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REFLECTIONS: "The Ancient — Review of Nature" (2002) by Choi Nam Gil is a contemporary piece that follows Korea's 5,000-year-old ceramics tradition.

Exquisite Asian art shows need two viewings

By Diane Weddington
CONTRIBUTOR

CHINESE CALLIGRAPHY and Korean ceramics, though each the artistic best of the countries' traditions, are jarring companions. It requires more than one trip to fully appreciate the two different exhibitions at the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco.

Each deserves its own extensive visit, particularly in light of the outstanding explanatory labels richly informing viewers of the historical aesthetic traditions of each country

and the significance of each piece in those traditions.

There is one common link, however. The entire collection of Chinese calligraphy in "The Elegant Gathering" has been given in trust to the museum by the Yeh family. Selected ceramic pieces of "From the Fire" will be donated by the artists to the museum once the exhibit has made its tour. These acquisitions continue to assure the Asian Art Museum will house one of the nation's foremost collections.

Please see **ASIAN**, Living 5

Calligraphy, ceramics combine for breathtaking exhibit

▶ **ASIAN**, from Living 1

"From the Fire" is a show case of the variety possible in ceramic art, with objects in a range of colors, textures and techniques. It is also an example of how modern ceramicists can convert ancient traditions into contemporary shapes and themes.

Museum director Emily Sano's claim, "Korea's ceramic heritage has established an imperative: If one makes ceramics, one must do it well," is borne out.

The 54 contemporary artists, who celebrate here the 5,000-year Korean tradition with stunning modern works, are world-renown. These pieces represent the finest and most honored work in modern Korean ceramics.

Many Korean ceramics students studied in the United States in the 1950s and the pieces reflect ideas and skills they took back home, yet this is the first show of its kind in the West. It's a solid inaugural demonstration of the value of cross-cultural exchange.

The delights of "From the Fire" begin at the entrance doors. Reviewers actually gasped on first view of the gallery. The shapes, colors and sizes of the 108 pieces are set off against walls and pedestals of light yellow and the green-blue characteristic of Korean celadon ware. The exquisite "Nest" rightly serves as the room's centerpiece.

Signs caution viewers not to touch the pieces, most uncased and within hands' reach. This is not as much because of breakage potential, but because the oils in human skin damage ceramic glazes. The exhibit is well-spaced and allows for as close an examination as desired — though one leaves longing to caress the vessels.

The pieces date from 1991 to 2003, with some created for this exhibit. The gallery is divided into three areas paralleling the growth of contemporary ceramics. The traditions are well explained in wall panels and in

If you go

▶ "From the Fire: Contemporary Korean Ceramics," through May 21
"The Elegant Gathering: The Yeh Family Collection," through Sept. 17
▶ Where: Asian Art Museum, 200 Larkin St., San Francisco

▶ When: 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesdays-Sundays, until 9 p.m. Thursdays

▶ Admission: \$10 general; free the first Tuesday of the month

▶ Contact: (415) 581-3500 or www.asianart.org

▶ Transit: Civic Center BART

the catalogue available in the museum bookstore.

Reflections of nature

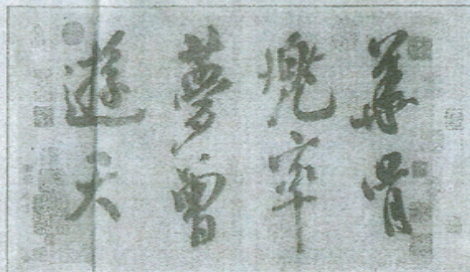
The first group includes 21 artists who work with the traditions of celadon inlaying, white ware, stoneware and stoneware with white slip. The second includes 21 who sculpt stoneware into shapes with psychological or physical meaning. The third includes 12 who work in both porcelain and stoneware, employing slip-cast techniques and using shards, wires and similar objects.

Curator Cho Chung Hyun says many of the objects have fish motifs to reflect the importance of sea life to Korea.

"Korea is a peninsula surrounded by water, and fish is a major food source in Korea," she says. "Many of these pieces reflect the importance of this natural world."

She is an acclaimed ceramicist who excels in onggi, or stoneware, Korea's oldest utilitarian ware. All social classes use onggi, in which such universal and vital foods as soy sauce, kimchi and fish sauce are fermented.

Two of her works, coiled bronze clay vessels topped with fluted rims and with royal blue flourishes on the sides, seem somewhat simple alongside some of the elaborately twisted pieces nearby. Yet great skill is required to hand coil and paddle the layers into a form



ART OF WRITING: This page from the "Duojing Lou," an album of 12 leaves, is signed by Mi Fu (1051-1107), the greatest calligrapher of the Northern Song Dynasty.

KAT TSURUTA

that can survive a 2,200-degree kiln.

Viewers will gravitate to different pieces according to personal preferences, but several should not be missed.

Hyang Lim Han's "Snowing Mountain" and "Autumn Mountain" are shapely evocations of the mountains of Korea. Be sure to examine the pieces closely, looking down between the peaks for the flowing river.

