

Interview

by Hella Berent (HB) with Koos de Jong (KdJ), director (at the time) of the European Ceramic Workcentre .ekwc in 's-Hertogenbosch, NL 2003

HB In 1998 and 2002, I worked in the .ekwc on my project THE BURNT BLUE. These work periods gave me the feeling of being on an island as a very special link between two worlds:

the world of the history of ceramics, including the specific materials, we work with and the world of modernity. Can you identify with that and what is your role as director of the centre?

KdJ I was educated as an art historian and I've worked mainly in museological institutions as a curator or as a director. That explains why I am not only involved in the artistic policy forming and the management of the EKWC, but also in showing the outside world what is happening in the centre and what the importance of this is. I view it as a challenge to do this without removing too many staff and financial resources from the core functions: that of artist-in-residence and centre-of-excellence.

As director I naturally decide the general policy. As regards the recruitment of the 45 ceramists, fine artists and designers, whom I will refer to jointly as participants, whom we welcome to the centre each year, half are selected by an international committee from the applications we receive following worldwide public enrolment. On average, one in ten applicants is selected in this way and is offered a work period. I exert no influence on this selection. The other half, on the other hand, is invited directly by me, perhaps because I find a particular participant interesting, because I want to focus attention on a particular development of country, or as part of a project. I also determine the choice of projects; these are usually co-operative projects with other institutions. Most of these projects aim at generating as much development in ceramics as possible. It mainly means continuous further extension and deepening of the uses of ceramic. The first step was taken right after the opening in 1991 when the centre was opened not only to ceramists, but also specifically to fine artists. In 1999, they were joined by designers and the new policy aims to involve more architects in the centre.

In a certain sense it's true that the participants come to work here for three months in a certain degree of seclusion. Being freed from day-to-day worries means that they are able to concentrate totally on the artistic and technical experiments they want to perform. To counteract this isolation, however, a continuous, extremely intensive and productive exchange of ideas takes place both with the staff who are supervising them and with the other participants. The unique aspect of our way of working is moreover that we encourage the participants to allow themselves the freedom not to aim immediately for results, but to take risks. The results will come later. This explains why many people experience this work period as an investment in their artistic careers.

At the moment, 50% are fine artists, 25% are ceramists and 25% are designers. I estimate that there are about twenty ceramic workcentres spread throughout the world. However, only the EKWC can both offer all possible technical facilities and an extensive staff of employees who have been educated at art college and have their

own specialisation. That makes us the only centre in the world that can take participants, 75% of whom have no ceramics knowledge or experience. The artistic and technical guidance we can give them enables them nonetheless to develop their ideas in a relatively short time. The fact that they often come up with 'impossible' ideas, means that the boundaries of the possible are continually being stretched and that is what generates the development in ceramics that we at the EKWC stand for. Incidentally, the fact that the boundaries between the disciplines are fading is something I consider as very positive. The cross-fertilisation that results has already produced a great deal and - thinking of architecture - I can see many more results on the horizon.

HB I would like to return to my project THE BURNT BLUE. How do you perceive the production of Delft Blue from Delft? What does the use of the blue and white glaze that is so typical of delftware mean to you as a Dutchman?

KdJ In the first instance, I let my head rule my heart. Although the history is a little more complicated than I can explain in the time we have for this interview, what it comes down to is that delftware originated as an imitation of Chinese blue and white porcelain, which had been imported from the beginning of the seventeenth century. The first shiploads were stolen by the Dutch from Portuguese ships, called '*caracques*', which led to the Dutch name '*kraakporselein*' or egg-shell china, but soon after that the Dutch broke the Portuguese monopoly and took over this extremely lucrative trade. Up until then, Dutch pottery manufacturers had been producing tiles and crockery from yellow or red-baked clay covered in a tin glaze and painted with multicoloured glazes, known as '*majolica*' (an Italian corruption of the Spanish Majorca), and later called '*plateel*' or delftware. This technique was imported from North Africa, via Spain, Italy and Antwerp to the Northern Netherlands in the second half of the sixteenth century. So as not to be completely put out of business by this competition, these '*plateel*' producers started imitating the Chinese porcelain. This imitation mainly concerned the decoration because more than a century would pass before real porcelain could be made in Europe. Apart from this economic reason, there was an aesthetic reason too that was closely connected to politics and Calvinism. After all, Calvinism was the prevailing religion in the Northern Netherlands once the Catholic Spanish had been driven out and the liberated region became a republic. Calvinism advocated an austere lifestyle and so the colourfully painted Catholic gothic churches were painted white and preference was given to plain blue and white over the 'too worldly' multicolours.

