

A Ceramics Career of Exploring Truth, Social Concern, and the Quest for Innovation:

Appreciating Prof. Huan-Tang Chiu's Ceramic Works

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Contemporary ceramics in Taiwan emerged during the 1960s. In the early days, when access to information was controlled, there were extremely few books on ceramics production, and few places to go to learn ceramics. Many of the older ceramists had to struggle bitterly to grope their way and learn. It was their valuable experiences, accumulated through frustration, that laid the foundation for ceramic art and initiated the popularity of ceramic art in Taiwan. When not creating, they passed on their valuable experiences in ceramics, assiduously guided up-and-coming ceramists, and promoted ceramics-related activities, thereby establishing the widespread, thriving ceramic art scene in Taiwan today. For this reason, among the Taipei Ceramics Awards organized by the Taipei County Yingge Ceramics Museum, there is a special Achievement Award for honoring senior ceramists for their successes and contributions. This year, in the 4th Taipei Ceramics Awards, the Achievement Award goes to Prof. Huan-Tang Chiu, and it is indeed well-deserved.

Prof. Chiu's achievements and contributions to Taiwanese ceramics are many-sided. First, during the early phase of Taiwanese ceramics development, he set up the Tao-Zen Pottery Workshop, where he taught ceramic art and nurtured outstanding ceramists such as Ming-Nan Tseng, Jung-Yu Tsai, Shu-Hui Kao, Pao-Tsai Lien, Tung-Ning Shen, Yung-Kuo Cheng, Po-Ken Lin, and Cheng-Ho Wang. He infused new life and energy into Taiwanese ceramic art and became a core artist. Second, he wrote the volume *Lectures on Ceramic Art*, which provides complete information on ceramic techniques and creative concepts. It made a major contribution in terms of spreading ceramics' popularity and raising artistic standards. Third, for many years he was intensely involved in all kinds of ceramic art activities in Taiwan. He has been invited to serve as a judge for all kinds of ceramics exhibitions; he has participated in ceramics seminars and symposia, where he provided insightful and constructive suggestions; and he has been invited to attend various evaluation and consultation meetings at the Council for Cultural Affairs, art museums, and other museums, thus adding impetus to the healthy development of Taiwanese ceramic art. Finally, the works he has produced through the years have been full of formal adventure and innovation, highly varied and colorful images, and diverse creative themes. They have triggered creative thinking in Taiwanese ceramics. In this article, therefore, I would like to present a few of my personal observations and analyses on his creative work.

Prof. Chiu has a high level of enthusiasm for creating, a quick genius and abundant energy. The ceramic works he has made over the past forty years, whether practical utensils or creative works into which he puts a great deal of thought, are quite rich in quantity and variety. Most of these exquisite, varied works fall into two large classes: practical utensils and formative expressions. His works may be further arranged and classified as follows.

Practical utensils

(1) Plates: These can be further subdivided into square and round. He treats a plate as the "canvas" for painting and the slanted rim as a frame. The image is handled with deeply colored glazes or painted lines, and the main theme is centered in the flat surface in the middle of the plate. In consideration of the plate's practical function, he mostly uses high-temperature glazes. As for the main themes of the paintings, these include floral still lifes, flowers and plants, fruits, mountainous or forested wilderness scenes. He is especially fond of things native to Taiwan, such as betelnut palms, sugar cane, the wooden boats of Orchid Island, the scenery around Tamsui, and so on, covering the things and scenes that he sees in daily life or observes while traveling. There are also a few deep round plates that preserve the pure white of the clay body, with bluelines around the rim, and in the middle piled shards of crystal have been baked to form three colored dots. The design is simple, open and creative.

(2) Teapots and bottle vases: Prof. Chiu has always attached importance to bringing out the nature of the clay. During the throwing and shaping process, the soft, pliable quality of the clay is gradually blended into the form through the nimble action of the fingers, and what finally comes through in the work is the naturalness and fluidity of the form. These qualities can be seen clearly in the works he creates on the wheel. In his teapots, the full, simple body of the pots, the solid handles, and the rough, short but clever spouts, coupled with his usual iron-red or ash glaze and improvisatory, sparse decorations have become his own distinctive teapot style.

