# Beauty of Simplicity Choi Kun discusses the physical and spiritual elements of Roe Kyung-Jo's contemporary ceramics





Top: Punch'ong
Lidded Bowl.
34 x 31 x 31 cm.
Above: Inlaid Marbleware
Vessel. 42 x 28 x 28 cm.

HROUGH PROCESSES OF THE ADDITION and subtraction on many clay pieces, big and small, Roe Kyung-jo creates a large and complex clay mass, and then he cuts away at it aggressively, removing unnecessary details. Numerous small details, which Roe Kyung-jo added to make an otherwise simple looking rectangular object interesting, are erased one by one by the artist to create a totally different shape from that which existed when he began. This rectangular object we see here has a beauty of simplicity and was created after a meticulous, regimented and well thought-out process of elimination. Roe's works recall the spirit of Joseon potters, who valued simplicity as the essence of art.

Roe Kyung-jo is immersed in transforming an otherwise a dull looking clay body into a joyful and dynamic shape by adding elements of a vessel, such as a spout, a lid and a handle, or by carving out wind holes to allow the rectangular body to breathe, or cutting off acute angles to make gentle a plane on some parts of the body.

As he is working on the clay, Roe Kyung-jo's hands are like those of an old carpenter with his eyes looking at the field outside his studio where the wind is blowing, and his mind looking for a beauty of simplicity that is a natural aspect of simple life.

When discussing the characteristics of Roe kyung-joe's works, it helps to understand him better if we categorise his works into bottles, cube vessels and lidded bowls. Such categorisation is, of course, not based on the types or shapes of his works called bottles, vessels or lidded bowls, but based on differences in physical elements that make up each piece that depicts his method of expression. The typical style of Roe Kyung-jo is bottles. They remind us of



vessels in the shape of a rectangular cube to which functional elements such as a spout and a handle are added. Roe's bottles are decorated with a planar inlaid design (*myeon sanggam*) on the spacious surface. His inlaid design is based on lines and volume of a Joseon porcelain bottle. He makes a minimum and barely noticeable alteration on a part in order to give slight variation. This tells us that his works are recreated to allow viewers of modern times feel comfortable by easing the strict tradition of Joseon porcelain, while preserving the aesthetic values contained in Joseon white porcelain.

Roe Kyung-jo applies the planar inlay technique, or *myeon sanggam*, using clays of various colours and textures on the basic form. His vessels are like Goryeo celadon decorated with *yeollimun* designs, which required three different kinds of clay (natural, white and red clay). The yellow-brownish clay surface, light and dark, are divided into several parts by wide or narrow free-hand drawn lines on the surface of a rectangular cube. Transparent or translucent glaze is applied on this surface, exposing the colour and texture inherent to clay. These planes look as if they are divided unconsciously but, if we look closely, we can see that they are created with careful attention and the elaborate plan of the artist, which makes perfect harmony with the shape and proportion of the vessel.

Rectangular cube-shaped vessels by Roe Kyung-jo are of simple form with no unnecessary decorations being added. To this simple cube-shaped vessel, Roe added a symbolic decoration, made a wind hole on the bottom or made alterations to the surface texture to transform otherwise meaningless or dull-looking shapes into special-looking vessels. Small triangular or square dots attached on the wide four sides of a vessel are similar to those on low-quality



Top: Marbleware Vessel. 30 x 30 x 23 cm. Above: Inlaid Marbleware Vessel. 30 x 21 x 21 cm.





Top: Inlaid Marbleware Lidded Bowl.

17 x 17 x 21 cm.

Above: Marbleware Bottle.

23 x 9 x 9 cm.

Joseon porcelain that were produced at local kilns some hundreds years ago, which reflected the emotions of ordinary people. These dots are placed on simple planes to give liveliness to the entire shape, rather than to serve any specific function. The triangle or square-shaped hole made through the bottom functions like a wind hole in a small piece of wooden furniture from the Joseon period. These elements make an otherwise dull, heavy looking rectangular cubeshaped vessel seem joyfully light. This is in the same context as balance and harmony that is sought by contemporary artists.

What impresses viewers most is that Roe made alterations only to the edges, where the planes join, by lining the form with different coloured clays, while leaving the four sides of the planes as they are. On the simple and flat planes are traces of beating and carving, which imbue the piece with liveliness and a gentle resonance.

