

REVERSING THE FLOW

European Designers **IN**
CHINA

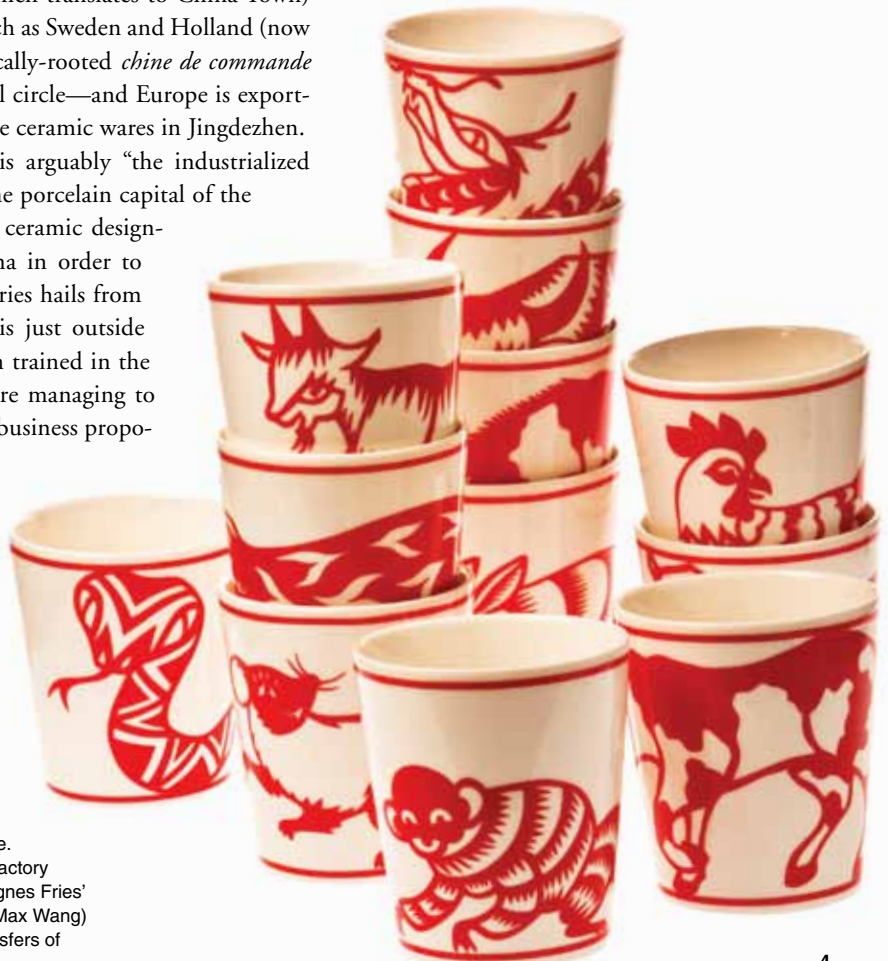
by Heidi McKenzie





For centuries China exported its highly sought after blue-and-white porcelain wares to Europe. Ships used to find their way through the waterways to Jingdezhen (formerly named Changnanzhen, which translates to China Town) to load their vessels to return to countries such as Sweden and Holland (now part of the Netherlands). Today this historically-rooted *chine de commande* of the 18th and 19th centuries has come full circle—and Europe is exporting designers to China to design and produce ceramic wares in Jingdezhen.

Jingdezhen in Jiangxi Province, China is arguably “the industrialized world’s workshop” and claims its status as the porcelain capital of the world. Agnes Fries and Carola Zee are two ceramic designers who have recently set up shop in China in order to design, create and/or produce their wares. Fries hails from Stockholm, Sweden, and Zee’s hometown is just outside Rotterdam in the Netherlands. Both women trained in the Scandinavian modernist school, and both are managing to translate their creative capacity into a viable business proposition in Jingdezhen, China. Fries and Zee became acquainted with the potential available in the Sculpture Factory in Jingdezhen through their multiple, self-directed artist residencies at The Pottery Workshop—a fully resourced ceramic artist residency that hosts up to



1 Agnes Fries’ *Bottino Vases*, slip-cast porcelain, glaze.
 2 Agnes Fries working in her studio in the Sculpture Factory in Jingdezhen. 3 View of color tests and samples in Agnes Fries’ Jingdezhen studio. 4 Ting Dynasty (Agnes Fries and Max Wang) *Zodiac cups*, slip-cast porcelain, glaze, overglaze transfers of paper-cut inspired designs.



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5 *Agnes* vases, to 11 in. (30 cm) in height, designed by Agnes Fries for Normann Copenhagen, slip-cast and hand-painted porcelain. 6 One of the artists who works with Agnes Fries adding the surface decoration to an *Agnes* vase. 7 Agnes Fries' *Jingdezhen Papercut* plate, slip-cast porcelain, overglaze transfer of a paper-cut map of Jingdezhen. 8 Carola Zee in her studio in Jingdezhen, pictured with carafes and glaze tests in the background. 9 Carola Zee's *Unique* carafes, to 11 in. (29 cm) in height, slip-cast colored porcelain, glaze.

twelve international residents at a time. I was one such resident last spring when Zee befriended me with the kind of hospitality of spirit that would almost seem out of place in North America, and later introduced me to Fries upon her arrival. Indeed, there is a built-in camaraderie amongst ceramic artists in Jingdezhen, and I came into contact with artists from all walks of life practicing all means of production. The Pottery Workshop (TPW) in Jingdezhen is surrounded by hundreds of small, independent craftsmen and artists located within what is known as the Sculpture Factory in an eastern suburb, six kilometers outside the city center. The Sculpture Factory is about 361,000 square feet (110,000 square meters) and

houses in total 1300 workers including a national ceramic art master, two Jiangxi Provincial ceramic art masters, 36 high-standard craftsmen, and over 400 other craftsmen, each highly skilled in their respective and specific trades.

