

CERAMIC ART TRENDS, TOOLS, AND TECHNIQUES

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THE POTTER AS DESIGNER

SAM CHUNG'S ARCHITECTURAL POTS

STORY BY K.T. ANDERS • PHOTOS BY SAM CHUNG

Clay is a humble medium. Raw earth, fashioned and fired into vessels, has long been part of ordinary life. The dehumanization of the Industrial Revolution, with its cheap, mass-produced goods, created a surge of popularity for handmade, common functional objects. In 1926, in his book *The Unknown Craftsman*, Yanagi Soetsu coined the word Mingei for the unassuming, practical crafts meant as "the people's art." The Mingei tradition of folk art was exemplified in the elegantly plain works of Hamada Shoji and Bernard Leach, among others.

Sometimes, however, clay transcends its humble serviceable essence to become an exploration of the visual as well as the functional. In the hands of Sam Chung, clay is a statement in architectural design, line, and form; it is a statement that reinterprets, yet serves functionality. "Today, a lot of ceramics are more inclusive of art and design, which is really interesting to me," notes Chung. "I've begun wondering whether I'm a potter or a designer."

Chung was schooled in Minnesota, which is richly steeped in the Mingei philosophy. "I love the pots that stemmed from that tradition," he says, "but I realized that I was too comfortable staying in Minnesota. I wanted a totally different environment that would force my work to change. I was making bad copies of 'Mingei-sota' pots."

For his graduate work, he chose an environment as opposite from Minnesota as possible: Arizona State University. "It was like landing



Vase. 14" x 8" x 5½". Oxidation-fired porcelain.

pottery. "It's how I can blend those elements together that interests me," he declares. "Once I discovered slab construction and drawing patterns, it was as if a whole new world had opened up. I thought, 'How could I have limited myself to one process?'"

Building from patterns, Chung begins with drawings—but even as he draws, he is contemplating how to build the piece, how to extract

on another planet," he recalls. "Not only because it was 115 degrees and I thought I was going to melt, but because the Mingei aesthetic did not have much of a presence at all."

Instead, Chung discovered architecture. He'd taken a course as an undergraduate, but it drove him crazy to sit and draw straight lines all day. "I was taking a ceramics course at the same time, and clay gave me so much more freedom," he says. It wasn't until a second-year grad-school grant sent him to India for the summer that the ideas of clay and architecture melded. "What appealed to me in India was the early Islamic architecture. That trip was the beginning of my working with slabs. I wanted to make forms that related to those buildings."

Two years earlier, Chung had studied with Mark Pharis. "Suddenly, after all that time, I remembered a demonstration Mark did at his studio where he built a form with slab work and pattern making" he says. Although his work moved away from the Islamic forms, Chung had found his style—work that is elegant and that combines the elements of architecture and geometric shape with more organic, volumetric qualities inherent in wheel-thrown



*Ewer, 9" x 7" x 3½".
Soda-glazed porcelain.*

patterns based on the geometry of the pot. "For example, I sketch a form and it will turn into five or six drawings of a ewer," he explains. "Finally when I draw one I like, I start making patterns based on the sketch."

"The complexity of the form is a product of me tinkering and trying to put things together in different ways." — Sam Chung

The patterns are similar to dressmaking. Slits in the pattern allow the clay to be folded and curved. Once the patterns are made, Chung cuts the porcelain slabs with beveled edges that he will slip and score for construction. "I prefer working with softer slabs because I have a better ability to expand the form than with very firm slabs," he notes. "I roll them out and let them sit an hour or two before I begin building. They are soft but strong enough to stand upright. In some cases, I build them on their side." His porcelain of choice at the moment is Babu from Laguna.

Smooth, clean seams are an important element in his designs. "Line is something that I want to be evident in the form—the clean edge defines a distinct line. A lot of that relates back to the drawing." Once the piece is made, he works with volume. "I often go back into the form with a soft rib tool and stretch surfaces so they aren't completely flat," he says. "That creates a more volumetric quality in the pot. You start to see the form develop."