Lidded bowls by Roe Kyung-jo are unique. This kind of specially constructed structure is rare in ceramics. It is as if Roe worked on all the square

bottles and cubes to reach this lidded bowl, and expresses the characteristics of his bottles and cubes implicitly. Roe re-interpreted the elements of shape such as angles, planes and curving lines and integrated them to create a completely new rectangular-shaped vessel, unlike the bottles or cubes he previously made. Planar inlaid *yeollimun* designs are reduced and moved to the borders, and the impressions created by different inlaid designs and surface textures are minimised. Instead, several decoration techniques used hundreds years ago, but which seem contemporary, are used for lidded bowls. Roe used a coarse brush to apply white slip, thus making alterations depending on the shade or thickness of the white clay slip, or created a unique texture by cutting the sides gently with a knife.

The physical elements of the shapes of Roe Kyung-jo's vessels may be considered relatively simple. However, the meaning of 'simple' is merely an expression of language that does not have the same meaning in the spiritual dimension. In a group of society with a common culture and knowledge, symbolic messages such as signs and letters are expressed in a simplified and abbreviated way, and can be explained by making the contents inside as abundant and expression as simple as possible. The simplicity or conciseness of Roe Kyung-jo's works is the result of condensation of contents, which is possible after only years of hard work. It is an expression only he can produce.

What Roe Kyung-jo considers most important in his works is diversity of experience and focus on uniquely Korean beauty. For this reason, he values and cares about traditional Korean houses, vessels and everything Korean. His works are products of love for things Korean and Korean tradition.

Choi Kun is the director of Joseon Royal Kiln Museum. Translated by Moon Soo-yul. Caption Title page: *Ash Glaze Bottle*. 21 x 13.5 x 7 cm.

# Editorial



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Trends in contemporary ceramics, seen from the viewpoint of a publisher and editor, is the subject of my talk that, as I write this editorial, is soon to be given for the Taipei County Yingge Ceramics Museum during the First Taiwan International Ceramic Biennale Competition in February, 2004. Other talks will focus on the same subject from the viewpoint of critics, educators and museum professionals. The occasion is a symposium held in conjunction with a major international competition and the talks must necessarily pinpoint the value of competitions, how they meet the goals of stimulating local interest in ceramics, setting standards and revealing trends for future activities in the ceramic arts. It is not an easy topic, however, and trends come and they go. At one point I am surprised how many articles come my way that show work in figurative ceramics, a classic expression and one that never completely dies away. At another time, the interest is in fragile work, unclaylike in its extreme vulnerability, and opposite to the rugged earthy wares that seemed so popular a few years ago. At another time the interest focuses on the abstract or architectural, artists seeming to look for stability, a grounded, settled and established aesthetic. I hear that function is now the 'new avant-garde', that classic forms and glazes, even tenmoku and celadon glazes are making a comeback. Scale was once the trend when it came to sending work to exhibitions, one needed to be noticed, then the white, precious and small came to be in favour. In competition terms, scale is always an important factor; when it comes to awarding large sums of money for premier prizes, award sponsors like to see something significant for their money - large and memorable, larger than life. To me, the best works stand out, no matter what the size, colour or style, or even intention of the artist. The judges, from different countries and of different interests in art, usually agree on the works to be awarded, a consensus occurs and that makes the role of judging an enlightening one. This Taiwan international symposium, which also offers workshops as well as the competition, demonstrates the lead that Asia is taking in the field of ceramic art. With China celebrating 1000 years of porcelain at Jingdezhen this year and a meeting of the International Academy of Ceramics in South Korea in August, there are many reasons to travel to the East and learn from traditional masters and see the work of emerging artists. Competitions in Europe, such as the Westerwald Prize 2004 in Höhr-Grenzhausen, Germany, attract many entries for larger scale work while the Cone-box Show presented annually by Baker University, USA, is within the capabilities, freight-wise at least, of any aspiring ceramic artist who wishes to break into the international field. It is participation that sets the challenge to oneself and brings rewards in many ways.

Jackmapiel

With Roe Kyungjo, Korean ceramic artist, and his collection of Onggi jars. It will be possible to visit his workshop during the meeting of the International Academy of Ceramics, Korea, 2004.

