

The Tang potters of China (618-907 CE) were the first to fully use the potential of runny glazes for aesthetic and expressive effects, especially shiny, bright, colorful lead glazes. An important characteristic of lead glazes is that they are easily fusible and thus very runny, and they move over the surface of the pot to collect at the base or even underneath the pot, which may cause the object to fuse to the kiln furniture, which may damage the kiln and the wares. For this reason, the Tang potters rarely glazed the whole surface of the ware, applying the three color glazes strategically on lidded jars (notably) around the rim and shoulder, from where they can then drip and run over the unglazed, bare surface of the lower portion, until setting and “freezing” there as the kiln progressively cools. Glaze surfaces usually appear cold not only to touch but also to the eye, yet Tang sancai glazes, and most runny glazes, appear warm and it is the drip that warms them up in its runniness and fluidity, as if it had retained some of the heat of the kiln. Tang sancai glazes are soft and warm in feeling, due to the richness of the colors and their fluidity over the form. The clay body itself is an under-fired stoneware which remains in actuality as well as visually very soft and open, porous, dry and matt, a light beige in color, which offers an effective contrast with the warm, shiny, bright, deeply colorful runny glazes. This effect of contrast between the superior, shiny, glossy, bright, colorful surface and the dull, matt, dry and drab lower portion makes for great visual, aesthetic contrast and impact. This effect is reinforced by the irregular, organic, fluid, wavy linear transition between the two. This transition, again, is not controlled or deliberate, yet it is premeditated by an understanding of the behavior of materials submitted to certain known processes and conditions, here a strategic application of the glaze(s) and a controlled firing. The materials in the heat of the kiln and through the pull of gravity take care of the rest. In the kiln, gravity will make the fluxed glaze move, as it becomes liquid again, fluid, and it will then “freeze” and set, as the kiln cools. It is by the serendipitous capturing of this arrested movement, this frozen moment that the best effects are achieved.

The Tang glaze surface is usually organically abstract, composed of seemingly random patterns that do not provide, even resist easy association, and remain totally abstract, non-representational (a first I believe, in art aesthetics). Even on sculptural works, like the celebrated Tang horses, the use of color is never descriptive (say of animal fur, or of fabric) but remains instead evocative of other surfaces and specifically “ceramic” in its visual effect. This application of “random” patterns and shapes, find their closest relatives in the drip paintings of Jackson Pollock or the stain and color field paintings of Morris Louis and Helen Frankenthaler, which they precede by centuries. The “drip” as a pictorial technique in art making is actually a specific ceramic trope, and its presence can be found earlier there than anywhere else. On Tang ceramics, geometric abstractions can also happen and even floral decoration, all achieved with the limited but rich three color palette and the white dispersion method so unique to these materials, as we will see later.

Historical influences:

Tang sancai wares have influenced ceramics everywhere since their incipience in China in the 7th Century CE. I would argue that it is one of the most influential glaze aesthetics there is and

its followers can be found all over the world, all the way to today. Historical examples include similarly colored lead glazes from 9th Century Iraq and Iran, also found all over the Islamic world, and the Nara sancai pottery from 12th Century Japan and also in medieval Europe, notably in Italy. Another strange influence of three-color sancai can be found in enameled wares (an over-glaze technique where an oil-based glassy enamel is applied over an already vitrified glaze and re-fired at a lower temperature); while they are also usually lead-based, over-glaze enamels are not suspended in water but in oil (also acrylic) instead, which greatly changes their fluidity, thus their application but most importantly their aesthetics. Their composition makes possible their application over the smooth, glossy, already vitrified surface of another glaze, itself applied on a white ground body, usually porcelain. By being fired at a much lower temperature than the original “sancai” glazes they imitate, they are less mobile and remain more stable over the surface, permitting a more controlled location and position of the effect, which is then expectedly much more stiff and predictable than their Tang predecessors. Examples include Kang-Xi (1662-1772) porcelain from China and also in the Yongsheng period (egg and spinach) in the early 1800’s. It can also be found in 19th Century Satsuma wares from Japan and also in England in Spode Bone China at the same time. Colored lead glazes resembling Tang sancai are also found in folk traditions all over the world, from the Middle Ages on, in Europe and in colonial America (in Mexico, in Oaxaca notably) as well. In England, early Wedgwood/Whieldon wares decorated with manganese sponging exploits very effectively the rich potential of colored lead glazes, in a direct ancestry with Tang “sancai” glazes.

Historically various examples of three colors glazing may have developed somewhat independently from Chinese precedents, yet it remains obvious that all contemporary uses of three colors glazing are deeply referential and influenced by Tang wares, which remain the most beautiful and resolved examples of the genre.

Contemporary examples:

Tang type glazing also has had an important impact on contemporary ceramics. Runny lead based glazes are characteristic of the work of the American potter George Ohr in the late 19th Century, as an example. We could actually consider George Ohr to be a contemporary potter, since his work was so ahead of its time and it was only recently rediscovered in the 1970’s. Examples closer to us are found in the work of Betty Woodman and her Mediterranean Pillow Pitchers, an interesting hybrid of an exaggerated Cretan form with a splashy three-color sancai surface. Tang Sancai is one of these iconic ceramic surfaces that instantly produce an historical association, reinforcing the fact that ceramics is an art form with a strong, direct connection to historical precedents, with its own specific visual qualities and its equally important and seminal contributions to visual art. This iconic association is used very effectively in the early work of Richard Milette and the more recent work of Leopold Foulem, both Canadians, again here hybridizing Western forms with Oriental surfaces to comment on the potential for ceramics to create original visual metaphors while retaining its specificity and formal independence. By either removing the expected volumetric form (Milette) or reducing it to a mass by closing the expected opening on top (Foulem), these works make us aware, through denial, of the operative workings of pottery forms. Their referential surfaces continue this intellectual process by

contesting the expected relationship between form and surface, image and object, 2D and 3D, usually found in ceramics. By being altogether non-functional and non-decorative, while remaining clearly pots semantically, they challenge us to rethink our familiar and rarely considered relation to these kind of objects and to the experience they usually provide.

