

Ming

An Interview With Chen Sui-Ming



Chen Sui-Ming, or simply “Ming” as most people in the ceramics industry know her, has been a revered ceramics teacher and artist for decades. As founder and educational director of the Ceramic Art Institute (CAI), Ming created the only ceramics teaching certification program in our industry for college credit. Former students are in awe of her dignity and knowledge. Some recall her commanding presence in the classroom as leaving them with “scars” from the challenge. Yet they speak fondly of her honesty and extreme patience—Ming explained reasons for the coursework to the smallest detail in understandable terms that never talked down to students. As a result, many students were inspired to attain levels of artistic achievement far beyond their expectations. She was a teacher who some have said “they wanted to please.” Recently, *Popular Ceramics* had the good fortune of interviewing Ming.

Popular Ceramics: How did you become involved with ceramic art and teaching art?

Ming: I was visiting a friend who was working on a piece of greenware. After the usual precautionary warnings about handling, she introduced me to painting on greenware, then took me to the shop where she was taking lessons. From then on I was addicted to clay. Not only was I intrigued by how underglazes and glazes can change the appearance of an object, I was also interested in how pieces are formed and how clay is made into “slip.”

I learned that pieces are fired in a kiln to set colors, mature the clay, and change glazes from a powdery coating into a gloss finish that is impervious to moisture.

Because of my interest in the art of ceramics, I began taking regular classes twice a week. After completing the beginner and intermediate sessions, I continued to learn techniques from books and magazines, and to take special seminars from traveling teachers at studios in the area.

After I gave several friends ceramic items as gifts, many of them encouraged me to introduce them to ceramics. Soon I had a group of people eager to begin a ceramic project.

PC: Tell us about your past and current life as an artist.

Ming: I have never considered myself an artist. I like color to enrich life and designs to provide balance.



Teacher certification programs have held student interest throughout the years.

The chemical makeup of fired colors has always intrigued me. It's an interest that led me to explore how the same colorants behave when fired at different temperatures. Besides ceramics, I have had an enduring and growing interest in glass: first with sagging and decorating with glass colors and overglazes, then with fusing and investigating which colored glasses are compatible with which, then firing them for depth of color.

PC: What are your teaching philosophies?

Ming: Very simply, they can be summarized as follows:

- Look and have respect for individual interests and abilities, and try to keep them in mind as you teach.
- Seek good teaching skills first and artistic abilities second.
- Learn people's names, pronounce them correctly, then remember them.
- Teach by example and with patience. Always be very well prepared, with backup plans in case a demo doesn't go as it should.

PC: How do you structure courses and methods of teaching?

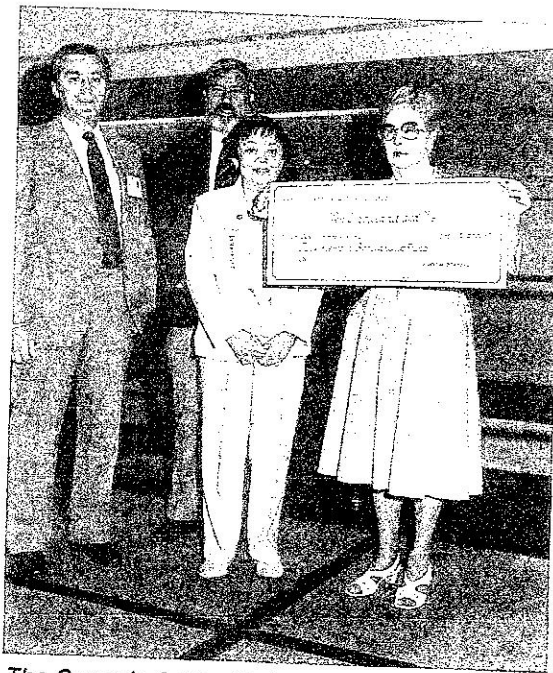
Ming: From the beginning, I have never held an open workshop. I always structured classes so that students learned about a specific material like underglaze, translucent underglaze, overglaze, or a specific technique or concept, such as brushwork or design. By following this simple principle, I was able to ensure a more thorough education in various materials and techniques. When students became more knowledgeable and skilled, they ventured into more intricate and extensive projects.

PC: Please give us your thoughts on teacher/student relationships.

Ming: People take up ceramics for many different reasons. I've always tried to address these varying needs and provide exciting challenges by investigating new materials myself. Then I would teach students how to use them. A master teacher nurtures and encourages students in the hope that they will bloom into gifted teachers who can impart knowledge to new students entering the field.

PC: Tell us about how and why you structured the CAI as you did.

