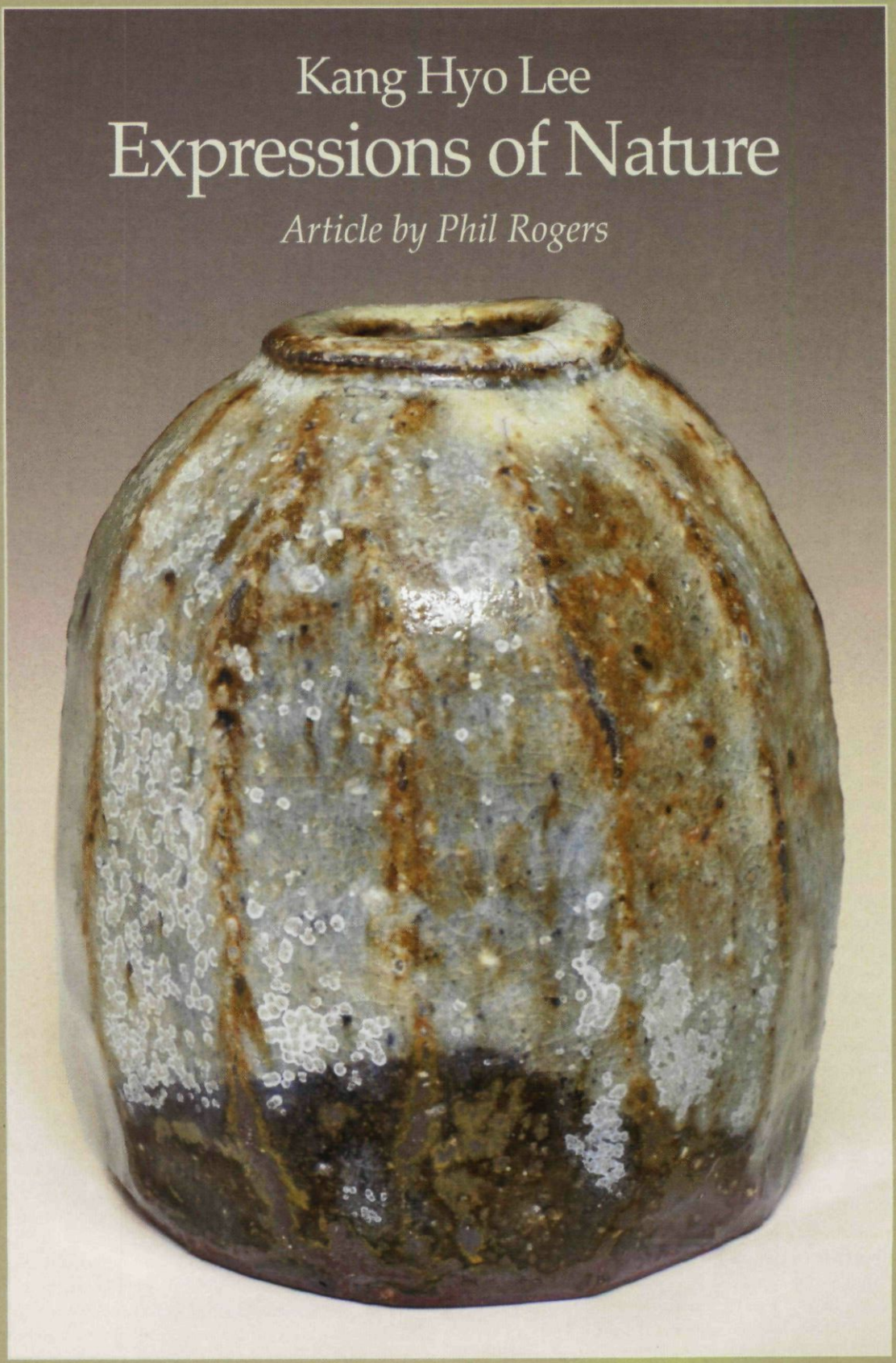
Kang Hyo Lee
Expressions of Nature

Article by Phil Rogers



***Vase**. Stoneware. 16.5 cm/h.*

Vase. Stoneware. 16.5 x 9 x 9 cm.

