

Kanghyo LEE: A Life's Devotion in Search of Buncheong's Beauty

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1. Buncheong ware; uniquely Korean

(1) Buncheong and its significance

The first ceramic ware - a type of earthenware - was made about 10,000 years ago in the Korean peninsula. Since then, skills in handling ceramic raw materials and firing in high temperatures developed to flourish a highly sophisticated ceramic culture over thousands of years. Along with 'cheongja' and 'baekja' - more commonly known as celadon and porcelain in the English language - when we look at the development of Korean ceramics, there is also the 'buncheong' ware. Although its terminology and concept is not found in the history of world ceramics, it is possible to state that it reflects on a specific ware in Korean ceramic history.

The term buncheong is the shortened version of 'bunjang-hwae-cheong-sagi' and it was first introduced in the 1930s by Yooseop Gohⁱ, a Korean art historian. It was a way of rejecting the terminology 'mishima'ⁱⁱ introduced by Japanese people (Hong, 2016: 615). The term 'buncheong-sagi' that we are familiar with today was not used during the period it was made. Unfortunately, we are unable to trace the exact name that was given to this particular ceramic ware through written historical documents, or to understand the determining factor that distinguished it from celadon and porcelain.

In terms of raw materials and making techniques, the buncheong ware bears no difference from the celadon. It used the same raw materials, glazes and decorating techniques of inlaid celadon. Nevertheless, the reason why this particular ware secures its own distinctive genre in the history of Korean ceramics is because it reflects on the historical transition from the Goryeo Dynasty to the Joseon Dynasty - from the sophisticated grace of Goryeo celadon to the dignified Joseon porcelain - completing its audacious and liberated authentic style that expresses the spirit of its period. For such reasons, it is important to understand the buncheong ware as a ceramic style that developed in correlation to this period focusing on making skills and not so much as a type of high-fired ware.

(2) Technical background

The interference of the Yuan Dynasty after the 13th century changed the nature of celadon completely. The refined and elaborate sophistication that once existed in Goryeo celadon disappeared - only to be replaced by crude decorations, largely because of the deterioration of ceramic materials. This took more direct effect entering into the 14th century, toward the end of the Goryeo Dynasty, due to domestic and external instability. It eventually led to the collapse of Goryeo celadon. At the time, celadon production was concentrated largely around Gangjin in the Jeolla-nam Province (the south-west region of the Korean peninsula). The royal court no longer funded ceramic potteries producing celadon which naturally led to their disintegration. The phenomenon caused potters to disperse around the entire Korean peninsula, and where they settled they set

up small potteries to meet the demands of local people. They began to make celadon, which led to the development of buncheong.

Therefore, it is possible to state that buncheong ware developed from the making techniques of Goryeo celadon combined with the lifestyle of different regional people. Before porcelain became universal among the Korean people, buncheong ware was widely used and was supplied to the royal court and also to government offices. Gradually it took on the philosophy and the ritual of the Joseon Dynasty and, while mimicking porcelain, it developed its own unique style. However, around 1467 the royal court established potteries near Gwangju in the Gyeonggi Province and they controlled the establishment of kilns for porcelain production – known as royal kilns – which eventually caused the rapid collapse of buncheong ware (Kang, 2005). In conclusion, buncheong ware developed as a way of reflecting on the social and cultural situation of the transitional period from Goryeo to Joseon, simultaneously as meeting the needs of a diverse range of people – from the royal court to the ordinary. Furthermore, it embraced a wide range of forms such as celadon, porcelain, earthenware, brassware and more to be an integrated fusion in terms of its style and aesthetics.

At the end of the Joseon Dynasty, the disorderly political situation of Korea led to the dissolve of the royal court kilns and the thirty-five years of Japanese occupation, where the majority of everyday ware in ceramics was machine-made in ceramic factories, encroaching on the halt of Korean authenticity, and history eventually inflicted the loss of tradition in Korean ceramics. After surviving the Japanese occupation (1910-1945) and the Korean War (1950-1953), Korea's ceramic history, known for its distinctive creative interpretations, degraded to become a souvenir tourist object for foreign visitors through the reproduction of Goryeo-style celadon (Chang, 2017: 64). In such dire conditions, Korea gradually recovered its national stability in terms of politics, economy and culture, which later brought about interests to preserve its outstanding ceramic history. Furthermore, the approach to ceramics as an art genre in universities enabled it to be more than a reproduction of historical wares and allowed it to advance to become modern, while cultivating its own style. Ceramics expanded actively, having a wide range of forms and experimentations meeting the requirements of modern art, as such.

