

Porcelain

Throughout his 50-year-long career, Van Loon has fashioned imaginative forms from ceramic and textile materials in a manner that is truly virtuoso. As the results continue to be surprising, it is more than of merely 'historic importance' to devote a few words to his oeuvre. At present, in 2007, he has taken a further step in porcelain – on which this short introduction specifically concentrates – in his continual search for new forms. Drawing upon his decades of experience, Van Loon recently developed a technique in which porcelain (known besides its translucence for durability and strength) appears to evanesce into gossamer-thin textile.

A brief summary of what led up to this begins with his schooling in textile design in Amsterdam and Copenhagen between 1952 and 1956. After that he became interested in ceramic materials. From 1958 to 1964 he mastered the skills of a ceramicist, working under Jos Eppens-van Veen in Haarlem, Thera Hofstede Crull in Amsterdam, Lucie Rie at the Camberwell School of Art in London, Stig Lindberg at the Konstfackskole in Stockholm, the ceramicists in the unique-copy department of the Arabia factory in Helsinki (including Kylikki Salmenhaara, among others) and Jan van der Vaart. (All of the above 20th-century ceramicists are now dead.) Absorbing everything that came his way, over the course of the years Van Loon gained the great technical proficiency that gives him the freedom to express the wealth of his ideas. Few ceramicists are so intrigued by the characteristics of the material as Van Loon, who continues to broaden his grasp of rendering malleable clay into permanent form. Often the material itself is the locus of expression, usually taking the form of a container, however far removed that may be from its original function.

When Van Loon went to Copenhagen in 1977 to work at the Royal Copenhagen Porcelain Manufactory, he was in his early 40s. By then, he had already become a well-known ceramic artist in the Netherlands through a number of solo and group exhibitions in Dutch museums and galleries, but he also enjoyed a reputation abroad through international exhibitions. At the same time, he had been designing textile for interiors and teaching a course in textile at the Rietveld Academy in Amsterdam. Later he had taught ceramics at the AKI in Enschede and the St. Joost Academy in Breda. After leaving Royal Copenhagen, he gained additional factory experience at Rosenthal Studio Porzellan in Beieren, where he was invited to design forms for luxury artefacts in 1980. He continued to work for Rosenthal off and on as a freelance artist.

In 1977, however, this had not yet occurred, and plans were being made for a solo exhibition in 1979 at the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen in Rotterdam. The activities at the Copenhagen factory were a new source of inspiration for Van Loon, who learned techniques with which he had not previously been familiar. The porcelain clay that was available in the Netherlands had yielded all its secrets, did not react readily enough, was not conducive to refinement, was too temperamental or, on the contrary, did not offer enough resistance – in short, it no longer held any challenges for him. In Copenhagen, the porcelain that had made the factory famous for 200 years was pure white and offered handling and firing possibilities of which a potter in his own studio could only dream. So at the time, the Copenhagen porcelain embellished with the familiar pastel colours and shiny glazes appealed to him tremendously. One could find these colours on classic vases with representations of flowers, birds, maritime scenes and seascapes and on the numerous animal figurines. Van Loon experimented with using the blues, pinks and greys on his own vases and bowls, both as underglazing applied to the surface and mixed with the paste of the porcelain itself. He personally introduced to the factory several elements which were above all adopted by the designer Anne Marie Trolle in her series of elegant utilitarian objects. For example, Van Loon attached randomly overlapping pieces of unbleached cotton, their edges finished by cutting with pinking shears, to the inside of moulds. She applied sophisticated decorations inspired by Eastern motifs to her objects, but she also adopted from Van Loon a milder version of temmoku glazing, which he himself had poured on the bright white porcelain in a rather bold manner. This strongly contrasting effect was probably too harsh for the Danes, who generally strive for harmony. Unfortunately, it was never really taken up in their production, except in the much more ‘respectable’ version by Trolle. The moulds lined with textile proved to be a success, however.

In Copenhagen, Van Loon experimented with discovering how far he could go in making the wall as thin as possible. The results were several extremely thin and subtle one-of-a-kind pieces with closed and openwork walls that were not wholly out of character with the style of the Copenhagen factories. For around 1900, as it happens, objects had been made at the Royal Copenhagen and the other famous factory, Bing & Gröndahl, with floral ornaments and figurative representations that express the extreme virtuosity of the designers and artisans and their dedication in making them. Van Loon was equally consequent in realizing objects of his own design, both with perforated structures and relief work. Where the Danes employed motifs from the plant kingdom, Van Loon put

his textile experience to use, with the walls appearing to be woven – of either porcelain or stiffened fabric. He did, however, break away from the perfection of Danish finesse by often finishing his bowls and vases with frayed, serrated or waving edges that point to the beyond, whereas the Danes stay within the strictly defined contours of the object.

Van Loon's experiments in porcelain place him in a long line of potters and artists who throughout the centuries have given an extra accent to the natural translucence of porcelain by applying perforations of all kinds. From China, we are familiar with walls cut out in complicated patterns from the early Sung period (960-1260), which subsequently were copied everywhere. The Chinese 'rice grain' technique is also employed 'everywhere' to this day, just as is the later Western sandblasting and etching technique with which the wall can also be treated. In Denmark, a stoneware material used for ovenware bowls, among other things, turns a beige/gray when fired at high temperatures. Its shrinkage is approximately equal to that of porcelain. Van Loon combined the two clays and came up with baroquely decorated objects both in terms of contour and wall, which in their combination of gray and white are extremely attractive but not at all appropriate for the kiln.

In the Royal Copenhagen factory, the major part of the production is fired in electric kilns. However, there was also a small coal-powered kiln that could be used for a limited number of objects. In here, glazes could be fired so that they were less shiny than when baked in the main kiln. The result was a soft satiny sheen, which had a really beautiful effect on porcelain with celadon glazing. The above mainly concerns the decoration of objects, whose shape can be either 'classic' or 'free'. Van Loon's idiosyncratic approach to design in both stoneware and porcelain stems from his imagination, but at the same time is part of a tradition. Porcelain in particular seems to challenge designers and potters to seek the limits of what is possible. Perhaps it is not surprising that much of the free-form design in this area comes from Eastern Europe. After all, the wonder of the rediscovery of porcelain took place at the beginning of the 18th century in Germany's eastern border region of Saksen. Shortly after 1700, experiments were already being done in Meissen with lacy as well as very heavy applications. Especially in the 20th century, various independent ceramicists (among others, Maria Teresa Kuczinska, b. 1948 in Poland) concentrated on figures built up from very thin layers of porcelain, for example. Add to that the great influence of the American-based Ruth Duckworth (b. 1919 in Hamburg) and her unusual applications of the material, and the possibilities of free

expression in porcelain seem endless. In the oeuvre of Johan van Loon, all these traditions and innovations come together to form a new chapter in porcelain.

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