

Introduction to Contemporary Korean Ceramic Artists

By Mei-ling Hom and David McClelland



Song Il Geun is a sculptor and rice farmer in the rural Korean village where he grew up. His sculptures are mostly human figures with broad, exaggerated gestures that express unbounded emotion. This is his hand-built, multi-chambered wood kiln.

Mei-ling Hom is an artist and independent scholar. In 2007, she was awarded a Fulbright research grant to study and document contemporary Korean ceramics. She traveled for ten months with a fellow artist, David McClelland, throughout South Korea, seeking Korean ceramic artists to interview and document. From their research, they produced a CD called "Contemporary Korean Ceramic Artists." Besides art installations, sculpture, and ceramics, Hom's artwork includes public art commissions at the Pennsylvania Convention Center, the Philadelphia International Airport, and the Raleigh-Durham International Airport. David McClelland is an art writer and photographer with degrees in both geology and library science. The authors have worked together on art projects in the US and in foreign locations, including Japan, China, Thailand, and South Korea.

The images of the ceramic artists in the following essay are representative of larger bodies of work from each artist **that are available as a supplement to this article on the EAA website.** To learn more about the project, or to purchase the CD, contact Mei-ling Hom at meilinghom@yahoo.com.

Our journey to Korea began almost three decades ago when we drove across the US to Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville to take a course in Korean ceramic techniques taught by Cho Chung Hyun. We had no particular agenda in mind but the inspiration of those wonderful Korean celadon pots we had seen illustrated



Hwang Kap Sun spent fourteen semesters studying and mastering the German ceramic curriculum at Muthesius-Hochschule fur Gestaltung in Kiel, Germany. He now lives in Germany with his family and teaches in Korea at Seoul National University. Much of his recent work has explored combining different colored porcelain bodies in simple cylindrical shapes.

in the ceramic books we studied in college. At that time, there were many books exploring the universe of Japanese ceramics, and Chinese ceramics had been pored over by European and American experts for centuries. But it seemed as if the ceramic traditions of Korea, Cambodia, Thailand, Burma, and Việt Nam weren't worthy of in-depth examination. Happily, that situation has changed in the intervening years, and many publications have explored the rich heritage of Asian ceramics in cultures other than China or Japan. Yet the emphasis of all the scholarship seemed to be on the historical record stimulated by the troves of ceramic treasure being recovered from shipwrecks and tombs and quickly being di-

verted into the international art market. With the exception of the lively clay scene in Japan, contemporary ceramics in Asian countries still seem to be ignored by the Western world.

Twenty-six years after our first encounter with Professor Cho, we were again immersed in Korean ceramics but this time in snowy Seoul instead of steamy Illinois. Our kind teacher was again explaining and demonstrating exactly how to achieve certain effects, why they were important, and who were the masters of those particular techniques. Professor Cho was an important contact in our study of contemporary Korean potters because she was the organizing force behind two separate group exhibitions of Korean ceramics that were touring North America and Europe. We are indebted to many Korean artists for their unstinting support of our travels between studios up and down the Korean peninsula, but we could not have achieved our goals without the efforts of our host Lee Inchin of the Hongik University Ceramic Research Institute.

We started our survey of Korean ceramic artists at the Icheon Biennial, the largest and richest international exhibition of ceramics in the world. Held simultaneously in three towns south of Seoul in an area traditionally devoted to



The onggi technique became the strongest influence on both the ceramic and academic work of Cho Chung Hyun when she realized it was the only form of Korean ceramics used by all classes of people because of its use in preserving Korean foods. She retired in 2005 as professor of ceramics, Ewha Womans University in Seoul.



Lee Kang Hyo is a master of the *onggi* forming technique, traditionally used to produce pottery for fermenting and storing ingredients in Korean cuisine. He strives to use these traditional techniques to produce contemporary works that elicit an emotional response.

Korea, we limited our area of interest to artists who were working in a contemporary studio vein not reproducing historic styles or producing utilitarian dinnerware in semifactory conditions. We still did not get to meet everyone we wished to see, and the lively art scene is continuing to stimulate new artists every day.

Although our study of Korean ceramics is centered on the here and now, no art exists in a vacuum, and it is important to understand the long historical process that provides the underpinnings for contemporary clay work. The ceramic heritage of the Korean peninsula stretches back 7,000 to 8,000 years to the earliest low-fired earthenware. Korea's close contact with China influenced the development of Korea's higher-fired stoneware about 1,500 years ago. In turn, Korea's ceramic developments would influence Japan's ceramic culture in the late 1500s, when the Japanese war lord Hideyoshi's invasion of Korea transplanted entire Korean pottery villages to the Japanese island of Kyushu.



