

## HIROE SWEN'S DIGITAL ARCHIVE

Chiaki Ajioka

**H**iroe Swen is a much loved and respected Japanese-Australian potter, who arrived in Australia in 1968 and, at 90 years old in March 2024, continues to create. Her works are in the collections of major art institutions around Australia (see Edie Young, 'Artist profile', *TAASA Review* vol.27, no.3, 2018). *The world of Hiroe Swen's ceramic art: educational resources and a digital archive* was launched in 2023.

Since its launch, people from a range of fields have reacted to the archive: one sculptor was 'shocked' to see the way Swen shapes her clay in her *Island series* with one simple knife; younger Japanese ceramicists have commented on the unique cultural quality of Swen's works: they are not what they consider to be 'Japanese' yet are also different from what they know of Australian ceramics. These comments reveal the value of the archive which presents the artist's career in a multi-dimensional way, that is, how it has been shaped in real life.

The genesis of the archive was a series of conversations among Swen's close friends. In 2020, at the opening of her solo exhibition at Sturt Gallery, Mittagong, ceramicist Jacqueline Clayton was listening in as Swen was telling another potter about the surface treatment she employed for a particular piece. The method was something neither Clayton nor the other potter would have chosen. Later, Clayton discussed with her partner and well-known potter Paul Davis that Swen's unique hand-building techniques should be recorded for the benefit of the ceramics community, and they suggested this to Swen and her husband Cornel Swen.

Davis studied in Japan for many years and his knowledge of both Australian and Japanese practices in ceramics underpins his close relationship with Swen. They decided to arrange a video recording of her creative process, but this idea faced some practical problems: he was based in Newcastle and Swen in Queanbeyan, and the Covid lockdowns made travels impossible. It was Mayumi Shinozaki, a long-time admirer of Swen's ceramics, who conceived the idea of expanding the project beyond demonstration video into a digital archive of Swen's life and work. For Shinozaki, the former Chief Librarian of the Japan Unit (closed in 2020) at the Australian National Library, this was an opportunity to illuminate the significance of Swen's work in Australia.



HIROE SWEN. PHOTO: MAYUMI SHINOZAKI AND YUMIKO STARKE

Shinozaki embarked on the archive project. It would be a bilingual (English/Japanese) digital archive consisting of demonstration videos, interviews, a catalogue raisonné (in progress) and essays on various aspects of Swen's work and its significance. With the help of three grants from artsACT, a grant from CreateNSW, private benefactors and a team of contributors, the archive was launched on 13 May 2023 at Drill Hall Gallery, ANU, Canberra. The archive is still growing; thanks to generous support from individuals. It is widely accessible till 2027 and its future will be reviewed before the end of this first phase.

Swen has always been scrupulously non-compromising in her judgement of the artistic quality of her work as well as other people's. In this regard, perhaps the treasure of the archive is the interview video in which Shinozaki's apt questions bring out some valuable insights into Swen's approach to work. We hear Swen placing her own hand-building technique within the context of a practice that is millennia-old, while asserting that she was drawn to the individualistic originality of modern Japanese ceramics. Indeed, we see in her work a happy marriage of her commitment to usefulness and her belief in self-expression: 'I like to make things that are useful and beautiful'; beauty in this sense is her response to nature which she hopes to share with the user.

Swen's ability to judge aesthetic quality with confidence appears to be based on her individual capacity on the one hand and centuries old Japanese connoisseurship on the other. The former has been nurtured through training her own sense of beauty, pursuing

its expression and always questioning her work – something Swen has installed in her students – while the latter refers to a tradition that is particularly strong in her hometown Kyoto. We hear her speak of *ma* or 'the space in between', an essential component in all art forms. She points out that the Japanese have thought about it and articulated it over the centuries, so much so that she feels that she incorporates *ma* in her work without thinking, as something that she has inherited. This echoes Bernard Leach's comment in his influential *A Potter's Book* (1940) that, in regards to pottery, a 'consensus of opinion' on aesthetic merits was lacking in the West. Over the years, however, Swen has seen development among Australians of an eye for quality in ceramics.

Many viewers comment on the preciousness of Swen's words in the interview because they are not just words: they distil the sincere mind of the artist who embraces change both in herself and around her. I, for one, am thankful that Swen's friends decided to share what they intimately knew to be very special about Swen as well as her willingness to embrace this project. The archive can be reached at: <https://www.hiroeswenceramicart.org/>

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Chiaki Ajioka is an independent Japanese art consultant. She contributed an essay and wrote subtitles for Hiroe Swen's digital archive project.

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