

BOSTON UNIVERSITY
GRADUATE SCHOOL OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

Dissertation

**TOMIMOTO KENKICHI AND THE DISCOURSE OF
MODERN JAPANESE CERAMICS**

by

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

2014

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ABSTRACT

In Japan, ceramics has long been considered a medium associated with elevated aesthetic expression and high cultural capital. However, the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries saw transformations of its epistemological underpinnings. The collapse of the feudal system gave rise to the multivalenced concept of “art craft” (*bijutsu kōgei*) that included “art ceramics.” For individual artists like Tomimoto Kenkichi (1886–1963), ceramics traversed a parallel path with other mediums of modern art that emphasized self-expression and hybridizations of multiple geo-historical sources. Ultimately, these ceramics became significant state-supported symbols of the nation.

An analysis of the art, praxis, and theories of Tomimoto Kenkichi presents an ideal case study for illuminating the central mechanisms responsible for the emergence and development of modern Japanese art ceramics. With a wide angle yet critical perspective lacking in previous studies, this dissertation not only reveals Tomimoto’s complex individual role in the history of modern ceramics, but also sheds light on the ontology of modern Japanese craft itself. By considering Tomimoto’s entire oeuvre—

including calligraphy, ceramics, design goods, painting, and prints—we may track the development of his modernist embrace of the direct observation of nature, abstract form, and original expression. His praxis, synergistically modeled on William Morris and Ogata Kenzan, reveals a modernist stance towards Japanese literati culture in which ceramics became a medium negotiating between British Arts and Crafts design; modernist European sculpture; and Chinese, Korean, and Japanese historical ceramics.

The dissertation's diachronic structure charts artistic concepts, ideologies, and creative works from the late Meiji to the mid-Shōwa eras, relying on formal analysis as well as organizational analysis of pedagogical systems, art organizations, and exhibition structures. Chapter One considers Tomimoto's lineal inheritances, university education, and self-study. Chapter Two explores Tomimoto's discourse of self-expression and the equivalency of artistic mediums. Chapter Three deconstructs the image of the ceramic vessel and Tomimoto's discourse of ceramic form according to respective engagements with Joseon porcelain and modernist sculpture. Chapter Four analyzes the sinophilic and modernist aspects of his overglaze enamel porcelain. Finally, Chapter Five surveys the role of exhibitions and preservation efforts in positioning ceramics as art and national tradition.