

# The Integration of Craft Defects and Artistic Expression in Modern Ceramics

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## Abstract

Today, most people still tend to evaluate modern ceramic artworks based on the quality standards of traditional ceramic art pieces. However, with the development of contemporary ceramic art, the creative goals and functions of ceramic materials have undergone a transformation. Therefore, the evaluation of modern ceramic artworks should no longer be confined to the inherent standards of traditional ceramic art pieces. We should appreciate the unique language formed by artists in their creative explorations with a more open and inclusive mindset, including creative approaches that intentionally utilize nature and interesting "craft defects" for artistic expression.

## 一、Introduction

### 1.1 Research Background

In the long history of ceramic art development in China, "exquisite" and "perfection" have always been the ultimate goals pursued by ceramicists. Whether it is for daily-use porcelain or ornamental ceramic crafts and artworks, people have strict requirements for the perfection of their craftsmanship. Currently, most experiments and theories focus on how to strengthen ceramic materials, and any effects contrary to this are considered craftsmanship defects that should be eliminated.

However, with the modern development of ceramic art, an increasing number of artists are attempting to explore and break through the inherent standards used to define ceramic quality, which have traditionally been dominated by practicality, integrity, and refinement. At the same time, artists are also utilizing intentionally or unintentionally produced "craft defects" in the process of creating ceramic materials, forming unique personal expressive languages through this technique.

### 1.2 Research Significance

Professor Ming Bai once said, "The core of contemporary art is no longer solely about discussing the beauty of the artwork, whether the technique adheres to tradition, or the practicality of the work. What the artist wants to express is instead being emphasized." This article aims to change people's traditional appreciation habits and break the inherent standards of ceramic artworks through the exploration of "craft defects." It is hoped that the public can discover the beauty of "craft defects" and uncover their meanings from a new perspective. Additionally, this article encourages the public to appreciate and interpret the innovative efforts and unique stylistic languages of artists with a more open and inclusive mindset and perspective, thereby providing new ideas for the future development of contemporary ceramic art.

Key words : Craft defects, artistic expression innovation, appreciation standards.

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## 二、Comparison of old and new views on craft defects

### 2.1 Definition of defects in traditional ceramic craft

Looking back at the history of traditional Chinese ceramics, it is a path of development from coarse to fine, from miscellaneous to pure, known as the "refinement of ceramics." Traditional ceramics mainly include ceramic handicrafts, daily-use porcelain, and industrial ceramic products. In the quality standards of traditional ceramics, any defects in the production process that do not meet functional requirements are referred to as craft defects. For example, deformation, cracks in the biscuit glaze, spots caused by impurities, breakage, lack of glaze, glaze shrinkage, crystallization, pores, cavities, clay residue, residue on the base, high water absorption, penetration defects, height deviation, and glaze sticking during firing, are all considered craft defects in traditional ceramics.

In summary, we can divide the traditional ceramic processes and their corresponding craft defects into four parts:

The first part is the processing of raw materials. The standard requires high purity and fineness, aiming for maximum cleanliness. Any presence of impurities constitutes a defect.

The second part is the forming process. The standard demands complete shaping that meets practical functionality. Any deformation or cracks leading to functional loss are considered craft defects.

The third part is the decoration process. The purpose of decoration, according to the standard, is to beautify ceramic products, making them more visually appealing. Any appearance of color differences, white spots, or patterns that evoke dislike are considered defects.

The fourth part is the firing process. According to the standard, firing should ensure that the glaze surface remains clean and uncontaminated, reflecting the pure texture and appearance of the material itself. Any phenomena such as ash deposition on the surface of the ware are considered defective products.

In traditional Chinese ceramics, functional vessels are predominant. Craft defects such as cracking can compromise their basic functionality, rendering them considered defective according to traditional appreciation standards. Conversely, ceramic artworks intended for display prioritize translucency, smoothness, flawlessness, and overall integrity in shape. Craft defects in such pieces serve no purpose and carry no meaning, rendering them useless. Therefore, in traditional ceramic appreciation, "craft defects" do not serve any functional purpose; they only lead to the loss of the ceramic product's primary function. Over time, people have formed an inherent cognitive recognition of "craft defects."

### 2.2 "Craft Defect" in the Creation of Contemporary Ceramic Art

We can observe a more open attitude towards "craft defects" in contemporary ceramics from the four major processes similar to traditional pottery:

In the first part, regarding raw material processing, artists no longer adhere strictly to the principle of "rare is precious" but rather "selecting the best." The choice between fine, white porcelain clay and rough pottery clay depends entirely on the artist's envisioned artistic effect and its alignment with their conceptual expression. In recent years, an increasing number of artists are not only satisfied with purchasing ready-made clay but also experiment with adding materials such as sand, paper, and wood shavings into the clay, which may result in textural defects, enriching their artistic expression language.



In the second part, concerning the forming process, completeness and smoothness are no longer the sole criteria. Artists create diverse textural defects through techniques such as tearing, folding, and scratching, using them as carriers to express unique concepts.