HB I am so curious which elements, which substances push historical developments. I understand that at the end of the seventeenth century there were as many as 30 factories operating in Delft. Why this concentration and on the colour blue?

KdJ I said before that the history is actually more complex than many of the sales brochures would have us believe. It is true that a relatively high number of factories were established in Delft. That was because around the middle of the seventeenth century there was a very favourable climate for the establishment of new pottery businesses after a ship carrying gunpowder had exploded destroying large parts of

the city. Besides that there was surplus capacity of business premises and of a working population when the production of beer collapsed as a result of competition from much cheaper imported beer. Honesty compels me to tell you, however, that '*plateel*', now known internationally as delftware, was made in a number of Dutch cities and in Friesland, such as in Haarlem, Amsterdam, Rotterdam and Makkum. Furthermore, although the market was dominated by blue and white pottery to begin with, by the end of the seventeenth century increasing quantities of multicoloured pottery was being produced under the influence of the French faience. In spite of this, I agree with you that the fascination for the colour blue is remarkable. It is a good idea to point out in this connection that the Delft painter, Johannes Vermeer, became famous through his use of the colour blue.

HB Where did the cobalt oxide come from that was used as the raw material for the delftware glaze? I often asked this question and I was told that the Dutch, just like the Chinese, imported it from the Middle East.

KdJ That's right, although the Chinese - as in most cases - had been doing that from as early as the seventh century Tang period and continued to do so after that. Cobalt oxide was transported by camel mainly by merchants from the Middle East via the silk route and exchanged for goods like silk and tea. It was over a thousand years later before the Dutch took over this lucrative trade, not by camel but by ship. As far as I know, cobalt oxide was always imported, but I don't know exactly where from. What I do know is that these sorts of products were not usually brought in by one and the same person, but passed through the hands of a number of intermediaries through bartering. I presume that the cobalt oxide was transported by caravan from the places it was found in the Middle East to the Levant, the Mediterranean coast of Asia Minor and from there by Dutch ships through the Straits of Gibraltar to the Netherlands and elsewhere.

HB In ancient Egypt, Egyptian Blue played a special role in relation to death and magic powers. Do you imagine delftware played a similar special role?

KdJ As far as I know that didn't apply to delftware. It's true that Calvinists placed more importance on life after death than on life itself. Ostentation was sinful. The result was that the upper middle class wore clothes in which black and white predominated, sometimes combined with blue, green and brown. You see the same austere colours in the interiors of houses, just as in the 'monochrome' painting of the first half of the seventeenth century.

So there were no magical properties assigned to the colour blue in Holland as was indeed the case in China and the Middle East. There people believed, for example, that celadon, which was produced in all varieties of green and blue in many places in China long before our era, contained magical properties. Valuable celadon was exported via the caravan route to the Middle East, where it was used not only to decorate the houses and tents of the rich and powerful, but was also believed to give protection against poisoned food and drink. Celadon was even ground up and used as medicine. That such special properties were attributed to celadon was probably because celadon was originally an imitation of the extremely expensive whitish-green nephrite, a jade-like stone found mainly in Turkestan in Central Asia

and imported from there to China. Real clear green jade would only be imported into China from Burma much later in the eighteenth century. Nephrite was used in China from time immemorial to protect the deceased from evil spirits. All the orifices were filled with nephrite and the bodies of deceased royalty were even buried in a harness made from pieces of nephrite, sewn together with gold or silk thread.