Lee In Chin, raised and educated in both Korea and America, feels at home in both cultures. His work reflects a lifelong love of clay, and the rich range of color changes from the flashing of the flames and the interesting ash effects are hallmarks of his ceramic style. His family lives in the US; he is a Professor of Art at Hongik University, Seoul.

clay-working, the biennial has thousands of artworks from hundreds of artists, both Korean and foreign. The prizes offered in the competition section of the biennial far exceed those awarded anywhere else in the world. Of course, this was a fertile field for our research, and dozens of studio visits followed days of photographing and note-taking. We also tried to see as many individual ceramic exhibitions as possible—a bit of a task since Korean art exhibitions usually run only six days, opening on Wednesday night in the traditional arts quarter of Seoul, Insadong, and closing the following Tuesday. We constantly asked artists who they thought we should meet and why. Because it would take three lifetimes to interview every potter in

Beyond their utility as cooking, eating, and storage vessels, both earthenware and stoneware ceramics were buried in tombs either to mark the status of the deceased or for the afterlife. The importation of true porcelain from China pushed Korean potters to exploit their own clay resources to try to produce domestic porcelain. The difficulties of processing the raw materials and firing them to a temperature of 2,300 degrees Fahrenheit using pine and oak logs were finally surmounted, and potters produced a distinctive green-glazed celadon and a pure white porcelain that competed with the imported Chinese product. From the ninth century until the

collapse of the Chosŏn monarchy at the beginning of the twentieth century, the Korean royal court supported the production of the highest-quality white porcelain and prohibited its sale to commoners.

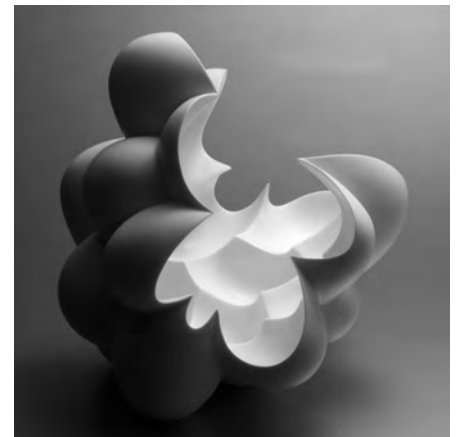
In response, kilns that produced utilitarian ceramics for the populace created a white ware by covering a brown or gray stoneware body with a thin covering of white clay slip, which was often applied with fast, rough brushstrokes. This type of ware is called *buncheong*. Another form of surface decoration unique to Korea is *sangam*, which consists of impressing or engraving lines into the leather hard surface of the clay before firing and filling the indentations with contrasting colors of clay slip, then covering the whole vessel with clear glaze. *Onggi* is a type of utilitarian earthenware made for thousands of years and still produced in large quantities today for use in food preservation. Korean cuisine leans heavily on fermented foods, and Koreans believe that the best-quality fermented food is made in large (up to six feet high) brown *onggi* jars that are stored outside to endure the natural weather cycles. Our taste of fifty-year-old soy sauce from an *onggi* jar sitting outside a rural village home was the culinary high point of our year in Korea.

The majority of the artists we interviewed were trained either in the university system or in specialized art schools. The old apprenticeship system is still alive in the field of *onggi* production, but education is linked to status in Korea, and almost all young people want to do well in the nationwide testing system in order to gain access to higher education. In recognition of this, the government has established a university specifically for training in the historic arts and crafts as a way to confer educational status on metal-workers, potters, textile artists, and others who would have been known as artisans in previous centuries. Several of the artists we interviewed either had studied in foreign universities or had worked in the studios of foreign artists. The combination of a deep background in traditional ceramics and a knowledge of contemporary international ceramic trends has produced a unique body of clay work, which we think represents the dynamism of Korean contemporary ceramics. ■



KimYik-Yung is one of Korea's most widely known contemporary ceramic artists. She creates one-of-a-kind porcelain forms and maintains a production line of her elegant vessels. Her factory studio is nestled in the hills past Heyri Art Valley close to the North Korean border. She is emerita professor of ceramics at Kookmin University, Seoul.

Yoon Sol is a young Korean artist who creates delicate sculptures using slip-cast porcelain modules. Most of his current work is based on the alteration of repetitive spherical or ovate modules that group together to form larger masses, bringing to mind the proliferation of cells.



Yoon Sol is a young Korean artist who creates delicate sculptures using slip-cast porcelain modules. Most of his current work is based on the alteration of repetitive spherical or ovate modules that group together to form larger masses, bringing to mind the proliferation of cells.