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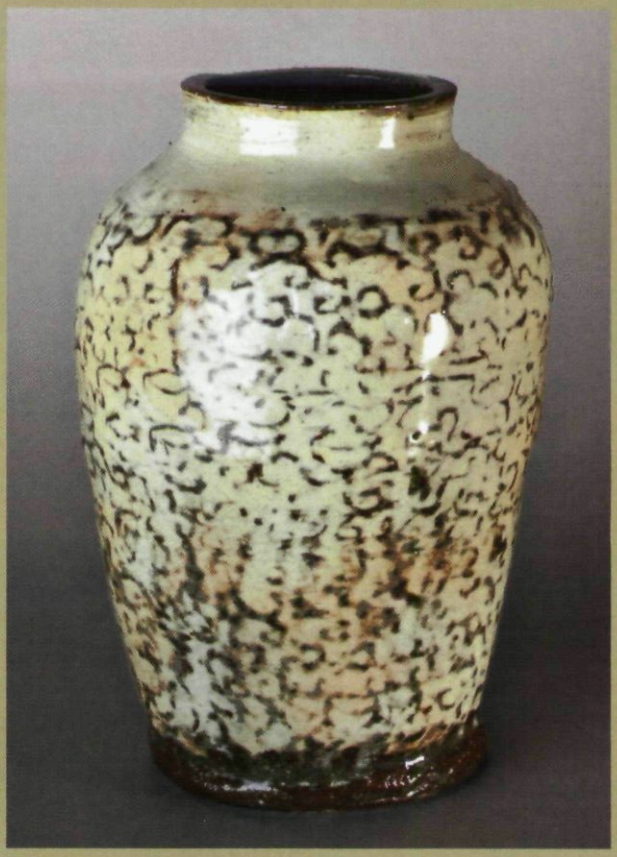
BERNARD LEACH CALLED KOREA "LAND OF THE morning calm" and thought it a place of unique beauty. I have visited Korea on many occasions and, even after the passage of 70 or more years since Leach, Shoji Hamada and Soetsu Yanagi were there, one only has to spend a short time in this small and intimate country to understand Leach's words. A rural tranquillity exists outside the frantic, traffic-filled streets of the cloned concrete cities. Between the forested mountains, the river plains stretch into the distance neatly and divide geometrically into rice fields. Telegraph poles and their wires help to define the perspective, as they become small and eventually disappear, while heron and egret feed on the numerous frogs that inhabit the water filled paddies.

Tall, densely forested and almost volcanic in shape, the mountains are largely unspoilt. The Koreans are great walkers and at the weekend hordes of middle aged and elderly Koreans with peaked caps, knapsacks and walking boots emigrate from the cities into the countryside. They would often walk past the door of my little house in the potter's village of Sangshin-li, from where I could see quite clearly one of the most famous mountains in Korea – Keryon-san. Said to resemble a giant face looking upward to the sky, the mountain is imbued with great spiritual significance by many Korean people. A large monastery inhabited by monks of both genders with grey robes and shaven heads, is to be found among its wooded slopes.

Ironically, considering I was living as a potter in a potter's village, Keryon Mountain is also famous as one of the ancient Korean kiln sites. Here, a number of kilns produced Punch'ong pottery, particularly iron painted Punch'ong, during the 15th and 16th centuries. Indigenous Korean clays are dark in colour, rich in the iron oxide that fires to a deep chocolate brown. To produce pots that were lighter in tone, the Punch'ong potters had to coat the brown clay with white slip. During the 15th century these potters devised an extensive vocabulary of decorative treatments that all involved the use of white slip. Slip was brushed on – sometimes smoothly and sometimes with a coarse brush that left behind a distinct pattern of marks. Alternatively, pots could be dipped in a smooth even coating of slip that was later painted with iron pigment (Keryon). Sometimes the pots were stamped before slipping. Later, when the pot was dry, the slip was scraped away to reveal the intricate pattern of white slip 'inlaid' into the indentations in the clay. Naïve, sometimes comical, often symbolic, drawings were made through the white slip to reveal the dark clay beneath. Over all of these various decorations a simple ash glaze was thinly applied, which allows us to see every mark and nuance of texture

***Vase**. Stoneware. 28 x 16.5 x 14 cm.*



***Vase**. Stoneware. 21 x 14 x 14 cm.*

while, at the same time, providing a pale jade green to soft grey-blue colour.

