

*Li Hongwei*

MASTER *of* INNOVATION



*Pucker Gallery • Boston*



*Dan #13*  
Porcelain and  
stainless steel  
12 x 9 x 9"  
HL155

*Li Hongwei*

## MASTER *of* INNOVATION

A ceramicist of the highest caliber and a sculptor of unsurpassed ability, Li Hongwei 李鴻韋 is internationally renowned for his porcelains, which are prized for their highly innovative glazes, as well as for his sculptures, which combine glazed porcelain and polished stainless steel. His ceramic glazes are acclaimed both for the new colors that he has pioneered and for the localized areas of crystallization that he induces within the glaze matrix to create decoration in a contrasting color. Mr. Li has achieved success not only in determining the quantity and size of the crystalline formations but in defining their shapes, which typically recall leaves and blossoms. And his unique sculptures offer a new direction in contemporary sculpture.

I first encountered Li Hongwei's work at a New York art fair fifteen or twenty years ago. The yellow-glazed vase embellished with royal blue, ginkgo-leaf-shaped designs featured in that display immediately captured my attention. Wholly apart from its beauty, the vase opened my eyes to the world of contemporary Chinese ceramics, sparking an interest that continues to this day.

Before I saw that yellow vase with blue designs some years ago, I was convinced that most contemporary Chinese ceramics were lodged in the past, so to speak, recreating Song monochromes and replicating Ming blue-and-white wares or Qing enameled porcelains but not technically advancing the potter's art. The moment I saw Li Hongwei's yellow-glazed vase, however, I knew that my



*The Origin #4*  
Porcelain and stainless steel  
47 ¼ x 35 ½ x 35 ½"  
HL139

previous belief was wrong: Li Hongwei can compete in the same arena as the finest, most innovative traditional Chinese potters.

As I learned from that yellow-glazed vase, Mr. Li's ceramics are not focused on recreating the traditional Chinese ceramics of bygone eras; rather, they are of an entirely different order. Highly innovative and stunningly beautiful, they are technically sophisticated, advancing the potter's art through the introduction of new techniques of decoration.

Chinese potters were the first in the world to produce stoneware, which they did as early as 1500BCE, evincing China's early technological prowess. With their invention of white porcelain in the eighth or ninth century, during the Tang dynasty (618–907), they established the foundation of the later ceramic tradition not just for China but for the world. With mastery of high-fired ceramic bodies firmly in place, whether stoneware or porcelain, potters faced the challenge of creating beautiful glazes and of introducing appropriate techniques of decoration to embellish their pots.

During the thousand years from the Han dynasty (206BCE–CE220) to the Song dynasty (960–1279), Chinese potters invented, pioneered, and perfected celadon glazes—those high-fired glazes, that, due to their inclusion of a small admixture of iron oxide, mature to a pale bluish green hue. Those potters also mastered clear, colorless glazes, which they applied over porcelains and other white wares, and they experimented with brown and black glazes, achieved through the addition to the glaze slurry of a slightly higher percentage of iron oxide than used for the celadon wares.

Having mastered stoneware and porcelain production and having perfected clear, celadon,

and dark glazes, Chinese potters concentrated on expanding their repertory of decorative techniques. They first embellished their ceramics with incised and carved designs; by the late Northern Song period (960–1127) they were using molds to impress decoration on the interior of bowls and other open-form vessels. They also learned to paint underglaze designs in brown and black slips as seen in Cizhou wares, just as they tried their hand at splashed glazes, inducing lavender suffusions to form in opaque, sky blue glazes by sprinkling copper filings on localized areas of glaze before firing as witnessed by Jun ware.

During the Yuan (1279–1368) and Ming (1368–1644) dynasties, potters at Jingdezhen—that city in northeastern Jiangxi province that would become the porcelain capital of China and then of the world—mastered the art of embellishing porcelain with bold designs painted in underglaze cobalt blue to produce blue-and-white ware, using brush techniques pioneered by their Song-dynasty forebears, but substituting cobalt for the iron-oxide-bearing brown and black slips used in earlier eras.