In China there is an emphasis on fostering expertise in a specialized area within the ceramic industry. Fries and Zee emphasize the importance of this distinction between East and West: whereas students of the Jingdezhen Ceramic Institute (JCI) are encouraged to master the art of copying, Westerners are raised to find and promote their own voice. Design is an emergent field in China relative to the West. Craftsmanship and reproduction remain the dominant



industry drivers; however, shifts are beginning to take place. These shifts were more than evident at the highly inventive fourth-year students' year-end exhibitions I attended at JCI last spring.

Zee trained at the Willem de Kooning Academie in Rotterdam and is primarily a self-taught ceramic artist. Fries completed both her undergraduate and graduate degrees at The Danish Royal Academic of Design in Denmark. One of the issues that both artists negotiate in their work is finding the right balance between the clean, minimalist aesthetic associated with their cultural milieus, and the extravagant, often ornate nature of the decorative Chinese porcelain tradition. Fries notes that "minimalism is not the issue." She goes on to explain that "people want to make sure they are buying something special," and with that in mind she and Zee focus on creating exclusive work of exceptional quality, and pay attention to the all aspects of the production spectrum, from the online or retail shopping experience, the packaging, the branding, and of course the integrity of the work itself.

After three years working at TPW and adjusting to the culture and language, Fries set up a design shop within the Sculpture Factory two years ago. Sweden, although leaders in design innovation (with the obvious example of IKEA) is experiencing a dearth of studio artists working with clay and Fries finds the absence of communal collegiality problematic back home. (Ironically, both Sweden and the Netherlands have established porcelain brands, formerly locally





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10 Carola Zee's *Unique* cups, slip-cast colored porcelain, glaze.
 11 A local Jingdezhen worker transporting Carola Zee's wares from kiln to studio. 12 A car-kiln stack of Carola Zee's work, pictured before and after the glaze firing. 13 Carola Zee's *Gradient* vases, slip-cast porcelain, glaze. 14 Carola Zee's studio in the Sculpture Factory, Jingdezhen. 15 Carola Zee's studio, with slip-casting molds in the foreground, works in progress on the shelves in the background.



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produced, that have now been outsourced and are being produced off-shore in countries such as Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Thailand, and China—where labor and production costs are attractively low.)

Fries interprets her unique aesthetic as “Danish Modernism inspired by Ming dynasty.” She believes that the benefits of living and working within the intensively creative microcosm of the Sculpture Factory fosters her own creativity in ways that would be impossible to replicate in her home country. In her words, “Instead of sitting behind my computer at home to figure something out, I just go around town.” For Fries, Chinese culture, “always gives my work a little twist.”

Fries recently teamed up with Taiwanese-based knowledge maker, Max Wang to form Ting Dynasty—a company dedicated to working collaboratively with local craftsmen to both raise the quality of serial production and the awareness of the people behind the production. Fries’ *Zodiac* line draws its inspiration directly from the ancient Chinese practice of paper-cutting. Applied with overglaze transfers, Fries’ designs are produced on porcelain mugs and are currently available in Jingdezhen, Shanghai, and Beijing, China; Taipei, Taiwan; Geneva, Switzerland; and various locations in Sweden.

Whereas Fries is primarily a designer, Zee positions herself as a designer-maker. This hybrid identity enables her to oversee the process from design, through production, packaging and distribution. Zee employs two local assistants who work to support her *label Aleph* line that ships from Jingdezhen to wholesalers in Beijing and Shanghai. She is also working with a business partner in Washington, D.C. to expand her penetration of the European and North American marketplace. Zee started at TPW in 2008



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and the next year decided to go it alone, setting up shop in rented studio space within the Sculpture Factory. She now spends up to seven months of the year in China.

Zee explains another fundamental difference in East/West methodology, “In Jingdezhen ceramic artists master one shape, and instead of changing the shape as they create new works, they express new ideas through painting or carving differently. That same shape lasts for hundreds of years.” Western designer/makers in China alter that equation by changing the shape and the decoration at the same time with each new design line.

Zee’s *Gradient Mountain* series incorporates the idea of traditional Chinese painting that expresses the beauty of the country’s landscape in a contemporary and modern way. Zee explains that her design is “a dialog between cultures: this is what you do, this is what I do.”

Her *Unique* series exploits Chinese slip-casting production but each piece has a hand-made dent, and they come in mix-and-match pastel color palettes—something that you don’t see often in Asia.

Both artists have fully embraced the transnational as a lifestyle and as a framework for doing business within the ceramic industry. As trail blazers, Zee and Fries are two of a growing collective of Western designers/producers in Jingdezhen who are forging innovative ways of working and making in an increasingly dynamic global marketplace.

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