Apart from preserving their basic functionality, the bodies of his vases show more emphasis on glazes and images. For instance, in his 1998 "bottles set series," he used the wheel to make a set of open-mouthed vases of various sizes that could be placed together, and to broaden the space for the paintings, he flattened the bodies of the vases. Then, as the size varied, he enhanced the overall visual effect of the vases by expressing the differentiation between glazed surfaces and incised lines, and gradually changing tonalities on the spectrum between two complementary colors, warm and cold. In addition, in his brick-shaped bottle vase series, which were pressured into shape with a clay slab, the main image was connected along the bodies of the individual vases in order to achieve the expressive effect of paintings arranged in three-dimensional space.

(3) Other utensils: In addition to dining utensils, Prof. Chiu is also very concerned about applications of ceramic art in other areas of life—candle stands, lamp stands, still and flowing water installations, and so on. The candle stands were relatively early works for which he used the wheel to make the various pieces, which were then assembled. The spatial arrangement on the candle stand surfaces, the proportion between the arched lines and the height on the supports achieved an aesthetically pleasing balance, and the copper-green glaze was compounded by Prof. Chiu's wife, Nadia Shih.

Prof. Chiu has had many clever ideas for lamp stands. For instance, he has used an upright vase thrown on the wheel as the main part of the stand, and in the body of this vase he placed an oval hole. Inside the hole there are several smaller vases strung together for a decorative effect as well as added stability. The form is simple yet varied. In addition, he used colored German clays to coil-build a square, hollowed-out columnar stem. The combination of black, white, ochre, and other colored clays makes a delightful open-work square column form, and as a result the lamplight shines with greater liveliness.

Ponds and flowing water installations are some of the large forms that Prof. Chiu is fond of making. Most of these are assembled from several individual units. Most of them, such as "Fountain with Connected Vases," an early work from 1970, and "Dish-Shaped Fountain," installed in California in 1979, use round columns thrown on the wheel and other individual forms such as large round plates that are assembled after baking in the kiln. The water then flows down from a gap in the rim of the plate.

Later on, the improved sculpture fountain "Waterfall" is comprised of four units thrown on the wheel and

spliced together into a tripod form. The base unit, with its three feet, gives the work its stability, and each of the three units on top are connected to the ones below them by two of their own three feet. The unconnected foot on each of the top three units has a groove through which the water flows and forms a waterfall. Together they make a triple-tiered waterfall in three directions. The shape of this towering work has many concave and convex surfaces as well as a variety of hollowed-out spaces. The three waterfalls and four layers of water surfaces are full of dynamism and bring an atmosphere of nonending vitality to the work's surroundings. Another sculpture fountain, "Venturing the Brook," is hand-molded using the coil building method, and visually the work carries even more of a full, unadorned massiveness.

(4) Design works: In his early period, Prof. Chiu borrowed space at Tien-I Ceramics Co., and in return he assisted in the design of commercial products. The wine set "Rice Harvest" has a wine bottle in the form of a farmer's wife: she wears a traditional conical bamboo hat and rain cloak, and she holds a firmly bound sheaf of rice in her hands. The entire bottle is covered with an earth-yellow glaze. The shapes of the seven wine cups are inspired from the form of bound rice sheaves and simplified, and an iron-red glaze is applied inside and out. This wine set symbolizes the farmers' joy at harvest.

Because the design of "Paired Lions," which are modeled after the form of traditional stone lions, required that the plaster mold be easily removable in mass production, Prof. Chiu did his best to reduce "dead corners" in the mold. Although the details on the lions' legs, curled manes, and facial features are reduced and simplified, with their large heads and small bodies they fully retain the stance and spirit-resonance of lions. "Chimpanzee Bank" is an adorable decorative product. Its brief, cartoon-like form shape the chimpanzee's voluminous body and pleasing expression, and its wide, protruding mouth is cleverly made into a coin slot. It is both practical and creative.

