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In studio with Tineke van Gils



Tineke, before we jump into the main topic of making teapots, please tell us something about your training and career as a ceramist.

For a change, let me start when I was young. Due to family circumstances, I had to leave my parents' house at the age of fifteen. From that time, I worked in Rotterdam for a living, studied in the evenings, and in the left-over time I organized craft clubs, a newspaper and some exhibitions. Around my twenties,

when I taught teachers about literature, poetry and linguistics, I followed my dream and studied Dutch at the university of Amsterdam. Then followed a marriage, a child and a divorce. Once again, now with a child, I had to earn a total living. At that time, I discovered the potter's wheel, or maybe it was the wheel that discovered me. From that moment on, my greatest talent got its chance, my hands were ready for this and I started a studio in Amsterdam. Within three years I

became successful in large-scale production and because I charged good prices, I could free up time for experiments.

Has your move to the Chinese porcelain-inspired city of Delft had an impact on your work?

Actually, I didn't move from city to city, but because I met the man of my life in the nineties, I moved with my thriving pottery business from Amsterdam to his dairy farm under the Delft Blue sky. For me as well as for my work it was like coming home. My working method was direct and spontaneous from the start. I like to save my fresh tracks and traces in the clay, I keep it pure and unadorned. My way of working fitted in very well with the way of life and working of my farmer. Collaborating with the ceramics city of Delft only came far later, after I had already worked in Japan, Korea and China.

You were invited to Dehua and later to Jingdezhen. China is particularly close to your heart, isn't it?

In my potter's work I feel a close connection with early Asian ceramics. My clay handwriting seems to have been born in China. In addition, the Far East is the cradle of porcelain. However my personal Chinese adventure maybe started when I created bamboo-shape teapots for my first real exhibition in the eighties, or was it in 2006 when I made a hundred different teapots, to sponsor a community performance of the opera Turandot. This teapot idea was in line with the story of the opera set in China where tea is the national drink. By the way, my teapots were presented in the presence of the Queen of the Netherlands. In 2009, because of my teapots, I was invited for an artist's residency in Dehua, where I totally fell in love with Blanc de Chine, the goddess of porcelain. In that blissful state they asked me to throw this purest white porcelain into one hundred unique teapots to be exhibited in Shanghai. My happiness was complete. Ten years later I was honoured with another invitation,



this time to make a hundred teapots in Jingdezhen. To complete my teapot circle I got the idea to make another hundred teapots in Delft. In one of the two remaining Delft blue factories I was given permission to make those teapots according to the authentic Delft blue tradition, using all the materials and tools from the factory.

As you are one of the most interesting builders of teapots, we would love for you

to guide us through the construction of your teapot and to give us tips on what to look out for in making them?

For this interview I opt for a porcelain teapot created with mixed techniques on the potter's wheel. By blending cobalt oxide in a part of the material, I make a blue/white marbled block. I roll thin slices of this in a special pattern on a clean slab of porcelain and shape the whole into a cylinder that I stiffen a little with the heat gun. I place it directly on a wet bottom

and connect it with some pressure while the wheel goes round. Another just prepared part I drape on the top and connect it in the same way. I play with the material, knowing that I can always start again. The cutting in wet porcelain I do with extremely thin wire and accurate, quick movements. The spout in this case gets an extra fold and I cut it from the lump directly in the good shape. There should be enough holes under the spout, and no narrowing in the neck, to allow the tea to



flow fluently. On the teapot body I connect it with some pressure from a wooden potter's rib. The spout is wet so I can still shape it any way, but it needs to end with a sharp rim on the right level. While glazing a biscuit porcelain teapot I take some glaze off from the spout's rim, which results in better pouring without dripping. The lid must hang with some weight in the pot. I dry the handle a little and press it firmly into place. By working with porcelain while it is still wet, I can create the entire teapot in one go, while

the making process remains visible everywhere.

I think you are a strong advocate of cultural exchange..

I like to surprise myself and to be surprised. Collaboration is a guarantee for surprises. At times I therefore challenge others and myself to work together while exchanging our skills. Sometimes I even manage to get the other so far that we can intervene in each other's work. In Dehua I honoured the saggar man by making a number of teapots in which



I marbled the finest Blanc de Chine porcelain with buffalo-walked saggar clay. In Jingdezhen on my potter's wheel I transformed traditional vases, fresh from the moulds, into teapots. In my own studio with great colleagues, we have created things that we would never have created on our own. I also sometimes do these exchanges with students. The spontaneity that then surfaces gives so much energy.

One of your sayings is, "Art can talk where words end". I hope that you will continue to speak to us through your art for a very long time. What are your goals for the future?

About thirty-five years ago a master ceramist asked me the same question. However, after all these years and with all the knowledge and skills I have acquired, my answer is still the same. My goal is always to create the ultimate pot that will land me in heaven. It doesn't matter if it's a new unique squared box, a mixed media teapot or just a production series tea bowl, the only thing I know for sure is that my heaven-on-earth pot will always be the next pot.

I just wonder have you ever thought of doing online courses on making teapots? Especially for ceramists who don't want to or can't travel anymore?

Loaded with experience and skills it's a pleasure to pass on the tricks of the trade. I am increasingly replacing physical teaching by giving demonstrations and lectures, which suits me better lately and gives me the opportunity to interweave my spontaneity and pleasure on the potter's wheel with all the ins and outs of the teapot, for example. My demonstrations are a kind of performances, inspiration comes when the energy flows in both directions. As I have become more skilled, I attach less importance to do's and don'ts. The most meaningful thing I can show in my demonstrations is that it's all about remaining playful like a child.

Tineke van Gils
The Netherlands
info@tinekevangils.com
www.tinekevangils.com

Evelyne Schoenmann's next
interview partner is

Johanna Rytkölä
Finland

Evelyne Schoenmann is a ceramist, writer and curator. She is an AIC / IAC member and lives and works in Basel, Switzerland.
www.schoenmann-ceramics.ch