

# The Hidden Dragon

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The Far Eastern attitude to ceramics has a static element to it, with change occurring within tradition. For us, this is also the case in the crafts. In contrast, art has a dynamic element. A decision in its favour is no longer a change in degree but an absolute one. It requires a different kind of creativity.

In the I Ching, the Book of Changes, creativity is portrayed as a bright, strong, primeval intellectual force. Where this primeval force comes from has yet to be determined, whether by depth psychologists or researchers into creativity. Today, we would be unable to say any more about it than the ancient Chinese, the ancient Greeks, Goethe or Nietzsche. The profoundest statement is still the metaphor used by the wise Chinese, for whom, "the path of creativity works through change or transformation, so that all things receive their true nature and purpose and come into true correspondence with the great harmony". The surviving version of the I Ching, which was translated in 1923 by Richard Wilhelm, is a commentary by Confucius on the Book of Changes from around 500 B.C. In it, the creative force, which "by its nature is in motion", orientates itself towards harmony with the eternal order of the world, the Tao (=path) of heaven. This corresponds to the findings of modern neurology, where "the experience of change leads to the fulfilment of the meaning of life and thus to greater psychological harmony" (Kankeleit). And the meaning of life, writes Laozi in the Tao Te Ching, lies in the immutable eternal law that change is in all things. Not from within, from creative activity, but viewed from the point of view of the result, today creativity is orientated almost exclusively towards the marketplace. With its greed for new things, it guarantees change. It is often said that nothing is more permanent than change. The speaker is often unaware that this piece of wisdom was written in the first millennium B.C. by Laozi in the Tao Te Ching, where the world is interpreted as being in a state of eternal change: "Only the Tao of change is permanent".

What good does it do if someone fulfils all the criteria with which philosophy defines creativity if he cannot earn a living with what he produces? In place of harmony we have competition, towards which creativity is orientated. The area in which ceramics can compete at all – if we mean pottery – has become very small. And if we mean the kind of art that has developed from pottery, it has entered into an entirely new field of competition where it first has to find its bearings. Either way, it seems to prove what

the I Ching says about creative production: in the first stage – the "concealed dragon" – the creative force is present but not yet active. The potter or ceramist – if we are to refer this to ourselves – has been stimulated by the creative problems and is responsive to them, but no concretisation follows. Only in the second stage, the "Dragon emerging in the field", does the creative process become conscious, to shape what in the following stages flows from one's inner depths. But this is combined with the danger of entering upon a pathway that is not in harmony with the necessities of the times; this was true 500 years B.C. The text continues that the upward trend is shaken by doubt of whether to take the risk. Doubt keeps things in motion until the individual has committed to creativity in its entirety. The I Ching also describes a fifth phase: Flying dragon in heaven". In next phase, "Arrogant dragon will have cause for regret" more danger lurks, that the creative person will be conceited about his work and will identify with the Creator. All of this sounds as if it had only just been formulated.

In this new field of competition, which the ceramist enters as an artist, the interests of the art market have acquired the character of legal cultural interests. Art here underlies an authoritarian system that develops its own dynamic. This sounds frightening but it is in fact quite natural, since art cannot be democratic and follow the will of the people. Pottery can do this as a creative craft, but not ceramics that has become an art form. Decorative, applied art is not meant here, which is a creative craft, but fine art is. It demands a quite different creative process, the results of which are no longer consumed. The user becomes the observer, of whom activity is demanded, i.e. thinking about the meaning. The work of art does not become comprehensible to the viewer through his pleasure in the decoration but through a reflective process of comprehension.

The ultimate implications of the decision in favour of Abstract Expressionism, which was taken like a revolution in California in 1952 in the controversy with Bernard Leach, Hamada and Yanagi, were not clear to the university-trained ceramists who had chosen fine art. The freedom of creation and the joy at creating something quite new had a greater attraction than subtlety and sensitivity in the Japanese sense.

But as the I Ching demands, a transformation was due in Japanese ceramics according to the requirements of the times. It was initiated by the USA and was just

perfect to add something in its own way to the ceramics of the Song or Ming period, to Koryo seladon or to temmoku. In the Far East, this transformation is metaphysically rooted as a mental force of nature that forces its way to the surface. Here in the West, however, creative times are a reaction against cool, clear reason: in contrast to the constancy of the mental state of the Chinese and Japanese, who strive for harmony, for us the development happens as a wave-like, recurring conflict between classicism and Romanticism, between Neue Sachlichkeit and Postmodernism, between Constructivism and Deconstructivism, as a revolt against the circumstances that have become conventional. A trait of character is manifested here that gives priority to youth, in contrast to the East, where old age is revered, and innovation against tradition. In our history, this has repeatedly led to the renewal of art, in the Italian Renaissance or in the German Sturm und Drang, when ceramics did not yet get a mention.

