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Young-Jae Lee—The Potter

No craft can be traced as far back in the early history of mankind as pottery. Pottery from the earliest cultures of East Asia generally bear the names of their discovery sites. Today, they are primarily associated with their respective ceramic forms. Customarily, however, the terms for different ceramic types derive from the places and areas kilns were located, and sometimes also from dynasty names. Most of these designations have occurred within the last hundred years, with the beginning of the practice of art history and archaeology, in the Western sense.

The desire to be creative, uninfluenced by practical necessity, manifested itself in ceramics in China as early as the fifth millennium BC. Beauty and function have been closely linked in East Asian ceramics since the beginning. This explains why museums devoted to East Asian art deal with works ranging from the Neolithic period to the present day.

The unbroken creative energy of East Asian potters is one of the phenomena of this cultural sphere. Form, glaze, firing technique, and so on, have been central concerns of potters for millennia; unflinching innovative variety and an early command of high firing temperatures are evidence of this (for example, stoneware was found in China as early as the Shang Dynasty—the Shang ruled between the sixteenth and eleventh centuries BC). Unlike writing and painting, however, pottery was never elevated to the rank of an art form on the East Asian mainland. With the exception of some of the potters in Yixing, beginning in the sixteenth century (Yixing ware is known in the West as the model for Böttger stoneware), and of a few other examples, articles of pottery were not signed. The tradition of signing in Yixing arose from potters' contact with scholars and artists.

Apart from the fair number of potters who, from the late sixteenth century on, made pottery for the tea ceremony in Japan, the potter in East Asia never saw himself as an artist. He considered himself a craftsman with a function to serve, who produced utilitarian objects and strove for beauty, perfect form, and a harmony of use and design in his work. The artistic criteria applied to writing and painting were never employed in connection with ceramics.

This, however, had no bearing on the high regard many scholars and connoisseurs had for the field of ceramics; they were keen enthusiasts and collectors of the most beautiful works. With regard to this connection it is useful to recall the imperial collection of China. Emperor Qianlong (reigned 1736–1795) added outstanding examples of pottery, dating back to the Han Dynasty (206 BC–AD 220), to his collection and had his comments and poems engraved on the most important pieces. In the case of

early ceramics, it was, however, the pursuit of antiquity that was of top priority; starting with the Song Dynasty, the aesthetic of form and glaze was the leading criterion in the selection of ceramic works; the potters always remained anonymous. Just as collectors never asked about the individuals who made these works, potters never seemed to have felt the need to intellectualize their art and verbalize their artistic achievements. They created on their own initiative, without analyzing their creative performance. They were aware of their social position as craftsmen. They considered making pottery to be their one and only task.

The good and skillful potter was sufficient unto himself and it was only modern Western art and art history that vested him with the title *artist*. The liberalization of the arts and the constantly expanding concept of art allowed the potter—destined to become artist to seize the opportunities that were now open to him. Clay and fire now became available to the potter as artistic media, his station liberated from the many thousands of years of professed captivity to the dictates of the material: The potter is no longer required to create items only for practical use. It almost seems as if many were happy to drop the designation “potter,” as the image of the craftsman, the artisan, was insufficient.

The application of the term “potter” in connection with Young-Jae Lee’s work is in need of explanation. A consideration of her creative output over the past thirty-five years shows that she has produced “only” utilitarian wares: vases, bowls, cups, and so on. The forms are rigorously balanced, and are occasionally new and unusual to the Western viewer; the glazes are vivid and of great naturalness. Of significance is the character of each individual work; the concise formal language reflects Young-Jae Lee’s Korean background, upbringing, and spiritual views. She is and sees herself as part of the millennia-old East Asian tradition of ceramics in which the self-image of the individual is indebted to the community.

Although potters always remained anonymous, their profession was thought deserving of mention even in the earliest texts of Chinese literature. In chapter eleven of the *Tao Te Ching*, for example, it is said that the potter molds clay into vessels and that empty space is what makes a vessel a vessel; thus, the visible constitutes the form and the invisible the value.

The philosopher Xun Zi (second century BC) explains the formation and cultivation of moral principles as an educational process by employing the metaphor of the potter who makes a pot by shaping and firing clay. To rule or to become a moral person without studying the teachings of the wise men of antiquity is comparable to attempting to make pots without having being an apprentice to a potter. By this, Xun Zi means that the “way” of the wise, just like the potter’s ability, is the outcome of a process that extends many generations.

Confucians emphasize the significance of the arts for moral education. For instance, Confucius states that the noble man is satisfied with a simple life, provided that beautiful things and beautiful sounds were part of his upbringing.

In this East Asian tradition the individual is assigned his place in the community; the potter is part of this tradition, and he endeavors to embrace, master, complement, and pass it on. He places his own personality at its service. The mastery of pottery skills is not an end to win fame and respect, but rather, is a means to develop and bring to fruition one's own ability, to confine oneself to the true purpose of ceramics and to, nevertheless, create something new. This can only be attained through strict self-discipline, absolute confidence and proficiency in the craft, and an utmost familiarity with the material, with clay and kiln.

Young-Jae Lee had a traditional Confucian upbringing as a child in her home country Korea. She studied art education in Seoul, with a concentration on ceramics, but it was only in Germany that she properly learned the craft of pottery. With great perseverance, earnestness, and modesty she works single-mindedly, persistently pursuing her path, and feels no outside pressure to change herself or her work. Her oeuvre exhibits a clear and sincere development. Her artistic path is straight and forceful. Her forms develop without hesitation; they are solid and determined, and occasionally of a diffident charm that avoids the winsome.

In her work, Young-Jae Lee is firmly rooted in the East Asian tradition; she does not see herself as an artist who has to create her own style. She does not try to explain her works, to justify her glazes and forms, to place them in any sort of art historical context. A disciplined worker, she is forever intent on better understanding and mastering material and form. In doing so, she draws from the rich ceramic tradition of her Korean homeland. Her works come from the heart, which explains their sincerity, conviction, but also their very personal nature. This makes Young-Jae Lee an artist in the Western sense, and a potter in the best East Asian sense. Those seeking to understand Young-Jae Lee's works are well advised not to be content with mere appearance, for only those who have held, felt, sensed a bowl or vase in both hands, will discover their true beauty and sheer perfection. Such works can only be created when the nature of the artist and the nature of the materials work together, a criterion that was formulated more than 2,000 years ago.

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