The contemporary potter who has exploited the most thoroughly and efficiently sancai glazing is Japanese potter Takeshi Yasuda, while working in Ireland and England in the 1980's and 90's. I use his work as an example here, but what I say applies to the work of many others too.

Takeshi Yasuda's work is direct, sensual and simple yet with a sense of excess reinforced by flexibility and fluidity. The glazing of his "sancai" pottery is particularly noteworthy and efficient. The glazing affects how we understand the work, their epistemology, and informs how we experience the work, their phenomenology. The forms themselves, often resting on feet, provide the objects with amazing elevation, lifting the form from the ground, making it feel more aerial than earthbound, defying gravity. This is rather unusual for pots and for ceramics where gravity and horizontality play such an important role. These forms push the runniness of glazes to an extreme and are often fired lifted on stilts so that beads of glaze can collect underneath the feet of the forms. After firing, this bead elevates the feet further, which then seem to visually hover above the ground. Thus, in the work of Takeshi Yasuda, many reversals take place: top becomes base and vice-versa, lips becomes feet, flat becomes round, plates become bowls, vase forms become platters. The rims which usually act as frames, stable and clearly confining, here become edges, falling over, unstable, "over the top". In his work as well, the positive ambiguity of borders is reinforced by the runny glaze, sliding over the rim, inside and outside the form, as if the interior content of the pot was spilling out over the edge, to the outside, running down the exterior in a manner that could be construed as messy or even abject in the work of a less deft hand and mind. This particular glazing deserves further analysis. Influenced by Sancai Tang wares of China, the glazing articulates the form through repetition, not mindless repetition but repetition that creates trust, which comes from experience. These repeated patterns are rarely (never?) there for purely aesthetic purposes. The fluidity of the glaze, its runniness, is used for perceptual reasons, blurring the passage between interior and exterior, from the horizontal to the vertical, and brings to mind the fluidity of experience as well as the fluidity of time itself. As well, the glaze is picked up by texture, by impressed lines and raised dots on the handles and feet which attract the eye, providing visual and tactile grip, but also demanding and begging for touch- thus creating a movement from the aesthetic to the erotic. This sensual quality is stressed by the folds, the drips, the stretching, the squeezing, as well as the animal feet and the organized, vaguely symmetrical patterns, stable, logical when applied, but becoming organic, changing, uncontrollable, as they run freely all over the form, despite being periodically stopped and collected by ridges and tracings, bringing some form of order to the potential chaos released. The balance of tensions is always taut, the equilibrium sustained by symmetry.

The reference to Tang Chinese ware in his use of blurred green and brown markings creates an historical connection with the past, with different cultures (a contemporary Japanese potter quoting ancient China from England) but also establishes distance, temporal distance and a

distance created by the switch from earthenware to stoneware, from China to England, from then to now. The forms of Takeshi Yasuda are original, idiosyncratic and unique, yet their glazing and colors are not. They are appropriated from a memory, a remembrance of things past. This borrowing is justified since it is a conceptual borrowing, rather than aesthetic or simply stylistic, and it operates to direct our experience of the work and how we come to understand it. Its use is phenomenological (how we perceive and experience) and epistemological (how we understand), rather than simply formal. While deeply material and physical, it is true conceptual art.

Other aspects:

The dispersion is another rarely used aesthetic effect, also found in Tang Sancai glazes, when the difference in atomic weight of the various minerals, especially the heavier lead in contact with the lighter copper and iron, disperses one color and pushes it away. When glazes melt in the kiln, the various chemical and mineral elements react with each other, often in an attracting or repulsing manner. With lead-based glazes as used by the Tang potter, the effect is very soft, hazy and quite subtle yet clearly noticeable, specifically when a white area disperses a colored area. Contemporary potters using that effect in high-fired porcelain include Americans Tom Turner and Linda Sikora, who both revisits the lessons of Tang potters in a fresh and relevant way with very different materials and at a very different firing temperature too, in porcelain.

If Tang sancai glazing is exceedingly beautiful and dynamic when done correctly, it is important to study and look closely at the originals, since one cannot find a bad example of Tang wares, despite the great variety and inventiveness of the type. One must absorb their lesson well before attempting emulation. For the viewer, such pottery and ceramic surfaces provide appreciation of the intricacy, complexity and difficulty of making such masterworks, considering their directness, unpretentious simplicity in the application, and the reliance on process. All this comes together effortlessly, beyond the reach and control of the potter, as the materials melt and respond to gravity inside the kiln. They are a lesson for every potter who intends on making good pots and they remain great examples of the potter's art. Their potential is yet to be exhausted.

When used appropriately and effectively, runny, drippy glaze surfaces are magnificent and very beautiful indeed, and their visual effect constitutes one of the major aesthetic contributions of ceramics to visual culture. Quite simply, the runniness and "drippiness" of glazes is one of the most important and specific contributions of ceramics to the large vocabulary of aesthetic surfaces in art. The earliest examples of this extraordinary potential are first found in Tang "sancai" wares.

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