Formative Expressions

Among Prof. Chiu's creations, his formative expressions are very rich in terms of number and variety. By form these may be divided into the following categories:

(1) Small-scale ceramic sculptures: In 1965, when he was taking courses in ceramic art at the University of Hawaii, he was dissatisfied with producing basic utensils and used his time to hand-shape a few small abstract or semi-abstract ceramic sculptures. "Three Warriors," "Herd," "Birds," and "Matador" are four virgin works of this period. These small-scale sculptures do not follow the traditional hand-sculpting method of piling up but are given shape by improvised, intuitive freehand methods. Because of the quick cleanness of the method, the forms are brief yet rich in imagination and humor, which is a consistent aspect of his creative work. In another work that he had formed at the wheel, "Refugees," there are six semi-abstract huddled, forward-leaning figures, and although their forms are indistinct and abbreviated, it is a powerful evocation of the panic and helplessness of a group of people fleeing from difficulty. This work was a finalist in the 1970 International Competition of Contemporary Ceramic Art in Faenze, Italy.

(2) Mid-size ceramic sculptures: Here I classify works that express a thematic concept with a single form or unit. Works in this category are medium in scale and are easily formed, transported and baked in the kiln. The parts of the body in 1970's "Childhood Dream"—the torso, head, arms, etc.—were each thrown on the wheel and later assembled into one whole. The raw material is red clay, the skin was applied with white slip, and for the clothes, white slip was daubed into pressed indentations, thereby forming white images over red clay. On the head portion, the face and expression are rendered with incised lines; red and black slip is used for the lips and hair. The child raises his hands high, holding a toy strung on a string, and he shows a delighted, satisfied expression.

"Star and Costar" makes use of a black slab with partial openwork and colored slabs from which dynamic

human shapes have been cut in order to depict actors on a stage. In "Zoo," images of human figures wearing all kinds of animal furs are pressed into black slabs. The work pokes fun of the fashion world and the overuse of animal furs among society's upper crust. Both of these works use light-color images on the black slabs that comprise their primary structure, and they are visually striking.

A stack of fruit packaging materials forms the base of "Leftover Apples of Day's Sale," and on top of it there are apples of different colors and varieties: the golden apple from Greek myth, the poison apple that the wicked witch gave to Snow White, the red apple shot by William Tell, the ripe apple that led Newton to his discovery of gravity, and the poison apple that Satan wanted Adam to eat. There is also the Apple Computer logo, representing the ubiquitous advertising media, as well as apple halves, metaphors for the pervasiveness of sex-imagery. Through the connotations of the apple varieties Prof. Chiu expresses his worries over today's culture, society, technology, environment, mentality, etc.

(3) Large ceramic sculptures: Due to limitations of production space, shaping technique and kiln dimensions, large ceramic sculptures usually cannot be made in one piece—it is necessary to divide them appropriately into separate pieces, baked, and then reassembled. Although the process is complex and easily leads to failure, such sculptures have really enabled ceramic art to broaden and expand. Early on Prof. Chiu used the assembly method to make works like the sculpture fountain "Waterfall." However, the "brick sculpture" series of works show his most frequent usage of assembly methods, over the longest period of time. He used plaster molds to mass produce ceramic bricks of six different specifications, and after baking these, he made all kinds of varying bent pillars using bricklaying methods, thus forming large sculptural work rich in block variation. They are extensive in scale and hold profound meaning. The public artwork "Arch of Millennium," erected in the large pond in front of Taipei County Yingge Ceramics Museum, is one of the later works in the brick sculpture series.

"Explorers II" is a remake of a destroyed earlier work, "Explorers." Both works focus on the theme of the ubiquitous technological development of the past few generations, but the newer work made some slight modifications. The four blocks from top to bottom symbolize the limitless expanse of space and the sea: the top block shows the image of an astronaut floating through space; the pentachromatic rainbow on the second tier shows the dynamic forces of the atmosphere, between space and the sea; the turquoise block on the third tier, representing the sea, shows fish and aquatic creatures swimming freely; and the block on the bottom tier shows the scenery of the base of the sea. A diver in black scuba gear examines the bottom-dwellers.

