



LI YOU YU

Master of Porcelain

by
MARC LEUTHOLD

Artist Li You Yu is a Chinese porcelain master of unusual distinction. Born in 1954 in the Hunan Province of China, Master Li, as he is usually called, grew up in modest circumstances during the austere Mao years of communist China. Li's family was unusually large: he has three brothers and two sisters. His parents were farmers.

Li excelled in school and was admitted to the Art Academy of what is now part of Tsinghua University in Beijing, China's most prestigious university. In school, Li was the protégé of renowned artist Wu Guan Zhong, under whom he studied design and sculpture. After Tsinghua, Li designed commemorative coins, highly detailed work. Li did not earn a Master's degree but nevertheless became a professor at Shanghai University. He taught design and sculpture and directed the museum there for about ten years. After leaving his position at the University in the early 90s, Master Li went on to truly distinguish himself in his own work and in his large scale seminal projects in the field of ceramics.

At this time, working with a team of scientists and artisans for five years, Li developed Hanguang porcelain. Pure white, translucent and fired to 1400 centigrade, this porcelain is considered by many to be the most exquisite in the world. Li's Hanguang Factory currently has 26 workers and produces vases, tableware and tea sets. Li and a few trusted artists design the forms and surface ornamentation. Some of the pieces are traditional blanc de Chine and many are decorated with flowers, insects and birds. Workers painstakingly hand trim rough castings when bone dry. They join parts, and in the end



opposite top -

Flying Birds painted by Li You Yu, porcelain and china paint 130 cm wide, 2013

below - Hanguang factory decorating room

right -

Hanguang porcelain vase, painted by Li You Yu
h 30 cm, 2014

below -

Ice Landscape Vase, gift from Chairman Xi to Barack Obama, Hanguang porcelain painted by Li You Yu
h 27 cm, 2011

the forms are about 80% handmade. The decoration is all hand done and is of such intense detail that it is hard to believe it is not decal work. Li and his artists first design the works on paper. Then they draw with graphite on the porcelain. Then with a sharp tool, they incise the contour lines of the imagery. The designs are then embellished with colourful stains. The watery pigments are dabbed on and stay within the incised lines; the incisions hold the watery pigment in place. Gradations of colour intensity are subtly controllable also. After the decoration, the pieces are glazed and once-fired to high temperatures. In addition to this high-end production work, Li himself paints some vases and large porcelain tablets that read as paintings. Organic imagery and landscape are the recurring themes. The most interesting work, because of its beauty and originality, are his wintry icy landscapes. These landscapes are clearly Chinese in spirit (see Song Dynasty artists, Li Ch'eng and Fan K'uan), but they are immediately recognizable as the artwork of Li. Chairman Xi, the Premier of China, presented one of Li's ice landscape vases to President Barack Obama. Another famous recipient was Bill Gates.

In 2008, Master Li began work at Shanghai Institute of Visual Arts (SIVA). He was invited to chair and teach ceramics and to operate a studio within the University. As a result, in addition to the regular teaching studios, Li has another large series of rooms for making his work with assistants. These rooms also function as his offices as Department Chair and Professor. Li uses the Hanguang Factory as an off-campus learning lab for his students. The best students (Asst. Prof Li Yang) have gone on to work for Hanguang, executing Li's designs and decorating and designing other forms. Unlike most academic programmes that are far removed from practical applica-





Li You Yu painted vase Waterfowl and Magnolia, h 27 cm, 2013

Li You Yu painted blue and white vase, h 24 cm, 2010



tions, SIVA students see top-drawer work in production during their studies.

Li's artwork is fundamentally important to his teaching and other projects. In addition to icy landscapes, a recurring motif is flocks of birds. These birds are in flight gliding effortlessly but swiftly in space. The ice landscapes and the soaring birds are otherworldly in quality and intensity. One can't help but think that Li is less concerned with the here and now – more concerned with a transcendent inner life. There is almost an isolation, a silence in these works. Birds in flight and ice landscapes are quiet and the bustle and noise of contemporary China is wholly absent from these works. The peaceful otherworldly quality is at odds with contemporary reality, and these qualities give Li's work a cosmic or spiritual quality that one finds in the ancient jade burial stones of Neolithic China. Like many moderns, Li seeks to renew and re-invent timeless themes but in a traditional spirit. In this sense, Li's work is Eastern. In contrast, in the West, artists take up modern themes and imagery, sometimes using traditional techniques: Grayson Perry's china-painted vases depicting cross-dressing trans-

Li You Yu painted vase "Cranes"
Hanguang porcelain, h 27cm, 2012

vestites, or Notkin's threat of nuclear holocaust depicted in the context of traditional Yixing teapots. Li's work is modern yet not specifically tied to contemporary politics.

Li's modernity and creativity are reflected in the dynamism of his many projects. Within his programme at Shanghai Institute of Fine Arts, he has invited more Western artists to teach than most other Chinese universities. On a recent visit, I found him with a broken leg propped up on a chair reviewing his plans to rehabilitate a nearby dilapidated village. He had schematics and google earth images and was planning an utopian village for artists nestled among canals in the shadow of the only forested hill in the Shanghai area. Li evidently has the connections within government to organize a project like this – despite the proximity of nearby golf courses and villas for millionaires. While most artists would be nursing their broken bones at home, Li is always pressing ahead with visionary ideas. Right after I first met Master Li, he organized the first international Wood Fire Ceramics Festival hosted by SIVA. Artists from all over the world were invited to participate. Artists brought wood fired pieces and we had a symposium with panels and lectures and we juried a student exhibition. Po (Zhou Guangzhen) brought with him a delegation of artists that included Elaine Henry, Suzanne Wolfe, Michael Moore, and Torbjørn Kvazbø. Dr. Chung, the famous Korean educator/kiln builder, brought a delegation of 30 artists and students.

When I dropped by Master Li's studio last summer to say hello, I learned of his Shan Dong Project in Bin Zhou city, near Beijing. This project involved the construction of 7 kilns, 6 huge wood fired ones with a budget of about 100 million RMB. Master Li researched the subject and determined that these seven kilns reflect the most important kiln designs throughout the history of Chinese ceramics. Master Li brought in Dr. Chung and Professor Li Yang (from SIVA) to manage the construction of the kilns, supervising 50 skilled workers to construct the kilns in three months. These kilns will be a centrepiece of the next international wood fired conference, where artists will have the opportunity to make work and fire in these kilns. There are other huge projects, including a museum and factory in Jingdezhen.

As long as I have known Master Li You Yu, he has made extraordinary art while at the same time organizing large-scale visionary projects. Perhaps these huge projects are what gives Li the inner peace to make poetic subtle art. He will be remembered as one of the greatest men and artists of his time.

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is a professor of ceramics at the State University of New York. His artwork is in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Art and Design in New York City, and the Smithsonian Museum of American Art in Washington DC. Leuthold has been a member of the Swiss Ceramics Association since 2016 and a member of the International Academy of Ceramics since 1999.



Artist Li You Yu, born in 1954 in the Hunan Province of China, is a Chinese porcelain master of unparalleled distinction. Professor Li invented Hanguang porcelain and directs the ceramics programme at Shanghai Institute of Fine Arts. Chairman Xi, premier of China, famously gave a porcelain vase by Li to President Barack Obama as a State Gift. Li has art in all major museums and holds innumerable honours. In addition to creating art of distinction, Li has organized large kiln projects in Bin Zhou city, and a museum in Jingdezhen. Li is currently working in the studio and planning a large artists' village in Shanghai.

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