Ceramics
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## Technique, Philosophy and Nature Presented in Roe Kyung Jo's Art Beyond Time, Beyond Measure

### Article by Heekyung Lee

A S A CERAMIC HISTORIAN, I WOULD POSIT THAT THE potter Roe Kyung Jo is in the line of both the Arts and Crafts Movement and the Folk Art Movement (Mingei Movement). Both movements, the former developed in Britain in late 19th century, the latter in Japan in the 1920s, put an emphasis on the necessity of maintaining traditional craftsmanship in highly industrialized societies. The Folk Art Movement found its important inspiration in the traditional crafts of Korea, where Roe was born. Roe is one of those successful artists who integrated into modern art practices elements that are present in certain traditional Korean crafts.

Roe Kyung Jo is presently a professor at the Deperment of Ceramics in the College of Design at Kookmin University in Korea. From April 25th to May 24th 2007, Galerie Besson in London hosted an exhibition of his paintings and ceramics entitled From Canvas Io Ceramic. The exhibition showed 20 pieces of his ceramic work and seven oil paintings dating from the early 1970s to 2006. The exhibited pieces, selected from throughout 40 years of the potter's career, capture the essence of his life work.

1. Features of his work As Korean art historians

Chung, Yangmo and Choi, Kon have already noted, Roe's work may be grouped into three categories according to the manner in which the form and surface decoration were done. The pieces shown at the Galerie Besson were not an exception.

When examining the first group, which were bottles, the viewers can instantly notice that the potter found his inspiration in similar forms of the late Choson dynasty (1392-1910) in Korea. The Choson model for this group is a rectangular bottle attached with a short neck and a mouth. As Choi notes, the potter makes minimal and barely noticeable alterations. The surface decorations done on this group of vessels, on the other hand, are more like those of stoneware decorated with a marbling technique called yeollimun that was produced during the Koryo dynasty (918-1392) in Korea.

He uses a number of different types of clay (natural, white and red) in order to create a design closely resembling marble. He carefully mixes the clays, kneads them and builds up bands of clay all calculated to produce a final visual effect. After glazing and firing, the surface reveals the specific design that he intended to create. It is comprised of varied bands

Yeollimun Black Glaze Lidded Bottle, 2007, 15.2 x 9 12.5 cm.



of subtly differentiated shades of vellowish-brown. Under a thin coating of transparent glaze, the subtle differences in the color and texture of the clays are vividly displayed.

This veollimun technique is known to have been developed as early as the Tang dynasty (618-907) in China. Korean potters began producing veollimun ceramic wares during the Koryo dynasty under the influence of similar Chinese wares. Upon viewing veollimun wares from the Koryo dynasty, Roe explored, experimented with the technique and finally claims to have rediscovered the secret methods. In the first group of vessels, freely curving wide bands created by the subtle difference of the clay colours usually take up a substantial part of the surface area. In general, in terms of both form and surface decoration, the first group is strongly based on traditional designs from the Choson and Korvo periods.

The second group exhibits purely geometric structure. It is composed of rectangular cube-shaped vessels with minimal surface decoration. They neither have a neck nor a mouth attached. This second group of bottles was constructed in accordance with extremely precisely measured geometric lines, angles and proportions. The last group is composed of boxes with lids. These boxes are basically a rectangular tube shape with or without slightly rounded edges. These last two groups have no corresponding form among traditional Korean pottery. It is interesting to note that although in the body shape these groups did not draw directly on any traditional forms, these vessels are still reminiscent of certain Korean traditions, including those of Choson crafts.

As Choi noted, in the case of the second group this

might come from the surface decoration where the potter made tiny holes in the bottom of the vessels or stuck on small triangular or square dots to the four sides of the vessels. He probably got the ideas of making tiny holes from some small pieces of wooden furniture from the Choson period or pots from the Unified Silla period (668-935). The idea of the small dots appears to have been developed from the simplified form of the zigzag shaped handles of Choson ceramic sacrificial vessels that were often found in punchong (stoneware decorated with slip and covered with pale green glaze from the early Choson dynasty) and white porcelain wares.

It is interesting to note that, in most cases, the amount of veollimun decoration used in the second and third group diminished drastically. In the second group, in particular, this decorative effect can often be seen on some edges along the line or half of the line. In the final group, Roe minimized the decoration, confining it to a few spots on the edges. Instead, the potter used other types of decoration brought in from the tradition, for example, white slip painting and scratching as those used in punchong.

