

[intro panel]

Life in Ceramics explores contemporary ceramic art through the works of five internationally renowned Korean artists brought together for the first time: Kim Yikyung, Yoon Kwang-cho, Lee Young-Jae, Lee In Chin, and Lee Kang Hyo. They all receive inspiration from the materials and the building, throwing, and firing techniques characteristic of Korean ceramics tradition, yet they—each in their own way—engage in a dialogue with contemporary art. Each artist creates strikingly different and highly individual works, and all five consciously transgress the border between art and craft through their impressive installations and the monumental, sculptural appearance of their work. On the other hand, they embrace the traditional, by making works that can be used in daily life. The exhibition, therefore, also features a selection of daily tablewares created by each artist.

Since the twelfth century, Korean ceramics have been highly appreciated for their superb craftsmanship and originality, first in China, then in Japan, and finally, since the nineteenth century, in the West. The celadons of the Goryeo (Koryō) Dynasty (918–1392) and *buncheong* (*punch'ōng*) and porcelain wares of the Joseon (Chosŏn) period (1392–1910) provide an unceasing source for inspiration of forms, colors, techniques, and designs. Moreover, Korean ceramics are well-known for the spontaneity of their throwing and firing processes. This often results in uneven, slightly distorted, and thus “imperfect” wares that evoke a lively, natural feeling.

Note: Korean names are written in the Korean order, surname first and given name last.

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[artists panels]

Yoon Kwang-cho, Mountain Recluse

Yoon Kwang-cho was born in 1946 in Hamheung (Hamhōng), Hamgyeong (Hamgyōng) Province (presently in North Korea). He now lives and works at his rural studio near Gyeongju (Kyōngju), South Korea. After graduating from Hongik University in 1973 he studied for two more years in Karatsu, a famous ceramics center in Japan founded on Korean ceramics traditions. In 2003 Yoon had a one-man exhibition at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, and in 2004, together with Kim

Yikyung, he was named “artist of the year” by the National Museum of Contemporary Art in South Korea.

The mountains around Gyeongju are scattered with large Buddhist monasteries, as well as the archaeological remains of smaller temples, pagodas, and Buddhist icons sculpted into the rocks. This landscape is as spiritual as it is gentle and beautiful, and Yoon Kwang-cho’s devotion to Buddhism is reflected in his works. Building on the *buncheong* (*punch’öng*) tradition using coarse clay and white slip, he boldly applies abstract designs with a brush or employs a dilute clay wash, called slip, as canvas for his free, playful sketches and inscriptions of the *Heart Sutra*. Yoon abandoned the use of the potter’s wheel in the late 1980s and began to build his ceramics from slabs or coils, producing irregular, edgy shapes that recall rock formations. Widely read in East Asian philosophy and art history, the artist also draws inspiration from Korean painting and calligraphic traditions. His sketches are reminiscent of the unpretentious works of eighteenth-century Korean literati painters who valued expressions of each unique artistic personality rather than striving for faithful representation in painting. Tradition, however, is something Yoon says one should not adopt but rather use as a basis for new creation.

Kim Yikyung, Courtly Elegance

Kim Yikyung was born in Jeongjin (Chöngjin), Hamyeong (Hamgyöng) Province (now North Korea) in 1935. Currently, she lives and works in Seoul and Paju (P’aju), Kyeonggi (Kyönggi) Province. After completing her undergraduate studies in chemical engineering, Kim came to the United States and earned a master’s degree from the College of Ceramics at Alfred University in New York in 1961. She then returned to Asia, where she served as a curatorial assistant for the National Museum of Korea and an instructor at the Kyoto Municipal College. From 1975 to 2000, Kim was a professor at Kookmin University, Seoul. Together with Yoon Kwang-cho, she was honored as “artist of the year” in 2004 by the National Museum of Contemporary Art in South Korea.

Many of Kim Yikyung’s works have been inspired by the elegance of porcelain used in Confucian rituals during the Joseon (Chosön), Korea’s last dynastic period. International ceramics conferences were equally important influences for Kim because they introduced her to new ways of handling clay and constructing abstract forms—helping the artist to find her individual style by integrating abstract and sculptural elements into her work. Her pentagons take inspiration from drum-shaped ceramic garden stools that were popular both in China and Korea. Experimenting further with tall angular shapes, Kim has created crystalloid column forms that complement the pentagon sculpture ensemble. If the pentagons can be viewed as garden stools, the columns can be seen as garden lamps. Both forms blur the boundaries between ceramics and sculpture, between usable object and art work, between traditional and contemporary.

Lee In Chin, An American-Korean Perspective

Lee In Chin was born in Seoul in 1957 and moved to Orange County, California, during his childhood. After starting his art education at California State University, Fullerton, he returned to Seoul to earn his bachelor's and master's degrees at Hongik University, where he eventually became a professor. Lee now lives and works in Ilchuk (Ilch'ök) in Kyeonggi (Kyönggi) Province. He has broadened his exploration of East Asian ceramic traditions by studying in Bizen, one of Japan's distinguished ceramics centers known for unglazed wares, and through his recent work at a studio in Jingdezhen, China, the historical center of porcelain production, where he began to produce white ware. Every year Lee takes his graduate students to the United States to conduct workshops together with American colleagues and their students.

Lee In Chin's installation of jars, plates, vessels, and bowls stands as a testimony to his interest in the variety of colors and textures of clay under exposure to fire. The result is a spectrum of colors ranging from yellow to bright orange, red brown to almost black. Some pots recall the round "moon jars" of the seventeenth century while others, because of their earthy color, are reminiscent of the bold round jars of the Silla period (third century to 935 ce). Arranged as if stacked in a kitchen cabinet they point to the basic character of pots used for daily life. Lee strongly insists that function is the most important aspect of ceramics and that therein lies their beauty.

