

Tradition and Innovation - Spotlight on Korean Contemporary Ceramics

By Jaeyoung Kang



A.

What is the origin of Korean ceramics? What characteristics make Korean ceramics unique? Korean ceramic culture boasts a history of five thousand years and is primarily represented by celadon, *buncheong*, and white porcelain. Dating from the Goryeo Dynasty (918-1392), celadon is characterized by refined shapes in transparent jade green; *buncheong* by freer forms in bluish-green; and dating from the Joseon Dynasty (1392-1910), white porcelain by elegant simplicity. Although different materials were used through the ages, Korean ceramics have always had a creative and natural, modest beauty. This is the reason they have become so popular internationally in recent years.

Despite the great tradition of Korean ceramics, contemporary Korean ceramics started in an unfavorable environment. Entering the twentieth century, Korean ceramics declined abruptly as a result of extreme political instability, collapse of the national economy, and the Japanese occupation. After Korea's liberation, Koreans became aware of their proud heritage of ceramics. Since the late 1950s, Korean ceramics have entered a new phase of development.

While reproduction of traditional Korean ceramics remained the primary endeavor, ceramic art that focused on artistic expression and eliminated the functionality of ceramics emerged. Influenced by modern art in the West, the younger generation educated in figurative arts in diverse fields, began to create unique works with clay as the material of expression.

Today's mainstream Korean ceramists can be divided into two groups: those who are trying to incorporate tradition, and those who are seeking purely creative forms of expression, free from the concept of ceramics as craft.

Tradition and Innovation – Spotlight on Korean Contemporary Ceramics intends to show a wide spectrum of Korean ceramics today. Korean ceramics began with the production of vessels for daily use and is now witnessing an up-swelling of unlimited imagination as it embraces contemporary expressive language and new challenges of our times. Ten artists are presented in this exhibition in three groupings.



B.

The first group of artists seeks to incorporate tradition into contemporary vessels. Their works uphold tradition and show that the deeply-rooted process of painstaking labor and craftwork together create truly outstanding artworks. These vessels reflect the individual styles of the artists, while embracing fundamental principles of ceramic aesthetics and production.

A.
Kwangcho Yoon
Buncheong Jar, 2005
red clay, buncheong
11 x 11 x 10

B.
Inchin Lee
House Filled with Light
installation, 2003-2005
wood-fired stoneware

Kwangcho Yoon broke from traditional forms and modified *buncheong*, advancing its liberal and free-spirited characteristics. On the surfaces of his uniquely-shaped vessels, Yoon expresses his emotions, making impromptu lines and rough drawings.

Geejo Lee extends the boundaries of white porcelain by blending its inherent nature with aesthetic principles of modern art. Lee's white porcelain vessels are geometrically shaped with sectioned and recomposed surfaces. They look intellectual and austere, but also inviting to the touch.

Inchin Lee uses traditional firing techniques without glaze to produce contemporary vessels. The unpredictable effects of firing make jars of simple shapes look primitive and yet very appealing to the contemporary eye.

The second group of artists is progressive. These artists have led the new movement in ceramic artistic expression. Clay as basic material is handled by the creative minds of the artists, and the result is an entirely new realm of ceramic art unique to each individual.

Sangho Shin's ceramic sculptures are principally about animals in drastically transformed shapes and his tiles are brightly colored with geometric lines. His theme of "Dream of Africa" combines ceramic sculpture and painting, and represents a distant "home" in our hearts and minds.

Suku Park produces works in dark pastel colors without glaze. His works are about everyday things such as windows, wooden objects, and umbrellas, and those we readily find in nature. Park's works reflect the landscape in his mind.

In the last group are the youngest artists of post-modern times. Their works show the dynamic and diverse aspects of Korean ceramics. Beyond the boundary of ceramics delimited by the material called clay, these artists interpret tradition and culture in new ways, attempting to transcend time, space, and genres.

Byungju Seo creates objects that embody the stories in his mind. His ceramic sculpture is filled with symbolic allegory. Horses, houses, the sky, and carriages, and other figurines in his works represent an imaginary world that commingles reality and dreams.

