

Looking Back on the History and Status of Icheon's Ceramic Culture

At the 12th Annual Conference of the UNESCO Creative Cities Network (UCCN), which was held on June 13, 2018, the applause of the representatives of the UCCN resounded throughout the city of Krakow, Poland. It was to congratulate Icheon, designated as a UNESCO Creative City for Crafts and Folk Art in 2010, as the first city in Korea to be selected as a chair in an individual creative field (Crafts and Folk Art) with full support from its member cities.

Icheon has been actively participating in not only the UCCN's annual conferences, but also the sub-network conferences, international forums, and international conferences and events. By successfully completing two international creative cities workshops, the framework of international exchange, which had been limited to China and Japan, was expanded to the Americas and Europe. The ceramics market also left the limits of the domestic market and advanced proudly to the Maison & Objet in Paris and



the Collect in London, starting with the American Museum of Ceramic Art (AMOCA) exhibition in the United States in 2013. The key to this foundation was the role of Icheon's ceramic history and cultural capacities.

1. Overview of Korean Ceramics

So, what is Korean ceramics? *Dojagi* 陶磁器 in Korean is a compound noun of the words *dogi* 陶器 (pottery) and *jagi* 磁器 (porcelain): clay with plasticity is used to make tools necessary for daily life before being fired at a high temperature.

According to Shiraki Yoichi 素木洋一, the author of the book *Thinking of Ceramics*, the character “瓦” (i.e. roof tile; *kawara* in Japanese) was initially used as a generic term for earthenware. It is said that the character represents a shape of making earthenware.

Also, “陶” is a hieroglyphic character that combines characters “阜(阝)” (sand structure), “匚” (embrace), and “缶” (jar). The 缶 character means a clay jar with large body and narrow mouth that was mainly used to store wine or fermented sauces. People of the Chinese Jin dynasty called this “鼓” (*gu*). “陶” originally meant kiln but gradually became a word to represent products made in a kiln.

“磁” refers to a bowl of hard texture and it originally meant “a stone that absorbs iron, that is, a magnet.” It is said that the reason this character has come to be used as often as the character “瓷” is because it borrowed the first letter of the name of Cizhou Kiln (磁州窯) in Hebei, China, which has been famous for ceramics since ancient times.

“器” is a compound word of four “口” (mouth) and one “犬” (dog): the four “口” together means “皿” (a bowl) and “犬” means “dog meat.” This implies that dog meat was common food in the ancient times so the original meaning of “器” was passed down to mean putting dog meat on a plate, and eventually it came to mean a vessel. Today, “器” means a vessel to put food in as well as the material of the vessel. It is also an academic term to refer to ceramics in a generic sense.

In English, the word “ceramics” can be found in ancient Greek. In

ancient Greece, the potter was called *kerameus*, the raw material or product potters used was called *keramos* and both the potters' quarter and the pottery market was called *kerameikos*.

The etymology of *keramos*, which means raw materials or products used for ceramics, is divided into two meanings: one is *keras*, which means beeswax in Greek, and the other is *keras*, meaning horn.

Kera or beeswax refers to a material with plasticity and also means a molded product. *Keras* means drinking cups (*rython*)—in ancient Greece, there were many horn-shaped drinking vessels made of clay—, and *keramos* came to mean “earth” or “pot.” Similar horn-shaped cups of different texture were also used in Korea throughout the Three Kingdoms period, the Unified Silla period, the Goryeo period and the Joseon period.

In addition, the meaning of “baking” can be found in the ancient Sanskrit language and combined with the concept of firing, the finished product is also called *keramos*. There is also a theory that *kula* is the etymology of *keramos*. Normally, the original meaning of ceramics can be seen to mean “baked clay products.”

2. Icheon, a Journey of Ceramics Culture

There is a sentence that best describes Icheon. Gwon Geun, a literary writer in the early Joseon dynasty, wrote in his book *Icheon hyanggyogi* (Records of Icheon Hyanggyo): “The land is wide and fertile, and the people are abundant and rich.” Commemorating the compilation of the *Icheon-gun ji* (Records of Icheon County) in 1984, Dr. Yu Dal-yeong, an agricultural scholar in Icheon, said: “The spirit of the town and its people that greatly benefit the society flows like a river.”

In Icheon, ceramics were produced continuously, starting with plain, coarse Mumun pottery made in the Bronze Age. In the sixteenth century records, it is mentioned that “porcelain” was famous as a special product of Icheon, and there are kiln site remains in Icheon where ceramics were produced during the Joseon dynasty.

Sagimakgol Pottery Village in Saeum-dong was a place where white

porcelain was fired for private use during the Joseon dynasty. The potters of this place were often requisitioned to the Gwangju Bunwon, a branch kiln of the Saongwon (Bureau of Palace Kitchen), and made white porcelain as an offering to the king. Today, Sagimakgol is the only traditional market for ceramics with about 50 workshops.

On the other hand, folk ceramics movement began to sprout and kilns were built in the Sugwang-ri area of Sindun-myeon around 1961. Young potters worked in the then booming lacquerware kilns, honed their skills, and produced traditional ceramics such as Buncheong ware, celadon and white porcelain. In recent years, Icheon has created the largest ceramic art village in Korea, “Ye’s Park” in Sindun-myeon, which has attracted more than 200 workshops. It is becoming a place where ceramics production, consumption, and experience coexist.

