

Porcelain: Material AND Storytelling

February 15 – March 6, 2022

Smart Museum of Art

The University of Chicago



Porcelain:

Material AND Storytelling

Porcelain is an artistic medium as well as a material substance. It can be used to represent figures and to tell stories in two-dimensional and three-dimensional forms, and its materiality can also be the subject of artistic expression.

This small exhibition presents three such possibilities with selected examples from different cultures and periods. Works in one group display the two basic elements of porcelain artifacts—a ceramic body and glaze—as the focus of representation. Another group focuses on the aestheticization of cracking, a feature of porcelain ware that has inspired ancient and contemporary artists to create original works. Those in the third group are narrative in nature, inviting viewers to contemplate the different uses of porcelain as a pictorial medium.

The audience is encouraged to think about the shared features and qualities of these examples, and to ask the underlying question: Why porcelain?

Porcelain: Material and Storytelling is curated by Wu Hung, Adjunct Curator at the Smart Museum of Art, Harrie A. Vanderstappen Distinguished Service Professor of Art History and the College, and Director of the Center for the Art of East Asia at the University of Chicago. Support for this exhibition and publication has been provided by the Feitler Center for Academic Inquiry Fund, the Center for the Art of East Asia, the Center for East Asian Studies, and the Museum's SmartPartners.

RELATED PROGRAMS

Ballet des Porcelaines

Wednesday, March 2, 7:30 pm

Thursday, March 3, 7:30 pm

The University of Chicago, Logan Center for the Arts, Theater East

This exhibition is presented in conjunction with *Ballet des Porcelaines* (also known as *The Teapot Prince*), an eighteenth-century French pantomime-ballet reimagined for the twenty-first century as an interdisciplinary project by Meredith Martin (NYU) and Phil Chan (Final Bow for Yellowface). The short performances, sponsored by UChicago Arts, Center for East Asian Studies, Committee on Theater and Performance Studies, Office of the Provost, and Music Department at the University of Chicago, are followed by in-depth panels on art history, dance, and diversity, along with Q&A sessions with the artists.

For more information, visit ceas.uchicago.edu/content/ballet-des-porcelaines.

Substance

By Zhiyan Yang

LIU JIANHUA

Chinese, born 1962

Vessel: Cup

2009

Vessel: Bowl

2009

Porcelain with *sang-de-beauf*
glaze inside vessel

Private Collection



Ceramics are traditionally categorized as applied arts. Some would call the porcelain objects here vessels, implying that their existence is dependent on the things or substances they hold—in other words, their functionality. A vessel is a bowl if it contains soup; a cup, wine; an urn, ash; and so on. Porcelain, once a prized medium, is taken for granted by a contemporary audience, not only due to its ubiquity as containers for food or liquid, but also because of its versatility in other contexts, from mosaic tiles to dental prostheses. It is through the pairing of two artists here, Liu Jianhua from China and Laura Letinsky from Canada, however, that we are once again reminded that porcelain behaves, as master potter Edmund de

Waal puts it, not as a noun but as a transitive verb. Seemingly still, quiet, uneventful, and all in all, ordinary, it embodies a process of constant transmutation full of wonder, a careful interaction among earth, water, wind, fire, time, and the magic touch of the human hand.

Liu Jianhua's *Vessels* (2009) introduces a cup and a bowl of similar size and color. At first sight, they appear to be celadon wares containing blood-like liquids, juxtaposed as if they were prepared for some ritual sacrifice. However, upon closer look, one realizes that the "liquids"—the rich, deep red color—are in fact part of the ves-

sel's surface glaze. Known as *sang-de-boeuf* (or *langyao hong*, as it is traditionally referred to in Chinese texts), it is adopted here by the artist to create an illusion of translucent fluid in the vessel. A type of "flambé" glaze that epitomizes the energy and whimsy of fire, the effect it brings to life is notoriously uncontrollable, and when done right, distinctively delightful. Legend has it that in order to achieve the intended blood red so desired by imperial commission in the past, a desperate potter had to sacrifice his own body by entering the flaming kiln. Here, Liu plays with both the literary references and the optical illusion of this lustrous glaze to showcase the dramatic yet often hidden process of a glaze being transformed from its liquid, free-flowing state to becoming one with the clay body.

