

## A Place of Reflection: Po-Wen Liu

By: [Elizabeth Perrill](#)

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### **Abstract:**

The article discusses the work of ceramic artist Po-Wen Liu. Topics include the influence of North Carolina's Blue Ridge Piedmont region on Liu's work, Buddhist influence on Liu's works, and the use of the lotus as a motif in his pottery. He use of glazing techniques including celadon glazing, monochromatic glazing, and alkaline-glaze formulas is noted.

**Keywords:** Po-Wen Liu | ceramics | pottery

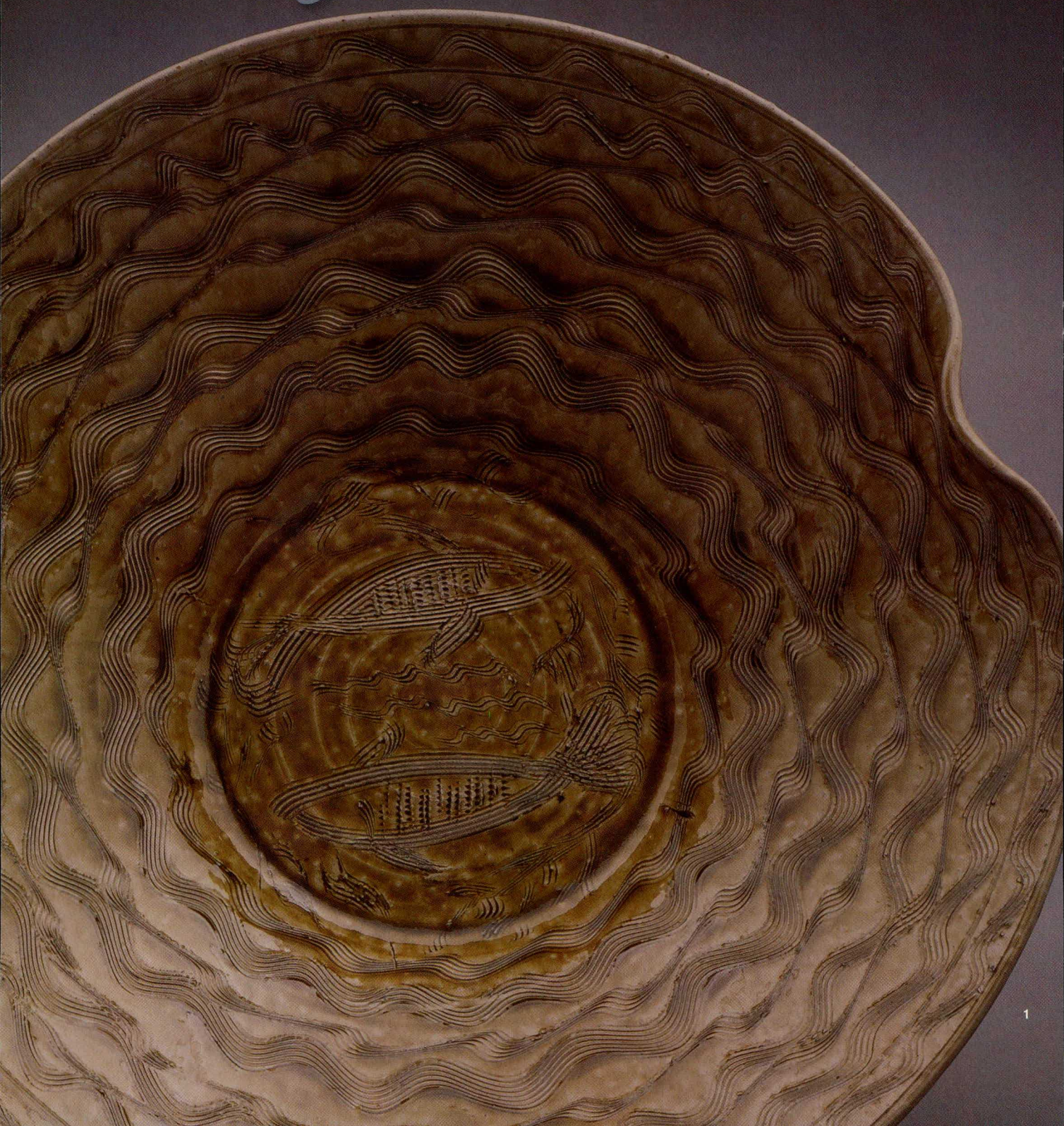
### **Article:**

**\*\*\*Note: Full text of article below**

# *A Place of Reflection*

Po-Wen Liu

by Dr. Elizabeth Perrill





2

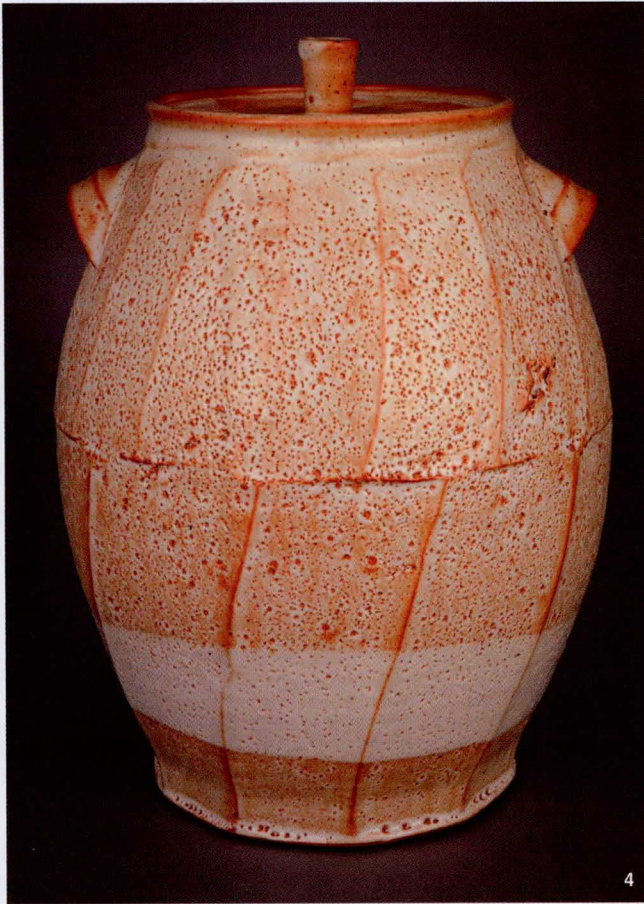
Uprooting one's self and moving to a new physical location is often a moment for transformation and reflection. This truism can be even more poignant for ceramicists; those who are invested in the history of local ceramic traditions or inspired by specificities of land and architecture are particularly vulnerable to the travails of displacement. Amidst the exigencies of professional or academic life, the question, "Where is your place?" can become a source of unsettling challenges.

In the past decade, Po-Wen Liu, has been no stranger to moving both his home and his studio. Relocating from his native Taiwan, where he earned a degree in ceramic engineering at the competitive National Lian-Ho University, Liu first acquired a BFA in ceramics from the School of American Craft in Rochester, New York in 2000. After attaining an MFA in ceramics from Northern Illinois University (2004,) Liu subsequently found himself



