

## **From the Fire: Contemporary Korean Ceramics**

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### **A Brief History of Contemporary Korean Ceramics**

Although Korean society developed over thousands of years, it was decimated by invasions and war culminating in the early twentieth century. In 1945 Korea restored its independence. Although occupation had ended, the country was in a state of instability with continued foreign intervention. As a result, the development of modern ceramic art was hindered and much of its own identity had been left in disorder. Some have referred to this period as the state of “unconsciousness,” which brought about amateur finishes, but developed a spontaneous sensitivity in the ceramic works, giving birth to an entirely innovative form of contemporary ceramics.

Many experts identify Korea’s contemporary movement in ceramics as beginning in the 1960s with ceramic art first acknowledged as an independent subject in Korean universities in 1958. At this time, contemporary Korean ceramicists began to make ties with their American counterparts and scholarships to study in the United States were given to numerous Korean artists who wished to be trained abroad, creating an opportunity for the cultural exchange of ideas. New theories were brought to Korea and new skills were taught simultaneously for the purpose of preserving the Korean ceramic tradition.

The 1970s saw a sudden increase in the ceramic artistic output. Ceramic artists began to acquire new skills and inspirations as education brought about new solutions to the technical ceramic problems, and ceramics became economically viable. Many different groups and associations were founded to develop contemporary Korean ceramics. In addition, the Korean government created a policy to increase the number of students in all areas of university level studies in order to raise the education standard of the Korean people. The number of individuals aspiring to go to a university expanded considerably. Art departments were established in most universities throughout Korea, and design subjects grew in popularity. As the ceramic arts stabilized, artists were beginning to think more about tradition and heritage. This resulted in the continued growth at universities in ceramic studies. Universities with strong financial bases began to install kilns and firing systems, providing the students with an opportunity to control their own firing and glaze making. The ties to universities continue today and much of the development in contemporary ceramics in Korea is through schools.

Contemporary Korean ceramicists continue to struggle with maintaining the positive growth of their craft while preserving the tremendous ceramic tradition that supports it. They cannot ignore the powerful past, but must view it through the lens of criticism, education and culture.

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