

Bamboo Exposed

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Bamboo has played an important role in Japanese culture since earliest times. Its elegant form, its straight, hollow, green stems reaching up into the skies, symbolize purity and good fortune. In *'Kaguyahime (The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter)'*, which is said to be the world's oldest science fiction story, a bamboo is cut open to reveal a beautiful princess. The story ends with messengers coming down from the moon to take her back into space with them. Bamboo possesses a strange spiritual and magical power that leads us all towards heaven.

Hafu Matsumoto's studio is located in the southern part of the Bōsō Peninsular, where the wind blows off the Pacific Ocean, and he listens to the sound of this wind rustling through the bamboo groves as he works. He says of his work, 'Fresh, green bamboo possesses more than enough beauty on its own. I cut its life short so the least I can do is to preserve its suppleness forever by sealing it within bamboo basketry.'

As the last apprentice of Shokansai Iizuka (1919–2004, designated a living national treasure in 1982) who was himself a second-generation apprentice of the genius, Rokansai Iizuka (1890–1958), Hafu Matsumoto is exceptionally skilled and has mastered the *shin*, *gyō* and *sō* (formal, semi-formal and informal methods) of weaving. One moment his expression resembles that of a samurai, as he struggles with the unforgiving bamboo, then the next he will resemble a peaceful priest as he works with the material's flexible nature. In his work, Matsumoto conforms to the golden rules that guided Rokansai and Shokansai throughout their lives.

The 'Noshitake' series, around which this exhibition structured, utilizes the 'Sō' (informal) technique that was developed by Rokansai. Its very simplicity allows the viewer to feel the vigor and refinement possessed by the craftsman. Pieces of bamboo, that have been split open then flattened by soaking them in boiling water, are bent together vigorously to create objects in which the tension resulting from the bamboo's natural tendency to stand erect, produces graceful forms. Tension and quietude are born from the enthusiastic dialog between Hafu and the bamboo. Hafu Matsumoto's bamboo baskets present a new form of bamboo craft suited to the twenty-first century that will doubtlessly weave a new future for Japan's unique traditions.