Here in the West, its insignificance during the industrial revolution has been detrimental to ceramics. It could use a renewal to remain interesting to coming generations. Its ethic is to guarantee quality, described by Nietzsche in *On the Genealogy of Morals* as standing still at a moderate level. As applied art too, ceramics remained on the foundations of craft, far removed from seeking conflict with the public: the public were to be educated to have better taste. Neue Sachlichkeit (New Objectivity), which was attached to it for a long time, could be experienced, was practical and useful, ordered and sensible, but without a vital spark. Both areas, ceramics and applied art, had ultimately become frozen in conventionality and were too satisfied with the state that they had reached for them to exhaust the full spectrum of their possibilities. Art glazes were an innovation that did not exist before the age of Modernism, but generally speaking they exhausted themselves in the stage of being merely recipes. The inventive spirit has become even rarer in this area than it was before. The first question is still: How was it made? We only learned the language of the material from the Japanese and acquired it for ourselves as a sense of subtlety. But for us, the language in which we think and create – in contrast to the Far East – is a form of describing the world, of seeing it in different terms and expressing it differently. Since the world burst in over us, a sense of insecurity has crept into the language that has developed as an outer skin and a bridge for our thought, which

only has one purpose, i.e. to communicate. This is related to the process of adaptation to the universal or "bridge" language to the extent that a communicable thought demands to be formulated appropriately.

What must the "dragon emerging in the field" be like for him to overcome self doubt and to rise up over the abyss? If it is not to be market value, then it should at least be exhibition value. Instead of a culture of reflection, ours has become a culture of recognition and reflection (Lyotard). How can individual and overall interests be reduced to a common denominator? According to the proponents of a social market economy, this can only be achieved through a competitive economy. In such a system, everyone has to get their bearings from the price system, which with regard to ceramics for gardens and flowers has changed greatly through the downward pressure on prices in the world economy through imports, and for tableware through industrialisation. For potters who sell from the pottery or at markets, competition is restricted virtually exclusively to jugs, mugs, planters, teapots, vases and bowls. Whatever it is, it lays claim to being special. The ceramist who as an artist sells via galleries or the internet sees his field of competition subjected to competition from globalization. In his work, he speaks a universal language in his own dialect.

Whatever the case may be, creativity is our hope and our motivation. We are motivated when we see what others achieve here and elsewhere in the world. The Hamburg neurologist Otto Kankeleit interviewed writers, painters and composers, who all pointed to the subconscious as a source of creativity. He also asked C. G. Jung, the specialist in matters of the subconscious. He was told, "I could give you a detailed description of the creative process, but I won't, because the whole thing is too mysterious. I am so much in awe of great mysteries that I am unable to express them" (as quoted by Kankeleit). Elsewhere, (Vol. 5 of his Zarathustra Seminars), Jung says, "Only people with an inflated self-image can claim that they create anything; Man is not a creator, but by working creatively, "something" is working within him – the creator is merely the instrument, and as a creator he is also being created by the creative urge ("in creation you are created)". However, this is not new. A hundred years earlier, before psychoanalysis even existed, Hegel described it as self-fulfilment, through which "Man becomes what he is at the end of this process". But this does not interest the observer of the artwork, as fine art does not ask what has formative influences affect the artist but how his work affects us through images. All kinds of visual art are intended as images, which have a formative influence through reflection. Through

the revolution of 1952, ceramics was to be elevated to the status of fine art. Abstract Expressionism was to become expressed in ceramic material. This is a question posed to the material. In the crafts, the question is, What is ceramic? The answer is: With as few problems as possible to make as many lasting, functional items as possible. The time factor lost importance in the crafts and was replaced by taking pleasure in use or simply by taking pleasure in a decorative object. This will always be so and will always find a market. In industrial design, the question asked of the material is how it can be formed by machine. None of these questions have any priority in art. Now the question asked of the material is how can the art of ceramics provide a formative influence with its material, ennobling it with images that are appropriate to ceramics and which are only possible in ceramics because of its innate properties? Abstract Expressionism is destined to fulfil these requirements, for irrespective of the subject being non-objective or only loosely related to reality, the material is integrated in the impact of the image. The creative artistic process is intended to develop freely from forms and colours, but the answer to the question posed is not that simple. It takes time to develop. The ceramist who was crucial to the 1952 revolution, Peter Voukos, a master of creative destruction, did not have that time. He changed to bronze. So did the professor of ceramics at the Berlin University of the Arts, Lothar Fischer.

They abandoned the material because the answer demanded not only an aesthetic justification but also a financial one. The development of ceramics as it is revealed to us fills us with hope. The dragon emerges in the field.

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*I Ching-Triptych I: "The Concealed Dragon".*

With the Chinese character for creativity, *kien*, and with a character from ancient Japanese cursive script.

In the *I Ching*, the Book of Changes, creativity begins covertly. It does not expend its power prematurely, to achieve something by force, for which the time has not yet come.

Glaze painting, 2010, 66 x 66 cm.

