



Marie Juge Raku Sculptor

*Anne Laure CaMilleri explores
the history and process of raku*

THE CERAMIC SCULPTURES OF MARIE JUGE combine soft, earth tone colours with outstanding depth surface effects. The self-taught artist who won the Paul Belmondo Prize at the Paris Autumn Salon 2007, follows her instinct and often challenges strict academic rules to design her own forms. Some very fluid lines nearly reach abstraction while some irregular pieces seem deeply rooted in the ground. The contrasts and subtle movements of her work inevitably lead the eye to the textured clay. The further use of transparent glaze and calcinations naturally emphasizes the stoneware sculptures. In the end, the lack of superficial decoration recalls the very essence of Raku Ware.

RAKU FIRING, A JAPANESE CERAMIC TECHNIQUE

Raku pottery is closely associated with the tea ceremony. Based on

Above: Marie Juge in the Studio.



Top and centre: Marie Juge
in the studio.
Above: Glazing a Figure.

the principles of Zen Buddhism, the tea ceremony, *Chanoyu*, appeared in the 15th century and was codified by tea masters during the 16th century. Sen no Rikyu (1522-1591) the most revered tea master is credited with establishing the tea ceremony into the art form it is practiced and taught today. The ritualistic ceremony is based on four guiding principles, Harmony (*wa*) Respect (*kei*) Purity (*sei*) Tranquility (*jaku*). The aesthetics of *Chanoyu* can be found in other Japanese art forms such as calligraphy, *ikebana* and ceramics.

THE RAKU DYNASTY

Sen no Rikyu initiated the production of tea utensils that symbolized the philosophy of his art. He favored local clay from the Kyoto area, and commissioned Chōjirō (?-1589) the son of a tile maker to produce the new tea ware. Simple, monochromatic *Raku* tea bowls were made under the two men's partnership. Chōjirō, who was of Korean descent, developed a technique based on low firing temperatures and the absence of a potter's wheel. With his method, the glowing pots were removed from the hot kiln and put into water or simply left on the ground to cool. The bowls were hand built and the exclusive use of black and red lead glazes produced subdued colours. Around 1582, Chōjirō's family received a gold seal from shogun Toyotomi Hiyedoshi and was granted the right to sign their tea ware with the symbol. The seal bore the Kanji character *RAKU* translated as spiritual enjoyment, happiness. *Raku* became the family's name and also referred to a specific ceramic style. The 15th generation of the *Raku* dynasty is still running the family workshop in Kyoto.

RAKU TECHNIQUE AND THE WESTERN WORLD

Universal Fairs introduced *Raku* pottery to western countries in the 19th century. The works and writings of prominent artists like British potter Bernard Leach (1897-1979) and Paul Soldner (1921-) the American ceramist, contributed to developing and popularizing *Raku* ceramics in Europe and the US.

Raku is now used as a generic word for the fast and low firing process. The pottery is first bisque-fired, glazed and *raku* fired. Then the pieces are smoke fired and cooled. Although the technique seems easy, the fire produces infinite creative possibilities. Experimentation, sensitivity and individual experience make a difference and contribute to growing and maturing styles.

THE SCULPTURAL CERAMICS OF MARIE JUGE

The artist's inspiration comes from Asian and African traditions and from the world of *haute couture*. Her rangy silhouettes bear the names of distant places like *Mekong*, *Geisha* and *Touareg*. Her most recent series is influenced by Ancient Chinese ceramics, specifically the Tang (618-907) and Ming (1368-1644) dynasties, to feature slender, graceful figures endowed with movement. The artist's design and smoke-fired works bring a subtle contemporary touch.

Juge sculpts stoneware clay and emphasizes the coarse texture with functional objects, according to her imagination. In her treasure box, modelling tools are next to the oddest items picked up at flea markets over the years, such as lace and crochet cloths or one African comb.

Sculptor-ceramist, she blends the two art forms to explore line, shape and texture. Her work is balanced with strength and delicacy, a paradox often expressed during the making of ceramic sculptures. The hand-building, sculpting and smoke-firing cycles make a striking contrast

with stamping or decorating tiny surfaces with a thin hairbrush. The completed sculptures reveal their complementary nature and reflect the artist's creative mind. Each piece features raw calcined surfaces intertwined with glazed surfaces stained with crazing lines. The colour pallet is anticipated in the earlier stage forcing the artist to select carefully her different types of clay. She favours pink, white and black shades, enhanced with deep textural effects. She works exclusively around original earth colours and never uses oxides.

