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HOT STUFF

By Laura Thomas

Tasteful Tables

A new medium for Japanese art form

Vince Meyer has opened a light-filled gallery to display the vintage Japanese transoms he converts into glass-topped tables. He also is showing katagami, stencils once used in textile dyeing that are works of art in themselves.

The metalworker discovered the transoms or ranma 20 years ago and began his Table Asia business in his Lake Street home. His new gallery is nearby.

The ranma come from early 20th century homes and were the one place, by tradition, where a family was permitted to display its wealth and taste. Always in pairs, they can be simply geometric, elaborately pictorial or organically abstract, the type he favors. Most prefer geometric patterns to the organic, which appear too similar to ordinary redwood burl, he said (example above, \$1,100). But to others, their abstract nature holds great appeal.

"It looks random, but someone worked very hard and selected very carefully to achieve that feeling," he said.

Meyer first bought ranmas from collectors who traveled to Japan, but he now goes there himself and was thrilled to find the katagami, which he frames for sale.

"They're phenomenal," he said.

The stencils are made from mulberry bark, smoked to render them waterproof and then etched, a process that takes four years. He sells them for \$350 to \$1750 framed, \$100 to \$900 unframed (shown below, right).

The ranmas are also sold separately, starting at \$395, or are made into tables, depending on their shape (table shown below left, 44 inches long by 19 inches wide, \$1,995).

"The ranma is a piece of art," he said. "I want people to see the table, and it is a way of making it useful."

And that made him realize that he has had a green business all along. "Steel is the most recycled material on earth. Powder coating is baked on. There's no solvents. No trees have been cut down for a hundred years. It's made locally," he said.

It's always nice when a trend catches up with an already committed practitioner.

Tale Asia Gallery, 1101 Lake St. (at 12th Avenue), San Francisco. Open noon-5 p.m. Monday through Friday or by appointment, (415) 750-9955, www.TableAsia.com.