

# Ceramics

## Art + Perception

2019

# #113

USD	\$20
EUR	€18
CAD	\$27
AUD	\$27
GBP	£15



# Sam Chung's Clouds of Heritage

Written by **Matthew Kangas**



The morning in the late winter  
is what comes to make the most perfect nature.  
Afterward,  
against the direction the snow melts and flows  
our spring will come.

– *Winter. Snow. Tree. Forest*, Ki Hyung-do<sup>1</sup>



**T**he work of Sam Chung, Professor of Art at Arizona State University, has been seen in a variety of group and solo exhibitions in Colorado, Iowa, Kansas and New York City over the past few years – as well as at the Eighth Gyeonggi International Ceramics Biennale in 2015. The second Biennale in 2003 was his Korean debut (he had visited Korea many times in prior years) where he won an Honorable Mention.

The award was significant because all of Chung’s art alludes to Korean ceramic history, especially celadon. What he brings to such an ancient tradition (dating in Korea from the 10th century AD) is an eccentric pot profile, extraordinary technical control over various shades of celadon (a grey-green to pale white glaze which arrived from China during the Koryô Dynasty) and a playful, fluid approach

to shape and structure. Celadon’s origin in China during the Five Dynasties period (907-960) has been disputed by some Korean art historians who claim archaeological celadon shards uncovered in China are from Korea. Less controversially, Japanese celadon is the undisputed result of Korean ceramists since, according to history, hundreds of Korean potters were ‘enslaved’ and deported to Kyoto during a period of Japanese invasion between 1594–96. As scholar Kallie Szczepanski wrote in 2018: “Between the examples of looted ceramics taken from Korea and skilled potters brought back to Japan, Korean styles and techniques had an important impact on Japanese pottery.”<sup>22</sup> Besides celadon, Satsuma, Karatsu, and Agano wares are also attributed to the presence of Korean artisans.

**Cloud Teapots**, 2017,  
porcelain, glaze and china  
paint, 16 x 7 x 5 in (40.5  
x 18 x 12.5 cm) each.  
Image credit: Tim Bailey,  
courtesy of Gallery IMA.

## Celadon's origin in China during the Five Dynasties period... has been disputed by some Korean art historians.

Working in North America, Sam Chung has tightly focused his interests on shape, profile and natural imagery. Using mostly traditional Korean forms – vase, platter, teapot – Chung's signature image is the cloud. This is also a recurrent theme of content or meaning. Clouds are transient, permeable, always in movement, appearing solid but actually transparent – much like Korean identity. By drawing the lines of clouds onto three-dimensional ceramic shapes, Chung extends the reach of each work, from the pot into the world. In *Cloud Teapots* (2017), black outlines are joined by red which lead the eye to a red dot – or setting sun. For *Cloud Pear Bottle* (2017), bumps on the surface imply clouds bursting out of the bottle but, with grey and red outlines across the surface, one senses an overlay of multiple clouds, drawn and shaped. *Flared Cloud Vase* (2017) takes the historic flared lip-vase form and adds appurtenances on the side which are reinforced by black and platinum lines punctuated by a gold-lustre disc, possibly the rising sun.

Darker, grey-green celadon glazes are used on stoneware vases such as *Cloud Pear* (2017) with copper-glaze-incised curves and straight lines. Swirling white celadon brushed onto the surface suggests inclement weather, with grey-green clouds and geometric lines over them. *Cloud Platter* (2017) uses the shape of the dish itself as a cloud formation and enhances the shallow interior bowl with gold lustre lines echoing the scalloped edges.



## Less controversially, Japanese celadon is the undisputed result of Korean ceramists...

*Above:*  
**Cloud Pear**, 2017,  
stoneware, slip, glaze and  
copper luster, 11.5 x 7 x  
5 in (29 x 18 x 12.5 cm).  
Image credit: Tim Bailey,  
courtesy of Gallery IMA.

*Opposite top:*  
**Mountainscape**, 2017,  
porcelain and celadon  
glaze, 10 x 21 x 7.5 in  
(25.5 x 53.5 x 19 cm).  
Image credit: Richard  
Nicol, courtesy of  
Gallery IMA.

*Opposite bottom:*  
**Cloud Bowl**, 2018,  
porcelain, glaze, china  
paint and platinum  
luster, 4.5 x 18 x 10.5 in  
(11.5 x 46 x 25.5 cm).  
Image credit: Tim Bailey,  
courtesy of Gallery IMA.

#### Endnotes

1. Ki Hyung-do, "Winter. Snow. Tree. Forest," in *Korean Poetry in Translation*, <https://jaypsong.blog>. Translated by Chae Pyong and Anne Rashid. February 7, 2013.
2. Kallie Szczepanski, *The Ceramics Wars: Hideyoshi's Japan Kidnaps Korean Artisans*, ThoughtCo. August 5, 2018.

#### About the Author

Matthew Kangas is an independent Seattle art critic and curator who is the author of numerous books.

Recent porcelains extend allusions to Korean landscapes, such as the two-part *Mountainscape* (2017), with its pale blue tinges beneath white and grey foothills and peaks rising from the sides above the sturdy blue feet. The pots are truncated pillow shapes, curved at one end, facing each other with contrasting flattened ends. It complements *Mountain Gourd Bottle* (2017), less sculpturally adventurous, but more harmonious with its flared neck and top and two separated mountain 'ranges' united by upward-pointing peaks. Instead of literal incised or glazed landscape decorations, Chung's clouds recall Korean geography, invoking peninsular landscape and climate, and connecting

contemporary American ceramics to historic East Asian ceramics.

Switching to a glistening white in 2018, *Cloudscape Passage* echoes the diptych imagery of *Mountainscape*, accentuating black linear activity and adding platinum arcs that face one another on their flattened ends. Similarly, *Cloud Bowl* mixes red china paint (a fragment of a disc at one end) with a matching platinum luster dot at the other. Rectangular and shallow, the latter resembles a dog's dish as well as a vessel that suggests an abstracted direction lies ahead; a direction less identifiably historic in origin, but sure to retain the pliable and shape-shifting utility of Chung's ubiquitous cloud. ■