For a thousand years, the chief decorative techniques for embellishing ceramics have been limited to incising or carving motifs on the ceramic body—or painting designs on the ceramic body, usually in cobalt blue—before applying the glaze slurry and firing the pieces in the kiln. The last great innovation before Mr. Li's recent contributions occurred some five-hundred years ago, during China's Ming dynasty, with the development of so-called overglaze enamels, in which designs were painted in brightly colored, low-firing glazes on the surfaces of already high-fired porcelains, after which the pieces were fired again, but at a lower temperature, the second firing melting the low-firing glazes—i.e., the so-called “enamels”—bringing their

colors to maturity, and fusing them to the surface of the existing, high-fired glaze.

By the late Ming period, porcelains with decoration painted in overglaze enamels had supplanted blue-and-white ware as the preferred ceramic ware. The overglaze enamels offered a broader range of colors than could be achieved with underglaze painting, which was limited to blue (from cobalt), red (from copper), and brown (from iron oxide). The expanded palette afforded by overglaze enamels appealed to the public's growing love of color; in addition, it facilitated the creation of decorative schemes that mimicked paintings on paper and silk, which was also met with increasing public acclaim. Qing-dynasty potters not only refined and further expanded the palette of enamel colors but created ever more sophisticated designs; their efforts culminated in the enameled porcelains of the eighteenth century, which surely are the most exquisite enameled wares ever produced, particularly those imperial porcelains known as *Guyuxuan* ware.

The invention and perfection of decoration in overglaze enamels was the last major technical innovation in Chinese ceramics until the advent of glazes with crystalline formations in the twentieth century. Mr. Li's unique contribution to the advancement of ceramic technology has been the introduction of means to control the size, shape, and quantity of crystalline formations in crystalline glazes, not to mention the quality of the resulting crystalline designs. His contributions thus embrace both aesthetics and ceramic technology.

In the twentieth century, such potters as James Lovera (1920–2015) and the husband-and-wife team of Otto (1908–2007) and Gertrud (1908–1971) Natzler achieved success in expanding the range

of glaze colors and textures, but didn't otherwise experiment with new decorative techniques. By contrast, Mr. Li has not only introduced new glaze colors but has achieved success in controlling the size, shape, quantity, and quality of the crystalline formations in his crystalline glazes and has thereby significantly advanced ceramic technology.

In terms of glazes, Mr. Li's new colors include his trademark yellow, which he terms "Splash Gold Peacock Blue Glaze," his lime-green glaze, named "Traced Ink Splash Glaze," his dove-gray glaze, called "Winter Morning Mist Glaze," and his variegated strawberry-red glaze. What is remarkable about these glazes is that they are all high-fired. Although Chinese potters had perfected bluish-green celadon glazes by the Song dynasty and had created high-fired, copper-red glazes during the Ming and Qing dynasties—such as the so-called "Sacrificial-red Glazes" of the early fifteenth century and the so-called "Ox-blood Glazes," or "Sang de Boeuf Glazes" (known in Chinese as *Lang Yao*) of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries—their yellow, aubergine, and pale and emerald green glazes were low-firing overglaze enamels, applied atop the glazes of already-fired porcelains which were then fired again at a lower temperature to melt the enamels, mature their colors, and fuse them to the glaze surface.

Apart from the crystalline formations in his glazes, Mr. Li has also achieved success in introducing variegation in the colors of his glazes with the result that the glaze color may vary in localized areas on a single piece, sometimes lighter, sometimes darker, and sometimes with hints of other colors, as seen in the "Winter Morning Mist Glaze," which is basically dove-gray but with suffusions of rose and mauve, which suggest the day's coming



*Allegory of Balance #16*  
Porcelain and stainless steel  
62 x 25 1/2 x 17 1/2"  
HL180



*Fragment Series—Xuan #14*  
Porcelain and stainless steel  
73 x 33 1/2 x 33 1/2"  
HL158

dawn. Mr. Li likens the suffusions in his glazes to the colored effects in Song-dynasty Jun ware.