Departing from the Chinese sensibility toward porcelain—often associated with delicacy, refinement, and purity—Laura Letinsky's *A Bloom* (2014) series stages a group of failed pots. Interested in porcelain's material paradox of being both malleable when unfired and fragile after firing, the artist associates the medium's low tolerance for error with human skin. Porcelain's unglazed surface hides nothing, revealing every crack, color difference, or fingerprint from handling. The worst of it even explodes—or as Letinsky terms it, "blooms"—into shards during firing. In her attempts to make the "perfect" urn, by highlighting porcelain's grotesque failures, Letinsky uncovers its unexpected beauty and celebrates its aging process along the journey. Like our human flesh that freckles, wrinkles, and aches, these porcelains stand as the frail, imperfect organ that not only endures but feels the world that surrounds it as well.



LAURA LETINSKY

American, born in Canada, 1962

A Bloom 1

2014

A Bloom 2

2014

A Bloom 3

2014

Glazed Porcelain

Courtesy of the artist

Cracking

By Yan Jin



YEESOOKYUNG

Korean, born 1963

Translated Vase

2007

Ceramic fragments, epoxy,
and gold leaf

Purchase, Gift of Gay-Young Cho and
Christopher Chiu in honor of Richard A. Born
2010.4

Cracking occurs when the ceramic body and glaze have sufficiently different rates of thermal expansions. As the kiln cools down from the firing process, the glaze may shrink more rapidly than the body and crack, leaving networks of irregular, fine lines running through the entire surface of the piece. Cracks can continue to form in the glaze even days after the piece is taken out of the kiln, yet the body of the piece remains intact.

Since ceramic ware was most commonly praised for its lustrous, impermeable surface, crackled glaze started out as a defect, resulting from the uncontrollable and irreversible transformations in the firing process. Such “accidents,” however, were first turned into opportunities for creative expression in Song dynasty China (960–1279). At this time, ceramicists empirically developed a way to manufacture crackled glaze ware, a type of object that stands right on the cusp between the fragmented and the whole. Cracks were sometimes dyed and fired several times to heighten the fragmentary effect.

By the sixteenth century, crackled glaze was identified as an important feature of wares produced by some of the famous Song dynasty kilns and coveted among East Asian connoisseurs. Cracks now became the focus of aesthetic appreciation and were intensely studied and categorized. Creative terms were used to distinguish and rank the crack patterns, including ice crackles, eel’s blood, crab claws, and plum blossoms. Inspirations for these terms can be glimpsed from the objects in the exhibition. The dainty bottle covered in rice-yellow glaze displays two sets of cracks. One set is black and more spaced out, while the other is faint red and might have been referred to as “eel’s blood.” Juxtaposed is a bowl with dabs of cobalt blue pigment faintly showing through webs of dark cracks, which evoke the experience of watching fish swimming under a thin sheet of crackled ice. In addition to the cracks on the glaze, the bowl also displays cracks on the body resulting from daily use.



UNKNOWN ARTIST

Korean

Small Bottle

19th century

Glazed porcelain (white ware, baekja)

Gift of the Estate of Ethel Behncke

1986.158



UNKNOWN ARTIST

Korean

Bowl

15th–16th century

Glazed porcelain with underglaze cobalt blue

painted decoration

Gift of the Estate of Ethel Behncke

1986.156

It seems to have been broken and repaired repeatedly, since some cracks were filled in with a white substance while other cracks and chips were patched with a black matte material that appears older. Such repetition of breakage and repair suggests that, to the owner, cracks were not just tolerated but cherished as an integral part of the bowl's appeal.

Centuries later, the Korean contemporary artist Yeosookyung also saw an opportunity for artistic expression in porcelain cracks. For her *Translated Vase* series, Yeosookyung salvaged discarded ceramic fragments from kilns throughout South Korea, where ceramic

masters are producing replicas of Goryeo (918–1392) celadons and Joseon (1392–1897) white porcelains. These vessels were discarded right out of the kiln because they were deemed “imperfect,” with distorted shapes or burnt traces on the glaze. Yeosookyung assembled these fragments into new, whole forms using epoxy resin as adhesive and metal beams for interior structural support. Finally, she embellished the re-sutured joints with 24-karat gold leaf—a practice initially inspired by the wordplay between “crack” and “gold,” which are homonyms in Korean (both pronounced “geum”)—to create a dramatic tension between the scarred porcelain body and the shining gold veins.