The "Amazon" series originated from the wave absorption blocks often seen on Taiwan's riverbanks and seashores. Although these immense constructions are intended to prevent nature from encroaching on people's economic interests, they seriously damage the environment. These long, uninterrupted lines of blocks destroy the harmony between humankind and nature, and they are also a form of visual pollution. For Prof. Chiu, they symbolize coarseness and non-feeling. From the form of these blocks he drew the mental association with the form of kneeling human figures, and he set up a contrast between attractive feminine gracefulness and the blocks' massive coarseness. The romantic, humorous works conceal a sharp, serious, ironic criticism.

The ceramic slab series: The "Ceramic Art Notebook" series of works are rich in substance. Because Prof. Chiu usually likes sketching to record the things of daily life, the things he sees while traveling, or the feelings and thoughts in his mind, for him ceramic slabs and paper are merely substitute tools and media. The "Ideas from My Notebook" series emerge from his feelings on issues in contemporary life, religion, the environment, and so on. One of the works in this series shows a pair of red lips in a dark, polluted atmosphere mindlessly sucking on a bottled beverage. We do not see where the other drinker has gone. It hints at the anxieties of modern life. Another image shows a letter sent from Taipei; the rainbow packed inside is stained by the dirty air, which highlights Taipei's seriously worsening air quality. In a third image, he uses mathematical vocabulary to show Jesus nailed to the cross. Such compositions, which take concrete objects and convert them into very basic

formal elements of composition, are Prof. Chiu's most accomplished means of expression.

"Rainbow in Five Movements" is one of the works in Prof. Chiu's "Ceramic Art Notebook" series. It comprises five slabs thematically linked by the rainbow, and it records five important eras in Western cultural history: the rainbow from the book of Genesis in the Bible, a rainbow formed by light diffracted through a prism, a rainbow formed by the rising and falling lines of a statistical chart, a discolored rainbow caused by industrial pollution, and a rainbow made possible by color video technology in the computer era. The images on the slabs are mostly linear, with light-colored glazes and text inscribed into the compositions. This work was shown in the National Museum of History's Sino-Japan Exhibition of 1981, and it was also shown by invitation at the International Exhibition of Creative Ceramic Art, which was part of the UN International Day of Peace celebrations in Seoul, Korea. However, the work's present whereabouts are unknown, so he made "Rainbow in Five Variations" on a similar theme.

"Rainbow in Five Variations" changes the original's form—pages from a spiral notebook—into complete rectangular slabs, so that the work becomes a five-piece set of connected ceramic slabs, which distinguishes it from the "Notebook" series. As for expressive technique, it switches from lines and light glazes to blocks of color and sprayed-on colored slip, which can express even or gradually changing colors. The three-dimensionality of the work strengthens the theme, causing it to become the focus.

There is another highly accomplished series of relief sculpted slabs. The "Landscape with Rainbow" series presses impressions of undulating wave forms on flat, smooth white clay slabs. Over the waves' rise and fall appear pieces of rainbow with gradually changing colors. Although the compositions and their coloration are very simple, the projected light-dark variation enriches the surface and gives it a dynamic feeling. For the "Wall Planter" series of works, fruit packaging materials to prevent shaking damage were used as molds, so that the concave-convex part of the soft clay slab and undulating lines make varying protruding and receding patterns of rounded forms. The glaze, meanwhile, utilizes ash glaze and bits of broken colored glaze baked and melted together, to emphasize the positive significance of recycling waste.

