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# CERAMIC REVIEW



# Potters on pots



## Sam Chung

**My first encounter with clay was during an art class in middle school when I was around 13 years old.** We had an assignment that focused on clay and I remember being so excited about the vast possibilities of what I could make. However, once I started working with it, I was frustrated with the limitations of my skills and how my hands could not execute the vision of what I wanted to make.

**I learnt ceramics during my undergraduate years at St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minnesota, where I majored in studio art with a concentration in ceramics.** The studio was small but well-equipped and I learnt many processes. I worked with underglazes, glazes, slips and even acrylic paint, while also learning how to fire both gas and electric kilns. I was eager to try everything and learn as much as I could. The studio was my sanctuary, I couldn't wait to be there every day after I finished my other classes.

**Throughout my career, I have worked primarily with the vessel, both functionally and sculpturally.** In many ways the vessel is a timeless object with its own history and

identity, able to serve so many roles: utilitarian, narrative, metaphorical and beyond. It is the ideal form into which I can pour my ideas, while continuing to battle with its never-ending technical challenges. I also appreciate the practice of developing and refining my craft and keeping traditional practices moving forward. Currently, I am primarily wheel-throwing, while incorporating hand-built elements. Most recently, I have learnt an Onggi-style method of making larger forms by adding levels of upright slabs and paddling the form.

**I work with both porcelain and stoneware to engage with two distinct sensibilities within my work as they relate to their historical precedents.** It is almost as if I become a different person when using one material versus another – each brings out a different personality in my work because of the different material qualities.

**When I first began learning pottery, the Japanese Mingei movement was the dominant aesthetic.** This was largely because so many potters in Minnesota were influenced by Warren MacKenzie, a former apprentice of Bernard Leach. My early work was strongly influenced by this aesthetic as it was so widely appreciated. However, the

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**ABOVE:** *Cloudscape Passage*



When I first started working in ceramics, I was introduced to the work of Betty Woodman and in particular her large *Pillow Pitchers*, which were originally inspired by Etruscan pitchers. Her forms were also thrown upright and reoriented on their sides, similar to the Janggun. I was enamoured with her work so, when I saw Korean Janggun jars in books, they immediately resonated with me. I finally had the opportunity to see many of these in person on trips to South Korea in recent years.

Joseon-era pots from my ancestral homeland of Korea were the predecessors to the Mingei movement and over time I have learnt to appreciate this pottery tradition. These particular pots have been influential, primarily as a foundational reference to identity in the form of pottery. Alongside ceramics, I also reference Korean folk painting (Minhwa) and other symbolic imagery from Korean art found in traditional arts and crafts.

**This influence is most visible in the forms of my pottery.** While inspired by traditional shapes, I alter and transform them into something beyond replication. One recurring motif is the cloud, a powerful metaphor in Asian art. For me, the cloud symbolises the undefined, liminal space of living between worlds, being ethnically Korean yet growing up American. Therefore, the cloud motif emerges in my forms repeatedly as a reference to a search for belonging. Most recently, I have introduced traditional Korean mythological figures and reinterpreted them to explore narrative themes about cultural duality.

**One particularly influential piece is a Korean pot called a Janggun, sometimes referred to as a rice-bale shaped jar.** This *Vine Patterned Janggun* (pictured above) is in the National Museum of Korea in Seoul, South Korea. It was made from stoneware by an unknown maker during the 15th-16th centuries of the Joseon dynasty. It is coated with a white slip and decorated with an iron-painted vine design.

**The Janggun jar exemplifies the quirky and expressive qualities of Buncheong ceramics from the Joseon period.** There is a carefree and soulful quality with the brushwork and assembly of the form. It was wheel-thrown upright and then turned on its side, giving it an elongated, submarine-like body. These jars were used to store everything from alcohol to human waste.

**While my work draws inspiration from these forms, it differs in several respects.** I take liberties with proportions and typically throw and assemble the forms with greater precision. Unlike the original stoneware, I often use porcelain, treating its whiteness as a ghostly blank canvas where reinterpretation can take place. I also integrate dimensional cloud contours that project outward and employ more controlled design motifs compared to the freer brushwork of historical Buncheong pottery.

**I generally follow the same basic anatomy and, over time, have become more attuned to the original proportions of the Janggun form.** It embodies a spirit of resilience that is full of life, struggle and beauty and resonates with me as a reflection of my ancestors. I like to think that this same resilience lives on in my own journey and in the story of my family.

**The reorientation of the form was likely practical, perhaps making it easier to strap to the body or allow it to also stand upright on its end.** To me, this act of turning the vessel sideways represents adaptability and innovation. It reflects the resilience of the Korean people, who endured countless invasions throughout history, and it speaks to the experiences of the Korean diaspora adapting within new worlds while still holding onto ancestral origins.

**The Janggun form, in turn, guides my own practice.** It allows me to merge past and present, acknowledge origins, transform cultural traditions, and explore a personal search for belonging while living in the in-between. ☐

For details visit [samchungceramics.com](http://samchungceramics.com); @sammychung70



LEFT: *Vine Patterned Janggun*, Joseon dynasty, 15th-16th century FROM TOP LEFT, CLOCKWISE: *Mythos Flask*; *Cloud jar*; *Cloud Janggun Diptych*

Images: courtesy of the artist; National Museum of Korea