Storytelling

By Sizhao Yi

ARTIST UNKNOWN

Chinese style

Bowl

19th century

Porcelain with overglaze polychrome

enamel decoration

University Transfer

1991.266



With its infinite possibilities to be shaped and decorated, porcelain has been employed by artists across time and cultures as a medium for storytelling. The diverse works featured in this section exemplify the ways in which stories can be “brought to life” through the visuality, materiality, and cultural connotations of porcelain.

Porcelain is often used in making tableware that is both functional and aesthetically pleasing. These objects provide smooth surfaces for painted images that are secured under the glaze or through enameling. The large porcelain bowl on display here serves as a striking example, where figural and landscape scenes with Chinese-style motifs spread across the object’s surface in a collage-like composition. Although separated by pictorial frames, these scenes engage with one another through the spatial dynamic created by the curving surface of the bowl, evoking the illusion of an abstract architectural space with visual depth. The story here, however, remains obscure. Yet as one circles around the bowl and repeatedly encounters the scenes from various angles, a narrative can be pieced together, both through the viewer’s physical animation of the images and as they ponder, recreate, and complete the story in their mind.

Such porcelain wares have been exported from Asia to Europe since the fifteenth century, stirring fascination not only with their visual designs, but also with the material itself. Known to Europeans at the time as “white gold,” porcelain was highly valued for its delicacy, strength, translucency, and luster. Moreover, with its mesmerizing visual and tactile appeal, its evocation of the remote lands of the East, and the mysteries surrounding its manufacture, porcelain was associated with magical powers in many early modern European narratives. As an early example of “true porcelain” made in Europe, *Adam and Eve in Paradise* masterfully employs the material excellence and mystical associations of porcelain to portray the transformational moment under the forbidden tree in the Garden of Eden. Another porcelain statuette in this exhibition, modeled

after a marble sculpture by Etienne-Maurice Falconet, captures the culminating moment in the myth of Pygmalion and Galatea when the sculptor kneels in awe upon the enlivenment of his own creation. The monochrome porcelain surface, left unglazed, evokes the subtle texture of human skin while simultaneously revealing the object's materiality, thus underlining the tension between the inanimate and the animate at the heart of the story.

The animating potential of porcelain is encapsulated in Geng Xue's *Mr. Sea* through stop-motion animation. In this work, the artist composes a fascinating world entirely of porcelain to reinterpret Pu Songling's seventeenth-century tale about a scholar's encounter with a mysterious lady and a monstrous serpent on an enchanted island. Geng's use of porcelain is rooted in the cross-cultural imagination of porcelain as a bodily substance that brings things to life. Meanwhile, the visual allure of the porcelain surface, the haptic sound effects of the porcelain body, and the material's inherent contrast of hardness and fragility conjure an uncanny atmosphere that is both seductive and threatening. The materiality is further highlighted by cinematic techniques, making porcelain not only the artistic "language" for the tale, but also an alternative protagonist that tells a story of the material itself.



JOHANN FRIEDRICH EBERLEIN

German, 1696–1749

Historia von Adam und Eva
(*Adam and Eve in Paradise*)

1745 (design), 1774–1813 (execution)

Hard-paste porcelain with overglaze enamel
decoration

Gift of Mrs. Leopold Blumka in memory of
Leopold Blumka

1979.55

SÈVRES PORCELAIN MANUFACTORY

French, 1716–1791

Pygmalion and Galatea

(after Etienne-Maurice Falconet)

1764–73

Unglazed molded hard-paste porcelain

(bisque ware)

Gift of Victoria Blumka

1975.3





GENG XUE

Chinese, born 1983

Mr. Sea

2014

Single-channel stop-motion animated video,
color, sound, 13:15 mins.