Through experimentation and through the study of chemistry—particularly ceramic and glaze chemistry—Mr. Li has coaxed copper, a traditional glaze-coloring agent, to produce new glaze colors. Chinese potters first used copper during the Eastern Han period (CE25–220) to produce low-fired, lead-fluxed, dark green glazes which they applied over brick-red, earthenware vessels. By the Yuan dynasty (1279–1368), potters learned that designs painted on porcelains in underglaze copper would mature to a strawberry-red if fired at high temperatures in a reducing atmosphere, resulting in so-called underglaze red ware, or Youlihong. By the same token, porcelain glazes colored with copper would mature to a brilliant strawberry red if fired in a reducing atmosphere, as evinced by the previously mentioned Sacrificial-red and Ox-blood Glazes. Seldom exploited by Mr. Li's predecessors because of the difficulty in attaining the desired color, high-fired glazes colored with copper can also mature to a pale green, or sage green, if fired in an oxidizing atmosphere, as witnessed by Mr. Li's "Traced Ink Splash Glaze." Such copper-green glazes superficially resemble celadon glazes, though the colors are not identical, though a true celadon glaze is attained with iron oxide as the coloring agent, and though the copper-green glazes are far more difficult to achieve. Additionally, if fired in the proper kiln atmosphere, copper can also produce dove-gray glazes, as seen in Mr. Li's "Winter Morning Mist Glaze." Traditional Chinese potters did not intentionally produce gray glazes, but a few Yuan and early Ming porcelains decorated in underglaze copper that were intended to be underglaze-red porcelains actually matured with gray decoration due to variation in kiln atmosphere during firing.

Through his introduction of new glaze colors and his success in controlling the size, shape, quantity, and quality of crystalline formations in crystalline glazes, Mr. Li has contributed significantly to the advancement of ceramic technology, creating decoration not under the glaze, not on the glaze surface, but within the glaze itself. These are major contributions to the potter's art and rank among the very significant breakthroughs in ceramic technology. In the arena of decorative techniques, Li Hongwei has made an indelible mark on the history of ceramics, adding his name to the short list of potters who have contributed new techniques of decoration to the ceramicist's art.

In short, Li Hongwei ranks among the world's most sophisticated contemporary artists, admired in China, in the West, and around the world. His ceramics are not merely technically accomplished; rather, they rise to the highest order of technical excellence. With their new colors—and particularly with their well-controlled crystalline decorative elements within the glazes—his porcelains reveal exceptional innovation, picking up and pushing forward a tradition of creativity that had lain dormant for several centuries. Best of all, his ceramics and his ceramic-and-stainless-steel sculptures are breathtakingly beautiful, an absolute joy to behold. If a ceramic masterpiece is defined as a work of fired clay that represents the supremely happy marriage of creativity, technical excellence, and aesthetic merit, then, Li Hongwei's works, whether his ceramics or his sculptures, are masterpieces, and he is a master artist to the world.

—Robert D. Mowry 毛瑞

*Alan J. Dworsky Curator of Chinese Art Emeritus,*

*Harvard Art Museums, and Senior Consultant, Christie's*

哈佛大學藝術博物館亞洲部榮譽主任暨佳士得高級顧問





*Mei-ping Vase*  
Porcelain  
Splash gold peacock blue glaze  
15 ½ x 10 x 10"  
HL165



*Vase*  
Porcelain  
Splash gold peacock blue glaze  
16 ½ x 7 x 7"  
HL175



*Allegory of Balance #26*  
Porcelain and stainless steel  
61 x 27 1/2 x 21 3/4"  
HL138



*Mei-ping Vase*  
Porcelain  
Splash gold peacock blue glaze  
17  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 8  $\frac{1}{2}$  x 8  $\frac{1}{2}$ "  
HL164



*Mei-ping Vase*  
Porcelain  
Splash gold peacock blue vase  
12 3/4 x 7 x 7"  
HL161



*Gourd Vase*  
Porcelain  
Splash gold peacock blue glaze  
13 x 6 x 6"  
HL159



*Moon-shaped Bottle*  
Porcelain  
Splash gold peacock blue glaze  
15 3/4 x 10 x 4"  
HL137



*Garlic Head Vase*  
Porcelain  
Splash gold peacock blue glaze  
16 x 8 x 8"  
HL141



*Mei-ping Vase*  
Porcelain  
Splash gold peacock blue glaze  
18 ½ x 11 ½ x 11 ½"  
HL166



*Vase*  
Porcelain  
Splash gold peacock blue glaze  
17 x 9 x 9"  
HL174



*Mei-ping Vase*  
Porcelain  
Splash gold peacock blue glaze  
17 x 9 x 9"  
HL162





*Gourd Vase*  
Porcelain  
Splash gold peacock blue glaze  
16 x 7 ¼ x 7 ¼"  
HL160



