



Jingdezhen, China has been a centre of the porcelain world for hundreds of years.

“Porcelain City” inspires local artist

BY CAROL GRANT

A residency at “The Pottery Workshop” in Jingdezhen, China is a truly unique experience that cannot be found anywhere else in the world.

This past summer, I was awarded a National and International Residency Grant from the Ontario Arts Council and recently spent one month as a resident artist at The Pottery Workshop.

Jingdezhen, also known as “The Porcelain City,” has a population of two million, with a long and interesting history of ceramics.

Throughout the world, the word “China” is synonymous with “ceramics” and in China, the name “Jingdezhen” is synonymous with “porcelain”.

Today, there are large production factories as well as thousands of small shops with independent craftsmen specializing in every aspect of the ceramic making process.

It is not unusual to see pots in various states of completeness lying on the ground outside these shops. Since labour is very cheap, much of the work is done by hand.

It is an incredible sight to see porters pulling hand carts down busy streets piled high with pots or large sculptures, transporting them to a glaze shop or to a kiln.

Some of the techniques which have been perfected over 2,000 years are unheard of by potters in the west.

Porcelain pots are placed directly in the sun to dry immediately after forming, trimming is done at the greenware stage and all work is single fired.

I had the opportunity to visit a small tile factory where large tiles are hand rolled by two people, dried and fired all in a couple of days.

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Plaid Friday

November 29

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THIS WEEK

Items are listed free for non-profit community groups. To have an upcoming event listed, call the NRT at 584-4161 or email <NRT@magma.ca> before 10 am Monday.

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 27

10 am - 4 pm, Canadian Clock Museum fall-winter hours (Tuesday to Saturday), 60 James St., Deep River *

12-1 pm, Soup & Sandwich Luncheon, St. Andrew's United Church, Chalk River *

12:30 pm, Weekly Progressive Euchre, play starting at 1 pm, Chalk River Legion *

1:15 pm, Social Bridge, sponsored by Friends of the Library, Deep River Library program room *

7:15 pm, Deep River Community Association annual general meeting, Deep River Library program room

7:30 pm, GriefShare program - support for those who have lost a loved one, St. Andrew's United Church, Chalk River (for information, call 584-3667 or 584-3618) *

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 28

6:30 pm, Deep River Players present "Murderous Crossing," Deep River Legion

6:30 pm, Lions bingo, Chalk River Lions Hall *

7 pm, Al-Anon meeting, everyone welcome, Laurentian Hills municipal hall, Point Alexander *

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 29

10-11:20 am, Coffee morning, everyone welcome, Deep River Community Church *

6:30 pm, Deep River Players present "Murderous Crossing," Deep River Legion

7 pm, Deep River Summerfest presents "Happy Acoustic Hour," Deep River Curling & Squash Club *

8 pm, Friday night Fun Darts, Deep River Legion *

8 pm, Alcoholics Anonymous meeting, Pt. Alexander municipal building, Hwy 17 *

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 30

12 pm, Six-Hand Euchre, Chalk River Legion

1:30-3:30 pm, Holly Tea & Bazaar, St. Barnabas Anglican Church, Deep River

6:30 pm, Deep River Players present "Murderous Crossing," Deep River Legion

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 1

MONDAY, DECEMBER 2

10 am - 1 pm, Deep River and Area Food Bank open (except holidays), at the Deep River and District Hospital (for more information, phone 584-2484) *

1 pm, Golden Oldies Euchre Club, CR Legion *

7:30 pm, Deep River Choral Group, Childs Auditorium, Mackenzie CS *

7:30-10 pm, Country Line Dancing, Bear's Den, Hwy 17 Deep River (for information, call 589-2644 or 589-2146) *

8 pm, Alcoholics Anonymous meeting, Pt. Alexander municipal building, Hwy 17 *

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 3

10 am, Story Time with Miss Helen, Deep River Library *

12:30 pm, Deep River & Area 49ers euchre, Deep River Legion *

7:15 pm, Duplicate Bridge Club, Faith Lutheran Church, DR *

An asterisk (*) indicates weekly events.

“Porcelain City”

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This is even more surprising when you see that some tiles are as large as 3m by 2m!

Porcelain originated in China and the porcelain production in Jingdezhen stems from the kaolin that was discovered in the nearby Gaoiling Hills during the Shang dynasty almost 2,000 years ago.

The clay found there has a high degree of whiteness and superior quality that allows it to be beautifully transparent when very thin.

From a distance, large white patches that look like snowy peaks at the tops of the mountains are actually large areas where clay has been excavated.

The name Gaoiling was later translated as Kaolin and is now commonly known as China clay.

Since the Song dynasty (960-1127), Jingdezhen has also been famous for its blue and white porcelain.

Although cobalt was originally imported from the Middle East, the technique of painting intricate designs with cobalt was perfected by the Chinese.

I was fascinated by the designs hand painted on the ultra thin porcelain attested by the number of pieces I brought home with me in my carry-on bag!

INTERACTION

The Pottery Workshop is an International Ceramic Residency Centre with living and studio space for up to 12 artists at a time.

During my one-month stay, there were artists from Holland, Australia, New Zealand, and the United States.

I believe the residency experience was vital to the broadening of my perspective and my intellectual analysis of ceramic art. However, it was my interaction with other artists in a setting that fosters elevated craftsmanship and artistic expression, that made the experience very special.

The other aspect that makes this residency unique is the fact that you can get very quick results with experiments.

Potters are used to working with a process that has a fairly lengthy timeline. Labour is so cheap in Jingdezhen, that you can concentrate on the part of the process you are interested in and have the other stages completed by locals who specialize in each step.

For example if you are working on forms, you can pay to have the pieces glazed and fired. Or if you want to concentrate on painting the surface of your work, you can buy greenware, paint on it and have the process completed by others and have the pieces back two days later.

I was completely fascinated exploring some of the seemingly endless small alleyways with colourful laundry hanging outside every doorway.

In these areas of small shops, often with studios in the back, you could see independent artists practising traditional Chinese ceramic techniques as well as innovative contemporary methods.

One of the main motivations for a residency is that simply getting out of one's comfort zone is known to stimulate creativity.

Coming from the small town of Deep River and landing in the very fast-paced city with cars and motorcycles everywhere, including the sidewalks, was definitely not part of my comfort zone.

More than once I found myself nervously holding the hand of Kim, the young girl who was accompanying me while she reassured me saying “don't worry” as we weaved our way between vehicles while crossing busy roads.

Visiting museums also gave me a deeper understanding of the historical aspects of ceramic art.

The opportunity to visit an ancient kiln site as well as a very large dragon kiln owned by an individual potter today making very large flower pots was fascinating. Actually standing inside the enormous kiln built into the sloping hill was thrilling.

This article cannot cover all the interesting aspects of Jingdezhen nor all the people that I encountered during my residency at The Pottery Workshop.

I gave a talk last year about the history of ceramics in China, but the impact of actually seeing it in person cannot be overestimated.

Because of these experiences, I am anxious to see how this residency will influence my work and what opportunities present themselves in the future, as my career path as a ceramic artist is continually reshaped by my experiences.



The sight of porters pushing hand carts down busy streets piled high with pots or large sculptures was a feature of life in Jingdezhen, China.

Photo: Carol Grant



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