Handles are cut from a pattern and folded, so they are hollow. Often Chung will create an additional plane on the handle by attaching a second, smaller slab.

Yixing Lids

To make his lids, Chung adapts the stacking method used in making Chinese Yixing teapot lids. The process is done before attaching a bottom, so that he can reach inside the form. "On the top slab of the teapot, I draw where I want the lid to be, then cut it out carefully. That will be my lid," he explains. To form a gallery for the opening, he uses a slab a little larger than the opening and attaches it underneath the cut-out area. "I then cut a slightly smaller hole in this second slab, following the form of the first hole. This technique gives me a lot of freedom to design the lid in whatever shape I want." Onto the first cut-out piece, Chung attaches a flange to weigh the lid down, being careful not to bend the lid, so it won't warp in the kiln.

Soda Glazing

Although many potters use soda to create a glaze during the firing, Chung is not seeking the traditional soda-glazed surface. "I'm more interested in how sodium will alter the consistency of the glazes I use," he says. "Sodium is a flux, so it can change the color and qualities of the glaze. It bleaches the surface a little, particularly making the edges go white." While firing in a neutral atmosphere to cone 10, he sprays a solution of 1 lb. soda ash to ½ gallon of hot water.

Chung uses a clear glaze to line the interiors of his pots, but for the exteriors, he often sprays the glaze. "I like to spray because the glaze doesn't coat the surface too thickly," he says. When using multiple glazes, he defines certain areas with latex, which can then be removed for the application of another glaze. "The latex allows you to apply multiple glazes in very specific shapes and places."



Cups: 3" x 3½" x 3½". Soda-glazed porcelain.

A New Design Direction?

While Chung's focus is on design, he never forgets functionality. "When I'm making the pieces, I'm thinking about how the human body engages with all those parts that make this a functional form," he says. "The irony is, because they take me so long to make and are so complex, I wonder if these pieces are actually used."

That irony may be leading him in a new direction. "In my older work, the process of working with the wheel had its limitations," he confesses. "Now I'm thinking again that maybe the way I'm working with slab construction has its own limitations, and maybe there are other ways to design forms. I'm wondering about the potential for ceramic artists to delve into what, for many years, was considered a more commercial venture. Maybe there is a possibility of designing work that reaches a larger audience."

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Description of Methods

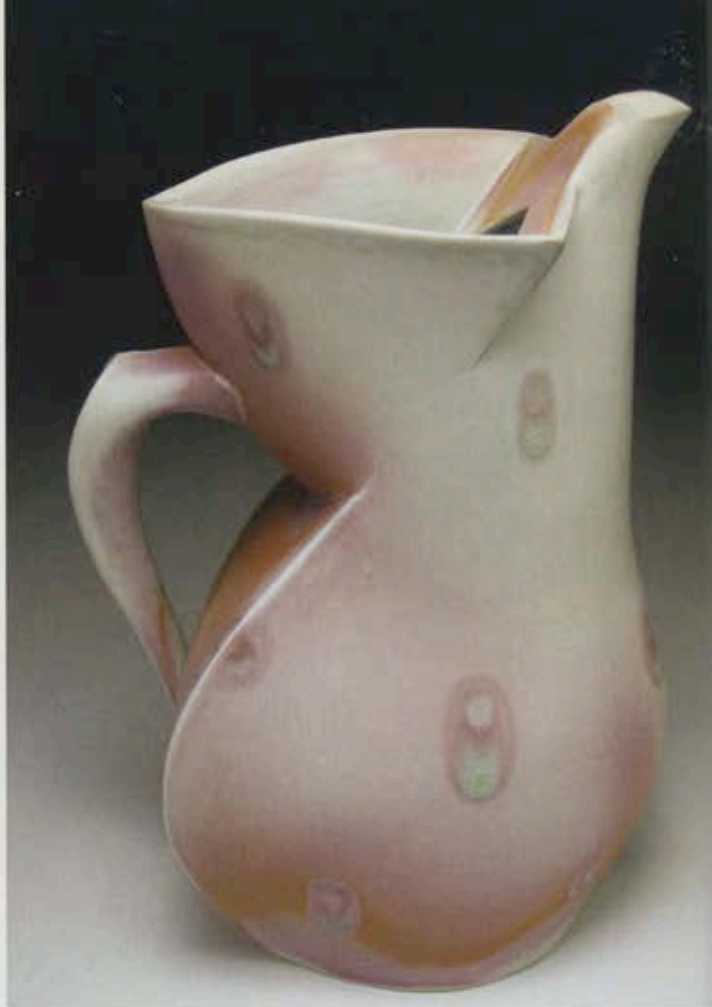
Glazing:

Some of my work is glazed with two different glazes in specific areas of the form. For these pieces, I usually use latex resist to block off or expose certain shapes, dunk the piece in a glaze, wax the glazed area, then peel off the latex so the shape is revealed. I then cut away the edge of the glazed shape with an X-acto knife to clean up any jagged edges. The second glaze is either dunked or sprayed onto the remaining exposed areas. Other pieces have one glaze sprayed over the entire piece and then a green celadon is applied with a brush in a regular dot pattern across the form.



Firing:

Much of my work is soda-glazed, but I also fire in cone 10 oxidation and reduction atmospheres. For the soda-glazed work, I fire in a neutral atmosphere to cone 10, at which time I spray in the soda/water solution with a traditional pump-style sprayer. I alternate spraying on each side of the kiln until the solution is gone. The updraft kiln is about 20 cubic feet and has small spraying ports on opposite sides of the firebox. I should also add that I prefer the soda-ash solution to not be sprayed directly onto the work, so I make sure to aim the nozzle accordingly.



Pitcher. 10" x 7" x 5". Soda-glazed porcelain.



*Teapot. 7" x 9½" x 5".
Soda-glazed porcelain.*

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Chung has been exploring 3-D computer modeling design using Rhino Software, in which the dimensional design on the screen can actually be used to create molds. "The fun part of this design direction is to find some way to design for the masses," he says. "That may mean identifying it as a completely separate body of work. I've thought it might be fun to design under a pen name."

Echoes of the unknown craftsman? It may be that Chung is bringing a whole new aesthetic to the Mingei tradition of pots for the common people. @

K.T. Anders is a potter and professional writer who resides in Upperville, Virginia. She is a regular contributor to Clay Times.



High-fire Glazes / Cone 10

Matte Black

Cornwall Stone	42%
Dolomite	15
Whiting	10
EPK (Edgar Plastic Kaolin)	23
Silica	10
TOTAL	100%

add Yellow Ochre	6%
add Cobalt Carbonate	2%
add Chrome Oxide	1%

Satin Mint Green

Barium	7.1%
Whiting	14.3
Kona F-4 Feldspar	35.8
Nepheline Syenite	21.4
EPK (Edgar Plastic Kaolin)	14.3
Zinc Oxide	7.1
TOTAL	100.0%

add Copper Carbonate	0.5%
OR Titanium for Satin Yellow	4.0%

Hensley Clear

Kona F-4 Feldspar	45.4%
Gerstley Borate	14.8
Barium Carbonate	5.7
Whiting	9.6
Silica	9.8
Grolleg Kaolin	11.3
Tin Oxide	1.1
Ferro Frit 3110	2.3
TOTAL	100.0%

Big Sky (Steve Roberts)

Nepheline Syenite	66.7%
Whiting	4.8
Gerstley Borate	1.9
Petalite	14.3
OM-4 Ball Clay	7.6
Bone Ash	4.7
TOTAL	100.0%

add Copper Carbonate	1.5%
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Pictured at left: Vase. 15" x 7.5" x 5". Reduction-fired porcelain.