Ming: I believe that decorating an item is not enough. A good teacher explains which product is appropriate and why, demonstrates proper brush techniques and ensures that students master them. I was fortunate to have assistance from the ceramic manufacturers when I began the CAI program. The Teacher Certification Committee comprised member manufacturers who represented various product lines in the ceramic industry. The committee provided me with technical information about various ceramic materials which I, in turn, provided to my students in the training program.



The Ceramic Art Institute established a scholarship fund (now liquidated) in memory of Mr. Jack Kemper. Ming (center) accepted the check from Mrs. Kemper.

PC: How has ceramic art changed for the better or the worse during the time you've been involved with it?

Ming: I have been away from the ceramic industry for several years, but like to feel that it is now better because the CAI program produced so many knowledgeable teachers. I still believe that education provides a solid base no matter what one wishes to pursue.

PC: What did you most enjoy about being an artist and a teacher?

Ming: The most enjoyable part for me has been meeting so many wonderful, interesting people. I have many "ceramic friends" in the U.S. and other parts of the world. It is gratifying to see that so many CAI certified teachers have published articles on their various finished pieces.

PC: What encouragement or advice can you offer others?

Ming: Keep asking questions and seek out the information you need to further your enjoyment of ceramics. *PC*



The Ceramic Art Institute's 20th anniversary in June of 1994

Requirements for Qualifying Pieces for the Ming
(Master Classification Only)
Effective: Jan. 1, 2012

Master Classification: Ceramic artist who has won one (1) top award, such as the Peggy, Exhibitors Association Excellent Artist award, Best of show, Flame Award and any National Pottery Award.

The Ming is given in the Masters Classification only.

The piece must be 75% CAST ceramics fired ware to at least a cone .06.

EA rules require: Competition pieces must be done in their entirety by the entrant. Since purchased bisque is not cleaned/fired by the entrant it will be subject to a mandatory deduction for cleaning and firing. An individual should choose the best cast and fired pieces available when entering the Masters Classification. General rules and categories of competition are applicable to Masters Classification.

The following, glass, decals, decoupage, china paints, and dolls by themselves are not eligible for the Ming, however, as a minimal embellishment or addition to a piece is acceptable.

Piece must be signed and dated with carving or fired products.

Entry must be done by entrant only and within the year of the last competitions date. Once a Ming has been awarded to an entrant in the Masters Classification, he/she can not win an additional Ming in any EA show during that year or the following year; although he/she are always eligible for the Best of Show awarded in that next EA Annual Show. A winner must participate in the EA competition during the non-qualifying year in any EA show, he/she will once again be eligible for the Ming award in the Masters Classification the following year. In summary: No Master entrant may win the Ming in any 2 years consecutively in any EA show, but must enter in an EA show in the Master classification during the non-qualifying year and will be eligible for Best of Show.

Class or certification pieces completed, as taught, in class will not be accepted, however pieces redone with some variations/originality added will be accepted for the Master's competition.

Once a ceramics artist has competed as a Master, this classification will determine competitive status on a permanent basis for EA competition. If in case, a disability should occur, it will be considered and the status could be changed.

Revised: 1/1/2012

Dear CAI Alumni and Friends,

November 1997

It is with mixed emotions that I write this announcement about my intentions for the future. After much deliberation, I have decided that it is time for a change. Effective immediately, I will no longer be administering the annual CAI Teacher Educational Forum or the CAI Teacher Certification Program on a national basis. The CAI Alumni will cease to exist as a corporation in the state of California after December 31 this year.

While relinquishing responsibility for the annual CAI Teacher Educational Forum, I will honor all commitments to teach CAI Teacher Certification sessions this year. I will also continue to distribute the self-paced home-study course: Programmed Instruction in Ceramic Art (PICA). PICA covers all the same technical subjects and techniques as the classroom training sessions, and includes the training manual.

CAI will continue to offer occasional special classes in porcelain, glass, and other media. If there is sufficient interest, CAI Teacher Certification sessions will be offered in the Sacramento area only.

To the many friends I have made over the last 45 years in the business, thank you. You have enriched my life through the warmth of your friendship and the continuous exchange of ideas. I hope that our paths cross again.

With best regards for the continued success of our industry and of each of you personally, A word of thanks to the CAI Board of Directors for their years of service and support, and a special thank you to Chairman Herb Stampfl for his loyalty through the years.

Sincerely,

*Chen Sui-Ming
Educational Director
PO Box 601
Citrus Heights, CA 95611-0601*



Ming accepts a gift, given in love and with respect, from those in attendance of the last CAI Forum.



An extra special vote of thanks to Elizabeth for taking time off to assist and direct the day by day activities to make each forum run smoothly for so many years. A special thanks also for the compiling, editing and extra hours that went into the last forum guide.

Special Acknowledgement Newsletter supporters for this issue

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