2. Understanding the old and creating the new It appears to me, however, that those surface decorations were not entirely responsible for the certain Korean or Choson feeling exuded by the pieces. Interestingly, it is the geometrically constructed rectangular cubes in the second group for which no specific analog can be found that give the viewer the greatest impression of Choson or Korean crafts. The thorough geometric construction gives the impression that the potter focuses on elements that exhibit efficient planning, simplicity and endurance. These are the qualities

Yeollimun Ash Glaze Bottle, 2002. 9 x 9.5 x 23.5 cm.



Inlaid Yeollimun Vessel, 2003. 21.5 x 21.5 x 31.5 cm.



that well-made high crafts of traditional Korea, particularly those of Choson, often demonstrate.

The case is similar with the boxes. While the ceramic boxes from traditional Korea usually have an expanded and voluminous form, the potter's boxes form a rectangular tube shape, although occasionally with slightly rounded or curved lines on the edges. The main wall of the box is substantial and thick. The potter attempts variations in the form of boxes, particularly in that of the lids. The upper part of the lids is not that of a rounded globular shape as usually found in traditional wares. In one of his boxes, the lid is shaped into something resembling a pyramid with a flattened top. The surface is facetted into several flat sides including the top; also, a small triangular shaped hole is cut into the centre of each side of the foot of the box. It is also true that not a few numbers of rectangular shaped boxes and facetted vessels are found in Choson wares. Yet, Roe's boxes appear to have been differentiated from those vessels in terms of his careful and precise planning of the geometry and his strict adherence to it.

Although such a geometric structure with an extreme simplicity is not directly from the Korean arts. the potter appears to feel that they compliment the Korean arts well. Yanagi Soetsu (1889-1961) who led the Folk Art Movement respected Korean crafts, in particular Choson, because they were solidly built, their designs were strictly faithful to function and they were economically made without any unnecessary adornment. Connoisseurs and critics, regardless of Yanagi's influence, do not deny that those qualities are distinctive of Choson crafts. It appears that the potter attempted to represent in his work such

Inlaid Yeollimun Lidded Box, 1997, 25 x 25 x 23.5 cm.



qualities of Korean crafts using the concept of strict geometric forms.

In the potter's boxes, another significant and interesting fact is found. While the sizes, proportions and angles of the boxes are executed with extreme correctness in accordance with a thorough mathematical plan, certain details such as the edges were, not in a few cases, rounded or left slightly less-finished or undulated. It appears to me that the potter often attempted to allow the viewer a somewhat natural, relaxed and easy feeling, alluding to traditional Korean or Choson craftware that was used in daily life. Above all, Yanagi and other connoisseurs admired the relaxed atmosphere and comfortable feelings found inherent in Korean folk crafts despite their practicality.

To me, it does not appear that Roe uses a specific type of traditional Korean or Choson crafts as his model. Rather, he seems to thoroughly deconstruct and analyse every element that comprises what he considers well-made or aesthetic in Korean or Choson crafts. This is reminiscent of what Yanagi has done. Yanagi had attempted to analyze Korean traditional crafts before other people tried. It is often the case that when people approach the same materials, they share their opinion at least in certain elements that appear obvious. So, I don't attempt to claim that the potter has unconditionally accepted and followed Yanagi's views. Roe sometimes goes beyond his predecessors' analysis, re-interprets many of the elements and redefines the Choson style or Korean style in accordance with his own knowledge and ideas. He seems to refer back to those elements as he freely and fluently combines and reconstructs an

Yeollimun Black Glaze Lidded Vessel, 2007. 9 x 9.5 x 23 cm.



entirely new entity. Those elements might be simple in terms of structure, reserved yet efficient, and economical in terms of the surface decoration. However, they demonstrate vitality and full use of the natural qualities of the materials in keeping with function and design.

The above analysis shows that Roe is indeed an artist who is bringing traditional elements to the forefront of contemporary art. Is this then a type of inheritance or succession of tradition? Yet his understanding and reference to the past do not seem to separate him from the modern world. Rather, his work appears modern.

