



Potter Shin Sang-ho uses bold colors to paint his pieces that take the form of animals at his studio called Bugokdobang in Yangju, Gyeonggi.

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Meet the potter molding a path for Korean ceramics



**ZOOM
KOREA**
Park Sang-moon

Shin Sang-ho has spent his career revolutionizing the art

Past the picturesque landscapes along the national highway in Yangju, Jangheung-myeon, Gyeonggi, then up a rocky, winding road, awaits a large door adorned with ceramic mosaic tiles. It is the location of Bugokdobang — the house, gallery and studio for Korea's renowned potter Shin Sang-ho.

Nestled inside a remote, forested area, Bugokdobang resembles a large art museum, full of pottery and paintings that Shin made throughout his life.

Shin, globally recognized for using clay to make celadon pottery, white porcelain and *buncheon* (gray-blue powdered celadon), has created a unique artistic world whilst being a pioneer in the field. He is sometimes referred to as a rebel for his constant attempts at new methods and expression in ceramics.

His works are part of permanent displays at prominent museums including The British Museum and Victoria and Albert Museum in the U.K., the National Ceramics Museum of Sévres

in France, the Everson Museum of Arts in Syracuse, United States and the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Jongno District, central Seoul.

Shin's passion for ceramics began when he visited the Icheon Ceramics Village in Icheon, Gyeonggi, as a student at Hongik University. Icheon Ceramics Village is a historic pottery village that has been around since the Joseon Dynasty (1392-1910). There, he fell in love with clay and returned to Icheon during his next summer break, in 1968. He didn't come home for a whole month so his worried parents went to Icheon to see Shin. They found him under the hot sun wearing only his underwear, covered in clay dust and making pottery. Crying, they asked Shin, "Son, why are you here like this?"

But knowing their son's stubborn nature, his mom and dad bought Shin a kiln and left.

Suddenly Shin was the owner of his own kiln and began to work through nights to master techniques in ceramics and experiment with different methods in pottery that hadn't been done before.

For instance, he refused to mix glaze with water and instead, grinded it with a stone hand mill borrowed from a neighbor. It brought out better colors in his end products.

Shin went on to become one of the first-generation Korean potters, along with Ji Sun-tak, Yu Geun-hyeong and Ahn Dong-oh, who developed the local ceramics scene.

In 1976, he went to Fukuoka, Japan. Working there for about one year, he encountered a gas-fueled kiln for the first time. In Korea at that time, kilns were only equipped to burn wood, which successfully fires pottery only five to 10 percent of the time. Gas-powered kilns successfully fire pots 95 percent of the time. The color and quality of pottery from the gas kiln are also better.

Shin brought the gas-powered kiln to Korea for 15 million won (\$11,787), introducing the technology to the country for the first time. His pottery baked in this new kiln sold well.

After making a lot of money, Shin's perspective on life took a turn and he began to see value in educating the next generation. In 1980, he stopped his lucrative pottery work and became a professor at Hongik University. There, he established the school's ceramics department and kicked off the boom of ceramic art across universities across Korea. In 1984, he taught at the University of Connecticut in the United States as a visiting professor. In the United States, he was able to meet world-class potters and gained insight about how to bring more modern ceramic designs to Korea.

In 1988, Shin invited prominent potters from around the world to his personal art studio for a one-week workshop as part of a special cultural event during the Seoul Summer Olympics. The general global view at the time was that Korea had artists working on traditional ceramics but no one was producing a more modern take on the art. The country was often dismissed in the field. But through the workshop that Shin hosted, Korean potters and ceramics became better known to the rest of the world.

After successfully modernizing the local ceramic scene and playing a pioneering role in the transition, Shin in the mid and late 1990s spent his time learning about the artistic values of African indigenous art.



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His series titled "The Dream of Africa," which uses bold colors and patterns to depict different species of animals was inspired by his passion for African indigenous art.

During his career, Shin has produced art that is entirely new and unique during moments of desperation. Some of these works include a piece that he completed with water mixed with clay instead of glaze. It is currently on show in the Grand Hyatt Seoul in Yongsan District. He is also behind the exterior wall of Clayarch Gimhae Museum in South Gyeong-sang. The wall of the world's first clay architecture museum is covered with some 5,000 tiles and a representative work of clay architecture. The back of central Seoul's Concordian Building is also decorated by Shin.

Since 2017, Shin has moved on from creating three-dimensional pieces such as celadon pottery and white porcelain to two-dimensional drawings. He draws with clay, something which hasn't been previously done. He was inspired by a streak of sunlight that shone through the moving leaves of a tree that he planted in his studio's front

Shin Sang-ho works on many pieces of clay at his studio Bugokdobang.

yard some 40 years ago.

Light, soil, fire and color that change through the seasons and time all harmoniously come together in Shin's recent work titled "Tree of Life" and "Book of Revelation." It has yet to be publicly displayed and is slated to be revealed in the U.K. in May 2023.

Shin, who said that he has lived his entire life very contently with clay by his side, has one more dream: to open a multi-use cultural space for galleries, artist residences, a school for design art, research and art fairs, in the "Camp Red Cloud" site in Uijeongbu, Gyeonggi. It is a 336,000-meter square piece of land that has been returned to Korea by the United States Forces Korea.

Just like the renovation of London's coal-fired power station, Battersea Power Station, Germany's Center for Art and Media (The ZKM Karlsruhe) that used to be an ammunition factory, and Singapore's renovation of old buildings into the country's art cluster called Gillman Barracks, Shin's plans to create a cultural space in this vast piece of Gyeonggi land is a bold project.

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Shin designed the facade of Clayarch Gimhae Museum in South Gyeongsang which is decorated with some 5,000 tiles.



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