Look closely also at Kwon Shin's "Nest, 2000." Stare just at eye-level inside the fluted ridges for a glimpse of the beautiful white eggs otherwise hidden from view. The piece itself is a wonder, sheets of clay first molded and dried on common roofing forms, then broken, cut, reassembled into elaborate forms, and fired.

Young Sil Han's "Frozen Wings" and "A Place of the Heart" give pause as, in each case, the viewer faces a hollowed human torso opened wide to expose beating white wings. One set floats freely upward from a bowl. The other is encased in a clear box.

Byong Ho Yoo's delicate "Flower I" is an incredible example of buncheong, or stoneware decorated with white slip. Starting at the bowl's center and working outward, the artist has created smaller and smaller sizes of the same pattern, dazzling the eye and clearly demonstrating the concentration of a master ceramicist.

Cultural resemblances

Certain pieces bring other cultures to mind, although this was not the artists' intention.

Hyun Sik Kim's "Meditation I" and "Meditation II" are mixed clay, oblong forms topped with fish. Meant to represent the sea-dependent and nature-loving Korean culture, the two works strongly resemble the carvings of certain Pacific Northwest Native American groups also closely tied to the sea.

Kyoung Soon Park's "Nature" appears to be a Hopi design from a distance, when it is in fact an example of an old tradition of adding fine painting details to a mixed clay body.

Soo Hong Jahng's "Plate," a large stoneware dominating a wall, appears to be an African basket, but on closer examination reveals deeply etched concentric circular indentations in the clay and corresponding painted circles ringing the edges, the added touches of a master ceramicist.

So much more can be seen, including many fine variations of celadon. The museum also has an extensive collection of traditional celadon in its permanent Korean exhibit upstairs, which deserves a same-day visit if only for comparative purposes.

Intellectual gatherings

"The Elegant Gathering," or *yaji*, refers to the informal get-

togethers held by China's intellectual elite. These gatherings were the place where intellectuals formed and discussed their perspectives on the politics and culture of the day. Guests would hold discussions, eat gourmet food and drink fine wine, play music or games, paint, practice calligraphy and write poetry.

These intellectuals built private collections of art, providing their own interpretations and reasons for the importance of the work to the family collection.

Ye Yanlan was born in the Guangdong province in 1823. The Yeh family, Cantonese ambassadors, professors and imperial bureaucrats, assembled an outstanding collection of art over the next three generations.

In 2003 Max Yeh and Yeh Tung, his great-great-grandchildren, placed in trust with the Asian Art Museum the 135 rare paintings and calligraphies of the Yeh family collection. The works date back to the seventh century and contain some of China's finest examples of calligraphy. The museum honors this donation with a two-part exhibit, each part featuring 40 of these light-sensitive works, which can endure only limited showing.

The labels describe not just the work's place in art history but also the place in the family collection, containing observations by family members on the reasons for acquisition, the significance of the artist, the style and the place in Chinese culture.

In China, calligraphy was not simply an art form. It was used to make moral or philosophical statements, to put personal feelings into letters, to serve as a complement to poetry or to inscribe paintings. Each of the 74 pieces exhibited here was chosen with these many meanings in mind.

Four notable examples are displayed. The "Yinfu Jing," an album of standard script at least 1,100 years old, may be the only existing work of the famous calligrapher Chu Suiliang. Its delicate lines hint at the priv-

ileged status of its creator. The "Duojing Lou" is signed by Mi Fu, the greatest calligrapher of the Northern Song Dynasty.

A hands-on and three hanging scrolls by Fu Shan show the range of the late Ming-early Qing Dynasty's most innovative calligrapher. The fine lines have given way to a coarser, less carefully planned style.

Wang Duo's album of poems for the Jesuit missionary Adam Johann Schall von Bell dates to the early 1600s. It represents the dedication of art to the influence of individuals or social trends, in this case the Jesuit influence in China.

Also included in the collection is Zhang Daqian's "Lotus," a hanging scroll by the most eminent 20th century Chinese painter. It is about as different in its large scope from Chu Suiliang's work as any two objects can be. This perhaps indicates the move away in China from art as a vehicle of privilege to art as an expression of the masses.

For those seeking to know more about calligraphy, the museum bookstore has a comprehensive collection of books, calligraphy tools and a catalogue of the exhibit. Gallery 18 upstairs in the museum contains 28 significant calligraphies introducing scripts, materials, formats and content.

Docents lead free tours of "From the Fire" daily at 10:30 a.m. Various Korean music, dance and poetry events occur during the run of the exhibit. Visit www.asianart.org for particulars.

To explain the significance of the calligraphy collection, UC Berkeley's Institute of East Asian Studies and the Asian Art Museum will sponsor the free conference, "The Elegant Gathering: Art, Politics and Collecting in China." The program with scholars from eminent universities will be held May 12 and 13 at the Berkeley Art Museum. For details visit <http://icas.berkeley.edu/> and click on events.

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