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The 'beauty' of the commonplace

Mingei exhibit makes great use of space to reconcile differences and similarities' among everyday objects.

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ART CRITIC

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Once they were traps for fish or shrimp. Technically, they still are. But more to the point, they are elegant centerpieces in a seductive exhibition called "The Beauty of Use."

These objects are emblematic of the philosophy of the Mingei International Museum, since the collection is built on the premise that everyday things can double as art objects. Scan the first-floor galleries of the museum and you'll see numerous things in the current exhibition that fit this description.

The ambition of the show is to mark, as its subtitle says, the "Mingei International Museum at 30." Actually, that anniversary won't happen until May 5, 2008, but this show remains on view through June 24 next year.

The mission of the museum is embedded in its name. Mingei was a word invented by the Japanese philosopher and scholar Soetsu Yanagi. He combined min (people) with gei (art), to describe his genuinely populist line of thought. The word embodied a school of thought and art-making that emerged in the 1920s and 1930s, which sought to elevate regard for handcrafted functional objects and encourage a flowering of beautiful, everyday objects.

In a grass-roots style, Mingei thinkers and artists wanted to bring art and life together. Not surprisingly, ceramics became a key medium of the movement. Its ambitions echoed those of the Arts and Crafts movement in late 19th- and early 20th-century England and America and of 20th-century avant-gardists who wanted to blur life and art.

It's not a stretch to say the major champion of the Mingei philosophy in the United States has been – and still is – Martha Longenecker, the museum's founding director and herself a ceramicist. She stepped down in 2005. Assistant director, Rob Sidner, succeeded her in 2006.

But if "The Beauty of Use," which highlights the collection, has a different look than exhibitions did under Longenecker's direction, this has a lot to do with Sidner's and the board's decision to bring on Bonnie Roche as director of exhibitions.

Roche, an architect who has headed her own firm in New York for two decades, is admired for designing new spaces and renovating others for theaters at Lincoln Center and elsewhere. Her work has required an eye for "choreographing spaces," as she puts it, and that's abundantly evident here.

She sets up sightlines that carry your eye from one grouping of objects to another. It's hard to look at the cluster of traps and not see the nearby wall of metal objects displaying curved blades.

And curiosity naturally carries you closer to the wall of blades, which look for all the world like weapons. But appearances can be deceiving. In their cultural context, they have a wholly different function, which I won't disclose. Discovering that function is half the fun.

In general, choosing "wow objects," in Roche's phrase, has been her aim. Given Longenecker's passionate pursuit of this high order of things for decades, she had a wealth of them to choose from. But, you still need the sort of sharp eye that can sift through thousands – and Roche clearly does.

That skill is evident in the case of small brooms, scrubbers and combs, spanning the globe from Japan to the Democratic Republic of Congo to Alaska. The brooms, all compact, are sculptural, most slender but one billowy like a wild head of hair.

It's just as clear in her choice of monumental baskets, both 20th-century examples. One is Apache, used for gathering, and adorned with a spare geometric pattern. The other is from a tiny indigenous group in Mexico, the Seri, who still speak their own language and clearly have a flair for weaving. The Seri basket displays a pattern of man and animal (probably a dog), framed by diagonal lines, elegant in its simplicity.

“People have a natural need to reconcile differences and similarities, to reconcile both when they walk into the space,” explains Roche. She uses that notion to finely honed advantage in this exhibition.

Japanese parasols share space with bamboo hats that gently echo their contours. She groups “Women's Cache-Sex Pelvic Pieces” in one case. All are from the Kirdi people of Cameroon and Nigeria. They lavish a lot of attention on these small surfaces, with beaded motifs that are floral or intricately geometric.

You can be sure that a broom-maker from the Congo or a hatmaker from Indonesia wasn't thinking about creating museum pieces. But that is precisely the point of the collection: to widen the concept of what is regarded as art.

Seeing a show like “The Beauty of Use” is a crisp distillation of that idea. You see how broad the concept of the functional object as art can be, encompassing everything from an Indian calendar crafted on a palm frond to a late-19th-century sake cask.

If you're looking for a lot of cultural history about these objects, then the Mingei is not your place. But if you want to see the world and art differently than you did before, it surely is.

Earthworks

As if to emphasize the point about an expansive concept of art, the museum has just opened a smaller new exhibition, “American Viewing Stones: Natural Art in an Asian Tradition.”

It's a tradition reaching back a thousand, perhaps two thousand years, in China and about 400 years in Japan and Korea. And it's a tradition of found art, in which rocks were collected for their resemblance to mountains and mountain ranges or simply for some exotic or aesthetically pleasing quality.

They were assembled for meditation, to spiritually nourish the viewer. In China, they were popular with the literati; in Japan, with Zen monks.

In recent years, they have become something of a mini-craze in the United States, with a plethora of collectors and books testifying to their growing popularity.

Among the most ambitious collectors are James and Alice Greaves. James, a highly regarded conservator who worked for the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the Huntington Art Gallery, among others, has also been a prolific collector through the years. Four years ago, he donated a big collection of pre-Columbian works to the Mingei.

Discovering and amassing these stones has become his and his wife's obsessive pursuit, he admits.

You can see why in “American Viewing Stones,” handsomely installed by Roche. They are marvelous things. One resembles a chrysanthemum; another, a mountain range. A third looks like a robed figure. Some are self-contained objects. Others, like “Island Stone,” depend on a sense of composition: the right shape in rock surrounded by sand.

The show, like this category of stones, blurs the distinction between collector and artist. (James Greaves also served as guest curator.) Plucking them from nature is an artistic act, while amassing them in quantity qualifies as collecting. But contemplating them provokes us to experience the power and pleasure of perception.