We can see that the colour blue also had a particular significance here from the fact that the bluish-green celadon was the most valued of all in China and Korea and was therefore the most expensive.

HB It is said that Shah Abbas, who ruled Persia around 1600, imported celadon material from China to inspire his local artists to create the turquoise glaze for the tiles that cover the mosques. The colour turquoise became a fashion.

KdJ The importation of celadon from China via the silk route had already been taking place for a couple of centuries.

HB When you look at turquoise or cobalt-glazed objects, what associations does it have for you? I am curious to know how different cultures reach similar ideas?

KdJ These associations are of course determined to a large extent by what I know. I know, for example, that in many cultures, but particularly in the Middle and Far East, blue and green glazed pottery served as an alternative for the much more expensive semiprecious stones like turquoise, lapis lazuli, blue copper, nephrite and jade. And this is where you see a certain parallel with delftware, which was an alternative for the much more expensive blue and white porcelain imported from China. The second thing that comes to mind is that in the Middle and Far East, the colours blue and green and all the shades in between refer to the elements air (heaven) and water and, in a more abstract sense, to spirituality and holiness. Opposite blue and green you have the colours red and yellow, which in turn refer to the elements earth and fire. Isn't it remarkable that the impenetrable solid nature of pottery that is created by combining earth and fire, is denied, as it were, by covering the pottery with a glaze that, through its blue-green colour, suggests space instead of solidity. Just think of the magnificent high palace walls that once stood in Babylon, parts of which can still be seen in the Pergamon Museum in Berlin. The blue-green glazed bricks formed the background to animals advancing in a stately manner. By using this blue-green glaze, the solid wall was 'lightened up' both literally and metaphorically. I think that is where the secret of these extraordinarily beautiful, spiritual colours lies. I'll limit my examples to the Middle and Far East to keep things clear. But remember, there are also many examples from completely different cultures like, for example, the early Indian cultures in North, South and Central America. Plenty of objects made from semiprecious stones like turquoise and jade have been found in these regions showing a clear symbolic significance.

A good example of the colour blue-green referring to water is that of the celadon dishes whose bases are decorated with two embossed fish, manufactured in Lungchuan in the Chinese province of Zhejiang. It's important to know that in China fish, including goldfish, used not to be kept in glass bowls, but in porcelain bowls that you had to look into from the top to see the fish. As I mentioned before, this celadon was highly valued in the Middle East and so it was imported from China by

caravan via the silk route. We know that that type of pottery then served as a model for the 12 and 13th century blue-green pottery from Raqqa in Syria, because not only the colour but also the shapes of Chinese proto-porcelain from the Tang and the Sung periods were copied. It is not, however, impossible that a different development - I'm referring here to the manufacture of blue-green pottery in Assyria, Babylon and Egypt - played a role in this. Until recently, people assumed that this 'classical' development was interrupted by the arrival of Islam in the early Middle Ages, but now it has become clear that the Byzantine Empire, in particular, played an important part in maintaining and then handing over this tradition to later Islamic cultures. In short, as always, the story is a little more complicated than it seems at first sight.

HB In Egypt, the Egyptian mummies wear necklaces made from Egyptian Blue glazed faience?

KdJ Yes, that was the type of pottery I was referring to before. Incidentally, to avoid confusion: faience is the French word for pottery glazed in tin and painted in many colours, called majolica or plateel in Italy and the Netherlands respectively, which was produced in the Italian city of Faenza from the fifteenth century. This pottery was exported to countries including France, where it was later copied in many places. Just as with delftware, you see that the name of a certain city comes to denote a certain type of pottery that was produced in other centres of production too.

