



– IDEA EXCHANGE –

KOREAN MASTERS

by Heidi McKenzie



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Within the ceramics ecosystem, something quite extraordinary happened last June in Toronto, Canada. Five Korean Masters—Kim Seong-Tae who specializes in five-layered slip carving; You Yong-Chul, renowned for his slip inlay; Choi In-Gyu, revered for his pierced, double-walled vessels and his intricate carving; Yo Se-Yeon known for his reverse inlay cranes; and Lee Hyung-Gu the master thrower—came to teach and share their skills and craftsmanship at the 40th annual Fusion conference. Close to 300 potters participated in the experiential learning in a giant, ballroom-sized workshop. Fusion is the organizing body within

the province of Ontario that is dedicated to the promotion of hand-crafted clay and glass. It boasts 450 members and offers annual conferences. The recipe for success included a huge dose of serendipity, many open hearts, and a healthy portion of good old Canadian hutzpah.

Serendipity Sparks an Idea

Unha Hill is a part-time potter from Hamilton, Ontario, who grew up in South Korea. When her 14-year-old daughter's children's choir was invited to perform in her homeland, Hill volunteered to



1 Korean Masters (from left to right): Kim Seong-Tae, Yo Se-Yeon, Choi In-Gyu, You Yong-Chul, and Lee Hyuang-Gu. 2 Lee Hyuang-Gu demonstrating throwing techniques for multi sectioned forms using a throwing stick. *Photo: Robert Cheong.* 3 Kim Seong-Tae carving through layers of colored slip on the surface of a large platter. 4 Choi In-Gyu piercing the wall of a vessel. *Photo: Gene Timpany.* 5 Korean carving tools and stamps provided to the attendees as part of their conference tool kit. *Photo: Jen Leis.*

chaperone. Her unbridled curiosity and love of ceramics took her to Icheon—the fabled city of ceramics about an hour and a half outside of Seoul. The village of Icheon in South Korea is designated as a United Nations Educational Science and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) City of Crafts and Folk Art. With a population of 210,000, it is twinned with Jingdezhen, China, and is equally renowned as the center of traditional pottery in South Korea, dating back to the Joseon Dynasty (1392 CE). Today over 80 pottery factories are congregated in the village, and approximately 300 gas and wood kilns are in perpetual motion.

Hill arrived in Icheon by bus on a Sunday to find the normally bustling ceramics quarters all but silent. While poking around and peering through windows, she happened upon a small group of potters. She was invited to join them for tea and that led to the beginning of what has turned into an ongoing, international, cultural exchange program between ceramic artists in Canada and Korea. Hill's attitude of "Why not?" was embraced with open arms. She returned to Canada and shared her vision with her mentor, Canadian potter Tony Clennell. Clennell enlisted the help of Chris Snedden, FUSION's Vice-President at the time, and together they



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hatched a plan to dispatch a reconnaissance group to lay the groundwork for the Korean Masters' voyage to Canada.

Laying the Groundwork

Clennell and Snedden, together with Hill, assembled a group of Canadian and American potters to travel to Icheon during the city's annual ceramics festival, which in 2015, coincided with the Gyeonggi International Ceramic Biennial (GICB). Snedden recalls, "We came as tourists and they treated us like rock-stars." Each day they would do a workshop with one of the Masters in their studio and then be taken to see the festival and museums during the day, and wined and dined by high-ranking city officials, including the mayor and other VIPs. The Korean press from fourteen different national and regional publications profiled the Canadian contingency.

Adapting Successful Ideas

It was Hill who picked up on adapting the GICB festival's hands-on format to motivate Canadian potters to become more engaged with FUSION. She observed that in the Korean festival, everyone from children to seniors, and amateurs to veteran artists were involved in making things with clay. Their wares would then be fired and shipped back to them by volunteers.

Since each of the five Masters possessed a particular finishing skill that could be demonstrated and used as an instructional hands-on technique, why not have pre-made pots ready for FUSION conference attendees to get their hands dirty? Clennell sourced friends, Don and Maureen Ross, who resurrected their ram-press to make 300 sets of five greenware ceramic items that were then readied in "bento-box" style packets and distributed to the 266 participants along with their own specialist set of carving, stamping, and cutting tools. Snedden, current FUSION president, personally color coated 300 bowls with five layers of slip in preparation.

Preparations and Participation

The conference encompassed a number of satellite activities. Local and regional vendors set up an industry center to sell and demonstrate their wares, and the Korean Masters sold their pots. Fusion founder, potter Donn Zver opened up his home to the five Masters and their wives for the duration of their stay. He also hosted a pre-conference dinner for delegates at his Café Troy (which he runs concurrent to his studio in a small town 1½ hours outside of Toronto) at which FUSION was able to reciprocate with the Korean consul general, the president of the Canadian Korean cultural association, and the Federal Minister of Culture in attendance. After dinner, Lee Hyuang-Gu threw a series of large pots that were then transported into Toronto for use as the Masters' demonstration pieces.

The whole conference was translated using volunteers, and as we worked with our pieces at the tables, the Masters who weren't onstage demonstrating were constantly circulating and guiding us individually with a helping hand. Clay has no need for language and the cultural barriers just slipped away, unnoticed. There was a conference dinner at a Toronto-based Korean restaurant during the event, and the whole weekend was launched with an exhibition of the Masters' work in the lobby and museum shop at the Gardiner Museum of

Ceramics. Post conference activities for the Masters included touring Ottawa, Montreal, Quebec City, and Niagara Falls, attending the Hamilton Arts Awards, and the quintessential Canadian experience—fishing and canoeing at a cottage on Curve Lake located on an Ojibwe First Nations Indian reserve.

Lessons Learned

Even as a full-time studio potter with years of professional training, I have to admit that before I got my hands dirty during the conference/workshop, I had zero inkling of the unfathomable technical skill involved in creating the pots that represented the five different traditional Korean ceramic techniques. In this case, seeing was not believing—doing was believing. When working with our flower stamp, it was challenging to get a consistent pressure and learn the subtleties of how to apply colored slip into the indentations just so. Handling the scraping tool to reveal an even pattern was no easy feat. It was similarly difficult to manage the mishima process to tease out a crane. Probably the most eye-opening difficult was the carving—to create a negative space pattern and carving into multiple layers of colored slip to reveal a pattern. Having never handled these types of customized tools, I found myself left with what looked like a kindergarten school project in my hands, and in awe of the seemingly effortless demonstrations taking place on the stage just a few feet away from me. Some people took to certain techniques more easily than others—everyone was supportive of each other, and we worked in an atmosphere of collegial non-judgment.

Most of us didn't get to know the Masters personally. We know them largely through the 2013 YouTube video, *Icheon Master Hand*. The video was produced and disseminated by the city to celebrate the public service, craftsmanship, skills, and dedication to preserving the age-old ceramic traditions of their Masters whom they hold in such high esteem. The video coincided with an exhibit at the American Museum of Ceramic Art (AMOCA) in Pomona, California.

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6 Choi In-Gyu's pierced, double-walled vase. **7** Hyuang-Gu's moon jar. **8** Kim Seong-Tae's jar with five-layer slip-carved pattern. **9** You Yong-Chul carving through white slip and adding stamped decoration to a large vessel. **10** Yo Se-Yeon speaking about his work.



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