3

1 Po-Wen Liu's platter, 18 in. (46 cm) in diameter, wheel-thrown and altered white stoneware, alkaline glaze, fired to cone 10 in reduction, 2013. Photo: Daniel Smith. 2 Po-Wen Liu's *Three-Eaves Incense Burner*, 17 in. (43 cm) in diameter, wheel-thrown and assembled porcelain, celadon glaze, fired to cone 10 in reduction, 2011. Photo: Daniel Smith. 3 Po-Wen Liu's *Pagoda Jars*, 10 in. (25 cm) in height, wheel-thrown and carved white stoneware, celadon glaze, fired to cone 10 in reduction, 2012. Photo: Mario Gallucci.



4

in Greensboro, North Carolina, near the ceramic hubs of both Hickory and Seagrove.

In Greensboro, Liu first established a home studio, but soon discovered that life as a father, husband, instructor, and studio artist required a retreat, a professional space of reflection. These struggles are familiar to many artists, and amidst the well-established traditions of North Carolina's Blue Ridge Piedmont, the question of place and belonging intensified for Liu. Any artist working in the ceramic medium in North Carolina quickly realizes that it is a historical center for utilitarian pottery in the US. Thus, a type of resonance developed for Liu. He has further developed his studio practice and reflected on his Asian training in utilitarian wares, as well as drawn on input from the region's large body of colleagues and local ceramic traditions. One can even see his incorporation of alkaline glazes in recent platters and containers.

