

AN ARTIST'S LIFE IN JINGDEZHEN, CHINA

Gary Erickson*

For the past nine years, I have been traveling to China to spend my summers in Jingdezhen, known as the “porcelain city of China.” This historic city has been producing ceramics for seventeen hundred years, with the first porcelains invented over one thousand years ago. Living and creating abroad has both challenged and rewarded me as an artist. The translation from low-temperature earthenware sculpture created in my Minnesota studio to pure white high-temperature porcelain in Jingdezhen has been a fascinating journey and *almost* as daunting as trying to learn the Chinese language.

For years I had been taught about kaolin in materials classes and used it in slips and glazes. When I hiked over a portion of Mount Gaoling for the first time, I visualized workers bringing kaolin out of the cave mines and down the well-worn path to the river for processing. The one thousand years of effort by miners, clay makers, throwers, mold makers, painters, and kiln firers flooded my mind. In my Jingdezhen studio I use the porcelain for the same properties that artists have appreciated for centuries. I am amused by the fact that someone like me—a six-foot-five-inch-tall, English-speaking Midwesterner—is now connected to the history of Chinese porcelain and part of the harmonious fabric of the porcelain industry.



Men and women transport porcelain throughout the town on wooden carts. They are vital to moving the work between the studios that make the porcelain, those that decorate the objects, and the kilns for firing them.

The designs found in growth processes in nature are commonalities of my earthenware and porcelain work. The concept of yin-yang (阴阳), the interaction of two energies that cause everything to happen, is the foundation for my Jingdezhen slip-cast porcelain forms, which embody a unique natural elegance, simplicity, and purity. Each form incorporates the spiral as a metaphor for the continuity of life. In Taoist thought, the spiral can be at once the beginning of all things and the way in which all things pursue their course. In an abstract way I strive to capture a spontaneous flow of energy that is not specific to any one object existing in the world but rather addresses something common to all.

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The author standing next to a giant teapot created in one of the “bigware” factories. This piece was not made for a customer but as testament to the scale at which this studio can work.



Prof. Gary Erickson was helped during his 2013 summer in Jingdezhen by Chinese students from Macalester College where he teaches and students from the Jingdezhen Ceramic Art Institute. They volunteer to assist him in his studio with his artwork, while he gives them experience creating and teaches them about Jingdezhen and Western aesthetics towards ceramics.

My first experience working with Jingdezhen porcelain was humbling to say the least! I used my familiar Western technique of coil-building. When the pieces were fired to 2300 degrees Fahrenheit, they cracked and slumped—leaving nothing to show for my efforts. The second year, I left my ego at home and wisely decided to learn from the one thousand years of porcelain history in Jingdezhen. I began using molds and slip-casting, allowing the porcelain clay platelets to align, giving strength to my forms. Each cast, though nearly identical at first, was altered in ways to create one-of-a-kind pieces. The next challenge was the kiln firing. I knew that if fired in their final orientation, such as a



Multiple throwers from a “bigware” factory throwing over four hundred pounds (180 kg) of clay for a single section of a vase that could be up to fifteen feet (4.6 m) tall. A master thrower utilizes up to four workers to support his hand through the throwing process.

horizontal form, the thin walls would slump at such high temperatures. Each piece needed to be somewhat precariously supported and fired on end to allow the spiral design to maintain its structural integrity. Convincing a kiln master to allow me to load my own work in this position was a challenge since they thought it would not work. It did work! Their perspective was, “Our traditions have been proven to work for centuries —so why change?” My Western-artist perspective was, “Let’s challenge the norm and try something new and unique.”

Division of labor was practiced in China centuries before the industrial revolution in Europe. The Jingdezhen porcelain industry was built on these practices and continues to use them today. Most foreign artists make their own clay, glazes, and molds and fire their own kilns. It took me a while to understand the flow of the city’s porcelain industry and how to utilize it. Once I let go of the self-imposed need to do it all myself, I found that my summers became very productive. Now I make my positive forms and bring them to a master mold maker who calculates the best approach with the fewest pieces needed for the mold and provides a finished mold in one day. After I purchase casting slip and when my forms are ready to fire, I call one of the several cart people who transport work between studios and other places. They bring my work to one of four public kilns used by artists and workshops in the Sculpture Factory Area. Whether you want to test a single piece or fire a body of work, it will be in and out of the kiln in less than twenty-four hours—very convenient, with quick results!

Over the past nine years, I have explored Jingdezhen and have seen the factories and studios do amazing things with porcelain.



A painter from Beijing was commissioned to paint this 6' x 12' tile in the area known as Lao Ya Tan (old duck pond).



This image shows many sections stacked and stored together for creating tall vases. It appears that the decorator is sitting on the rim of a giant form when in fact she is sitting eight feet (2.4 m) in the air on bamboo scaffolding.

Over the past nine years, I have explored Jingdezhen and have seen the factories and studios do amazing things with porcelain. I have witnessed four workers assisting a master in simultaneously throwing over four hundred pounds of clay. Each section is attached at the dry stage with casting slip, and the sections are stacked upon each other to create vases up to fifteen feet tall. Some factories produce slip-cast bowls in two minutes, with eggshell-thin walls; some others produce three-eighth-inch-thick tiles in sizes up to four feet by twelve feet—perfectly flat! The unique properties of Jingdezhen porcelain allow for both scale and thinness unimaginable in the West.

I have interviewed materials experts, visited historical and contemporary mines, brought students to help in my studio while teaching them about porcelain, and created a unique body of work that could not be made anywhere else in the world. An artist’s relationship with kaolin is very different from that of a scientist. Artists want to know how kaolin might be used in clay, slip, or glaze to enhance their artwork and personal expression. Some artists also study the chemical and structural side of kaolin, leading to new ideas and applications. Through our symbiotic relationship with scientists and their research, artists and industry provide new and creative applications of kaolin. As in my work, the yin combines with the yang.