

# THE JAPANESE BAMBOO BASKETS OF THE LLOYD COTSEN COLLECTION

BY NOELLE FOYE

LLOYD COTSEN JAPANESE BAMBOO BASKET COLLECTION, GIFT OF MONDEN YUICHI



LLOYD COTSEN JAPANESE BASKET COLLECTION, GIFT OF MIMURA CHIKUHO



The lineage of the Japanese bamboo basket can be traced across centuries, dating back to roughly 3000 BCE, during the Jomon period (10,000–300 BCE). This seemingly straightforward creation reflects how an everyday utilitarian object can be a work of art representative of a culture.

The Asian Art Museum in San Francisco, California, is home to the Lloyd Cotsen Japanese Bamboo Basket Collection. With nearly 1,000 pieces, this collection is one of the largest in the world. Cotsen, former CEO and Chairman of Neutrogena, began collecting baskets in the 1970s. His collection includes early traditional utilitarian unsigned baskets, classic examples by recognized masters, as well as commissioned contemporary sculptural works. These pieces trace the evolution of weaving bamboo baskets through the history of Japan and the development of an artistic style unique to Japan's culture.

Early on, specialized bamboo baskets were often made to hold flower petals and arrangements for religious rituals in both Shinto and Buddhist practices. When trade opened up with neighboring China in the 1400s, karamono, or "Chinese things," were quickly coveted by the Japanese elite. These desired pieces included intricately woven bamboo and rattan baskets to hold flower arrangements. Japanese basket makers sought

OPPOSITE PAGE  
Monden Yuichi, **Spherical Dream**; 2003; bamboo (*madake*), rattan, plastic monofilament; thousand-line construction, irregular plaiting; 25.5h x 20.75w x 13.5d in.

THIS PAGE  
TOP: Nakatomi Hajime, **Continual Winds**; 2004; bamboo (*madake*), rattan; thousand-line construction, twining, diamond twill base; 7.5h x 15 in. (diameter)  
BOTTOM: Mimura Chikuho, **Island Cloud**; 2006; bamboo (*madake*); irregular plaiting; 12h x 14w x 14d in.



LLOYD COTSEN JAPANESE BAMBOO BASKET COLLECTION. GIFT OF UENO MASAO AND TAI GALLERY, SANTA FE



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to meticulously copy the Chinese baskets, leaving them unsigned to have the baskets accepted as Chinese-made to increase their value. As the traditions of the tea ceremony took hold in Japan in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the bamboo basket became more important in the Japanese culture.

By the mid-1800s, Japanese bamboo basket weavers began to break from the precisely symmetrical and balanced Chinese style of weaving and presented a Japanese organic, free-form aesthetic.

Hayakawa Shokosai and Iizuka Rokansai were among the leaders of this new generation of artists, creating original designs that were uniquely Japanese. Shokosai I was the first basket maker known to sign his work, openly declaring it was not the work of a Chinese weaver. While the materials and many of the age-old techniques employed by the Chinese continued to be employed, a new Japanese aesthetic was being launched.

Traditionally, Japanese basket makers develop their craft as apprentices to a master bamboo basket weaver. The first several years of the apprenticeship are spent simply learning to split and prepare the bamboo for weaving. The apprenticeship continues with learning and perfecting each of the many techniques and styles of bamboo plaiting and rattan weaving. At roughly the 10-year point in the apprenticeship, the student is considered ready to begin to work independently.

OPPOSITE PAGE  
Ueno Masao, **Inside Out**; 2006;  
bamboo (*madake*), rattan,  
gold leaf; circular plaiting (variant);  
15h x 20w x 19d in.

THIS PAGE  
TOP: Higashi Takesonosai;  
**The Wave**; 1975; Bamboo, rattan,  
lacquer; 11.5h x 25.5w x 10d in.  
BOTTOM: Higashi Takesonosai,  
**Waves of the Four Oceans**  
**Around Japan**; 1991; bamboo;  
7h x 17.5d in.