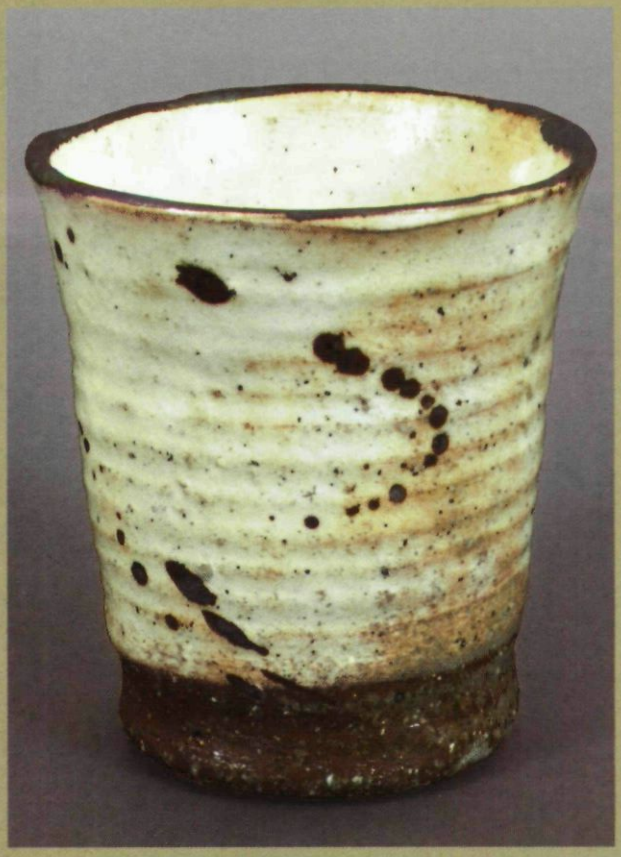
Korea is justifiably proud of its Punch'ong tradition. Many contemporary potters still work within that tradition making utilitarian wares that employ all of these decorative methods. Unfortunately, many of these potters produce nothing more than pastiche. It is given to comparatively few Korean potters to push, or at least coax, that tradition into a new place – to have the vision to bring to Punch'ong a new and vigorous lease on life that not only allows the tradition to survive but, extends it, revitalises it and reinterprets it. Kang Hyo Lee is one of those potters.

Kang Hyo Lee lives just outside the village of Oksan in central Korea about one and a half hours south of Seoul. Rice fields surround his workshop and in the evening the cacophony of sound created by the crickets and frogs is almost deafening. The assemblage of traditional Korean farm buildings are constructed of timber frames and paper on an earth floor and it is rare to find, even in the countryside, buildings of this age that have survived for more than 100 years. From the entrance to the compound the ground slopes gently upwards. Alongside this slope is a 8 m (25 ft), blackened and battle scarred, anagama kiln.[1] At the top of the slope is a flat area where, under rudimentary cover, there are two kilns – one gas fired and the other fuelled with oil. Large fired and glazed pots line the wall toward the throwing room and as one enters there is a perceptible drop in temperature. The warmth of the Korean sun gives way to a dimly lit, earth-floored and timber-framed room that is lined with bamboo shelves laden with finished work. Lee's wheel is at the side of the room, sunken in a pit dug out of the earth. A wooden wheel, primitive in nature – simply a turntable suspended on a birdcage-like construction – is turned with the foot, as one would spin an upturned cart wheel with the sole of the shoe. Miraculously Lee can construct large pots in a short space of time at this wheel because of the two years' training he received at an Ongii factory.[2] The whole atmosphere of this charming room serves to transport one back in time. It is as though we are with Leach and Hamada in 1918. The place is fascinating – full of treasures and one's eyes are constantly flitting from one finished piece to another. Shelves and cupboards are filled with *chawan* (tea bowls), *yunomi* (tea cups), platters, store jars, large vases and immense planters.

