



One of ceramist Fong Choo's exquisite teapots in the ancient Yixing style will sell at art fairs such as the American Craft Exposition for \$400 to \$500.

DIY: Discovering the soul of the teapot

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When Garth Clark, author and collector, published "The Eccentric Teapot: Four Hundred Years of Invention" (Abbeville, 120 pages, \$24.95) in 1989, he said that a teapot "allows for all kinds of games with anthropomorphism." That got me thinking. Did the attribution of human characteristics to this inanimate object have something to do with its appeal far beyond its functional purpose?

That is how at the crack of dawn the last Saturday of February I headed for the workshop, held in the basement of the art center, housed in a vintage mansion on the north shore of Lake Michigan.

Dressed in bib overalls, Choo, a trim high-energy man, began the session by sitting with us around a large worktable and telling us about his background.

He is of Chinese descent, born in Singapore. He was an aircraft mechanic for six years before he came to the U.S. in 1983 to study business. As an antidote to his boredom with business classes, he took a pottery class. The moment his fingers met clay, he was hooked.

Today Choo is adjunct professor and artist in residence at Bellarmine University in Louisville. Among the many workshops he gives are those at Penland School of Crafts in the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina and at Terra Incognito Studios & Gallery in Oak Park. He has participated in the American Craft Exposition in Evanston and the Smithsonian Craft Show, the nation's most prestigious juried exhibit and sale of contemporary American craft.

I was among 10 other workshop participants, all potters. Although I have no credentials as a potter, other than that I ran with the art crowd



Tribune photos by John Dziekan

Fong Choo shows how to shape a teapot with simple tools such as a stick to hollow the interior.

DIY Diaries future and past

Today's Diary of a DIY Daredevil story is the third in an occasional series. Here are other installments you can read in the coming months and previous stories in the series:

Next

Oct. 8: Playing in the mud was never this much fun. Assistant Home&Garden editor **Marjorie David** learns how to spread the mud and tile a kitchen backsplash.

Other upcoming stories

- The Chicago Bauhaus Academy teaches Tribune tech reporter **Eric Gwinn** centuries-old techniques that shape wood into elegantly simple furniture.
- Will a girl who loved jigsaw puzzles be as mesmerized with mosaics when she's grown up?

in college and often hung out in the ceramic studios where I tried throwing pots.

Some I learned were very accomplished ceramists, such as Peggy Frazer, whose hand-built teapots were gorgeous (she told me she had a piece in a small but important museum in Hawaii, where she's from). She had begun making ceramics at the age of 8. Now 83, she said she

Home&Garden editor **Elaine Matsushita** is about to find out.

■ A pottery class dropout, assistant Home&Garden editor **Tran Ha** retakes her seat at the potter's wheel.

Previous stories

■ A stained-glass class makes reporter **Karen Klages'** fears transparent. (See June 25 issue of Home&Garden and chicagotribune.com/diy.)

■ Garden reporter **Beth Botts** heads to the Chicago Botanic Garden to learn how to transform peat moss, sand and cement into a planter that echoes the rough-hewn stone watering troughs from European farms. The result? Call it "a brave start." (See July 23 issue of Home&Garden and chicagotribune.com/diy.)

would continue until her last gasp. She was in the workshop to learn cane handle technique from Choo.

Philosophy of detachment

I told Choo I had not touched clay in decades. In his high-energy way, he promised me he "would get me there." But he added that making

an actual teapot might be too much of a challenge for me.

Before we get to that part, here are a few introductory things he told us.

"I teach [my students] the whole philosophy of detachment, especially in clay," Choo warned. "If you are not used to losing, you are in for a 'fun time.'" he said sardonically. "For every teapot I show, I lose 80 percent [of those he makes]. I shoot them at my farm. Out of pure respect for the piece. I'm used to losing hundreds of teapots.

"Every firing is like Christmas," Choo said, when his pots survive the rigors of the kiln.

I loved it when he let us in on his inspirations, as when he showed us the handle on his Ming teapot, which he said is "reminiscent of Chinese moon gates," in Chinese architecture, a large circular opening in a wall through which one can step. "Something I saw in Singapore," he said.

"It is an ancient Chinese secret," Choo would add after giving us an insider tip, followed by a chuckle. "Talent is not a prerequisite. [Creativity] is learning how to see."

Then came the moment when Choo sat himself at the potter's wheel. I swear I thought I saw someone very ancient enter his being. His face and demeanor changed. The impression lasted only seconds. Houlehan had told me, "He puts his soul into his teapots." Another artist friend

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