

By Hunter Drohojowska

Every country has its national treasures, but in Japan some of them are human beings. The "Living National Treasures of Japan" are craftspeople and artisans who have mastered traditional art forms — the ancient techniques of ceramics, textiles, lacquerware and metalwork, as well as the performing arts — and used them to create traditional and contemporary artwork. An amazing array of applied art — forming a first-of-its-kind show organized by Boston's Museum of Fine Arts — is on view now through May 1 at the Japanese American Cultural Community Center in Little Tokyo.

Few cultures have such reverence for the beauty of the common object: a sheet of handmade paper, a woven basket, a teacup. Yet, this singular perspective was jeopardized after World War II by the easy, modern ways of the West, which were

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assimilated rapidly into Japanese culture. Fast music, blue jeans and Coca-Cola eclipsed kabuki, kimonos and tea.

In 1955, the Japanese government passed an act to protect not only its culture's rare artwork, but the artists who could produce it. Each of the 70 individuals elected to "National Treasure" status receives a government stipend of approximately \$7,000 annually to facilitate teaching, exhibiting and/or training apprentices. (Many supplement their sinecures by selling their wares privately.)

Japanese ceramics are probably the best known of the applied arts, and the show's selection ranges from the delicate porcelains to earthy, iron-glazed wares; from refined serving dishes to humble tea bowls used in Zen Buddhist ceremonies.

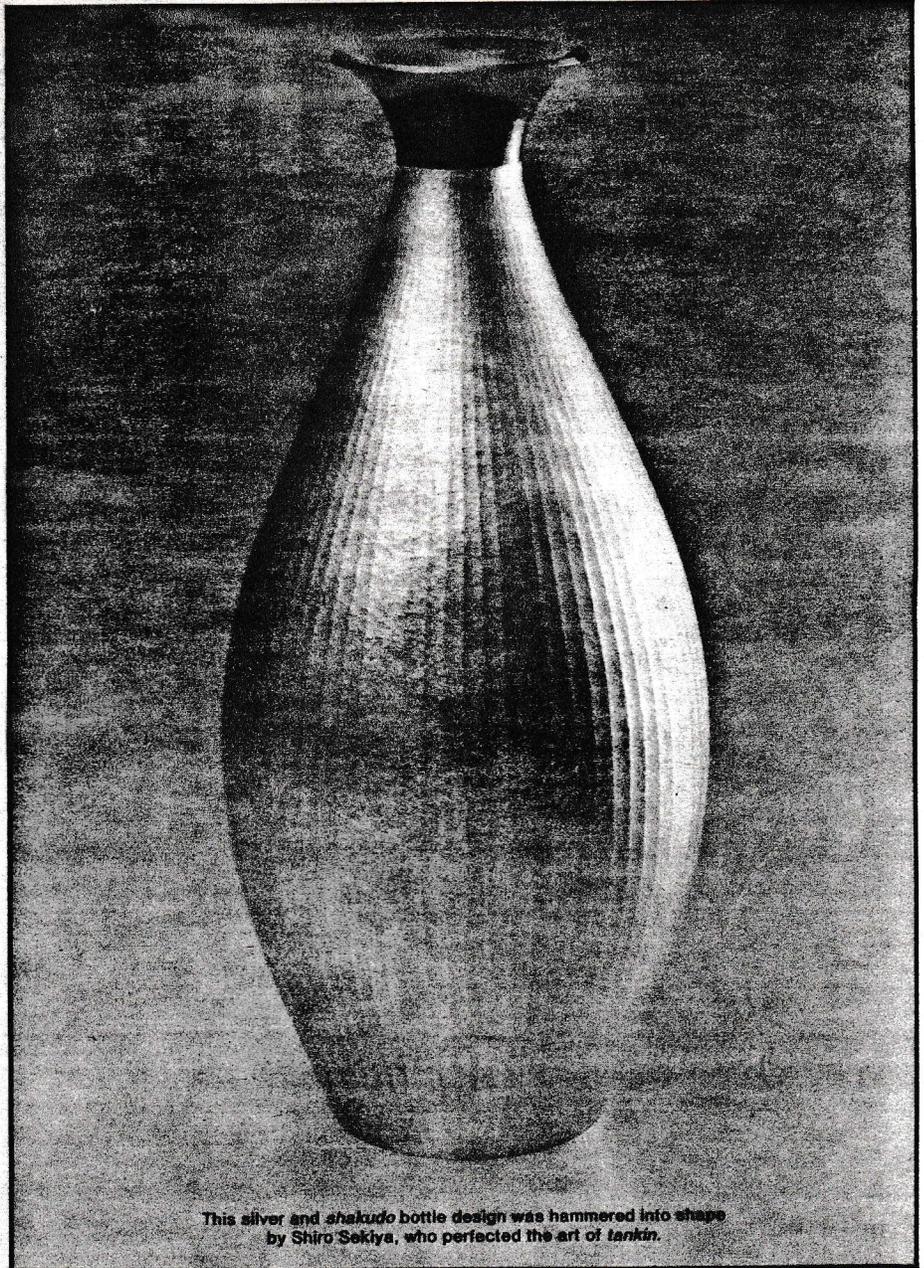
The exhibition features all manner of textiles but highlights the kimono. To the Western eye, a kimono is a peculiar garment — something between a bathrobe and a ball gown. And while today's efficient Japanese may seem ill-suited to the kimono, it's far from obsolete.

Also featured in the show are fine examples of Japanese works in lacquer, which, when buffed to a high red or black sheen, have surfaces that rival onyx in luster. Lacquer is used to coat boxes, bowls, baskets and myriad wooden containers.

Included in the show's "Important Intangible Cultural Properties" are representative pieces of metalwork — metal casting and carving, surface treatments such as gilding, coloring and polishing, decorative metalwork and metal beating or *tankin*. Among the 120 items on display are gongs, tea kettles, baroque-carved boxes, swords and hammered silver.

Overall, the work appears graphic, abstract and innovative, and it's impossible not to notice how very up-to-date and American much of the work on

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This silver and shakudo bottle design was hammered into shape by Shiro Sekiya, who perfected the art of *tankin*.

exhibit appears. While Japan was once — and is still — borrowing from America, today Japanese design in fashion, food, interiors and architecture has wended its way into the American aesthetic. Nowhere is this as evident as in the design from the

New Wave movement.

Maybe the U.S. Congress should take note and adopt an Important Intangible Properties Act to preserve our own living treasures — before they vanish. ■