In the third part, regarding the decoration process, decoration no longer solely serves the purpose of pleasing the eye; its integrity and precision are no longer considered essential. It is acceptable for artists to convey certain ironic meanings through patterns that may evoke slight discomfort.

In the fourth part, in terms of firing, more and more artists are returning to wood firing, soda firing, pit firing, and even artificially creating ash deposits to enrich the surface color and texture of ceramic artworks, breaking the monotony of aesthetics.

It can be seen that traditional standards are no longer entirely applicable in the production of modern ceramic artworks. When "craft defects" are combined with personalized artistic expression, they are endowed with strong conceptual significance. When artists use them to convey specific, innovative information, "craft defects" become functional and necessary, no longer just synonymous with quality standards.

However, not all craft defects are desirable. When "craft defects" are intentionally utilized as a carrier of artistic expression, they represent innovation and conceptual presentation, serving as a unique form of artistic expression and embodying the essence of the artwork. But when a defect is unavoidable and left uncontrolled or utilized, it becomes undesirable.

## 三、Case study on the combination of "craft defect" and artistic expression

### 3.1 Domestic and foreign artist cases

#### (一)、Lucio Fontana

Lucio Fontana, the renowned founder of Spatialism, is best known for his "sliced" and "pierced" canvas works. Using the same iconic symbols of Spatialism, he created the modern ceramic series "A Piece of Clay." The creation process of this series is quite simple: cutting through clay pieces or lumps with metal wire and then opening them up. By creating an artificial fissure, viewers are invited to access the space behind it, thus generating an infinite one-dimensional space. At this point, the fissure ceases to be a flaw in the artwork; instead, it becomes a crucial vehicle for Lucio Fontana to explore the concept of space, evolving into his most recognizable personal language.

#### (二)、Peter Voulkos

Peter Voulkos is known as the pioneer of modern ceramics in America. He fully embodies the spontaneity and freedom of clay in an unrestrained and incidental manner to express the emotional concepts of artists, creating a new aesthetic style and bringing the traditional ceramic concept of "form follows function" into the realm of modern art. His bold and unconventional forms and decorative techniques symbolize a departure from practical functionality and an exploration of how ceramic materials can enter the realm of pure art. Rather than the readability of his works, I believe the greatest accomplishment of Peter Voulkos lies in how his ceramics, which do not conform to traditional aesthetic standards, have changed the Western art's perception of ceramics, sparking a revolution in modern ceramic art.

#### (三)、Ming Bai

Ming Bai's works, including "Contemplating Zen: Form and Process," "Great Accomplishment in Emptiness," "Cone and Cylinder," and "Overlapping Relationships," all employ the combination of artistic expression with "craft defects" to showcase the relationship between art and philosophical contemplation.

In "Contemplating Zen: Form and Process" and "Cone and Cylinder," Ming Bai seeks entirely different independent lives within a relatively consistent vast space. The texture in these works resonates with the depths of human hearts; part of it is the expression given by the artist, while another part is the expression of the clay itself, implying the richness of human expression. Thus, these works are also a derivative of the Zen nature of the relationship between humans and objects. "Great Accomplishment in Emptiness" reflects Bai Ming's understanding of the Tao Te Ching, attempting to find a balance and three-dimensional and two-dimensional reflection through the completion formed by circular rotation. The intentional "craft defects" in the artwork serve as a contrasting language to norms, exploring a balance between destruction and norms through this form. "Overlapping Relationships" aims to express observations and reflections on natural changes through non-traditional processing and abstract forms.

Ming Bai distorts and folds his works, treating them symbolically, to express the rhythm and philosophy of cosmic movement and balance gracefully, while seeking ways to interpret the relationship between fracture and continuity.

#### (四)、Elaine O. Henry

Elaine O. Henry strives to explore a type of clay slab with entirely new texture, edges, and thinness akin to paper. By throwing, tearing, and compacting the clay to create textures with "craft defects," she then cuts these textured parts and applies them onto extruded layers. She handles the clay slabs with everyday objects that are not ceramic tools, creating textures that appear to be "craft defects." The weight of the work itself causes the shapes to collapse, and during firing, bending or breaking may occur. Ultimately, she assembles them into stunning ceramic artworks.

She deliberately selects these "craft defects" to explore a balance between overly excited and suppressed emotional states and self-control through this method, combining sculptural exploration of the opposing forces of yin and yang and the constraints of fluid stability.

#### (五)、Paula Winokur & Alan Watt

Paula Winokur is an American artist, while Alan Watt is an Australian ceramicist. They share the commonality of expressing their contemplation of landscapes through the use of torn texture in clay slabs.

In her work "Earth Changes," Paula Winokur incorporates "ruptured" areas. She deliberately tears and stacks clay slabs using a sculptural tearing technique. She believes that this "visual" creative approach allows her to express her thoughts on landscape issues without the need for verbose descriptions, especially concerning cliffs, reefs, crevices, earthquakes, geological "changes" and "ruptures," as well as the marks and wounds left by humans on the land.

