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Tanabe Chikuunsai IV at The Metropolitan Museum of Art

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Heaven, Wind (title) Boat-shaped flower basket (description), 2014. 66 x 17.5 x 34.5 cm.

The Gate, a floor-to-ceiling curviling tiger bamboo structure by Tanabe Chikuunsai IV, rises up at The Met, its woven, brown-flecked flaxen limbs both hugging the floor and flying into the heavens. It's unlike any of the other ninety works on view at The Met. The flowing entrance spires signal a new era for bamboo design, craft, and sculpture. For one, this bamboo has been recycled ten times and was, for example, in a different configuration of rising braided arms at the Musée Guimet in Paris.



The Gate, 2017. Photo by Jan Garden Castro.

Second, the construction consists solely of bamboo pieces (moistened with water though water is not part of the work). Third, tiger bamboo is especially durable and comes from Kōchi prefecture, a rural mountain area in Japan. Most importantly, Chikuunsai IV is carrying forward his love of craft and his family's tradition as, at the same time, he gives new directions to bamboo art.

Distinct from some artists who use hay, straw, twigs, or bamboo to create sculpture, Chikuunsai and his two able apprentices, Tomo Uesugi and Emika Nakamura, create masterful shapes that combine Eastern and Western traditions. In the Western arena, one thinks of nature mort paintings and sculptors as diverse as Ursula von Rydingsvard, Maya Lin, and Martin Puryear. *The Gate* is Chikuunsai's abstract visceral sculpture that conjures nature and human nature, past and present at once. In an Eastern direction, the weave is simple yet complex; the shape is figurative and abstract, spiritual and earthy. Its immediacy and fluidity are additional striking features. This is a departure from other works in the exhibition, which are smaller and all in glass enclosures. It invites light as it turns the entrance into an intimate adventure.



Close-up portion of *Creation*, 2015, 35 x 35 x 63.5 cm.

A long display in one gallery contains pieces from the entire Chikuunsai clan, starting with the master of the eldest, Wada Waichisai I (1851-1901), then Tanabe Chikuunsai I, who began as an apprentice in 1890 around age 13. Chikuunsai II (1910-2000) occasionally added the shafts of old bamboo arrows to his baskets. Tanabe III (1940-2014) used arrow bamboo, timber bamboo, rattan and lacquer for his *Delight for the Future* abstract sculpture with circles inside squares; it received a prize in 2009. Tanabe Chikuunsai IV (b. 1973) has a boat-shaped flower basket titled *Setting Sail* in this display. All of the works at The Met are from the Diane and Arthur Abbey collection.

Chikuunsai IV told me, "Technique and skill and spirit are important. My parents taught me that this spirit is more important than technique. Using bamboo, I try to keep the spirit and tradition in my heart as I create new work." For his piece at The Met, he first considered the context and space and then created a drawing. The artist is adept at working with twenty kinds of bamboo,

including: *madake* (giant bamboo), *torachiku* (tiger bamboo), *kurochiku* (black bamboo), *susudake* (smoked bamboo), and *kikkō-chiku* (“tortoise shell bamboo”).

Two important upcoming shows are hundreds of works at Takashimaya, a high end department store in Tokyo, at the end of June, and a small and large installation at the Pierre Marie Giraud Gallery in Belgium this fall.

The artist, based in the Sakai district of Osaka, Japan, earned a sculpture degree from Tokyo University of the Arts. Publications of his work include one book from the Musée Guimet and *Chikuunsai IV*, published in April 2017 by his studio (www.chikuunsai.com). The book illustrates this young master’s work using a range of shapes and bamboo types. *Flowing Pattern*, 2016 combines dark and light-hued bamboo and vertical and diagonal and horizontal directions; the weaving also makes spaces for light between the lattices. *Ray of Light*, 2014 has a more open weave and complex curving knots up the handle. *Shooting Star*, 2013 has light entering in a burst halfway up the bottom of this striking composition. *Innocent*, 2017 uses thicker pieces of bamboo, and its bamboo handle curves upward in an expressive way. The *Creative City* series, 2017 departs from basket styles to interpret architectural structures. Finally, the book contains some of the iterations of the tiger bamboo – installations that soar in multiple directions at once, that rise, braid together, and bend in rooms circled by windows: natural light enters and shines through the weave.



Shooting Star, 2014, 26.5 x 26.5 x 34 cm.

The Gate’s welcoming shape in the Sackler Wing at The Metropolitan Museum, with its mottled hues of bone to brown, glistens in natural and installed light. (see <http://www.metmuseum.org/metmedia/video/collections/asian/japanese-bamboo-art-timelapse>)

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