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Within the master studio system of Japan, several family lineages of outstanding artists developed. Skills were passed from father to son to grandson and on, down through the generations. One of the most famous of these dynasties is the Tanabe family, known by the artist name Chikuunsai. Tanabe Tsuneo was given the name Chikuunsai by his teacher Wada Waichisai I when he finished his apprenticeship. His son became Chikuunsai II followed by his grandson Chikuunsai III and his great grandson Chikuunsai IV.

Looking at the pieces by the Chikuunsai lineage held in the Cotsen Collection, you can follow the artists' voices through the generations. Each builds upon the skills and designs of the previous generation, while interpreting the form anew in their own style. The Chikuunsai family helped further the place of bamboo baskets and sculptural works in the art world.

Exploring works by the successive generations of the Chukuunsai family provides an interesting look into the history and evolution of bamboo baskets in Japan. Chukuunsai I's *Hall Replete with Happiness and Longevity* is an elegant, symmetrical, and balanced piece done in the Chinese style. Chikuunsai has even woven the Chinese characters of the title into the panels on each side.

While continuing to use the Chinese style of his father, Chikuunsai II developed his own

OPPOSITE PAGE  
Shono Shounsai, **Shimmering of Heated Air**; 1969; bamboo, rattan, copper alloy; 13.75h x 14d in.

THIS PAGE  
TOP: Iizuka Rokansai, **Man of Virtue**; circa 1926–1940; bamboo (*nemagaridake* variety); openwork square plaiting; 25 x 14.5 in. (diameter)  
BOTTOM: Iizuka Rokansai, **Man of Virtue** (detail of signature); circa 1926–1940; bamboo (*nemagaridake* variety); openwork square plaiting; 25 x 14.5 in. (diameter)



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personal designs. *Flower Basket*, with its random irregular weave, is skillfully designed to highlight the sense of natural organic flow appreciated in Japanese culture.

Chikuunsai III formally studied design, bringing a new influence to his work. He often explored more sculptural pieces. His *Core* basket has a very contemporary feel. He wove solid spokes of bamboo in an intricate and precise geometric pattern and laced them together with rattan to create an interesting interplay of components.

Chikuunsai IV currently heads the Chikuunsai lineage. He studied sculpture at the Tokyo University of the Arts along with apprenticing under his father. His work *Disappear XII*, part of a series, transforms the traditional bamboo basket into a modern sculptural piece. Collaborating with Harvard School of Architecture's Professor Sawako Kaijima, Chikuunsai IV developed computer-generated algorithms to build a resin mold using a 3D printer. He then used the mold to place and weave the bamboo into the complex and dynamic form of the vessel.

Higashi Takesonosai is another contemporary bamboo artist whose work is included in the Cotsen Collection. His basket *Bamboo Grove* is a modern take on the traditional flower basket. Referencing a bamboo forest, the varied angles, widths, and textures

#### OPPOSITE PAGE

Tanabe Chikuunsai, **Hall Replete with Happiness and Longevity**; 1900–1937; Bamboo (*madake*), rattan; twill plaiting, mat plaiting, chrysanthemum base plaiting; 19h x 10.25w x 1.25d in.