Lee Kang Hyo, Playfulness

Lee Kang Hyo was born in Incheon (Inch'ön) in 1961 and now lives and works in North Chungcheong (Ch'ungch'öng), South Korea. He graduated with a bachelor of fine arts degree from the Department of Ceramics at Hongik University in 1983, followed by a three-year apprenticeship in a workshop in South Kyeongsang (Kyöngsang) Province where he learned to produce *onggi* ware. Onggi containers, which can attain the height of an adult person, are built from long coils of clay and then shaped on a potter's wheel. They are traditionally used for the storage of soy sauce and kimchi (*kimch'i*), the pickled vegetables indispensable to any Korean meal. Workshops with foreign potters in Britain and Japan have also been an important source of inspiration.

Lee Kang Hyo's ceramics reflect the *buncheon* (*punch'öng*) tradition of gray stoneware decorated with white slip (a dilute form of clay). The subtle color variations range from milky white to a spectrum of grays and beiges, from pink and rusty red to an earthy dark brown. Lee achieves such subtlety by firing the works in a kiln he built himself in 1992 in the traditional manner, using lumps of clay rather than bricks. His designs dwell in the realm between abstract and concrete but are derived from themes of nature—trees, grass, clouds, mountains. The quality and properties of the clay itself are very important to the artist—his designs, created in

dilute clay wash (slip) amalgamate with the coarse structure of the clay of the vessel body. To choose his clay, Lee travels the Korean Peninsula testing the clay that suits his ideas best. He still gives demonstrations of how to make large onggi, but in addition he applies the onggi technique to his small pieces, giving them a more natural, asymmetric profile, a thicker body, and an irregular, gentle shape—enhancing and bringing forward the natural characteristics of the clay and slip.

Lee Young-Jae, A European-Korean Perspective

Lee Young-Jae was born in Seoul in 1951 and currently lives and works in Essen, Germany. She did her undergraduate studies in Seoul and then continued her education at the University of Applied Sciences in Wiesbaden, Germany, and through internships with renowned German ceramics artists. Between 1984 and 1987 she served as lecturer at the Department of Ceramics at the Gesamthochschule Kassel and since 1987 has been the director of the Keramische Werkstatt Margaretenhöhe GmbH in Essen. Apart from Korean tradition, Lee receives inspiration from the strict tectonic structures of Bauhaus design, a leading early twentieth-century school of modernist design.

Lee Young-Jae's bowls are simple yet elegant in their shape, repetitive yet individual in their form, while their colors often recall the refined hues of celadons of the Goryeo (Koryō) Dynasty (918–1392). If the title is read “one hundred eleven,” it represents a large quantity. However, if read “one, one, one,” the individuality of each bowl's shape, color, and texture is recognized and respected. Indeed no two pieces are alike. In their multitude they represent the infinite variations of a very basic theme: the bowl, which is perhaps the most common shape in everyday life as well as being a vessel for religious offerings. In Korea cups of wine are used for offerings in shamanist rituals and Confucian ancestor rites with parallels to the Catholic rite of the Eucharist. This ritual context provides the basis for Lee Young-Jae's installation of 111 bowls. The project began with a commission for communion cups from the Jesuit church of Saint Peter in Cologne, Germany, and took its most impressive form in the installation of 1,111 bowls in the Pinakothek der Moderne in Munich in 2006.

Lee extends the idea of ritual to the process of throwing the ceramics. Performed again and again, it becomes a ritual repetition, driven by the constant search for the extraordinary in the multitude. The unique quality of her ceramics is thus as much a result of the mystical as the artistic experience.

Ceramics in Daily Life

Korean ceramics are well-known for their inherent liveliness, as the spontaneity of the throwing and firing processes manifests itself in an often uneven, slightly distorted, and thus “imperfect” result that evokes a feeling of naturalness and

individuality. All five artists in this exhibition agree that the elementary function of ceramics in daily life is central to their practices. Thus each of them creates sets of daily ware for meals and for drinking tea or wine, although they differ greatly in their production processes and scale. Kim Yikyung and Lee Young-Jae each design a “line” of cups, bowls, and dishes that is produced by the staff of their workshops. Following upon her interests in Bauhaus school ideas of the connection between art and daily life, Lee Young-Jae offers a “daily ware” line, produced by potters at her studio, Keramische Werkstatt Margarethenhöhe in Essen, Germany. The Keramische Werkstatt was originally founded in 1924 to apply the strict formal principles of the Bauhaus movement to everyday items, and Lee Young-Jae revived it to new effect in 1986. Lee In Chin and Lee Kang Hyo produce their sets themselves and sell them through galleries. Yoon Kwang-cho, who refrains from using the potter’s wheel for creating his sculptural vessels, employs it for some of the bowls, bottles, and dishes of his drinking sets. His sets, however, are not made for sale.

The Heart Sutra

The *Heart Sutra*, which Yoon Kwang-cho inscribes on many of his works, is often recited during the ceremonies and services of Korean Buddhist monasteries. It is composed in literary Chinese and chanted in Sino-Korean. Essential parts of the sutra read:

Form does not differ from emptiness; emptiness does not differ from form. Form is just emptiness; emptiness is just form. The same is true of sensations, perceptions, impulses, and consciousness.

Since bodhisattvas rely on the perfection of wisdom, their minds are untrammelled. Because they’re untrammelled, they’re fearless. Leaving far behind distorted views and dreamlike perceptions, finally—nirvana!

Since all the buddhas of the three time periods rely on the perfection of wisdom, they attain complete, perfect enlightenment.

Therefore know that the perfection of wisdom is the great spell; the spell of great knowledge; the unsurpassed spell, the unequaled spell which can allay all suffering. This is true not false.

Translation by Robert E. Buswell Jr