INTRODUCTION

Tomimoto Kenkichi (1886–1963) was an outstanding and innovative ceramic artist. He specialized in over-glaze enamels. His varied and striking designs and colours have ensured his fame as one of Japan’s leading artists of the twentieth century.

Tomimoto was a close and long-standing friend of the great British potter Bernard Leach. In his book Beyond East and West: Memoirs, Portraits and Essays Bernard Leach described Tomimoto as ‘a rare maker of patterns, an originator. All his work was fine and sharp.’ Leach defined ‘pattern’ as being ‘folk dance, or melody, a few sounds, or movements, or colours reduced to an ultimate simplicity of related and evocative elements.’

Tomimoto thought of himself as an artist rather than as a craftsman. His sense of design, colour and shape was outstanding. In his careful attention to detail he never lost his vision of the whole piece which he was creating.
LIFE

Tomimoto Kenkichi was born in 1886 in the village of Ando 安堵 on the outskirts of Nara not far from the famous temple complex of Hōryū-ji 法隆寺 which contains the oldest wooden buildings in the world (dating from the end of the seventh century) and some of Japan’s finest ancient architectural and artistic treasures. The temple had a profound influence on Tomimoto’s development as an artist. He returned often to Ando and his house and studio with its storehouses have now been preserved as the Tomimoto Kenkichi Kinenkan 記念館 (memorial museum). The buildings in traditional Nara style form a small group and contain a permanent if limited display of representative articles made and decorated by the artist. Many of the finest examples of Tomimoto’s work belong to the Nara Prefectural Museum, but the museum’s exhibition halls are normally devoted to special exhibitions.

Tomimoto’s family was relatively well-off. His father, who was a connoisseur of the Chinese classics and art, introduced his son at an early age to Nanga (南画 Chinese origin southern school of painting) style painting and to blue and white Chinese wares, as well as to pots made at Arita 有田 in Kyushu. His father unfortunately died when Tomimoto was only eleven. At school he developed his mathematical skills. Despite family opposition, in 1904 he enrolled in the design department of the Tokyo School of Fine Arts to study architecture and design. He also studied Japanese style painting.

Following his graduation in 1908 he persuaded his family to allow him to pursue his studies in England. He took lodgings with other