Similarly inspired by landscapes, Alan Watt's focus is not on natural pristine scenes but rather on scenes that have been cut, damaged, altered, and rearranged, reflecting human demands, contradictions, yet harmonious scenes. Alan Watt's contrast between torn "craft defects" and smooth sections suggests his contemplation and metaphor on the "conflict" between nature and human intervention.

The torn fissures in the works of these two artists become a significant expression technique for their contemplation on different phenomena in the landscape. This integration of "craft defects" with their unique artistic expression styles gives their works recognizability and depth.



(六)、Jimmy Clark

Jamie Clark is an American ceramicist who employs “craft defects” in both his sculpting and firing processes to express his artistry. In sculpting, he embraces the fractures and punctures from accidents, collisions, and ruptures as a fascinating mode of creation. He intentionally shatters the pieces, resulting in distorted forms and pronounced cracks, evoking a sense of overpowering force or violence. In firing, he employs pit firing or sawdust firing along with unpredictable methods to smoke the pieces, achieving the rich surface variations he desires. Subsequently, he embeds existing ceramic shards into the works, infusing his personal experiences into the artistic creation, thus forming a unique creative style where the artist integrates personal narratives into the artwork.

3.2 Take my personal art creation "I'm fine, and you?" as an example

3.2.1 Inspiration source and concept embodiment :

At the beginning of 2020, a new coronavirus storm swept the globe. Faced with the battle-like fight against the virus epidemic, events such as delayed school openings, inability to return to work, and continuous policy changes plunged people into a “collective” state of deep anxiety.

My work is inspired by my own feelings of anxiety, which became unusually intense after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, gradually reaching its peak over time. The obstacles of online communication, changes in graduation plans, the inability to implement plans, and the uncertainty of everything made me feel anxious. Later, I realized that I was not alone. Parents faced constant changes in their jobs, while elders in other families felt anxious about their children’s education plans. It seemed like we were collectively caught in a whirlpool of anxiety. However, as the epidemic came under control and various issues were resolved, this emotion gradually eased.



▲ Image1 "I'm fine, and you?"



▲ Image2 "I'm fine, and you?" detail 1



▲ Image3 "I'm fine, and you?" detail 2

Through creating on this theme, on one hand, I aim to explore the soothing effect of art on emotions by addressing and resolving my own feelings of anxiety in the process. Secondly, by evoking resonance among viewers, I hope to stimulate public reflection on feelings of anxiety. This metaphorically represents the societal reality of people coming together and collectively bearing the burden in the face of severe emergencies. It implies that we will eventually overcome the epidemic and return to a stable life. Furthermore, it expresses my concern for others and society, as well as my respect for all those who are persevering. At the same time, through this work, I hope to contribute positively to the society enveloped by the epidemic by demonstrating the process of transforming negativity into positivity from a professional perspective. It aims to provide some positive psychological implications and influences, warm humanistic care, as well as confidence and hope in the face of adversity. It is also a way to provoke personal and collective reflection on the significance of artistic creation in times of disaster.

3.2.2 The application of "craft defect" in creation

Based on the techniques of throwing or slip casting, traditional vessel forms are initially created with regular shapes. Subsequently, by exerting external pressure on them against the edge of a tabletop, I allow the vessels to undergo irregular deformations without predefined paths, caused by the force I apply and the force exerted by the tabletop edge. There are two reasons for the creative use of “craft defects” in the artwork. Firstly, the uneven application of forces on the same object leads to cracks and wrinkles during the deformation process or fissures caused by shrinkage during drying. Secondly, during the drying and oxidation firing processes of the clay, partial sagging due to its own weight or the absence of support points can result in tearing cracks.

Sculptures reimagining ceramic vessel forms alongside bodily elements express the anxiety and changes experienced by individuals in society under the pressure and inner turmoil of the current pandemic, through inclines, collapses, descents, and deformations.

四、Peroration

As Chen Songxian once said: “The spatial model of modern ceramics undergoes ‘alienation’ from traditional ceramics, which is a natural response to the multicultural phenomena of contemporary society, and also a rethinking of the essence and value of ceramics.” In the creation of modern ceramic art, artists’ objectives have diverged from traditional ceramic products and crafts. Since the purpose and function have changed, our judgment and appreciation standards for them should also change accordingly. We should no longer approach the “craft defects” in modern ceramic art works with the traditional rigorous mindset applied to traditional ceramic products and crafts.

Compared to serious perfection, “craft defects” themselves are more natural, charming, and thought-provoking. The diversity of “craft defects” allows artists to freely explore the possibilities of various effects of ceramic materials in an environment without a “standard answer.” The public’s more open and inclusive changes in aesthetics not only liberate artists’ free expression but also liberate the nature of ceramics as a material. This form of creation also breaks the paradigm of traditional ceramics’ standardization and pursuit of perfection, broadens the boundaries of aesthetics, forms new aesthetic forms, and intentionally explores creative approaches with special visual effects. Thus, while guiding changes in public aesthetics, it also provides a broader stage for modern ceramic art works.

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