Born out of the desire to carve out a meagre living, it was the characteristic, yet unconscious freedom evident in Korean peasant pottery that so attracted Hamada, Leach and Yanagi. The instinctive, unfussy, non-intellectual approach of these artisan potters was appealing, ironically, to this intellectual group who,

***Lidded Jar**. Stoneware. 17.5 x 19 x 19 cm.*

***Teapot**. Stoneware. 9.5 x 9.5 x 9 cm.*



***Cup**. Stoneware. 10 x 9 x 9 cm.*

following Yanagi's lead (influenced by the writings of William Morris) revelled in the irregular. They sensed that in Korean pottery, the overall spirit of the pot was far more important than any individual element from which it was made. This was particularly evident in pots from the 15th century onward, Punch'ong and the later porcelains of the Choson period. Thus imperfection was of little matter, indeed imperfection and asymmetry enhanced rather than detracted from a pot's vigour and charm.

Soetsu Yanagi wrote in 1954, "If one visits a Korean country pottery, the mystery attached to the beauty of imperfection in the pots is solved; the whole process of throwing, turning, glazing and firing partakes of [an] easy going naturalness, rough perhaps, but beautiful and imperfect. The making of these pots is free – but not consciously free – and full to the brim with natural good taste."

All of these qualities are apparent in the work of Kang Hyo Lee, but he is definitely no peasant or country bumpkin. He was trained at Hongik University under Professor Sang Ho Shin and among his contemporaries at college were fellow International Academy of Ceramics members Sung Jae Choi (also showing at the Pucker Gallery) and Mi Kang Lim, who currently works in Pennsylvania. Kang Hyo Lee's wife Kyong Hee is also an accomplished potter, making porcelain tableware. Lee's work is currently included in the permanent collections of a number of important museums including the Victoria and Albert in London, the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, and the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco. He has travelled the US demonstrating the Ongii methods of pottery making in workshops at Western Illinois University, Macomb and Alfred University, New York. In 2005 he gave a workshop to West Virginian potters at Cedar Lakes. Kang Hyo Lee is regarded as among the best of a select group of contemporary potters in his Korean homeland.

Kang Hyo Lee has taken a tradition that is revered in his own country and has dared to move it to a different place. The essential ingredients of Punch'ong are there – dark clay, white slip and a pale green ash glaze. He has absorbed and assimilated the naïvety of his predecessors and has replaced it with a thoughtful sophisticated approach to the softness of clay and the wetness of slip that, given his structured and often 'art' based university training, must have been difficult to return to. In some pieces the qualities of early Punch'ong exist, but these works are far more than pastiche – Lee has contemporised the tradition. He manages to reinterpret, with some humour, the drawings seen on older pieces. The crane is a common motif in Korean ceramics – here it is a comical,

***Dish**. Stoneware. 49.5 x 49.5 x 14.5 cm.*

although slightly sad, creature flying over a grassy landscape. Lee's patterns are gestural; often abstract surfaces akin to the paintings of Willem de Kooning or Jackson Pollack. A form of abstract impressionism, they often are what you want them to be – mountains, rocks, trees, grasses, plants, brooks. There is movement, wind and water, stormy skies, dark threatening clouds, or a sun peeping through a watery mist partially hidden by reeds. All of this is done with slip applied with a brush or the fingers then swirled and moulded until a pattern appears that promises harmony with the form and a structure that pleases the potter.

Jackson Pollack once said, "When I am in my painting, I am not aware of what I am doing. It's only after a sort of get-acquainted period that I see what I have been about. I have no fear of making changes, destroying the image, because the painting has a life of its own."

I once asked Kang Hyo Lee about his decorative techniques. In fact, he was teaching me to use hakeme slip in the Korean way. I wanted to know his thought process; how did he prepare himself to work in this way. Through broken English, the best way he could explain was, "no thinking – just do it – no thinking". The similarity to the words of Pollack is striking. Lee was trying to say that to think too much was to rob the hakeme or the drawing of its spontaneity. As if to intellectualise it would render it lifeless. Like Hamada and his familiar 'broken sugar cane' motif, Lee has become a master of his chosen technique and the wet, fluid white slip is no barrier to his creative energy because he and the material have become one.

