



Specialist profile *Hitomi Hosono*

Using traditional pottery techniques, Japanese ceramics artist Hitomi Hosono creates delicate, modern pieces that evoke the Wedgwood legacy. By Caroline Clifton-Mogg

Rather like the delicate leaves that she painstakingly casts and carves in clay, Japanese ceramics artist Hitomi Hosono looks as though the first autumn gust could blow her away. But it would be a brave gust indeed that would try to deflect the determined Hitomi from her chosen course.

Her work is extraordinary: building on a ceramic base that may be in the form of a bowl, a vase or a tower, Hitomi applies cast-clay ornament in the form of leaves, stems and blossom to create unglazed pieces that are fluid in form, yet incredibly structured. She makes ceramic boxes too, in the same manner, but with heavily gilded

interiors, in surprising and satisfying contrast to the carved unglazed exterior.

The technique from which much of her work evolves is a modern take on the 200-year-old art of 'sprigging', where clay slivers are cast into shapes before being applied to flat ceramic surfaces: a pedestrian description of an eighteenth-century technique that, using the right body (specifically jasperware) and in the right hands (specifically those of Josiah Wedgwood) has produced some of the most

In front of her studio kiln, Hitomi holds one of her creations

perfect ceramic examples of relief decoration ever seen.

Hitomi was brought up on her parents' rice farm in Japan. After completing her BA in ceramics in Kanasawa – and having taught herself English by listening to the BBC World Service – she applied for a scholarship in Europe, through an exchange programme organised by the Japanese Rotary Club. She won a place to Copenhagen, where she studied product design, and, after her return to Japan, she won a scholarship to study for an MA at the Royal College of Art in London, from which she graduated in 2009.

As part of her MA studies, she spent six weeks at the Wedgwood headquarters in Stoke-on-Trent, where she explored the decorative possibilities of using 'sprigging' in a modern context. And, in a sense, that is what she has been doing ever since.

She starts by making the base shape, which is then mounted on to a potter's wheel, ready for decoration. Next, she makes the moulds that will produce the decorative sprigs: 'I carve a leaf, for example, on to a piece of clay; from that I make a mould, and then, when it is dry, I press a piece of wet clay into the mould to form the leaf,' she explains.

The details of the leaf are then further defined; the work is very precise, and, unable to find professional sculpting tools that were fine enough, Hitomi bought and adapted some everyday dental tools: tooth scrapers, picks and probes now trace out the fine veins and serrated edges of the clay leaf. The result is as delicate as a piece of chiffon, and looks as ephemeral as anything in an autumn garden.

The finished leaves sit, curled as though fallen from the bough, ready to be attached to the base piece, which is dampened with water. As each leaf is set carefully in place,



pressed on to the body with a spatula – rather like adding pastry leaves to a pie before baking – they seem to ripple over the bowl or box, taking on a life of their own. Some pieces – for example the wisteria tower – are decorated inside as well as out: here, she uses chopsticks to position each leaf carefully on to the inner walls, working from the base upwards and pressing the sprigs well into the sides of the wet clay.

The next stage is to find a box large enough to hold the piece securely so that it can dry out as slowly as possible.

One side of the box is removed, the whole covered in plastic, and small pots of water are placed on the box floor as humidifiers. The finished piece is moved into its new home, where it remains for two to three months, and is sprayed daily and turned until it is ready for firing – which, again, is done very slowly, sometimes taking up to 15 hours. The finishing touches include cleaning, polishing and sealing. Then, and only then, is it ready to leave the studio.

Adrian Sassoon, a dealer who first saw Hitomi's work at the RCA degree show and now represents her in London, says, 'What is extraordinary about her is how she cherishes and cares about her pieces. It seems to me to be almost a nesting process – like a mother hen, she tends each piece from the creation of the clay elements.'

These are original and beautiful pieces that combine the fragility of nature with the discipline of classical design. One cannot but think that that consummate artist and tireless innovator, Josiah Wedgwood, would surely have approved □

Hitomi Hosono: www.hitomihosono.com

Adrian Sassoon: 020-7581 9888; www.adriansassoon.com



TOP Hitomi uses the eighteenth-century technique of 'sprigging' to create her intricate pieces. ABOVE FROM LEFT This 'box' has a gilded interior which contrasts with the unglazed exterior. A clay leaf is removed from its mould. Hitomi applies leaves on to the base shape. She sketches the decorative details before making moulds