

Review

EXHIBITIONS
AND BOOKS

5 Lim, Moo Keun – *Oh How Beautiful It Is to Live Together*, stoneware, 2006, L78cm



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TRADITION TRANSFORMED: CONTEMPORARY KOREAN CERAMICS

ORMEAU BATHS GALLERY, BELFAST
MAY 2007

Curated by the (retired) Professor of Ceramic Art at the Ewha Womans University in Seoul, Ms Cho, Chung Hyun, the exhibition presented sixty pieces by twenty-nine ceramists made between 1998 and 2006. Belfast has been bereft of exhibitions of ceramics during the renovation of the Ulster Museum and it is a testament to the ambitious vision of the new board of the OBG to stage this show.

Certainly the term 'diversity' could be attached to the title of this exhibition as the material of clay has been used in many different guises to present traditional decorated pots, abstract clay forms and colourful wall-mounted installations. The title *Tradition Transformed*, however, must be considered. The curator points out that a strong 'tradition' such as Korea's ceramic history can have an inhibiting impact on contemporary evolution and certainly there are works that have an austere, traditional quality of crafted excellence, somewhat spartan and conservative.

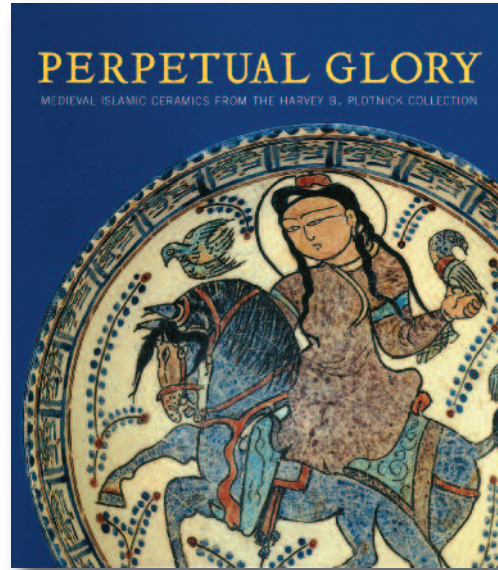
Yet, alongside these perfect vessels, are flourishes of experimental assemblies, energetic, bright in colour and ambitious in scale. I personally found myself relishing simple, pure, porcelain forms by Kang, Suk Young and Joo, Ji Wan, or the perfectly incised layered slip spheres by Ro, Hae Sin, whilst also admiring ambitious multiple assemblies of human scale clay garments by Kim, Jin Kyoung or tall stoneware thrones intended for spirits by Jung, Yoo Kun.

It seems as if Korean ceramics, judging by this exhibition, is in a process of reinvention or rethinking. Economic stability in the 1980s led to a shift away from a traditional focus to a more experimental and expressive mode. Clearly there is much evidence here of this transition, so the 'transformation' continues. Some exhibits exuded a quiet celebration of traditional clay techniques and forms while other pieces seemed to question that presumption of what clay can and should be, a questioning occurring within many movements of ceramics.

For such an ambitious international exhibition to come to Belfast was an occasion of much excitement. *Tradition Transformed* testifies to the deep and valued history of continually evolving contemporary Korean ceramics. Established makers were presented alongside many rising stars, a quietly dignified and thoughtful exhibition.

Michael Moore

A fully illustrated catalogue is available



PERPETUAL GLORY: MEDIEVAL ISLAMIC CERAMICS FROM THE HARVEY B PLOTNICK COLLECTION

OYA PANCAROGLU
YALE UNIVERSITY PRESS
£30 HARDBACK

This is a fascinating book full of beautiful images cataloguing a wide ranging assortment of medieval ceramics from around the Islamic world. Harvey B Plotnick is revealed as a passionate and cultured collector who is dedicated to researching into the background of every object beyond its initial visual appeal. Several examples of tiles and panels are included in the catalogue but the main body of this collection consists of vessel forms.

The book is very well laid out and, thus, presents clear, well-written information supported by excellent colour photographs throughout. It demonstrates the high degree of sophistication achieved by Islamic potters during that period together with excellent descriptions of the methods involved. Many decorative pieces illustrated eloquently display the full extent of their skill, ingenuity and advanced techniques. The three main forms of decoration used consist of abstract and stylised designs, figural representation, and calligraphic inscriptions. There are many examples where objects are embellished in only one of these modes but, also, they are frequently found in combination with each other.

There is an abundance of technical information about the materials used by Islamic potters, including the refinement achieved by adding large amounts of quartz to the body composition producing fritware that allowed the manufacture of very fine bodied vessels to be thrown without the danger of slumping. This thin, almost translucent, white body was often exploited with intricately pierced decoration covered with a fluid, transparent glaze. But carved and moulded works made in this material are equally splendid when left unglazed.

Inscriptions have always held a prominent position among the visual arts in the Islamic world so that calligraphy was sustained as the most prestigious art not only in books but, also, in textiles, on objects, and in the magnificently tiled surfaces of important buildings. While we can marvel and enjoy the graceful pattern formed by inscriptions encircling a vessel or bordering a dish without needing to understand its literary content, many of the inscribed pieces included have been translated for us. These range from the bold, rhythmic calligraphic inscriptions on a bowl (No.24) executed in black slip on a white slip background (translated as 'There is no good (in) wealth unless it belongs to a generous person. The true God is munificent. With good fortune (and) blessing') to other superb vessels poetically inscribed in greater complexity with painted, metallic lustres.

Peter Lane