

Art Springing from Life – A Ceramics Story

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The first time I met Gustav Kraitz was in the coffee shop at the Capital Museum in Beijing. Our museum was preparing an exhibition of ceramic art and sculptures by Swedish artists Ulla and Gustav Kraitz. When I learnt that Gustav's artistic inspiration came from ceramic art pieces from the Song dynasty, I was indeed surprised. Here, from far away in northern Europe, were two artists who – some 40 years before – had been so captured by the colour and glaze of a single shard, seen in Nils Palmgren's book *Sung Sherds*, that they then devoted their life to the art of ceramics.

In this process, they needed to master the technical difficulties of kiln firings, and control the exceptional change in colour, form and quality of the ceramic pieces that may occur when burning at temperatures of 1,300 degrees Celsius and above. No simple feat! Not surprisingly, I keenly anticipated my first opportunity to see the works of this couple in real life.

On April 21, 2009, the exhibition of ceramic sculptures by Ulla and Gustav Kraitz opened at Capital Museum in Beijing, a show that I visited countless times. As the art works made a deep impression on me, I also told my friends to see it. Tenmoku, celadon and oxblood glazes, as well as pure, clear blue glazes, are the main theme for the Kraitz couple. The exhibition proved a great success, giving me a new understanding of their creative commitment and achievement.

I have not read the book *Sung Sherds*, but judging from the flame fired works which the Kraitzes create, the ceramic shards introduced by Nils Palmgren probably originated from the Jun kilns, found in Henan province. Jun was the northern Chinese porcelain made famous by the imperial court during the Song dynasty

(960-1127). Jun glazes are characterized by widely alternating opalescence with blue as the base, varying from almost darkly red to sky blue, or even moon white; and with the blue tones often having a silky lustre. No other area during the Song dynasty could match the beauty of the Jun colours.

Ulla and Gustav Kraitz combine technical prowess with cultural inspiration. By firing using wood and coal, they give the one thousand year-old Chinese technique life today, and they produce ceramic pieces with glazes as beautiful as during the Song dynasty. But they don't stop at that. No piece of art is an isolated object, and the Kraitzes have developed a style where each art work is connected with their other pieces and at the same time unique, reflecting a lively, contemporary feel.

When an artist selects his or her subject, material and form, the final expression is closely related to the personality of the artist. With the Kraitz husband-and-wife team, many of their works are linked to their emotions of life and hope, and in the case of Gustav there is a very close connection with his personal experiences and outlook.

In early September 2011, I paid my second visit to Ulla and Gustav Kraitz in Sweden. Gustav Kraitz is now 85 – but his spirit is vigorous and we exchanged experiences while he himself drove the car and showed us the local sights. Later, in the evenings, he returned to his work to fire new ceramic pieces, already oblivious of himself and driven by his task.

During this visit, I became aware that we had arrived at a landscape which provides inspiration for the sculptors. Not only does the Kraitzes' connection with nature result in forms close to nature's own, they also live in this rural setting and created a large number of works for the outdoors, where those works in turn get in direct touch with nature. Ulla and Gustav Kraitz have lived in the countryside of southern Sweden for over 40 years, and they believe that the land has had a decisive influence on their creativity.

The couple lives on a fertile slope with magnificent views overlooking wide plains with farms, orchards and beech forests. Such scenes help enrich their art. They say, that when they place a piece of art in this landscape, they are returning it to the soil. Thus, nature and culture conduct a dialogue. Large crustiform sculptures provide space for snails to crawl; oxblood red spheres and ceramic pillows mix with well-kept shrubs and fruit trees; a bronze cat sneaks across on the quiet.

Gustav Kraitz, constantly busy, is absolutely clear on his own view on life and art, as time runs its course. We discussed the question of time. He told me that he had more than once turned to heaven to seek a five years' extension: "There is so much to do, so many art works to finish..."

When this subject was discussed I sensed sympathy and understanding for his longing for an extended artistic life, and for his aspiration to reach an even higher artistic level. The true meaning of his longing and aspiration is to keep designing and creating in order to let art enlighten life and explain our existence.

Looking at both form and content, many of the Kraitz couple's creations express praise and hope, such as in the sculptures "Pregnant woman" and "Newly born baby". Art works like "Apple", "Shards", "Cocoon" and "Pillow" come from everyday life, but the Kraitzes transform them from the rational to something larger, from the familiar to the unfamiliar, in an impressive vision. This is how the couple decipher life, making it a perpetual theme. At the same time, "life" is a theme which educated them, making them masterful artists of international significance.

That shards from the Song dynasty can serve as inspiration and then be enriched by the Kraitzes' creative distillation surely is confirmation of the variety of cultural development. By refining the technique and getting inspired by Song dynasty ceramics, this

Swedish couple has created works that not only shine with lustre, but also carry a magic tone.

May Ulla and Gustav Kraitz be able to create even more art pieces, and enjoy a continuing and flourishing artistic life.