Back to the Egyptian blue of objects made from faience – I'm thinking of jewellery, but also of little votive gifts: statues of gods, people and animals, called '*shabti*' - that are patently obviously connected with death. Here, too, faience was mostly a substitute for the much more expensive semiprecious stones like turquoise and lapis lazuli. Stones which, often combined with precious metals like gold and silver, only the very rich could afford. The blue colour referred here not only to the spiritual, life after death, but also served to exorcise or ward off evil spirits in its apotropaic function. I'd like to point out once again how much the western and the eastern worlds influenced each other. This influence was possible for two thousand years due to the silk route, which linked Rome with Beijing via the Middle East including Alexandria in Egypt. Roman and Syrian glass, dinnerware made from precious metals, cobalt and pure-bred Persian horses were exchanged along the silk route for silk, tea, fragrant substances, ivory and porcelain from the Far East. To give you an idea of the extent of this lucrative trade, I'll tell you about the ban imposed by the Roman senate in 14 BC on the wearing of imported silk from '*Seres*' (China) by men and women. This happened because the senate was annoyed by the extravagant display of luxury and the effeminate behaviour that accompanied it, but mainly because there was threat of a shortage of gold and silver bars used to pay for the silk. Nowadays we would call that a disruption of the trade balance between nations.

HB I'm glad you've mentioned the use of precious stones and the custom in different cultures of imitating these semiprecious stones by using blue and green glazed objects in different shades. How do you perceive the artist's work that artists concentrating on one particular colour, blue in my case?

KdJ Let me say first that the term 'artist' only made its entrance with the Renaissance as far as the western world was concerned. From that time, too, a distinction was made between the higher and lower arts, inspired by the classics. Before that time there was only anonymous art produced in religious centres and by artisans centred in cities. It wasn't very different in China, although here there was a class of well-educated officials, called literati, who had trained in calligraphy and painting. In that sense, they can be compared with what we call artists. I'm telling you this because I want to mention a clear example of the production and valuation of blue pottery. During the Sung period (960-1279) in China, particular types of pottery, like the jade green 'Yue' proto-porcelain and the similarly hard burnt, monochrome blue glazed 'Chun' pottery were produced under the supervision of officials for the Emperor's court. This pottery was thus made by fairly simple artisans, but was valued and bought by people with refined taste. You can imagine that these literati did not limit themselves to production and purchasing, but, as proof of their good taste, collected this pottery too as a permanent attribute for their writing desks and studied it.

As far as the second part of your question goes, I am not an artist, but I can imagine that an artist might view a particular colour as a metaphor for a particular culture or way of thinking. This then develops into a continuous fascination, not only for the colour as such, but for the world or a particular culture associated with this colour.

HB The idea of THE BURNT BLUE evolved from the awareness, that my head touches the sky and my foot touches the earth. I wanted to connect the earth with the sky metaphorically by fire, the catalyst of the alchemy of process.

KdJ The remarkable thing is that there is an antithesis here. You come across this antithesis in all sorts of cultures. Just think of the contrast and force of attraction between the masculine and feminine 'ying' and 'yang' in the Chinese culture, but also of the contrast between the elements water and fire, air and earth mentioned in Stefan Weidner's article on osmosis. His article appealed greatly to me. After all, simultaneous attraction and rejection connect our entire existence.

HB What are your personal feelings when you look at objects covered in a cobalt-blue or turquoise glaze? I remember the fascinated look in your eye whenever you walked into my studio during my work period at the EKWC.

KdJ For me, this colour stands primarily for the exotic because it denotes different, non-western cultures. As you know, I have been interested in this for many years, but above all, I am intrigued by the relationship between Western and Eastern cultures. In actual fact, there is no such thing as a 'Western' or 'Eastern' culture. Almost all cultures and certainly the most developed have been formed by an amalgamation of different cultures that have influenced each other. Maybe this interests me exactly because I am Dutch and belong to a minor nation. A nation that, for the most part, has been formed over the years by various influxes of immigrants. A sea-faring nation that lived off trade and therefore saw the necessity of mixing with other peoples and cultures and learning their languages. Incidentally, I don't think we're any the worse for this.

HB How do you view the glazing phenomenon that is really nothing more than a thin layer of glass, coloured with metal oxides, applied to an object made of baked clay.

