

NEW CERAMICS

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Blanc de Chine, love at first sight

Tineke van Gils



With a sketchbook, some personal tools and a heat gun Tineke van Gils (NL) went to China to create 100 different teapots of Dehua porcelain on a potter's wheel next to the oldest dragon kiln in Dehua County.

Every daybreak I watch the weather and its consequences on the teapot-making process in the open air factory of the Yueji Kiln. It is April 2010, the wet season in Fujian. If it is not raining cats and dogs there is white air hanging between the hills. This makes everything damp or wet. I keep my sketchbook dry under my pillow.

Surprise of the saggarman

Ten metres from my potter's wheel in the common studio there is a shed outside where a Chinese potter kicks the only wheel of the factory barefoot. Every rainless day he throws about two hundred saggars in

local grog clay, walked by two buffalos in a pit behind his wheel. We work shoulder to shoulder with a wall, a world between. In the afternoon his lined-up army of saggars dries in the sun. In the wood-firing kilns the saggars are needed to keep Dehua porcelain free from the effects of ash and flames. During my first stay in Dehua for the opening of the Yueji Kiln Art Center (Oct. 2009), I decided to make an installation of local saggars in combination with my wheel-thrown porcelain teapots. Because of those teapots I got the invitation to come back to Dehua to make a 100 different wheel-thrown teapots for a solo exhibition in Shanghai. Four months later

when I returned, the saggarman welcomes me with a quickly thrown fat teapot of the lump of clay on his wheel head. Our hands have a relationship and we laugh together. Just in time he reshapes his teapot into a saggar when he spots the supervisor.

ILLUSTRATIONS -

above

- From my room - I have a view of the Yueji Kiln

below l. to r.

- Firing the Yueji Kiln

- The Yueji Kiln, the oldest Dragon Kiln in Dehua





Rhythm of the day

Wheel-thrown porcelain in China is usually made in several steps by different workers. A potter throws a very thick basic pot. Later a trimmer trims it eggshell thin. Pots from the wheel are always perfectly round and symmetrical. Luxury pots are enriched with sculptures formed by hand or made in moulds, another assembly line technique with which large-scale production can be realized.

To make translucent wheel-thrown pots in the way I do, without trimming, has to do with personal style. Dehua porcelain on a potter's wheel in combination with my plastic handwriting requires extremely accurate timing, each intervention has to be done at the only right moment. In my working method Dehua porcelain is the most challenging porcelain in the world. When wet and soft it sticks to the fingers like chewing gum, but the lack of binding agent means that the water sinks out quickly and then all the cohesion is gone.

When I got the invitation for this teapot project I knew that an opportunity like this would never come twice. In China a 100 teapots exhibition made by 100 artists is common, but made by no more than one artist from abroad, that's a story. To be successful however I find that I had better not think too much about the number 100. I know that quantity is just a result of quietly continuing. All I have to do is stay close to quality. I already experienced in China that last minute changes in agreements are unpredictable but always to be expected. Still I am totally surprised when it turns out that, without any consultation, a preview exhibition in the Yueji Gallery of Dehua is scheduled within two weeks. I work long days and when I sleep I dream teapots and techniques and sketch them in the book under my pillow.

Blanc de Chine

The translucent ivory-white porcelain of Dehua, the blanc de Chine, dates back to

the Wei and Jin Dynasties (220-420). Since the Tang Dynasty (681-907) it has been used by local artists to create devotional sculptures. By exporting products in large quantities Dehua became one of the porcelain capitals of China. Today Dehua is still home to master porcelain sculptors who are descendants of the great masters from the past, some of them have received the official National Treasure status from the government. One of those is Mr Qiu, famous because of his five hundred Buddhas and developing firing techniques for large-mass and non-radioactive luminous porcelain. At the opening ceremony of my teapot exhibi-

ILLUSTRATIONS -

*above L. to r. - Tineke working with the Saggar Man
- Tineke choosing saggars for her project*

*below L. to r. - Teapots from the moulds
- 500 metres from the Yueji Kiln there is another Dragon Kiln factory*





ILLUSTRATIONS -

- above l. to r.
- Tineke making 100 teapots in Dehua (China)
 - Honey Dew 1-5 Mellow Series
 - Wave Mellow Serie H 13

tion, he is one of the guests of honour.

The process of pottery making in Dehua County has remained unchanged for centuries. With over 200 wood-firing climbing kilns old history is still alive, but times are changing. Dehua porcelain has to be fired in oxidation. It contains an exceptionally low percentage of iron so there is no visual change when reduced. Wood is no more than the fuel to boost the fire in the kilns to 1330°C in less than 24 hours. Nowadays electric kilns enter the scene. To preserve the heritage of Dehua with its dragon kilns on the hillsides, the Yueji Kiln Ceramic Art Center was founded.

Teapots from the moulds

From my room I have a view on the open air factory around the foot of the Yueji Kiln itself. With its age of over 400 years this kiln is regarded as the fossil of the dragon kilns, which climb the hills at an eight-

degree angle with an average length of 50 mtr. In the dry season the Yueji Kiln can be fired every ten days with 20,000 teapots stacked by threes in saggars piled up in the kiln. From dawn until midnight men and women create an eternal flow of spouts, lids and handles. They fill the moulds with liquid porcelain and take out the dry teapot components to carry them on long boards to the workshops under the roofs. The never ending noise in the valley is the incessant rhythm of the machines of long waves of wooden hammers. They rise and fall to pulverize the special local raw material on which Dehua porcelain is based.

A 100 unique teapots

Dehua porcelain is unique in the world, but teapots in China are as common as daily bread. Yet no object in the potter's world seems to inspire more than teapots do. Because of its asymmetrical and complex form

combined with its function, to me the teapot is a ceaseless challenge. Working with Dehua porcelain I find that I am creating a shadow by leaving my fingerprints and the prints of my tools in the pure-white material, like someone who is walking in virgin fields of snow. Shadow changes Dehua porcelain into black and white. Searching for balance and counterbalance I create teapots like sculptures and give them names.

In May I finish over one hundred teapots. By truck they go to Shanghai and I follow by plane with my head full of ideas for more teapots and my hands filled with eagerness to create. The teapot is my favourite and Blanc de Chine my love at first sight.

Tineke Van Gils has been a ceramic artist for almost thirty years. She is a specialist in various techniques on the potter's wheel. She has a studio and gallery in Schipluiden (near to Delft) in The Netherlands.
www.tinekevangils.com