2. Today's Buncheong

(1) Restoration of tradition and its re-interpretation

After independence, Korea's modern and contemporary ceramicists paid tribute to the recovery of Korea's national culture even in dire conditions. Recovery, development and continuation of the ceramic tradition in Korea was encouraged and promoted for economic-independence. Issues surrounding Korea's tradition applied not only to the ceramic culture but to the overall Korean society, as it had continued to be a subject of much discussion. Especially today, tradition in Korean ceramics is crucial. Historically the development of Goryeo celadon caused hard paste earthenware to deteriorate rapidly, and celadon, which once hid its appearance through buncheong, soon disappeared once Joseon Dynasty porcelain became high in demand. In the last century, Korean ceramicists understood tradition as 'something needing to be restored and reproduced in terms of ceramic style' (Kang, 2012). However, such a thought was far from achieving any kind of artistic or modern development. No matter how beautiful and mysterious the Goryeo celadon or the Joseon porcelain is, it is different to the lifestyle and the culture of modern people. Therefore, tradition requires re-interpretation in parallel with contemporary ceramics.

Korean ceramicists have continued to overcome prejudices around tradition set in the modern era. They have worked to restore and succeed in their tradition after having experienced colonial control working under Japanese officials. They sought new values - ceramics as contemporary art with roots in tradition. Even today, many Korean ceramicists refer to tradition as a source of inspiration, by interpreting traditional values, materials, techniques, images and more in new ways. Korean ceramicists believe that they need to find

beauty in material and technique so, as a consequence, the role played by earthenware, celadon, buncheong and porcelain as ceramic heritage has been crucial, with buncheong reserving its own significance.

(2) Re-discovery of buncheong

Buncheong ware, although less refined than celadon or porcelain, has shapes and surface decorations that tend to be freer in expression. The spontaneous and coincidental nature of buncheong in terms of expression brings about maximum effect through minimum movement. Free, non-calculative brush movements – using liquefied clay mixture known as slipⁱⁱⁱ – swirl around the surface of clay objects. The coincidental effect created by dipping and splashing slip is similar to the concept of the American modern abstract painter Jackson Pollock (1912-1956). This shows that buncheong shares similarity in abstract expression and freeness with modern art.

In comparison to celadon or porcelain, it is true to state that less attention has been given to buncheong. However today, the aesthetical value of buncheong has been largely appreciated, not only by Korean people, but the world over. Furthermore, many are inspired by its material and method of making as there exists a certain degree of freedom in the making process compared to celadon or porcelain. When we study the period in which buncheong developed, it took place at a time of confusion – a change in dynasty from Goryeo to Joseon – as a result, buncheong ware developed a certain freedom unrestricted by criteria based on wisdom and skill acquired over a long period of time. In this respect, it is the result given by time. In conclusion, buncheong ware possesses dual characteristics that coexist together –simplicity and complexity, softness and roughness.

Such traits in buncheong ware have been interpreted creatively in many different forms. Utility ware for the royal court show off the beauty of repetitive pattern, created by applying a stamping technique where patterns overlap. Such buncheong ware is simple without being too overbearing. Those that are dipped in slip tend to give off a sense of exhilaration with their freeness and coolness. The slip-brushed wares create a kind of landscape, with rhythmic and spontaneous brushstrokes depicting water or wind. Buncheong ware decorated in iron oxide tends to be bold in shape, with a humorous roughness and possessing a unique beauty. Buncheong ware, from childlike crude images to diverse ranges of painted expressions, is interpreted from a new angle in contemporary art (table 1).

Ceramicists considered traits found in buncheong to be important expressive factors in contemporary ceramics. It is possible to express both traditional elements and contemporary sensibility. The non-anthropogenic abstract nature of buncheong resulting from material and expression allows for it to be easily applied to contemporary art simultaneously as showing Korea's authentic beauty. For this reason, buncheong is constantly being re-interpreted by contemporary ceramicists (Lee 2014). However, after the Japanese Occupation, some ceramicists have attempted to use special features in buncheong as distinctive expressions. In this respect, contemporary ceramicist Kanghyo Lee succeeds and advances tradition as he has achieved both through his work.

