

Quietly Continuing The Teapots of Tineke van Gils

Article by
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ASKING ME TO WRITE ABOUT CONTEMPORARY POTTERY is nearly the equivalent of asking me to hold a young child. I am not comforted by the number of times that other people have done it and I dread the cliché endearments that I feel are expected of me. Furthermore, no matter how much I resist them, I will inevitably and against my will be charmed by one of them and, in the discovery of my genuine affection, experience something that can only be described as revelation. I have had such good fortune with the teapots made by Tineke van Gils.

I first met van Gils in 2009 at a symposium in Dehua, China and I can still remember the naturalness and the infectious joy that emanated from her pottery wheel as if it were some kind of generator. The ease I observed, however, masked just how challenging

Below: *Cinderella, Ballet Series*. 16 cm.

Above: *Queen, Royal Series*. 16 cm.



and pivotal the artist's experience in Dehua and her successive experiences in China, were.

Living near the Dutch city of Delft, one might think that van Gils would be at home amongst Dehua's casting operations. Yet van Gils is, to her core and by her nature, a potter whose hands were destined and designed to throw on the wheel. The only person throwing on the wheel in Dehua was the saggar maker, his clay being a sturdy and forgiving stoneware. Dehua's porcelain (or *Blanc de Chine* as its European admirers have called it) is, on the other hand, or not for the hands at all, as pure and white as it is temperamental. Lacking plasticity, its working time reduced to a bare minimum, Dehua's porcelain demands immediacy. This immediacy is suitable for simpler, singular forms, but van Gils has a committed relationship to the teapot, which is anything but simple. Rather, teapots are asymmetrical assemblages of compound curves and joints, engineered juxtapositions of form and compendiums of planes, pores and protrusions. No matter how they are reduced and distilled, no matter how understated, the teapot remains a complex thing,

In all its complexity (and in Dehua porcelain) the achievement of the teapot, or as van Gils describes it, the "arrival of the teapot", requires a certain degree of mastery or, as one might describe it, crack-shot midwifery. More particularly, the endeavour requires two skills. First is the ability to complete the teapot while the clay is completely wet, without the





luxury of any set-up or drying time for its component parts. Second is the reduction of the throwing process from a drawn-out series of regimented steps to a seamless progression of swift movements. At this speed, says the artist, the clay already is before the clay has time to decide what it will be. It is the perfect seduction. The clay, as if following the lead of a ballroom dancer, yields to masterful technique without resistance.

The ease and comfort with which she now works should not, however, be taken for granted. For van Gils, the reduction of the throwing process is intuitive, it is the gift of intelligent hands and the result of a 30-year career as a production potter with outrageous deadlines. Some fraction of this skill is also owed to the artist's 'eccentric' throwing experiments. Working off-centre or even upside-down, the edge of the potter's wheel has been the only boundary in an arena for the sport of pottery making. Van Gils has not been limited to functional forms, but even the purely sculptural elements she has made on the wheel have given her insight into the potter's art. Today, the fluidity with which van Gils handles even the most troublesome clays and the unbroken contours of her movements are evident in the fixed softness and suppleness of her forms and surfaces.

While her life on the wheel has endowed her with skill and charisma, character has also been a necessity. In this case, character refers to the quiet determination that compels one to go forward

without measurement of one's accomplishments – to be carried by an unceasing flow of ideas and to work always in the current of inspiration. At the outset of her second experience in Dehua this was put to the test by an unexpected demand for more than 100 completed and unique teapots in less than four weeks and a preview show after only two weeks. Fortunately, van Gils is not an accountant. Instead, van Gils is more like a farmer (and she is a farmer's wife) who tends to her work with modesty, perseverance and patience, all qualities that are embedded in her work.

Also embedded in her work are the artist's own grace, amicable personality and wonky sense of humour. The artist's teapots are her offspring. Quirky on occasion yet always sensible, smart, personable, spare and elegant, the clay's inheritance of personality is as inevitable as if van Gils was dressing her own child for her first day of school. First is the love for the material and the process. Second is the desire to create something useful. The rest is genealogy.

Of course, the artist does have a trajectory. In working with the world's whitest porcelain, for example, van Gils is in pursuit of its opposite – the greys and blacks of shadow. Like footprints in the snow, the shadows of creases, crevices and lift are

*Above: Rosemary, Flower Series. 13 cm.
Below: White Swan, Ballet Series. 18 cm.*



decorative elements that are both a result of the artist's initiative and a natural by-product of the material's handling. There is also the drapery, a reference to Dehua's centuries-old tradition of modelling exquisite porcelain figures, to which van Gils pays homage in her work. Van Gils also comes to the wheel with a degree of two-dimensional planning, the potter's wheel adding the third dimension to vessels that quickly become improvisational.

These are the sparks of inspiration that are produced by the creative friction of hands on clay. Between these two elements the balance will shift from teapot to teapot, but at her best Tineke van Gils makes a connection with the material that is reflexive and reciprocal. It is a connection that has not been interrupted by extraneous demands, convoluted ideas or overbearing aspirations. In these pristine moments of simplicity, in the patient precision of mastery, potter and clay mirror each other. Purely, remarkably, the phenomenon is more rare than one might expect.



*Below, top to bottom: Chamber One, Yueji Kiln Series. 13 cm.
Van Gils with 100 Earthenware Teapots in The Netherlands.
Right, top to bottom: Anemone, Flower Series. 18 cm.
Lotus, Flower Series. 12 cm.
Stamp on Dehua Porcelain.*



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