What could be the reason? This summer I had a chance to visit his workshop at Yang'pyong in Kyong'gi Province. On the way to his studio, I asked the potter how his work could be both traditional and modern simultaneously. The potter gave the exact answer that I had assumed. "It occurs to me that the monochrome period of white porcelain ware that is representative of the Choson period, corresponds with Minimalism in modern art. The source of inspiration for my work is partly Minimalism as well as Korean crafts."

Rectangular tube shapes are often used in Minimalist architecture and design. The potter appears to have modeled the geometric elements upon those of Minimalism. These geometric elements mesh with certain elements and decorations inspired by traditional Korean arts. This harmonious integration is represented in his work particularly from the second and the third groups.

In a way, it appears that the potter implanted Korean or Choson elements into essentially Minimalist works. Yet perhaps the reverse might have been the case as well. Overall, I found the

potter's aesthetic sensibilities to identify the essential elements

with the harmony and integration that these two different arts could orchestrate.

Roe appears to have used all his talents and skills to achieve a visual construction representative of his philosophy of art. I believe that his philosophy has originated in his ardent and academic interest and comprehension of the arts and traditions of both East Asia and the West.

3. Reservoir of motivation, inspiration and ideas On the way to his studio, I could see that the Paldang Dam was full of crystal clear water. I asked the potter about his early years and his education.

At the end of the Choson dynasty, Japan annexed the Korean peninsula. The country had never fully opened its door to Western civilization before this and was often described as being 'the land of the morning calm'. His maternal grandfather was one of the first generations of people to take advantage of a modern Western education in this calm land. He was a graduate of Meiji University and majored in religion, philosophy and law. His wife (grandmother of the potter) was a 'new woman' specializing in piano, having been educated at the Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music. His paternal grandfather and many other members of his family, including his father and uncles, received modern educations and became professors or professionals in their fields in Korea and the USA. Thanks to his paternal grandfather who also appreciated Korean traditional arts and artifacts. Roe grew up surrounded by a huge collection. Such an intellectual, academic and artistic environment played a key role in nurturing him early to open his eyes to traditional culture and Western and modern ideas.

He was also lucky to have outstanding mentors, including Choi, Sun-u (1916~1984), former director of the National Museum of Korea, a great connoisseur of the period. While working at the National Museum, Choi was also invited to teach an art history course at the Kyung Hee University where Roe was attending. Thereafter Roe was an ardent student of traditional arts and art history. After training at the graduate school of the same

> university, he went to Japan in 1977 to continue his ceramic training at

the Kanazawa College of Arts and Craft. Upon his graduation from Kanazawa, Choi recommended Roe's work to numerous exhibitions and also recommended him to Kim, Su-gun (1931~1986), the most renowned Korean architect of the time, then the director of Kookmin University where Roe is currently teaching. Kim installed an exhibition corner for

Oil on Canvas with Vessel, 1974.



Roe at the Gong'gan (Space) Gallery, a prestigious gallery that was exclusively open to acknowledged artists and architects. It was through this process that the potter came to step into contemporary art circles.

The potter's passion for the Korean tradition led him to pursue almost every excavation throughout the country conducted by the National Museum of Korea. He examined and experimented with shards collected from old kiln sites from various periods and places. His reconstruction of the veollimun technique is one of the results of such efforts.

Miyoung von Platen, an independent curator who prepared the Galerie Besson show, described in detail the method by which veollimun wares are made, "The potter made great efforts to produce the precise design of veollimun, and the color and texture that he desired. Maturing the clay can only be made through an extremely complicated and demanding process in which the temperature and moisture levels in the clay are carefully controlled. Sometimes this process took several years."

His enthusiastic desire to learn and master traditional pottery drove him to build his home and studio in Punwon-ni (literally, a village where the branch of the Culinary Office of the Choson royal court was placed) in Kwangju in Kyong'gi Province. This was the final home of the kiln factories of the Choson royal court. He spent 20 years there before he moved his workshop to Yangpyong in Kyong'gi Province where we were heading.

4. Beyond the canvas, beyond the ceramics

The exhibition was different from other ceramic shows because it exhibited paintings along with ceramic works. Upon learning that the exhibition included oil paintings,

I asked myself, "Why on earth is this ceramic

artist interested in painting?" examining his paintings, however, it occurred to me that his painting and ceramic work were intrinsically linked.