Table 1: Decorating techniques of buncheong

■ Inlaying



■ Stamping



■ Sgraffito



■ Iron painting



■ Brushing



■ Dipping



3. Kanghyo Lee, contemporary taste in traditional sense

Buncheong ware, abundant with Korean beauty, was short-lived – existing only from the latter part of the 14th century and disappearing after the middle part of the 16th century. The subtle harmony between white and grey and the unrefined free lines and colours possess a unique sense of aesthetics at the same time as being progressive - quite different from Goryeo celadon and Joseon porcelain. Even today five hundred years since it was first made, it is a subject of much attention among contemporary ceramicists because of its special appeal and modern sense found in the making process. Modern and traditional aesthetics coexist and its abstract expressions allow for it to become an attractive genre among many contemporary ceramicists. By examining the authentic values rooted in original buncheong wares, contemporary ceramicists endeavour to create a new understanding of aesthetics.

In spite of facing difficulties, contemporary Korean ceramicists preserve the lineage of buncheong and its distinctive capacity for expression, during a period of historical turbulence. However outside of Korea, buncheong itself was unable to secure a collective of makers for it to develop further. Kwangcho Yoon (1946 ~), first generation contemporary buncheong ceramicist, found his own voice in tradition whilst simultaneously creating new styles to take on an elevated future, and in doing so he managed to continue the traditional lineage. Sangho Shin (1947 ~) experimented in re-interpreting traditional buncheong by developing new skills. Through the process he expanded this traditional ceramic ware into the domain of painting, treating clay surfaces like a canvas. Byeongho Yoo (1947 ~) harmonized shape and function to the highest level. Soojong Ree's focus is on material property, at the same time as immersing his energy into his work. Other recognized contemporary buncheong ceramicists include Jeongdo Lee (1953 ~), Sungjae Choi (1962 ~), Sangwook Huh (1970 ~) and more (Hong, 2016). These ceramicists have researched the making skills of Joseon buncheong and they have been internationally recognized for their exceptional work. Although Korean buncheong has been brought to attention in the UK, Japan, America and other places around the world through Bernard Leach and Shoji Hamada, regrettably its artistic understanding and status has drawn to a standstill. The appearance of Kanghyo Lee has been phenomenal as he has elevated the aesthetic value of Korean buncheong to another level. He has expanded boundaries through his new approach where he performs to show the spontaneous nature of this particular ceramics, and in doing so he has moved beyond craft to crossover into the domain of contemporary art.

(1) Kanghyo Lee and the material clay

Kanghyo Lee today is widely known not only in Korea but also internationally. In his path of life, he had three important encounters with the material clay. The first encounter came about by chance. The second was a destined incident and the third was a conscious one. He was first introduced to clay while he was preparing for his university examination. He had always desired to become a painter and in order to prepare for this he took art classes at an art academy (extra-curricular learning after school). By coincidence, he discovered a ceramic studio near the academy. He soon began to learn the throwing technique on the potter's wheel. Prior

to this period, he had no interest in craft, particularly ceramics. The experience of creating simple plates and jars on the potter's wheel was the first encounter with clay and also the first step to becoming a ceramicist. The second encounter was in 1979, when Lee was in his third year of university. In the 1980s there were two main tendencies in Korean ceramics. One was in restoring and developing traditional making skills in order to succeed the ceramic heritage handed down by ancestors as a means to revive Korean ceramics. The other concentrated purely on formative expressions, emphasizing deconstruction of any kind of art genres in search of a new flow in contemporary ceramics. In universities, the two tendencies coexisted (Shin, 1994). Lee emphasized the importance of tradition and his work focused on cultivating skills, however he sought after new tendencies following the trend of the time. Therefore, he continued to experiment with form. He combined the two tendencies and teachings from two different teachers. They were influential in developing Lee's skills in ceramics – Daejeong Won (1920~2007), worked in the traditional method using porcelain to create unique expressions and surface decorations; Sangho Shin (mentioned above) moved away from reproducing tradition, while incessantly experimenting with concept and material. Shin constantly sought after new expressions. Lee was fortunate to create functional and practical forms with roots in tradition but applying western art tendencies such as geometric abstract and purely abstract expressions. This was largely due to the two different teachings which eventually built the foundation for Lee to combine tradition with modern aesthetics in order to create his own style.