Making judicious use of his free time to do his creative work as desired, Prof. Chiu has, throughout his entire artistic career of more than 40 years, adhered to the principle of never having it affect his regular career teaching English. He does not have any fixed mode for his work's expressive forms, and before starting he does not think and plan in excessive detail. Instead he follows his intuition and inspiration through the creative process, grasping the original spirit of the work and moving smoothly ahead from there. Consequently, in all the various kinds of practical or formal artistic ceramic works that he produces, one can clearly perceive the following distinctive qualities:

(1) A diversity of form: Over a long period of time Prof. Chiu has always created ceramic art with an open mind, and he likes to display faithfully the distinctive quality of the clay. In the practical utensils, he stresses the flavorful aesthetic of handicraft and utilizes all kinds of shaping techniques to make them. Each item as a consequence possesses a clearly independent character. The formative art works make adroit use of blocks, unit assembly, slabs, relief, and so on. On the surface they may appear as realistic paper, wavy panels, fruit packaging materials, and so on, but there are also semi-abstract human and animal forms, wave absorption blocks, etc., as well as the abstract or geometric forms—the ceramic brick pillars, the rainbow pillars, the blocks representing the heavens and the oceans, and so on.

(2) Richness of imagery and color: Color and images are correspondingly important expressive elements in Prof. Chiu's works. For the practical utensils, he uses higher-temperature glazes with stable, solid colors expressing a painterly brush texture and tenor. In the formative art works, in order to emphasize the thematic focus, he uses resplendently colorful mid- or low-temperature glazes or glaze pencil. In addition, he always enjoys trying various kinds of clay, whether it is local clay, porcelain, imported clay, or colored clay, and he frequently applies variously colored slip on the clay body and then adds layering and variation to the images

and colors by means of incised lines, scratches, applied wax, glazing, etc. The interplay and contrast of color, line, and texture then become important surface qualities of his works.

(3) Breadth of thematic range: Prof. Chiu has interests in philosophy, history, literature, music, and theater, and he enjoys absorbing the most up-to-date information. He is also concerned about changes in the political and economic situation, social and cultural development, and the natural environment. The biggest impetus for his wide-ranging study is his powerful curiosity about everything. Due to his solid mastery of English and Japanese, there are more varied, deeper information channels available to him, and these enable him to explore the truth of things and get to the heart of various issues from different angles, and at a higher level. His rich, diverse education and the plenitude of his creative artistic skills are his main sources of inspiration. The themes of his work cover nearly everything—nature, culture, art, society, religion, the environment, science—and he can deeply explore single themes from different angles or combine different issues in a single work, while at the same time revealing his own innermost concerns and hopes.

(4) Comprehensiveness of skill: Besides applying the usual methods used in ceramics such as coil building, slab building, wheel throwing, mold pressing, and so on, Prof. Chiu uses ordinary objects found in daily life, such as corrugated paper, fruit packaging materials, wavy boards, etc., as supplementary tools, which usually generate unexpected forms and effects. The additional shaping with found objects also enriches the content of the works. Garden tools, kitchen gadgets, and other utensils not intended for ceramic purposes are also frequently used by him to process the works' surfaces, so that all kinds of innovative textures or images can appear.

(5) Diversity of creative concept: Prof. Chiu is very flexible with the materials and techniques of creation, and this experimental quality hints strongly of difficulties easily encountered, but he views them as challenges and opportunities for originality in his works. He attaches great importance to bringing out the essence of the ceramic materials and will retain the original appearance of the materials to an appropriate degree. He shows the natural and abundantly vital "earthiness" of ceramics. He does not stick blindly to a single style but boldly tries all kinds of formal variation, and he tends to favor the mixed presentation of different raw thematic materials.

He thinks: an innovative but imperfect work is more interesting than a technically unassailable work that lacks any new concept. From this we can tell that he fully stresses the expression of creativity in his work.

Prof. Huan-Tang Chiu's works are rich in color and deeply meaningful, whether in terms of form, color, or thematic content. Their themes provide us grounds for deeper reflection; their forms and painterly expressions let us appreciate his distinctive artistic character; their creative stances are abundantly revealing; and their creative concepts are freshly instructive. Finally, through all these years he has always retained a childlike open-mindedness, an exceptional sensitivity, freely absorbing the newest information and observing the things around him, and transforming intense creative passion into finished works. Such creative spirit and attitude truly deserves our respect and emulation!