Professor Jon Keenan Selected as Fulbright Scholar at Japan’s Kyoto Seika University

P rofessor Jon Keenan, an internationally known ceramic artist and educator who resides in Elkins, N.H., will serve as a visiting artist, scholar and teacher, as well as a representative of the United States.

The Fulbright Program is the U.S. government’s flagship international educational exchange program. Administered by the U.S. Department of State’s Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs and the Council for International Exchange of Scholars, the program seeks to increase mutual understanding between the citizens of the United States and those of other countries.

Professor Keenan, who joined Colby-Sawyer in 1990, is an expert in ceramic history, studio ceramics, East Asian art history, and Japanese language and culture. He earned a Master of Fine Arts in art history and anthropology at Kyoto University of Fine Arts Graduate School and has studied and exhibited his work in Kyoto, Japan’s cultural center, many times over the years.

As part of the Fulbright Senior Specialists Program, Professor Keenan will teach classes in ceramics, Japanese art history and anthropology to undergraduate and graduate students at Kyoto Seika University. His lectures will focus on ceramic art, its history and contemporary practice in the United States and in Japan, and he will provide demonstrations of his research and creative work.

Professor Keenan was first exposed to the art and craft of clay as a boy living in New Delhi, India. Village Sikh potters from outside the capital visited his school to demonstrate their throwing abilities using primitive hand-powered wooden wheels.

“As a Fulbrighter, Professor Keenan joins the ranks of distinguished scholars and professionals worldwide who are leaders in the educational, political, economic, social and cultural lives of their countries,” says Sabine O’Hara, executive director for the Council of International Exchange of Scholars. “It is our expectation that as a representative of the United States, Professor Keenan will demonstrate the qualities of excellence and leadership that have been the hallmarks of this respected academic exchange program founded in 1946 by the U.S. government.”

Professor Keenan is the third Colby-Sawyer faculty member to receive the prestigious Fulbright award. In 2007, John H. Callewaert, former professor of the Institute for Community Environment, received a Fulbright grant to teach at the University of Brazil in Natal, the University of the Institute for Community Environment, and to conduct research. “This ranks of distinguished scholars and professionals worldwide who are leaders in the educational, political, economic, social and cultural lives of their countries,” says Sabine O’Hara, executive director for the Council of International Exchange of Scholars. “It is our expectation that as a representative of the United States, Professor Keenan will demonstrate the qualities of excellence and leadership that have been the hallmarks of this respected academic exchange program founded in 1946 by the U.S. government.”

Professor Keenan is also pursuing his research interests in Japanese art history, investigating the role of Buddhist patronage of the arts, past and present, in Kyoto, and the ways in which Buddhist traditions have found expression in Japanese arts. He is also continuing his research into green technologies and studio practices in ceramics, and will bring his findings back to Colby-Sawyer to share with his students in the classroom and through field trips to visit artists and temples in the city and surrounding villages.

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“My experiences in Japan will inform my teaching at Colby-Sawyer in a direct and significant way and keep me current in my field,” says Professor Keenan. “I also hope to build on Colby-Sawyer’s relationships in Asia and establish connections that could lead to academic exchanges for our students and faculty. I feel the college is perfectly poised to expand its international educational exchanges into this part of Asia.”

Professor Keenan also looks forward to collaborating and sharing ideas with his colleagues at Kyoto Seika University, and to making new works in the university’s ceramics studio. His work concentrates on anagama wood-fired pottery, made of and inspired by nature.

“My ceramics are both functional and sculptural, echoing the interaction between nature, culture and the experience of everyday life,” he explains. “I mix my own glazes and clays with natural materials, which contain the subtle hues of nature itself. I’m attracted to the spontaneous and expressive qualities achieved through firing in an anagama semi-subterranean wood-fired kiln. It allows me to explore the expressive possibilities of porcelain and stoneware provides for unlimited opportunities to communicate subtle and nuanced ideas.”

Professor Keenan served as a visiting research professor of art and associate director of the Craft Campus at the University of North Carolina-Ashville in 2007-2008. As part of a yearlong sabbatical in 2005-2006, he conducted research as a visiting professor at the Exotic Materials Institute, part of the University of California-Los Angeles Department of Chemistry.

Professor Keenan’s ceramic work is currently on display at the John Molloy Gallery in New York City. He has exhibited his work widely in the United States and Japan and guest-lectured and exhibited at many institutions including the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, Hampshire College, the University of Maine, the Renwick Gallery in Washington, D.C., the Federal University of Brazil in Natal, the University of Leeds in England, and in New Hampshire, at Dartmouth College, Holderness School and the University of New Hampshire. He has also received grants in support of his work from the National Endowment for the Arts, New England Foundation for the Arts and the New Hampshire Council on the Arts.