To end, Lee encountered two different experiences every three years, in a time span of six years. Some thirty years later this time frame has been crucial in transforming the ceramicist's life, innovatively enabling him to live as a contemporary buncheong maker. He not only knows how to mix and make clay, but he also has exceptional building skills. He has learnt to respect the material he uses as a ceramicist. During his university days, Lee was interested in old objects. By chance he discovered himself standing in front of large and old sauce jars in an antique shop. He was immediately drawn to the simplicity, the weight and the volume of onggi jars. As a result, he decided to learn the onggi making skill. Lee settled into a studio-home in an onggi making village in Oego Mountain near the city of Ulsan. Here he studied under onggi master Malsu Hwang, learning in the traditional way purely by watching the master at work. He countlessly repeated the onggi making technique over and over again. Through the process, he began to understand structure, shape and a wide range of expressions. He worked extremely hard to discover his own style. This later became the base to Kanghyo Lees' buncheong style, where he applies the onggi making technique to buncheong. Soon he was called upon by his former professor, Sangho Shin. At the time, Shin experimented with simple contemporary forms using the onggi technique, and Lee worked under him to make tall shapes that were more than two metres high. The experience was invaluable as he began to understand contemporary expressions applied to traditional making skills. After this period, Lee settled down near Cheongju city, building a studio that he had always imagined having.

(2) Kanghyo Lee, clay paintings

At a time when other ceramicists of Lee's age were concentrating on so-called 'contemporary ceramics', Lee was in search of ways to succeed with traditional Korean ceramics. Thirty years later his attitude remains the same (Wu, 2014: 27). He continues to maintain his focus in finding ways to re-interpret and to develop tradition by continuously pushing boundaries through challenges and experimentations. He has a wide certified knowledge of clay that opens new paths for Korean buncheong to develop.

Kanghyo Lee's buncheong pieces are made by applying the onggi building technique. Therefore, the shape and the structure rely on the onggi technique but the surface pattern is drawn combining both buncheong and onggi methods – onggi finger drawing is used together with buncheong decorations. The expressions appear like abstract paintings, completed with Lee's final touch. Such use of slip, similar to abstract paintings, is Lee's representational expression. Dipping, brushing, splashing and drawing with fingers are techniques enjoyed by Lee. Depending on the effect, he wipes, layers, scraps and decorates clay surfaces

with subtle colour tones, often appearing to be spontaneous and non-calculative. This method of using fingers for patternmaking originated in ancient times. It is used for decorating onggi jars with three fingers (often depicting natural images). The term 'bunjang' literally means to powder the surface. In the case of buncheong, white slip is applied on to a dark clay body colour. Although the method originates from ancient times, the splashing method used by Lee is neither onggi nor buncheong in its technique. Lee applies the two methods closely to create natural expressions (Figure 1).



Figure 1 Kanghyo Lee in his performance art

On a two-metre high clay object, Lee applies different shades of slip. He splashes, sprinkles and literally throws buckets of different coloured slips. The method of decorating appears like a shaman's ritual, especially when traditional Korean music is played in the background. The performance unfolds in harmony with the music, and the ceramicist draws, makes marks and brushes slip onto the surface of his object. It usually takes anything from five to ten minutes and sometimes twenty minutes, depending on the ceramicist's state of mind. Lee does not always perform with music. At times, he conducts his performance without any sound, particularly if he is making a refined piece. He tries to observe only clay surfaces in concentration to see the next stage of the making, almost like a meditation strengthening the inner energy. When he makes spontaneous, vigorous pieces, he plays the Korean 'nong-ak' - Korean music praying for good crop by farmers. Instead of a brush he uses a stick to draw lines, with his body covered in wet slip from head to toe, dancing away to music. The act is an integration of body and mind, an extension of the being releasing energy externally. His dance performance is comparable to the ritual held before igniting the kiln fire where food and drinks are laid out for spirits, in the hope of achieving a successful firing (Figure 2).



