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Crossing the Boundary

Expressive Functional Pottery of

Po-Ching Fang

In modern society tea drinking has evolved as a social ritual. It reflects cultural phenomena associated with day to day life, such as the casual gathering associated with Chinese tea drinking, the spiritual awareness of the Japanese tea ceremony, and the gracefulness of the English tea style. Tea utensils are a distinctive aspect of tea drinking, embodying cultural phenomena and a dialogue between the aesthetics of art and craft. On the one hand, tea utensils demonstrate the manner of usage and appreciation of the functional aesthetic; on the other, they act as a medium to connect people, in both social and spiritual aspects. I believe that the utilitarian object is not just composed of function and the craftsman's aesthetic, but also has the ability to build a conversation between people – an important function of art work.

My series of tea utensils represent a personal viewpoint of the physical environment and visually reference both natural and

man-made elements. One of my motivations for making expressive functional tea utensils is the synthesis of art and craft in the second half of the twentieth century. The integration of contemporary art and the craft making tradition intrigues me – a contemporary Taiwanese ceramist trained in both the East and the West. Instead of emphasizing the differences between the genres of art and craft, my intention is to synthesize attributes from both areas in order to understand them. Therefore my intention is to engage users of my teawares to my viewpoint on the environment, my major thematic concern.

I see the human environment as a construction of both natural and man-made elements. The term 'natural' is mainly used to refer to rocks, trees, and birds, the things which are 'naturally' occurring objects. In contrast, the term 'man-made' references things such as buildings and transport systems which are invented by



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human beings. Although one may argue that trees or rocks found on the street are not purely natural, having been somehow changed or moved to the position in which they are found, they still retain an original 'natural' structure. We do not refer to a car as a natural object, or a building – even though both were created from natural elements. From this perspective, the differences between natural and man-made elements are clarified. Based on this analysis, both elements are envisaged as components of the land and present as landscape within a broad human vision.

Historically, the artist has expressed a range of human attitudes toward the environment. Attitudes toward the natural environment have changed over time and these are partly a response to artistic representation of the natural environment. This ranges from the fear of wilderness to the commitment to cultivation, and later on, the reinterpretation and realization of the relationship between nature and human kind in which man represents himself in a dominant and controlling role. Instead of proposing an argument about man/nature relationships, I merely intend to represent a neutral vision of landscape through the format of the tea set. The vehicle by which I effect this is the Chinese-based tea set, generally composed of a teapot, cups, and a tray. The format, a tray with tea wares on the top, is intended as a metaphor for the land inclusive of all of its natural and man-made elements.

I see my expressive tea utensils as a reflection of myself

ILLUSTRATIONS -

opposite page - "Tea Set" - stoneware - porcelain - 2006 - 35 cm in width (largest)

above - "Cups and Tray" - stoneware - porcelain - 2006 - 38 cm in width
 right - "Cups and Trays on Wall" - stoneware - porcelain - 2008 - 30 cm in height (each)



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– a Taiwanese ceramist, a product of his educational and cultural background. These include aspects of multi-influenced Taiwanese culture and my education received both from East and West. Similarly the Chinese-based tea set has absorbed craft values such as the aesthetic of material and functionality, from both Japan and the modern western world.

I believe that functional objects have the capacity to take on metaphorical and symbolic perspectives over and above mere physical function. An example is given by John Armstrong in his book *The Secret Power of Beauty*, the glass of a seventeenth century Venetian wineglass was made with a fragile structure and the shape of its rim is not practical for drinking. However, the design was well-considered over and above its intended “educational effect” which was to “constrain the movements and impulses of the user”. Function does not just indicate what a functional object is and what we want it for, but it may also suggest “a style of living, or a way of being human”. Taking this notion of symbolic function, I consider that function is not mere utility, but also a vehicle to deliver my viewpoint of the physical environment. My impression of landscape in general has been incorporated with functional properties which are retained as a bridge between user and the work. Instead of applying the original idea of ‘form follows function’, I apply the notion of ‘resolution of function and concept as co-existing in form’.

In order to build a dialogue with the user, I have transformed landscape references in my work into simplified visual elements.



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ILLUSTRATIONS -

left
right top to bottom

- "Cup with Tray" - stoneware - porcelain - 2004 - 16 cm in width
- "Tea Set for One" - stoneware - porcelain - 2005 - 29 cm in width (largest)
- "Cup with Tray" - porcelain - 2007 - 15 cm in height (each)

opposite page

- "Tea Set" - stoneware - porcelain - 2007 - 88 cm in width (largest)



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Simplified forms, such as straight and wavy lines, organic and geometric shapes, regular and irregular patterns, are employed with various contradictory surfaces and colours – earthy roughness and refined smoothness. These contradictory visual languages are distinguishable in my works and act as metaphors for the natural and the artificial. While the simplified visual elements are used to indicate their different characters they are also meant to enhance visual tension, my aim is to create an ambiguous fusion of both these elements. Each natural and man-made element has its own main attribute, but also implies the other. This ambiguity is meant to introduce my synthesis of harmony between the natural and man-made.

I believe that a functional utensil should be pleasurable physically, visually, and also artistically. Tactile functional objects provide a direct language to communicate with people. The making

of functional ceramics expresses powerful and complex cultural elements. Based on this notion of using functional wares, my tea utensils do not just stand as functional objects, but also express my viewpoint, as a witness of environmental phenomena in this era. I see this reinterpretation of using functional objects as a way to respond to Sôetsu Yanagi's thoughts about art.

The attitude that art should be "non-functional" must be changed. For the sake of spiritual uplift of life... For the sake of the happiness of the people. For art to choose a new direction, there must be courage.

Reference:

Armstrong, John. *The Secret Power of Beauty*, London, England: Allen Lane, 2004.
Yanagi, Sôetsu. *Kôgei Bunka (Craft Culture)*. Vol. Selected Works Volume 3. Tokyo: Nihon Mingaikan, 1954.

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