Though ceramic production in Icheon did not diversify after the fifteenth century, white jade and ceramics were recorded as special products of Icheon in the *Dongguk yeoji seungnam* (Survey of the Geography of Korea). White jade, earthenware, lime, and chestnuts were also listed as specialties of Icheon in the *Dongguk yeojiji* (Geographical Record of Korea) that was published in the middle of the sixteenth century. However, in the mid-seventeenth century, the *Yeoji doseo* (Atlas and Geography of Korea) wrote: “They were found in the past, but not now.”

Icheon-related literature tells us that the ceramics of Icheon existed for about 100 to 150 years, from the late fifteenth century to the early seventeenth century. Village names such as Sagisil, Jeommal, and Jeomchon are identified on old maps, which means that these areas were all ceramic workshops in the past. In fact, broken pieces of refined white porcelain have been excavated from the kiln site at Sagisil in Majang-myeon. It has been confirmed that white porcelain and black-glazed porcelain were also made at the Jeommal kiln site.

During the Joseon dynasty, the branch kilns of the Saongwon brought raw materials from all over the country and used them to make white porcelain. It can be seen that white clay from Yanggu, Bongsan, Jinju, Chungju, and Icheon was selected as good quality clay during the reign of King Sukjong (1674–1720). In the 24th year of King Seongjong’s reign (1493),



Ye's Park, Icheon Ceramic Art Village

Yu Ja-gwang, commissioner of the Saongwon, reported a need for a new kiln to the king and asked a nearby village to bring the clay of Icheon to build it. In other words, Icheon's white clay was excellent quality for porcelain making as well as one of the best in the country for building kilns.

Potters from Sagimakgol village in Saeum-dong were mobilized to participate in the production of porcelain that was made exclusively for the royal court at a branch kiln. The records on the mobilization of potters or ceramic artisans are found in several books such as the *Yeoji doseo*, the *Icheon-bu eupji* (Village Record on Icheon-bu) that was published in the 8th year of King Heonjong's reign (1842), and the *Eupji* (Village Record), which was published during the King Gojong's reign (1863–1897). These records show that the advanced techniques of ceramic making were transmitted naturally to potters in Icheon.

The excavation of Seolbongsanseong Fortress in Icheon found many earthenware relics from the Baekje period in the fourth and fifth centuries and from the Silla period. Ceramic production during the Goryeo period (918–1392) remains unclear. However, white porcelain production began in the early Joseon dynasty and it was active enough to be considered as a local



Earthenware relics excavated from Seolbong Sanseong in Icheon

specialty from the late fifteenth century to the early seventeenth century. According to literature on local history that was published after the mid-seventeenth century, ceramic production had ceased in the seventeenth century. However, lacquerware kilns appeared in Icheon from the end of the nineteenth century and began producing black-glazed bowls for home use.

In the 1900s, Japanese antique collectors started to pay attention to Goryeo celadon, and from 1908, efforts to reproduce Goryeo celadon were actively developed at the Yi Royal Family Art Manufactory. As these reproduced celadon wares were mainly produced in Japanese factories and as Japanese and Western styles were blended, it is difficult to say that traditional porcelain was restored. Meanwhile, some Korean potters, including Yu Geun-hyeong, tried to revive traditional celadon and porcelain techniques after learning practical skills at a Japanese-run ceramic factory.

After the closing of the Gwangju Bunwon, traditional kilns run by Korean potters, who were scattered throughout the country, mainly produced ceramic livingware including earthenware jars. Among these kilns were Icheon's

lacquerware kilns. Lacquerware pottery is fired at a higher temperature and thus has black glaze as if it has been covered with lacquer. It is hard and dense and has a quality close to porcelain. It is presumed that this was created by ceramic artisans from this region who attempted to integrate white porcelain-making techniques into earthenware. The lacquerware kilns in Sugwang-ri survived the destruction caused by the Korean War and enjoyed a boom in the late 1950s, as potters and ceramists who had studied traditional ceramic techniques at the Korean Institute of Formative and Culture and the Korean Artwork Research Institute gathered at the lacquerware kiln to work. Icheon became a place to revive traditional ceramic techniques. In particular, Haegang Yu Geun-hyeong, who founded the Haegang Goryeo Celadon Research Institute, created a new ceramic art technique. Doam Ji Sun-tak of Goryeo Toyo reproduced Goryeo celadon successfully for the first time and trained young talents. Gwangho Jo So-su, founder of Gwangjuyo, introduced and exported Korean ceramics to Japan, creating an economic foundation for other potters.

The Korean Artwork Research Institute (Daebang-dong Kiln) at Daebang-dong in Seoul started making folk pottery in 1956. However, when the kiln closed in 1958, almost all of the potters working in the Daebang-dong Kiln transferred to Icheon to work at a lacquerware kiln. As a result, Icheon has been producing celadon, white porcelain, Buncheong ware, and colored ceramics and the ceramic culture of Icheon is now well known in Korea.

3. Inheritance and Prospect of Ceramic Culture

As of 2020, there are eight Masters of Craftsmen of Korea among the potters in Icheon. Icheon has also implemented the Icheon Ceramics Master System since 2002 to continue the tradition of the ceramic industry and to recognize the importance of potters and ceramists.

Twenty-three Icheon ceramic masters have been named by 2020 and these masters take the lead in creating a new tradition of Korean ceramics by developing traditional ceramic techniques with a fundamental awareness of how to transmit the excellence of Korean ceramics. They also continue to



experiment with new shapes and techniques.

We look forward to seeing the essence of Icheon's ceramic culture bloom in the community of ceramic culture created together by potters and citizens.

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