

FOCUS EYE: article by Kazuko Todate

AGNES HUSZ 'SHAPES FROM STRIPS OF CLAY'

The thin belt-like strips of clay, impregnated with air, gracefully sit one upon the other, or they may spiral out from a central point and at times, even take on the shape of a cube. The shapes of Agnes Husz's ceramics are continually evolving. It is as if the clay strips themselves possess a will of their own and in so doing, seek out some kind of shape or form. You might say that it is an autonomous formation on the part of the clay strips.

For a long time, many potters have used clay slabs in the production of ceramics. However, you could say that an approach which freely searches for shape in the appearance of the delicate clay strips to this extent, finds no parallel elsewhere. The majority of potters use a slab of clay which has been literally cut to size as is, or usually shape the clay around the curve of a cup or similar item. Or, take, for example, the work of Kuriki Tatsusuke, where he has a series of works which focus on clay strips. His shapes, which are static and dense, are poles apart from those of Agnes Husz, with the flexible and unrestrained handling found in her clay strips.

This potter's unique shaping comes from a particularly original method. Firstly, the design precedes the shape. Usually, a ceramicist would apply various patterns to a shape as soon as the shape had been decided. The standard formula in ceramic making is to add decoration after the shaping of a work. However, in Agnes's case, she adds the design before the shape is fixed. She uses a brush to apply the design sensually and in an impromptu way, to the whole of a rectangular slab of gray clay, which has emerged from a block print press. In recent years, for example, Agnes has frequently been using cool, *shibui* tones in black zaffer and white engobe. The nimble touch of her freehand designs will allow her at a later stage, to obtain various kinds of expression, through the movement of her clay strips.

Having cut the clay slab, which has already had the design applied to it, to the desired width, the potter swings the strip, gripping it with both hands, gradually lengthening it. Through the process of stretching the clay strip, cracks are added to the surface, bringing a softness to the design, with the clay strip gradually becoming thinner than the original clay slab, resulting in greater length. In the making of the clay strip itself, the naturalness inherent in the clay is skilfully captured. The shape is created as the strip is coiled, piled upon or wrapped within itself. The subtle irregularities on the edges or surface of the clay strip accentuate the natural look of the clay all the more and this in turn, produces a justifiable sense of unity with the black zaffer and white engobe designs.

Ms Husz first tackled this technique of coiling the clay strip in earnest when attending the EKWC (European Ceramic Work Center) in the Netherlands in 1993 for a three-month stint as a guest ceramicist. At first, she focussed on an expression which favored concept, by using numerals as motifs with the clay slab. However, she happened to remember making a snail-like shape by balling up clay strips when she was at the International Ceramic Studio in Kecskemet in Hungary, the country of her birth. And so, she practised the action of coiling clay strips radiating out from the center, day after day. The spiral achieved gradually grew to the size of one meter across. The potter states that she found this repeated action of coiling the clay strip totally absorbing. She set out to search for shapes which involved the development of clay strip spirals, among others. In the nineties, Ms Husz became interested in pottery used in the tea ceremony and tried her hand at the Oribe and Shino styles, but in 2014, her clay strip spiral presented itself in tea paraphernalia, such as in the Ripple Water Container work (see page 88). This was the culmination of twenty-three years work, grappling with clay strips.

While still a student, Ms Husz had already mastered the techniques of using the potter's wheel and casting and she began to feel more at home producing clay strips which were bolder than before. She was able to make shapes that were at times graceful and delicate and yet, at other times, dynamic, through piling the clay strips one on top of the other and with her use of curved lines and surfaces. This free development is evidenced in later years, in both her bowls and *objects*, whether working with earthenware or ceramics. The works undergo reduction firing at a temperature of 1260 degrees in a kerosene kiln built by the potter herself. It is only through this process that the potter is able to achieve the kind of ambience we see in her final product.

The city of Mohacs in Agnes's native Hungary is a region renowned for its production of black pottery. In her family home there was a black ceramic pot with handles, among others, which her father had bought. As a child, she had wanted to become a sculptor some day, but when in high school, she studied shaping in a pottery course. After graduating from high school, for the next four years she was employed part-time in a pottery, working on prototypes for mass produced ceramics. After this, she entered the Ceramics Department of the Hungarian University of Applied Arts. When Agnes was studying during the eighties, Hungary was a communist country and the area of sculpture was open to political influence. Ceramics, however, enjoyed more freedom of expression.

After marrying the woodblock print artist Wakabayashi Fumio, Ms Husz settled in Nagano in 1993 and states that she is delighted to be able to conduct her ceramics work in Japan. The fact that it is recognized that 'there is a need for pottery' can be experienced personally when living in Japan. In Agnes Husz's search for freedom in the process of ceramics production, being able to work with her strips of clay and being able to do so in Japan are huge advantages.

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(Translator: John Millen)