Figure 2 Slip splashing, hand painting and more on vessels built using the onggi method

Lee usually prepares five to six slip colours. He avoids porcelain as he needs the dark clay colour to apply light shades of slip – white, grey and more. He moves away from the traditional brushing method known as 'kwi-al'^{iv} by applying layer after layer on to large vessels. After splashing, he rubs vigorously on the surface in order to create a smooth and shiny layer. Then he uses a stick to draw lines, this is known as the bakgi technique or sgraffito. It is as if a black line is drawn on white paper. The act of layering and overlapping slip using hand and tool creates a profound and mysterious sensibility. The tonal intensity is further emphasized once clay is fired.

(3) Kanghyo Lee, connecting through clay

Lee makes shapes with clay, and through his performance he applies slip with his fingers and draws with the palm of his hands, creating patterns. His drawings are not planned but rather they are spontaneous. Like a person putting on clothes nonchalantly, nothing is planned and all is coincidental. 'Unlike something that is accumulated like studied knowledge in my head, the energy found in materials and senses, like today it is raining, yesterday it was sunny . . . there are cold days and warm ones . . . my emotional energy changes in correlation to my surroundings.' (Cho, 2015: 69) Through his spontaneous nature his emotional energy creates abstract images (Figure 3).



Figure 3 (L) Kanghyo Lee, *Buncheong Shower*, 2012, 30x24x35(h)cm, (R) Kanghyo Lee, *Buncheong Faced Vase*, 2012, 32x17x34(h)cm

There is nothing artificial about Lee's works, but rather they are spontaneous accidents. He does not plan how his emotion is going to protrude externally, however he remains true to the authenticity of buncheong by adding 'skill to unconscious skill' (Goh, 1993). This is deeply rooted in the work as it is internal energy coming to the surface. Material and the body integrate, expanding further out to create a new type of performing art. The technique of decorating clay surfaces used in buncheong is a traditional Korean method using slip. Through Lee it has developed into an abstract painting form. The difference between painting and craft relates to the innermost subjectivity when it comes to expressions in art. If craft objects are 'cold objects' relying heavily on the technique of the maker, paintings are art tendencies expressing the conflicting inner emotion of an artist (Lee, 1994: 241). Benedetto Croce (1866~1952) provided theoretical clues in modernism aesthetics. According to Croce, paintings can be defined as 'moral symbols or sensational expressions that can be distinguished from ideological materialization' (Chang, 2010: 255). In order to express sensations, Croce placed much importance on intuition and based on this art portrays the spur of the moment 'spontaneity' in logic and analysis, relying on rationality. Spontaneity based on intuition is an important factor in Western aesthetics (Bang and Lee, 2014: 220).

The spontaneous nature of applying decoration as conducted in the works of Lee is a rare expression in Korean ceramics as it tends to demand perfection in skill. Such a way of expressing is not something that can be learnt. It comes from years of experience. Furthermore, it has a thread of connection with the method used by the American abstract painter Jackson Pollock (1912~1956) – action painting. Lee's way of using the wooden tool for spontaneous linear drawings resembles demi-cubist expressions using space and shapes by surrealist painter Andre Masson (1896~1987) (Figure 4).

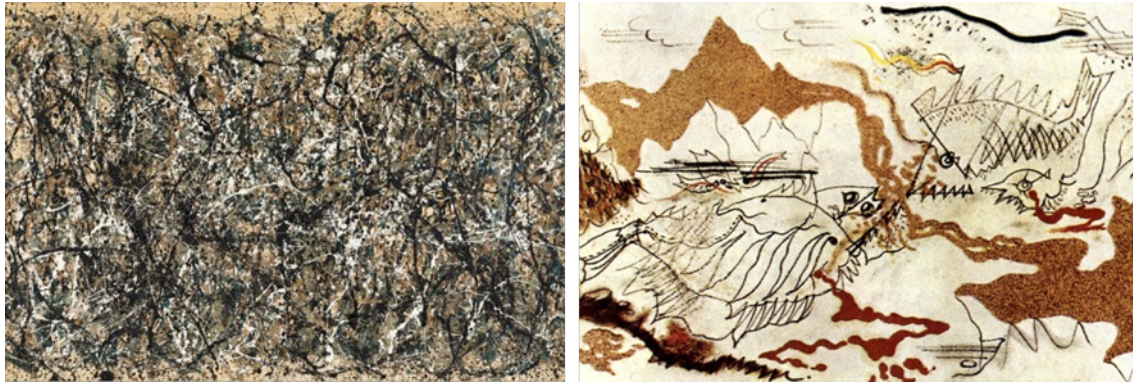


Figure 4 (L) Jackson Pollock, *Number 1A*, 1948, oil and enamel paint on canvas, 172.7x264.2 cm (R) Andre Masson, *Battle of Fishes*, 1926, oil and enamel paint on canvas, 1600x796cm

