

Producing Porcelain Tableware in Jingdezhen, China



Takeshi Yasuda at Red House ceramics Design Studio in Jingdezhen, China. Standing in front of shelves displaying tools stored in second-quality slipcast porcelain mugs.

THE JAPANESE POTTER TAKESHI YASUDA MOVED FROM THE UK TO JINGDEZHEN IN 2003, to assist Caroline Cheng in establishing the Pottery Workshop, a residential studio that enables Western potters to work in collaboration with Chinese porcelain artisans. In 2008 he established Red House Ceramics Design Studio nearby, on the ground floor of a large building at the Sculpture Factory. Anyone thinking that the studio's name refers obliquely to Chinese Communism or Mao's *Little Red Book* is mistaken. Yasuda named it after the house that the 19th century British architect Phillip Webb designed and built for the writer and design reformer William Morris, whose dictum "Have nothing in your house that you do not know to be useful or believe to be beautiful" inspires Yasuda. In Jingdezhen he now manufactures his production range of slipcast porcelain tableware, as well as throwing individual pieces.

Colin Martin relates the ingenuity and innovation of Takeshi Yasuda

For a ceramist who makes work of such rare delicacy, Yasuda is remarkably unstuffy. A story he tells against himself makes the point. When entering Canada some years ago, he was asked by an officious immigration officer, who had noticed that his passport gave his profession as professor, what his academic discipline was. On modestly replying 'pottery', the guffawing officer shouted to his colleagues, "Hey guys, he is a professor of pottery." Someone else might have replied professor of ceramic art or other self-aggrandisement, but not Yasuda, whose aesthetic sensibility is complemented by his practicality. When we drank tea, with which any discussion begins in China, a thermometer wedged between



Yasuda inspecting the contents of a recently fired kiln.

the lid and body of his elegant teapot ensured that the tea was brewed and served at its optimal temperature. On his neatly arranged shelves, brushes and other small tools are elegantly stored in slightly flawed slip-cast porcelain mugs, not randomly shoved into prosaic jam jars.

As a potter, throwing clay on a wheel has always been of paramount importance to Yasuda, but when he directed the Pottery Workshop, he had little time for wheel-based creative work. But, as he points out, in addition to enabling potters to work creatively, wheels were a powerful tool for mass production in the pre-industrial period. He is thoughtful about how he produces his porcelain tableware because he had initially considered industrial or product design as a career, before he became a potter. He slipcasts the mugs from his production range in open half-moulds, which are mirror images of each other, symmetrical around the carved, curved indentations which form complementary half handles. He does not trim the ridge formed at the joint of the leather-hard handles or their slightly ragged edges so that, when fired, their irregular form contrasts with the smooth curved bodies of the mugs. The relative roughness of the handles also aids gripping and the slight thickening in the pooled glaze also produces slightly deeper coloured handles when fired. The bowls and plates in the porcelain tableware production range are bisected with roughly cast lines simulating joins, so that when an individual setting of porcelain is displayed on the table the axes of individual pieces can be aligned attractively to unify the different shapes and sizes to form a ceramic composition that delights the eye of diners as well as their sense of touch.

Red House is well aligned too, arranged as an enfilade of five large, airy spaces, each with its defined purpose opening into the next. From a central grassed courtyard, one enters an office and library, to the left of which there is capacious storage. Proceeding to the right one enters Yasuda's studio followed by the production studio and finally the kiln room, which incorporates an area for working on moulds. Yasuda also has plans to utilise part of the shared, but currently disused, courtyard as an *al fresco* space for relaxation or hospitality.

Yasuda's production range of tableware is inspired by the shadowy luminescence of Song Dynasty Qingbai ware.





Facing page, top: Yasuda in injection pressure moulding area of studio.

Facing page, below: Porcelain tableware drying on shelves before firing.

Above: Yasuda inspecting wheel-thrown porcelain vase.

Yasuda pressure casts his range of production tableware using stacked moulds, forming the inner and outer surfaces of plates and bowls. During the three months before the commercial pressure moulding equipment he ordered was delivered, he improvised a small scale injection moulder using a pressure cooker, which he still uses in producing prototypes. Further evidence of his practicality is his glazing cabinet. At the flick of a switch, water flows down its rear and side walls, preventing aerosol glaze from adhering to their surfaces and washing it down into a bucket below. Elsewhere, an inexpensive plastic bucket with its base removed is used to improve the efficiency of an exhaust fan sited above a work bench.

Yasuda's production range of tableware is inspired by the shadowy luminescence of Song Dynasty Qingbai ware. "History is always harsh," says Yasuda. "The most important facet of tradition is survival." Economic as well as aesthetic survival is important, so Yasuda sells his porcelain tableware alongside his wheel-thrown works in the nearby Red House gallery, located in a precinct that is particularly lively every Saturday when a weekly market is held (which he helped establish while he was at the Pottery Workshop). China can be challenging climatically, as well as economically. In mid-August, a typhoon caused extensive flooding in Jingdezhen, leaving many families without their homes or livelihoods. "Fortunately, our studio survived without too much damage, with only 20 centimetres of water," wrote Felicity Aylieff, a partner in Red House Ceramics Design Studio with Yasuda. He was travelling at the time, a 21st century master celebrating journeyman predecessors, flourishing his potter's passport.

Colin Martin is a London-based Australian writer and collector.
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