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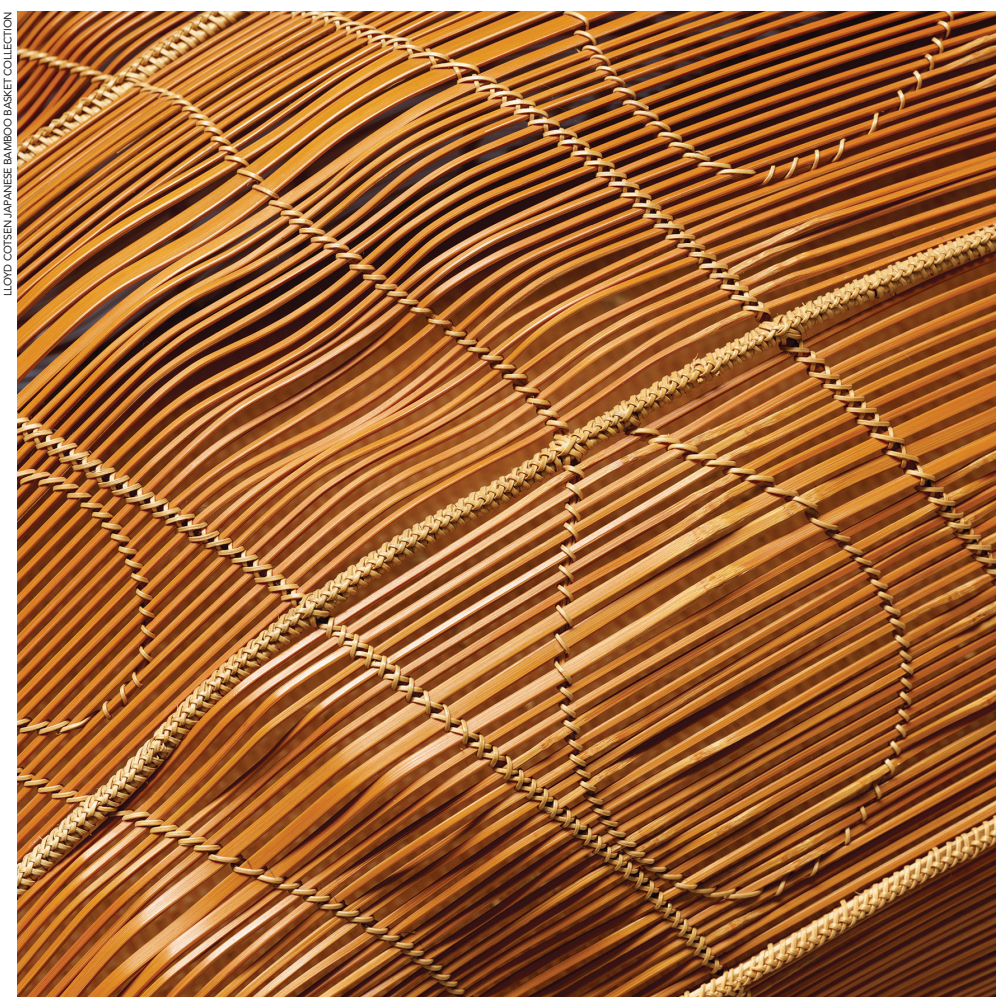
TOP: Tanabe Chikuunsai II, **Flower Basket**; 1930–2000; bamboo and rattan; 19.5h x 11.25w x 9.75d in. BOTTOM: Tanabe Chikuunsai III, **Core**; 2018; bamboo (*yadake* and *madake*), rattan; parallel construction, square plaited base (inside), diamond twill plaited base (underside); 9.5h x 24d in.



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of the bamboo strips he used present a very simple yet inspired reflection of the natural turnings and leanings of the bamboo grove that inspired the piece.

*Stone in the Stream* is another example of Takesonosai's skill using bamboo to express a personal vision. The varied widths of the bamboo strips and the meandering twining of the rattan help create the illusion of looking at the stone shape through the flowing stream. The carefully crafted bubbling and bending of the bamboo further deepen the sense of running water.

The baskets gifted by Lloyd Cotsen to the AAM tell the story of the Japanese bamboo basket. They also provide a glimpse into the history and culture of Japan and introduce the master artists of the form.

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OPPOSITE PAGE  
Higashi Takesonosai, **Bamboo Grove**; 1977; bamboo and rattan; 7h x 18.25w x 5d in.

THIS PAGE  
TOP: Higashi Takesonosai, **Stone in a Stream**; 1971; bamboo and rattan; 11h x 17w x 28.5d in.  
BOTTOM: Higashi Takesonosai, **Stone in a Stream** (detail); 1971; bamboo and rattan; 11h x 17w x 28.5d in.