Juge has dedicated herself to ceramics and sculpting for the past eight years. A former marketing chief in the fragrance industry, she decided to follow her passion for the fire and earth art forms. She lives and works in Paris and spends time in Brittany to do the *raku* firing.

THE STUDIO

It all begins with selecting the clay body, since the colour, plasticity and chemical characteristics are essential to the final result. The clay must withstand thermal shock and have a porous body suitable for glazing. Stoneware clay is typical for the *raku* process. The percentage of coarse grog reduces the risks of shrinkage, deformation and breakage.

In her studio, Juge first visualizes the future transformations of the piece. With the finalized work in her mind, she associates different types of clay, then sculpts, paints and stamps certain areas. Trimming is also necessary to prevent air bubbles that could break the piece during the firing. The sculptures are put away to dry evenly for three weeks, allowing the clay to harden and shrink.

The sculptures are loaded piece by piece into a top loading electric kiln built from firebrick. The greenware is bisque-fired in three stages to allow slow temperature increases up to 950°C. Each step marks a physical chemical reaction of the clay. At the earlier stage the residual moisture is expelled. When the first cycle reaches the quartz transition point (573°C/1060°F) the quartz structure is altered causing the clay to shrink by 1% to 15%. The clay then gradually hardens. The bisque firing process last 10 hours, depending on the sculpture sizes and materials used. When she opens her kiln, the artist discovers the changes in colour induced by firing. Some results may be unexpected, but good or bad, the accidental is part of the process. Certain types of clay produce spectacular colour alterations, turning from black to orange or from black to pink while other clay alterations are quite insignificant.

Coating the piece with transparent glaze will produce glossy surfaces during the *raku* firing and preserve the clay's natural colours. The artist mixes water with a thin powdered glass frit to create a white looking glaze that becomes fully transparent in firing. She applies the glaze using a brush, by spraying or dipping. When decorating her work, the sculptor is pursuing the creative thought she had envisioned prior to the drying and bisque firing process. Her specific technique is revealed at this point, as she does not use colour additives alien to the clay body. She simply and artfully transcends the earth with smoke firing, achieving fine crackle lines on the glazed surfaces and raw black clay on the unglazed surfaces.

RAKU FIRING

The coated pieces are loaded in a portable gas kiln that has a firing chamber made with ceramic fibre. Within 90 minutes the temperature reaches 950°C. The dilatation produced by the quartz inversion



Top: Preparing the Neck on a Figure.

Centre: Using Lace for Texture.

Above: Studio Tools.



Inside the Raku kiln.



Placing the hot pieces in the combustible material.



Top right: Three Completed Works by Marie Juge.

(573°C/1060°F) may break the largest pieces especially when the firing isn't quite homogeneous. The glaze firing turns the glaze into glass and gives a glossy appearance to the pieces.

As she opens the hot kiln, the sculptor's tempo quickens. Wearing protective gloves and holding special *raku* tongs, Juge removes the 1000°C glowing pieces from the kiln and carries them to a small container. Due to the thermal shock, the glaze begins to craze. The sculptures are covered with sawdust, immediately catching fire and sending an acrid intense smoke in the air. The fire blackens the unglazed clay and penetrates the glazed crackled surfaces. The artist concludes her work with clay texture and produces the most dramatic contrasts. She grabs and rolls the burning ceramics in the barrel to direct the *raku* effects. The container is then covered for a time depending upon the density of the black that she wants to achieve. At last, she removes the pieces from the container and places them on the ground. When they have cooled, the residual ash and soot are washed away. The ceramic sculptures now display their pallet of texture, crackle lines and earth colours.

EXHIBITION AND COMMERCIALIZATION

The artist exhibits her work nationally in major art exhibitions and art fairs known for their international attendance like Maison & Objet and the GMAC event. She enjoys welcoming the visitors herself and gladly explains the making process of her ceramics. In Paris, the Talbot art gallery (6e) and the Kadrance business center (9e) show a selection of her work throughout the year. In 2007 her ceramic sculptures caught the eye of the Neiman Marcus Group. A series featuring Asian women are now available in the Neiman Marcus department stores across the US beginning in September 2008. She is currently working on her next solo exhibitions respectively scheduled in Pont-Aven in 2009 and at the Chateau des Tournelles (Seine et Marne) in 2010 (both in France). The most coveted pieces are 30, 60 or 80 cm/h but larger figures can be 1,50 m/h. The complexity of the work determines the selling prices.

SOURCES

Marie Juge : <http://mysculpture.free.fr>

Le raku de Jacques G. Peiffer - Editions Dessain et Tolra.

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