*Vase*  
Porcelain  
Splash gold peacock blue glaze  
16 x 6 ½ x 6 ½"  
HL176



*Upwelling of Gravity #45*  
Porcelain and stainless steel  
21 x 10 x 10"  
HL136



*Upwelling of Gravity #18*  
Porcelain and stainless steel  
21 x 10 x 10"  
HL169



*Bowl*  
Porcelain  
Splash gold peacock blue glaze  
4 1/4 x 6 1/4 x 6 1/4"  
HL151



*Pomegranate Vase*  
Porcelain  
Splash gold peacock blue glaze  
12 1/4 x 11 x 11"  
HL146



*Mei-ping Vase*  
Porcelain  
Splash gold peacock blue glaze  
16 x 9 1/4 x 9 1/4"  
HL163



*Gourd Vase*  
Porcelain  
Splash gold peacock blue glaze  
16 ¼ x 7 ½ x 7 ½"  
HL179



*Drum Vase*  
Porcelain  
Splash gold peacock blue glaze  
15 ½ x 7 x 7"  
HL140



*Olive Vase*  
Porcelain  
Traced ink splash glaze  
15 ¼ x 7 x 7"  
HL168



*Dan-ping Vase*  
Porcelain  
Traced ink splash glaze  
15 ¾ x 7 ½ x 7 ½"  
HL156



*Upwelling of Gravity #56*  
Porcelain and stainless steel  
19 1/4 x 10 x 10"  
HL171





*Upwelling of Gravity #62*  
Porcelain and stainless steel  
28 x 10 x 10"  
HL173



*Upwelling of Gravity #29*  
Porcelain and stainless steel  
22 x 8 x 8"  
HL170



*Double Gourd Vase*  
Porcelain  
Yellow glaze  
13 1/4 x 6 1/4 x 6 1/4"  
HL149



*Moon Vase*  
Porcelain  
Winter morning mist glaze  
15  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 9  $\frac{1}{2}$  x 3  $\frac{3}{4}$ "  
HL152



*Drum Vase*  
Porcelain  
Winter morning mist glaze  
15  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 6  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 6  $\frac{3}{4}$ "  
HL148



*Drum Vase*  
Porcelain  
Variegated strawberry red glaze  
15 ½ x 7 ½ x 7 ½"  
HL157



*Guan-yin Vase*  
Porcelain  
Winter morning mist glaze  
16 x 8 ½ x 8 ½"  
HL145



*Upwelling of Gravity #60*  
Porcelain and stainless steel  
26 x 12 x 12"  
HL172



*Mei-ping Vase*  
Porcelain  
Traced ink splash glaze  
15 ½ x 8 ¼ x 8 ¼"  
HL167



