



Rising in the east

Shiro Kuramata leads the pack

Chinese contemporary art boasts specialist galleries throughout the west, and artists have achieved staggering prices in auction houses, but Asian design has remained a relatively quiet niche area with few known designers recognised in Europe and North America.

Nevertheless, Japan has established a beachhead in showcasing its designers. "Japanese design is one of the highest expressions in the field of design," says Paola Antonelli, senior curator at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA)'s department of architecture and design. Clearly, the Japanese aesthetic is firmly established in America: Yoshio Taniguchi redesigned MoMA in New York and completed Asia House in Houston for the Asia Society, while Tadao Ando has designed buildings for the Pulitzer Foundation for the Arts as well as the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Texas.

"All the infrastructure for collecting Japanese design is there, including Tokyo's 21_21 Design Sight space [designed by Tadao Ando]," says Melissa Chiu, director of the Asia Society Museum in New York. But even so, collecting Japanese modern and contemporary design is limited in the west.

On the auction scene, the most prominent designer by far is Shiro Kuramata (1934-1991), who used wire, steel, Lucite and mesh in novel ways to such acclaim that the French government awarded him the Ordre des Arts et des Lettres in 1990. "Kuramata is where the longest legs are in the Asian design market as he is actively traded," says Joshua Holdeman, Christie's senior vice president of 20th century art. "Every design museum and design department of a major museum either already has or would love to have Kuramata's work." Mr Holdeman adds.

With that kind of demand, prices for Kuramata have been rising fast. When first offered at Christie's New York in 2000, his 1988 acrylic *Miss Blanche* chair from an edition of 56 (est \$60,000-\$80,000) made \$82,250. Seven years later in

London, the same chair made £156,500 (est £30,000-£50,000).

"Industrial design is predominant in Japan and the quality is excellent, but it is not conducive to sale at auction, as it is not produced in limited series," says Ms Antonelli. To date, MoMA's collection includes 173 Asian design examples—most of it Japanese, with just three pieces from Korea and not one Chinese piece. China has a rich tradition of Ming furniture and porcelain vessels dating back centuries, but native contemporary design remains relatively quiet.

"Ten years ago, there was no contemporary design in China," says the Asia Society's Ms Chiu. She adds that it is only within the past eight years that the Chinese government has launched design departments. "Updating the traditional Ming furniture is a really recent phenomenon."

Today, China boasts close to 1,000 relatively newly established design academies and design departments within art schools, although they have yet to bear significant fruit. Chinese contemporary art and design dealer Pearl Lam opened her first Contrasts gallery in Hong Kong in 1993, and there are now four branches, including two in Beijing. She has blazed a trail in blending eastern and western aesthetics, but reports seeing very little contemporary design of note. "It's too early," says Ms Lam. "Great Chinese design is very difficult to find."

But there is good news on the horizon for Asian design. Seoul is World Design Capital 2010, and the Cincinnati Art Museum in Ohio is currently showcasing "China Design Now", which first appeared at the Victoria & Albert Museum in London.

"There is enormous interest in the area," says Aaron Betsky, director of Cincinnati Art Museum.

"Collecting contemporary Asian design by museums is akin to the position photography held 20 years ago," says Ms Chiu. "Design will follow suit once collections of contemporary art are built."

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Kuramata, *Miss Blanche*, 1988