KdJ The effect of glaze on light is two fold. Both the reflection and the refraction of light cause a spatial effect and create as it were a third dimension. There is a suggestion of a space under the glaze that does not really exist. In this sense, the effect of a glaze can be compared with the techniques a painter or draughtsman has at their disposal - I'm thinking of both the atmospheric and linear perspective - to suggest a particular space on a flat canvas or sheet of paper. The characteristic feature of Egyptian blue or 'Burnt blue', as you call it, is that it isn't really monochrome. There are all sorts of colour nuances in it, varying from blue to green. It is these nuances that can be compared with the application of several transparent layers of paint - called 'glacis' for good reason in art - or with the transparent watercolour technique, which produce this magical spatial effect. As a matter of fact, you see the same thing too in Chinese calligraphy, where the characters are painted with a brush. The personal handwriting of these characters is not just determined by the form and movement of the way the lines are formed, but also by the extent to which these lines, depending on the pressure applied to the brush, are black and opaque or grey and transparent. Here too you see that space and a particular atmosphere are created by the effect of dark and light.

HB I would like to ask you about colour as a form of memory.

KdJ Tell me more.

HB Here are three glazed test-tiles on the table in front of us. One shows a green copper oxide glaze, the second a blue-green turquoise glaze and the third one shows a clear blue cobalt oxide glaze.

KdJ I understand you to mean that these green, green-blue and blue glazes denote pottery from the Far East, the Middle East and the West respectively, but, for me, it's not that simple. That might be true in terms of the big picture, but within each of these cultures there are glazes varying between green and blue. Don't forget that the ultimate colour of a glaze depends on far more factors than only the composition of the glaze. The ultimate resulting colour was influenced just as strongly by the temperature, the addition (oxidation) or removal of oxygen (reduction) or even the position in the kiln. Because it was the work of man, there were always small variations occurring and that, in my opinion, makes the final result so attractive.

HB I think that colours keep the memory of existence.

KdJ That is then your personal interpretation, but, naturally, I have nothing against regarding them as such.

HB Your approach is more scientific. I think it is the relationship between nature and man.

KdJ Assuming that man is part of nature, that applies to human development too. After all, without memory there would be no technical or artistic progress at all. That applies equally to the development in ceramics that the EKWC stands for: there can only be progress if we learn from the artistic and technical achievements of the past. Talking about history: we have to realise for that matter that our historical understanding is not a fixed concept, but rather a view of history that is subject to change. Think of how our outlook on historical facts like the colonies and slavery has changed over approximately fifty years. But new facts, too, can radically change our historical understanding. Imagine what our idea of the Roman Empire would be if we had no knowledge of ancient Rome. But that's just what happened in relation to the history of China: after all the spectacular terracotta army that formed part of the grave of the first Chinese emperor Shi Huangdi in X'ian was only discovered in 1976! You can say without exaggeration that after that the history of China had to be rewritten.

HB When I asked you about the memory stored in colours, that touched exactly on what you were saying about how man imagines history. Aby Warburg, who developed the concept of the *mnemosyne*. It stands for an accumulation of patterns of knowledge relating to human existence and refers to the memory of colours, related to history. Would you like to add something about beauty of colours, about the concept of beauty?

KdJ It looks as though you've saved the most difficult question till last. Beauty, in my opinion, has everything to do with harmony, with balance. But that sounds simpler than it is. After all: tastes differ. That expression hides a great truth because ideas of what harmony is differ for each period, for each region, for each milieu, political and religious conviction, profession and level of income, and within these, for each person. It is sometimes necessary to disrupt harmony to break out of the monotony of things or events and, by creating tension, repair the balance. And so we come back to the contrasts we talked about earlier: the contrast between the elements of earth and air, water and fire, the temporal and the spiritual, the feminine and the masculine, 'ying' and 'yang' and the fact that these opposing things not only repel each other, but also attract each other and are therefore in harmony. I think this can equally be applied to colours. You see it again and again in art and very clearly in fashion: a serene monochromatic use of colour eventually provokes an irrevocable response in the form of violent or complicated use of colour and vice versa. We cannot escape this law of nature and that's no bad thing: it keeps us alive.