

China's Potters at Work

An exhibition at the Ethnographic Museum of the University of Zurich

Address: Pelikanstrasse 40, 8001 Zürich

Opening: July 15, 2010, 6 p.m.

(For press use)

In pottery, a great variety of methods can be found in different cultures across the globe. Pots are formed on turntables activated by foot or by hand; spinning clockwise or counter-clockwise; the potters sitting on a chair or squatting, standing upright, leaning up against a wall or bent-forward. This variety is reflected in the ways in which bodies are put into use. Bodily postures are much less an individual choice than they are a reflection of the local cultural background: The question why people work in a certain way is usually answered by potters with "this is how it is done around here". At close view, seemingly irrelevant details like working angle, sitting postures and hand gestures relate to much more than mere custom. Within them, man expresses his technical skill, informed by the history and culture of his native society. He expresses his very personal bodily cultural experience.

The anthropological perspective

Anthropologists are interested in the perspective of the Other. They try to find out what the world looks like from the point of view of the stranger, in our case, that of the Chinese potter.

Skill

In anthropology, skill means the culturally specific ways in which man uses his body. Even the ways in which the most simple daily chores are pursued are culturally informed. As they do not require any willpower it seems as if the body itself „knows“. The body is more than a simple tool. It is the memory of cultural knowledge.

Porcelain in China

Pottery is one of the oldest human handicrafts. From an early age on, Chinese production was especially known for its high quality and its special processing technology. Our exhibition focuses on two specifics of Chinese ceramics production: the technique of turning/shaping and the working in proximity to the floor.

Turning/shaping: In China the relatively non-plastic clay is first shaped into a thick and rather imprecise form. After this raw shape is sufficiently dry it is then turned into an even and delicate form. This difficult task requires an appropriate practice and skill.

Working in proximity to the floor: In the early ages of Chinese history, Confucius was sitting on the floor. Within a time span of more than a thousand years, the Chinese rose from the sitting mat onto the folding chair, onto the sitting platform, the chair, the throne – even today this process is far from being accomplished in many areas of life. This is visible also within handicraft. Working in proximity to the floor – as does the Chinese potter – requires special skill. The results of pottery on low-level turntables range from great in quantity, to great in dimensions, to great in refinement.

The seeming implicitness of audio-visual media

How can research on techniques of the body be done? On the one hand, visibly apparent phenomena – i.e. bodily postures and hand gestures - can be observed, documented, photographed, filmed and described. On the other hand, certain aspects of skill which are informed by the cultural background are less easily accessible. Oftentimes, they can only be made accessible through interviews with potters or by analysing the accomplished object. Therefore, in addition, practice-based methods have also been applied in this exposition, especially through the use of audio-visual media. The reflection on the use of these methods is part of the results presented. We believe that only the parallel use of different media can thoroughly explain the different notions of skill: Objects, such as porcelains, materials and tools go side by side with photographs, films and texts.

The exhibition gives insights into research under way at the Ethnographic Museum of the University of Zurich on the work of Chinese potters, uniting the expertise of a ceramist and sinologist, a visual anthropologist, a photographer and an anthropologist of technology.

Exhibition: July 16, 2010 to June 30, 2011

Opening hours:	Tuesday to Friday:	10 a.m. – 13 p.m. and 14 p.m. – 17 p.m.
	Saturday:	14 p.m. – 17 p.m.
	Sunday:	11 a.m. – 17 p.m.

Free entry!

The exhibition is accompanied by the following brochure, available at the museum shop: Mertens, Anette and Thurnherr, Christof and Leuenberger, Kathrin and Flitsch, Mareile (Eds.), *Abgedreht! China töpfer bodennah*. Völkerkundemuseum der Universität Zürich 2010, 48 pages including many color photographs, ISBN 978-3-909105-52-6, sFr. 10. --.