#### **Blending Beliefs, Expertise, and Experience**

At his studio, Natural Green Pottery, Liu has also been able to reexamine the Buddhist monuments that influenced his initial forays into ceramics. Both Liu's utilitarian storage jars and, even more strongly, his recent stupa vessels feature the form of the swollen teardrop knob. This shape has run as a leitmotif through his production of the past several years and is a subtle reference to the architecture of Taiwan. When asked about his stylistic choice, Liu smiles and discusses the Buddhist temples and pagodas that were a place of refuge in his youth, sites to reflect where he would ride his bicycle while growing up in Nantou City.



5

Liu's inclusion of Buddhist-inspired motifs has also been manifested metaphorically in his decorative motifs. He captures an increasing sense of movement and expression in the lotus forms that often crown his vessels. Carved in a freehand method, the petals of Liu's lotus motifs recall more traditional Asian ceramics, but one can see the artist's greater tolerance for asymmetry and gesture. While discussing this motif he recalls a proverb that loosely translates as, "The lotus springs from the mud." Apt words, certainly for any ceramic artist, but this saying seems particularly fitting for an artist reflecting on both his metaphorical and physical place in the world. Liu, who moved studios every year or two for over a decade, persevered as a member of the increasingly transient professorate. He has finally found a fixed home, and the Buddhist goal of rising above the adversity or suffering of daily existence seems to have brought his artistic practice through this long transition.

Liu's most recent forms build upon the lotus metaphor from the base up. For example, the finger marks created in thick slip at the base of these conical, lidded vessels Liu references the materiality of mud and clay. The entire form then rises up from this loose texture, into a lotus blossom, and finally resolves itself as a smooth, teardrop shape referencing the simple terminus of a stupa or pagoda. The statement of spiritual, as well as aesthetic, refinement is clear without being heavy handed.

With a similar structured flexibility, Liu's glaze chemistry has developed to embrace both his earlier training and this new stage in his career. Liu has long been acknowledged for his expertise in celadon glazing and traditional ceramics. In 2002, the children's author Linda Sue Park consulted with Liu while writing her Newbery Medal winning publication, *A Single Shard*. While Liu's passion for celadon glazing continues and he still prefers the monochromatic glazing that predominates in Taiwanese ceramics and many Asian traditions, Liu is currently exploring the wider alkaline-glaze formulas of North Carolina. The parallel effects of pooling and breaking that can be found in both glazing traditions seems to intrigue the analytic, ceramic engineer side of Liu's personality. He has been experimenting with color and opacity to accentuate his more experimental forms, while maintaining the traditional celadon practice that one can see in his other forms.

It is clear that Liu still maintains a demanding practice of himself and this is reflected in the recent positions he has held in his new location. As an adjunct instructor at the University of North Carolina, Greensboro, Greensboro College, and Catawba Valley Community College, he often teaches as many as 12 courses per year, driving as many as 440 miles per week. Logging long hours amidst family life and teaching, Liu is inspiring for his capacity to subtly transform his studio practice despite the extremely demanding schedules that so many adjunct and part-time instructors and faculty are now experiencing. Rather than being bogged down in the inconveniences of moving or the day-to-day stress, his art has taken on a more reflective quality and is taking root in a new sense of place.

**the author** *Dr. Elizabeth Perrill, is an Associate Professor of Art History at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro and Consulting Curator of African Art at the North Carolina Museum of Art.*



6



7

**4** *Faceted Lidded Vase*, 12 in. (30 cm) in height, wheel-thrown and faceted white stoneware clay, shino glaze, fired to cone 10 reduction in a gas kiln, 2013. **5** *Large Bowl with Wavy Rim*, 21 in. (53 cm) in diameter, wheel-thrown Catawba-Valley stoneware clay, rolled hollow rim, alkaline glaze, fired in a groundhog kiln to cone 11, 2012. **6** Po-Wen Liu's *Green Stupa Vase*, 10½ in. (27 cm) in diameter, wheel-thrown and carved white stoneware, Reitz green matte glaze, added slip, fired to cone 10 in reduction, 2012. **4-6:** *Photos: Daniel Smith.* **7** *Floating Water Vase*, 10 in. (25 cm) in diameter, wheel thrown, added slip, blue ash glaze over matte black glaze, fired to cone 10 reduction in a gas kiln, 2012. *Photo: Mario Gallucci.*

For more information and recipes in addition to the celadon glazes on page 38, visit Po-Wen Liu's blog <http://powenliu.blogspot.com>.