Courtesy of the artist

Mister Sea (Hai gongzi)

By Pu Songling (1640-1715)

Translated by Judith T. Zeitlin

This brief story is one of nearly five hundred pieces included in Pu Songling's famous collection Strange Tales from Liaozhai. Falling between tale and anecdote, "Mister Sea" is narrated in a deceptively straightforward manner in the objective stance befitting "The Historian of the Strange," the sobriquet that Pu adopted for himself. Causality between events is hinted at rather than stated directly, and the dangerous pleasures of the island, which dazzle the senses, are vividly conveyed in just a few swift strokes. Since Hai ("Sea") is a relatively common surname in China, and gongzi ("Mister") archaically denotes "Lord," the double meaning of the title and the true (sinister) identity of this mysterious figure is only revealed midway through. There is no mention of porcelain in the original tale, which makes Geng Xue's adaptation of it into a stop-motion animation composed entirely of this substance and its magical interactions with light, liquid, and sound all the more original. The main (and brilliant) change Geng makes in the film is that rather than having the shape-shifting seductress simply disappear when "Mister Sea" makes his entrance, as befits the materiality of porcelain she abruptly shatters into pieces.

In the East China Sea, off the coast of Shandong, lies a place called the "Isle of Ancient Footprints," which is covered with millions of varicolored camelia flowers that bloom year round, unfazed by the seasons.

The island had long been uninhabited, and few people ventured there. A young man from Dengzhou, Zhang by name, was curious by nature, and had a passion for wandering about and hunting. Upon hearing about the island's beautiful scenery, he provisioned himself with food and drink and rowed out in a little skiff.

When he reached the island, the flowers were blooming in such profusion that their fragrance drifted for miles, and there were trees so huge that their trunks measured over ten armspans in girth. He lingered in the spot, unable to tear himself away from a place that so gratified his delight. He poured himself a cup of wine and began drinking, regretting only that he had no companion to share it with.

Suddenly, a stunning young woman emerged from the flowers, clad in a dress of dazzling red; he had scarcely ever seen her equal.

She smiled at him.

“I thought my own sensibility was quite out of the ordinary. I never expected someone so in tune with me would have gotten here first.”

“Who are you?” he asked in surprise.

“I’m a call girl from Jiaozhou. I happened to accompany Mister Sea here. He’s gone roaming in search of other vistas, but my walking is hampered by these tiny feet, so I’ve remained behind.”

Zhang had just now been suffering pangs of loneliness. Thrilled to have found such a beauty, he invited her to sit down and join him for some wine. Her conversation was soft-spoken and charming, and she intoxicated all his senses.

He was deeply enamored. Worrying that Mister Sea would come back before he could fulfill his desires to the utmost, he pulled her down next to him and got right to business. The girl happily went along with him. Before they had reached the end of their pleasure, however, they heard the rustling of the wind and the sound of vegetation toppling and breaking. The girl abruptly pushed Zhang away and stood up: “Mister Sea is coming!” By the time he fastened his clothes and looked around him in alarm, the girl had vanished.

Presently he saw an enormous serpent slither out from the bushes, thicker than the most gigantic bamboo tube. Terrified, Zhang took cover behind a big tree, hoping the serpent wouldn’t see him, but the serpent advanced and began coiling its body around man and tree together; after several circles around, Zhang’s two arms were pinned straight against his thighs and he couldn’t bend them in the slightest. The serpent lifted its head and pierced Zhang’s nostril with its tongue; the blood flowed out, spilling to the ground and forming a puddle. The serpent then bent its head and began lapping it up.



Zhang believed he was doomed, when suddenly he remembered that the pouch he wore around his waist contained some fox poison. So he pinched open the bag with two fingers, poked a hole in the packet, and piled some of the powder in his palm. Then inclining his head to one side and looking downward, he let the blood from his nostril drip onto his palm; before long, a handful had accumulated. The serpent, as expected, moved toward his palm and started lapping up the blood there, but before it was even all gone, the serpent's body abruptly straightened out, and then, its tail, with a sound like thunder, struck the tree, which collapsed in half. There, outstretched beneath it like a roof beam, lay the dead serpent.

Zhang, for his part, was so dizzy he couldn't get up, and it was only after some time that he fully came to. He took the serpent's carcass back home with him, where he was seriously ill for over a month.

He suspected the girl had also been a snake demon.

Contributors

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