The wide brushwork that he uses to lay down neutral tones creates an almost monochromatic effect on the canvas. The use of thick contours further simplifies the subject and background. Regardless of the media used to express the artist's ideas, whether it is canvas or the surface of ceramics, common features consistently emerge.

As Platen described, the seven early landscape paintings and portraits and the twenty rectangular ceramics in this exhibition (dating from the early 1970s to the recent past) demonstrate that Roe is interested in modernism as well as traditional arts. In the early 1970's. Roe painted landscapes and portraits in oil, depicting places in Seoul that were familiar to him such as Pukhan Mountain and Kyung-Dong High School (which he attended). He interpreted the landscapes using wide bands of color executed in two or three neutral colors. Thus, the canvas appears almost monochromatic with only a few subtle changes in color (green, gray and white). It is similar to the way yeollimun appears on his vessels.

Roe uses the surface of the pots as his canvases as Platen described. Working with fire and chemical interactions, he shapes the raw materials to produce an artistic experience. He said, "Varied unexpected phenomena have occurred and have produced mysterious results." These 'accidents' have proven to be valuable learning experiences. The wisdom gained from these experiences has accumulated over time.

5. Finishing the interview at his studio by a forest We were reaching a small village brilliantly covered in green leaves in Yangpyong. Under a small hill along the edge of the forest was his red brick building which serves as his studio.

I could not find any traces of human dwelling in the studio other than the potter himself. It was so quiet, neat and it provided a solemn feeling like that of being in a sanctuary. It reminded me of the space in residences for son (Chinese: Chan, Japanese: Zen),

> where monks retreat to do meditation. Along the four corners of the floor

a number of his ceramic works were exhibited on flat stands. The shelves in the mini-kitchen were stacked with rice bowls, dishes, plates and tea sets all made by the potter himself. At the rear of the studio was his workshop full of materials and tools.

It appears that I was right when I thought he was in line with both the Arts and Craft Movement and the





Folk Art Movement. His studio demonstrates that Roe is obviously a potter who is extremely faithful to the method of traditional craftsmanship. He does not have an assistant, as many others people do. Thus, he is able to control the entire process from beginning to end.

As he himself describes his work, I feel something similar to moss tinting here and there in his work. It occurs to me that the naturalness of his work creates a sense of familiarity. It is so natural that the forms. tones and textures of the clay have always been in our minds, yet they were not easy to visualize by ourselves. He quietly and fluently brought them out as if they spontaneously revealed themselves.

The development of these feelings of spontaneity and familiarity may not be limited only to Koreans who are familiar with the aesthetics of Korean or Choson crafts. I believe that William Morris (1834-1896) who led the Arts and Crafts Movement and his mentor, John Ruskin (1819~1900) who founded the best virtue of crafts in Medieval Gothic art might also have had similar feelings.

This is because the familiarity of Roe's work originates in its organized and sensitive construction. Through his selection of elements he provides the

Yeollimun Ash Glaze Bottle, 2002, 9 x 9.5 x 23 cm.



work with a breath of durability, functionality and simplicity, vet gives a sense of liveliness and, above all, brings harmony between to those elements themselves. As previously mentioned, this way of directing his own designs may have been based on his ability to deconstruct and re-interpret certain Korean traditional crafts including those of Choson, along with his reference to some modern designs such as Minimalism. Gothic art has similar qualities: functionality, simplicity, use of natural materials, harmonious combination of materials, function and design, and above all an emphasis on traditional craftsmanship. I am certain that Yanagi and his colleagues who knew the Arts and Crafts Movement, and the English potter Bernard Leach (1887-1979), would have sensed certain common features between the Medieval crafts and those of Korea, particularly Choson arts. Not only these pioneers, but also not a few modern studio ceramists who understand the nature and spirit of the Arts and Crafts Movement, will have an affinity for Korean and Choson crafts and the qualities of Roe's work which has abstracted many of the best features of them. Yet, most of all, to many other people who do not know anything about art history these qualities might be naturally appealing.

It was time for me to leave the cottage studio by the edge of the forest. As I prepared to depart, I could smell the scent of the green leaves from the forest. The leaves had grown dark and their scent was fresh and vital as the days ran towards the summer solstice. Nature is always punctual, scientific on its own terms, practical vet comfortable and simple, I found a similar atmosphere in the potter's art.

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