Paying attention to issues facing Korean ceramics and the constantly changing trends of today, Jiman Choi's ceramic vessels of traditional shapes depict a 21st century landscape, including war, sports, and computers. His works freely address a broad range of issues from Western values to contemporary aesthetics and social concerns.

Jinkyong Kim challenges a conventional notion according to which clay becomes stronger when fired. Her works are about clothing as a metaphor for the fragile human body. In this way, she shows the sensitivity of clay, which can also easily be broken.

Kyungran Yeo produces works in relief. On traditional vessels such as tea pots, flower vases, and jars, she carves the kinds of flowers and birds typically seen in Korean folk paintings. Her ceramic works are brightly colored like folk paintings, and cross-over genres as well as the mediums of painting and ceramics.

A most challenging artist in the exhibition, Dongwon Shin presents conceptual ceramic sculpture in relief. The two-dimensional wall of the exhibition hall serves as a canvas for his three-dimensional expression in ceramics.

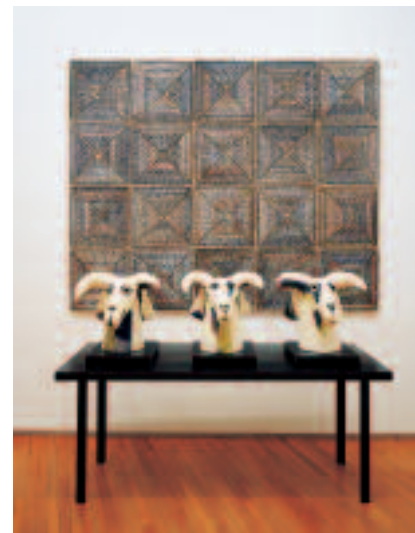
Tradition and Innovation – Spotlight on Korean Contemporary Ceramics presents a wide spectrum of Korean ceramics today, bolstered by unlimited imagination as it embraces contemporary expressive language and faces the challenges of our changing times.

Jaeyoung Kang is chief curator for the World Ceramic Exposition Foundation, Korea. She studied art theory and has organized various exhibitions, and curated the 2005 exhibition *Trans-Ceramic-Art* for the Third World Ceramic Biennale in Korea.

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C.



D.



E.



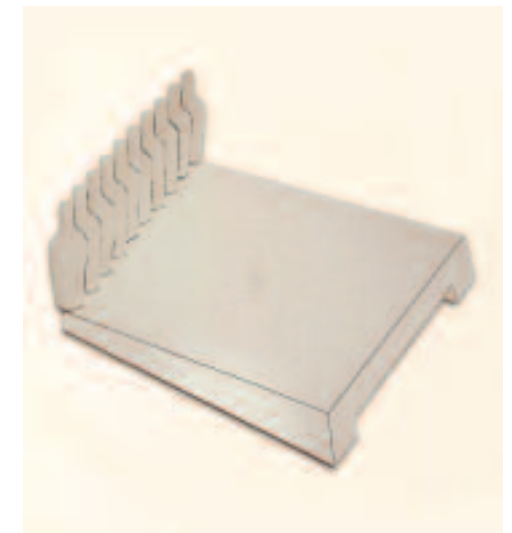
F.



G.



H.



I.



J.

C.
Geejo Lee
Vase, 2004
white clay
10.25 x 9 x 10.25

D.
Sangho Shin
Dream of Africa, 2004
ceramic
23.5 x 22.5 x 21 front
98.5 x 79 back

E.
Suku Park
Rainy Day
wood-fired stoneware
27.5 x 13.75 x 29.5

F.
Byungju Seo
Play Riddles, 2004
stoneware, music box,
leather strap, glaze,
terra sigillata
24.5 x 8.5 x 21.5

G.
Jiman Choi
21st Century Jar and
Stand of Goguryeo, 2004
31 x 13.25

H.
Jinkyong Kim
Netting Clay 952, 2006
super white clay,
copper, fabric
31.5 x 13.75 x 10

I.
Dongwon Shin
Wish, 2005
porcelain, plywood, paint
31 x 27.5

J.
Kyungran Yeo
Untitled, 2005