*Vase*  
Porcelain  
Winter morning mist glaze  
13 3/4 x 6 x 6"  
HL177



*Vase*  
Porcelain  
Winter morning mist glaze  
13 x 7 x 7"  
HL178

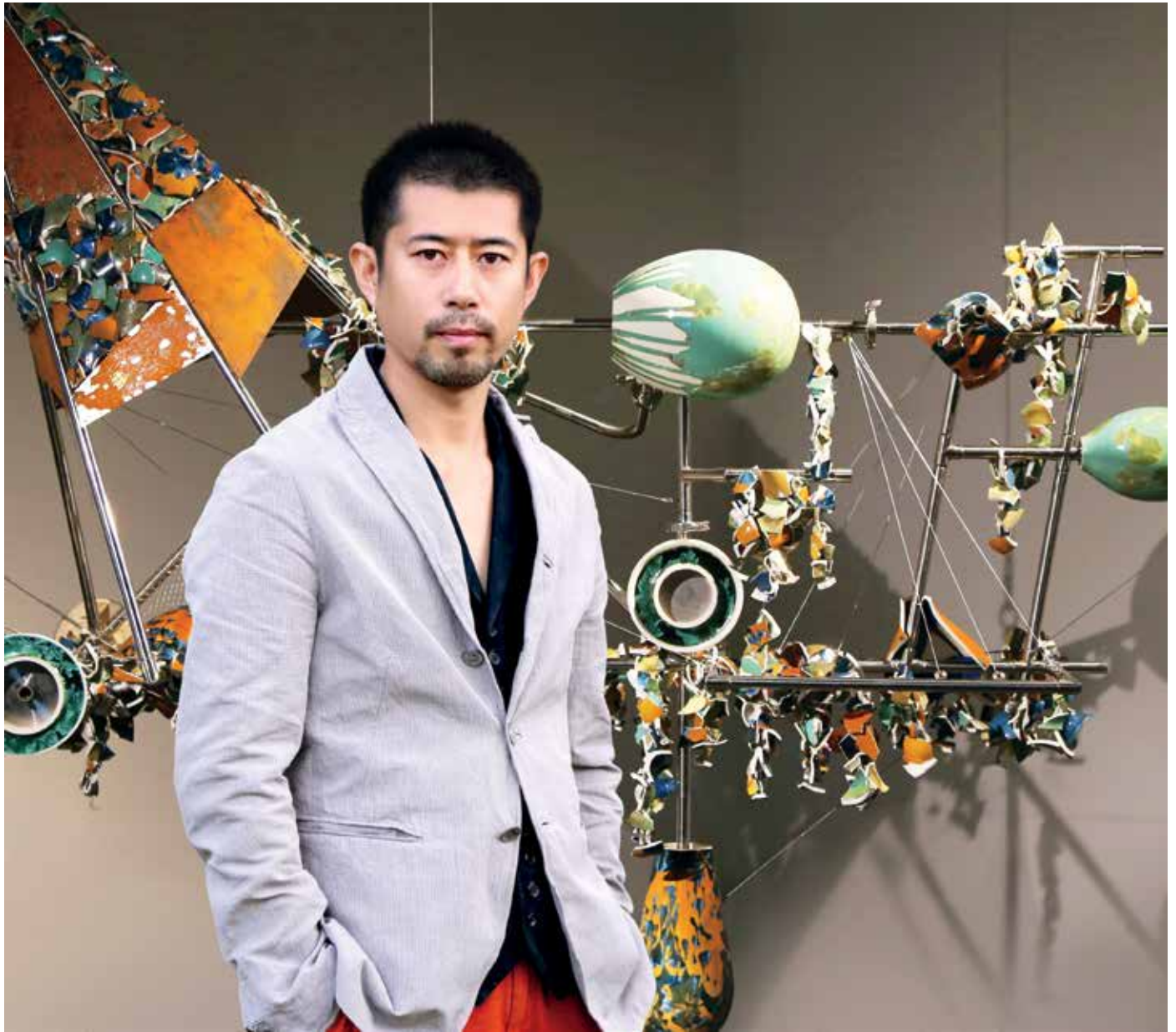


*Mei-ping Vase*  
Porcelain  
Winter morning mist glaze  
16 x 8  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 8  $\frac{3}{4}$ "  
HL142



*Dan-ping Vase*  
Porcelain  
Winter morning mist glaze  
15 x 8  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 8  $\frac{3}{4}$ "  
HL144





**L**i Hongwei (b.1980, China) is a contemporary artist who works and lives in Beijing and New York. His works have been acquired by the British Museum, the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, the Art Institute of Chicago, The Israel Museum, the Harvard Art Museums, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, and the Long Museum, among others. His works have been exhibited in numerous international art institutions, including the National Art Museum of China, the Louvre, the U.S. Embassy, the New Mexico Museum of Art, the Fox Art Gallery of the

University of Pennsylvania, The Art Institute of Chicago, the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, the Long Museum, the Dublin Castle in Ireland, and others. In 2013, he was awarded the Taylor Prize by the 2013 France International Salon.

Hongwei holds a bachelor's degree in sculpture from the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing, and a master's in ceramic art from the New York State College of Ceramics at Alfred University in Alfred, NY. As a visiting artist, he has been invited to give lectures at different institutions, including Harvard University and Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

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GALLERY

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*Credits:*

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Leslie Anne Feagley

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biographies, and  
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of the Week* emailist.

COVER:

*Beyond the Height #4*

Porcelain and stainless steel

106 x 45 x 32"

HL153

*Li Hongwei*

MASTER *of* INNOVATION

*Dates:* 23 March through 5 May 2024

*Public Opening Reception:* Saturday, 30 March 2024 • 3 to 6 PM  
The artist will be present.

*Online Events:* Please visit [www.puckergallery.com](http://www.puckergallery.com) for a list of virtual gatherings and events accompanying *Master of Innovation*.



*Bowl*

Porcelain

Splash gold peacock blue glaze

7 x 12 x 12"

HL154