Lee's buncheong lies at a point of contact integrating the aesthetics of East and West. Similar to Western modernism and Joseon Dynasty buncheong, Lee expanded beyond tradition and order in search for something new in art. However, he differs from the Western avant-garde in that he did not sever off tradition, rather he extended further from it. Moreover, he kept the essence of the potter alive, retaining the spirit of a craftsman only to reinterpret newly the nameless ceramic maker of the Joseon Dynasty and continue the lineage which has become something of an old tradition to add new creativity, making it apt for the current times. (Figure 5)



Figure 5 (L) Kanghyo Lee, *Buncheong Landscapes – Mountain_Water*, 2014, 85x46x85(h)cm, (R) Kanghyo Lee, *Buncheong Landscapes*

3. Conclusion

Korean ceramics reflected on the ideology of the royal court as well as the aesthetics of the ordinary people. Tradition has been stubbornly preserved until now and unlike China or Japan, trade with the West was not common. Hence the reason why Korean ceramics are lesser known around the world. On the other hand, because it was less influenced and interfered with by Western influences, it is praised as retaining Asian

tradition and aesthetics. For such reasons, it is highly valued in the international market. Buncheong which was once overshadowed by the finesse and sophistication of celadon, and the pure and simple nature of porcelain, today receives much attention the world over as representing Korean aesthetics. Many contemporary ceramicists study buncheong to modernize tradition. The freeness of expression without restriction encourages contemporary ceramicists to re-interpret tradition and, consequently, they continue in this way. Tradition, materials and making skills provide inspiration for new experimentation creating a new type of buncheong. Lee is a pioneer among contemporary ceramicists as he promotes the beauty of Korean buncheong globally.

'I am satisfied even if you classify me under tradition. I am satisfied also if you define me as a contemporary ceramicist. Because if you call me a traditional ceramicist, it means that I have elevated skills inherited by ancestors and therefore I am recognized for the experienced skill. If you praise me as a contemporary ceramicist then I am recognized for my aesthetics. So, I am not bothered. I like to bury my body and mind in clay only to progress forward' (Son, 2015). He looks for freedom in expression retaining strength, simplicity and plainness in buncheong. Clay and glaze harmonize with fire, adding a sense of spontaneity to his unique expressions. This has transformed into a new kind of performance in art, again expanding his horizon crossing over craft and contemporary art. To conclude, there is more to his art than spontaneity as the belief in himself is strong and mature, deriving from years of developing skills and experimenting with material.

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Endnotes

ⁱ A Korean art historian born in Gyeonggi Province and graduated from Posung High School in 1925. Between 1927 and 1930, Goh studied art history and aesthetics at the department of Philosophy, Kyungsoong University. In 1933, after serving as Director of Kaesong Museum, he was appointed Professor at Yonhee College (currently Yonsei University) and Ewha College (currently Ewha Womans University). He conducted many field studies on Korean scenic sites, historical remains and temples.

ⁱⁱ The terminology ‘mishima’, as stated by Japanese people, derived from Shizuoka region where almanacs made by Mishima Daisa had thin texts and lines resembling the horizontal and the perpendicular spacing with floral patterns found in buncheong wares.

ⁱⁱⁱ This is a method that uses a wide and coarse brush in order to create brush marks on completed clay forms. The brush marks created in this method often appear vigorous, swift with rhythmic movement. The action is not a calculated one but rather it reflects on the nature of the person making it. The thickness of brush marks or the density of slip on forms is neither planned nor calculated. This method further emphasizes beauty in Joseon buncheong.

^{iv} The surface decorating technique of buncheong uses the white slip to cover the entire surface of objects. This is followed by drawing patterns into the slip covered surface. Once this is done, a grayish-blue glaze is applied. After firing, the pattern reveals itself. Whiteness of patterns in contrast to the gray background creates a unique beauty.