing and Shanghai, the Washi series is more popular.



(Pic : Washi series tea bowl - ocean in the heaven)

—Is there anything you find particularly difficult in terms of applying traditional techniques to the modern world?

Tamura : When I was young, I wondered if there was any real meaning in taking the time to write kana scripts and waka poems, things that people today cannot read at a glance. Nowadays, Kutaniyaki fine art are a bit of a trend but as whole world tends favor minimalism in interior design and architecture. So I am always thinking and working on how my work with letter will fit into current people's daily life. With this in mind, I was delighted to be able to realize a work in the Washi series that is equally detailed and uses traditional techniques, yet blends in casually with

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daily life. Of course, on the other hand, there are also works that are filled to the brim with writing, and I try to create works one by one with a sense of balance .

—Are there any events that have left a particularly strong impression on you in your pottery making activities to date?

Tamura : Basically, I focus on solo exhibition activities, but sometimes I receive custom orders. For example, there was one that asked me to make a work for his mother's birthday with a waka poem that would help her live longer. In the past, to be honest, I had a hard time working on custom orders. I didn't have the confidence to incorporate the customer's wishes into the work. But recently, my knowledge of waka has been increasing little by little, and I think I have obtained the ability to create the work that meets the shape, size, and purpose of the customer's request by doing a large number of waka works. So now I am grateful to be able to accept such custom orders, and I have fond memories of each one. I now feel that this is a job that only I can do.

—How do you feel about your work for this solo exhibition at Tosei Kyoto Gallery?

Tamura : I have held many solo exhibitions outside of Ishikawa throughout the year, but this will be the first time for me to hold one in Kyoto. I am nervous because Kyoto is the home of Kyo-yaki colored porcelain, but many of the waka poems I write every day are from the Heian period, and there are many poems written by court nobles in Kyoto and poems reading the scenery of Kyoto, so I thought it would be a great honor to be able to exhibit in the home of these poems, and I was really looking forward to it.

—You are the fourth generation, but do you plan to take over the tradition in the future?

Tamura: Our family has passed it down from generation to generation, but we did not decide to do so, it just happened. There were many craftsmen who were doing hosoji in my great-grandfather's time, but they have left or there has been no one to take over the tradition, so technically it has become only my father and I. To be honest, I have no desire to preserve this tradition because it is a tradition, or to have someone else take it over. I believe this is not a hobby but a job that is able to make your life with so if there is a demand for good work, it will naturally remain, rather than just being a tradition that should be preserved. So I would like to be the kind of person that people will eventually see my work and see me working as a craftsman and think about giving it a try. So I welcome anyone who really wants to try it, regardless of blood or anything like that (laughs).

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—Is there anything you would like to challenge in the future?

Tamura : Due to COVID-19, I have not been able to hold solo exhibitions overseas recently, so I would like to be able to show my work overseas a little more. However, rather than setting a big goal, I would like to take my time and improve the perfection of my works little by little.

How was the interview with Seito Tamura?

Seito Tamura's works are designed to fit in with modern life.

We hope you will enjoy the messages that are put into each of her works.

The exhibition will be held from Friday, April 1 to Saturday, April 30, 2022.

We are looking forward to seeing you there.