When he paints he loses what Hamada referred to as his 'tail' and he merges with his technique in the most subtle and beautiful way.[3] A moment of creative energy born out of complete confidence and mastery of technique. I will never forget the demonstration at the International Potters Festival in Aberystwyth when, having completed a 1.5 m (5 ft) tall store jar in the Ongii style he painted this vast vessel with lashings of white slip using his hands and his whole body, as if it were a dance. Afterwards he broke into an impromptu solo performance of a Korean folk song, which had everyone standing and cheering. He is quite the star.

To watch Kang Hyo Lee work is a revelation. At first he makes long coils of clay about 3 cm in diameter by throwing the clay on the floor, first to the left, and then to the right. As the clay hits the floor it stretches each time until a 2 m long snake is wound around his neck and over his shoulder. As he sits at the revolving wheel, the clay coil is fed on to a circular clay base and with the deft movement of thumb and forefinger a

***Vase**. Stoneware. 17 x 15 x 15 cm.*

wall is constructed. Another coil is added and in just a few minutes there is a pot almost 60 cm (2 ft) high. At this point Lee employs a hammer and anvil technique to join, thin and shape the wall. The hammer, in the form of a wooden paddle, is outside, while the anvil is mushroom shaped and is used on the inside of the pot. As the wheel turns, the paddle and the anvil behave as the outer layers of a sandwich. As the tools meet in a succession of light taps the clay is shaped, compressed and strengthened. This is the Ongii way. One example shows the relief pattern of the carved surface of the paddle and is an example of the process becoming the decoration – nothing hidden – true to the materials and the technique. Yanagi would have approved.

The pots of Kang Hyo Lee are a celebration of the softness of clay and the fluidity of liquid slip. For many people not conversant with this ceramic vocabulary, they may seem rough, even crude. I say to those people, give them time. Pick up a *Chajan*[4] or a *Sojoojan*[5] and close your eyes. Turn it in your hands. Feel the contours; let the surface texture and the asymmetry become a tactile experience. Look at the colour. See the subtle way that cream turns into pink. Revel in the realisation that here is a piece of ceramic, made by man, that is so close to the earth, so close to nature that it has become the same thing. It is one man's vision or expression of nature. With luck you will come to understand that throwing and trimming of this kind has a whole different vocabulary from most other kinds of pottery making. It is as far from the industrial or Western studio pottery as the moon is away from the earth.

It is interesting to note Hamada's words: "The Koreans don't mind anything; they are casual and are not concerned at all about how they do things. They know what the pot needs and they do it... Whether the pot is crooked or not is not important to the Koreans; they turn off large chunks of clay – sometimes the foot is uneven, and often the bowl is better because of it... The clay is still extremely soft when they turn the footring... they work so quickly that often the pot is not perfectly centred or level for turning. Sometimes this results in one side of the footring being thinner than the other."

Hamada was, of course, talking about the peasant potters he encountered in 1918, but all of this could be equally said of Kang Hyo Lee. In making his pots Lee has one eye firmly fixed upon his ceramic ancestry – that tradition is his lifeblood. However, he is also a potter of his time. A modern man given to international travel, interaction with other potters, and ready to accept, albeit sometime reluctantly, the praise and admiration of his peers. He is also one of the kindest, most generous people I have ever met. His generosity of spirit and his honest, kind, nature shine brightly from his pots.

REFERENCES:

1. *Anagama* – a single chamber kiln fired with wood. Often long and narrow resembling an upturned boat with the firebox at one end and a chimney at the other.
2. *Ongii* – The traditional, often large, country made pottery of Korea. Almost always dark brown in colour, it is made from local iron-rich clay and glazed with a mixture of the body clay and wood ash that resembles treacle.
3. Shoji Hamada likened the ego or the self conscious to a tail. He maintained that the best pots would appear when the potter had 'lost' his tail. In other words, when the self had given way to a complete immersion in one's work, without the hindrance of arrogance or the desire to please.
4. *Chajan* is the Korean word for the Japanese *Yunomi* or teacup.
5. *Sojoojan* is the Korean word for the Japanese *Guinomi* or sake cup.

Phil Rogers is a ceramic artist and writer on the arts from Rhayader, Wales. This article was written for Kang Hyo Lee's exhibition at Pucker Gallery, Boston, US, in 2006.

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