

# In Studio with Tan Chia Chuen

Evelyne Schoenmann



**C**hia Chuen, you are the first nonprofessional ceramist in my *In Studio* interview series. Can you tell our readers your professional background?

Evelyne, I would like to first thank you for the interview and glad to be a first. I am currently heading the tax functions in a Singapore listed multinational corporation, with the key responsibilities of managing the Group's compliance with international tax regulations and tax strategies – a job that I guess is seemingly unrelated to ceramic art.

*You once told me that you make ce-*

*ramic art in your spare time. How did it all begin?*

My interest before making ceramics is gardening and my initial interest in ceramics was triggered by the idea of making personalized ceramic vessels for my plants. All these changed after my encounter with ceramics, in the year 2014, and ceramic art is instead my main interest now. My spare time during weekends is in fact mostly devoted to ceramics.

*And now you are a member of the Nanyang Clay Group. When four of us Swiss ceramists had an exhibition with your clay group in Singapore in*

*2018, I was absolutely stunned when seeing your carved objects. How come your carving skills are so exceptional?*

The Nanyang Clay Group, formed in 2005, is the only registered society in Singapore which is dedicated to the expression of art through clay as a medium. The aims of the Group are to organize local exhibitions for ceramics lovers all over the world and wishes that the organization of such exhibitions will help to increase the awareness of ceramic arts and bring more insights into the making of ceramic artworks. I am therefore greatly honoured to be able to be part of Nanyang

Clay Group. The 2018 exhibition is my first participation in a ceramic art exhibition and, besides being overwhelmed in excitement, I have gained lots of inspirations and knowledge. I am grateful for the generous sharing of knowledge by the Swiss ceramists and treasured the opportunity to admire the amazing artworks up close in person. I especially like the elegance and yet expressive flows demonstrated in your artworks. I am delighted that my carvings are able to attract your attention. I have always been fond of carvings and am fortunate to learn the carving skills from my ceramics teacher, Mr Pang Swee Tuan. Mr Pang is a Singapore ceramic artist whose works feature intricate textures from his hallmark meticulous detailed carvings. He is a great mentor and always willing to share his knowledge unreservedly.

*I am sure our readers are interested in knowing the secret of a perfect carving...*

I guess you will first need to love carving! Carving is in fact the part of ceramic work which I most look forward to and the process is therapeutic. As my teacher always says, clay is the most obedient if one is able to communicate with the clay and understand her needs. As the carving process can take a while, we need to be sensitive to the reaction of the clay. It will tell you when it is thirsty or demonstrates her unhappiness when you dampen her with too much moisture. If we are able to pick up these hints and meet her needs, she will obediently reciprocate with a smooth carving experience.

*What are your biggest fears when you start a new carved object?*

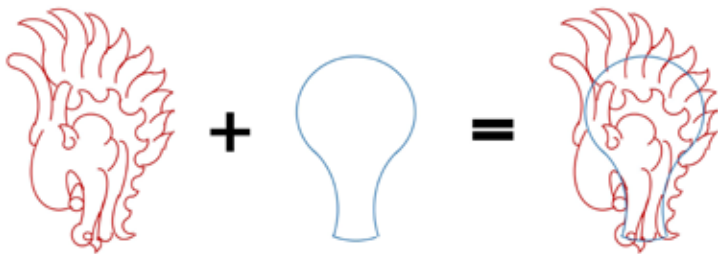
Unlike a wood or stone carving, a ceramic artwork has to undergo a firing process and my greatest fears are the risks of deformity during the firing process.

*The object in this article is a dragon. Can you lead us through the construction of this sculpture, from the idea to the final work?*

It has been my aspiration to create a sculpture of a dragon for a long time and I have finally decided to embark on the journey in 2019. For this sculpture, I have used fine white stoneware for its versatility and relatively smooth







white texture that is well suited for fine carvings. Before commencing on the project, I had spent considerable time to conceptualize the construction process. The key obstacle which I needed to overcome was to construct a dragon body which can provide a solid support and mitigate deformity during the firing process. In order to emphasize the graceful swirling movements of the dragon, I would also need to keep the contact points on the base to a minimum and this in turn increased the complexity. I finally decided to build the body by constructing several cylinders and cutting them up at an angle before joining them back to create the winding body of the dragon. I had decided to use cylinders as they are one of the structurally strongest shapes due to its ability to disperse stress throughout the entire shape. Once the body had been constructed, I then proceeded to construct the head. To achieve a light weight yet solid structure, my preference is to use a constructed vessel as a base and modify it to the desired form. In order to identify an appropriate vessel, I had actually drawn an outline of the head using Microsoft Excel and thereafter overlapped it with various identical vessel forms. I finally found the prunus vase (meiping) to be a close match and the head was hence constructed through modifying a prunus vase. Having completed the two most tedious parts, the fun begins – the carving. Legs and fins were added to the body before the carvings started. Once this had been completed, the next step of joining the head to the body is perhaps the most tense part of the whole construction process. I can tell you it felt like I had butterflies in my stomach when releasing my hands after attaching the head to the body, and I was so relieved that the dragon decided not to nod his head... The tail was finally constructed and the sculpture was sent for bisque firing, followed by a glaze firing to cone 5 using electric kiln. I have applied a combination of white and transparent glazes for this sculpture and I am extremely happy with the final ivory look of the dragon.





*You can indeed be very proud! Apropos Dragons and Phoenixes: your models dwell in fantasy worlds. Do you maybe have a secret passion for fantastic creatures?*

Growing up in multiracial and multi-faith Singapore, I have all along been fascinated by the art forms of different ethnic groups. In particular, the traditional Chinese carving and sculpting art found on a range of mediums from stones, wood, bamboo, to paper had deeply captivated me. Animal symbolism abounds in these art expressions and the depictions of these animals go beyond aesthetic purposes but a way of imparting lessons about life and philosophy. Among the most common mythical animals seen are dragons and phoenixes. Both dragons and phoenixes symbolize auspiciousness and occupy prestigious positions in Chinese culture. A common proverb used in Chinese families is to “hope one’s son becomes a dragon and daughter a phoenix”. Dragons and phoenixes are thus associated with ideal masculinity and femininity respectively. I am henceforth always curious on what exactly is the dragon that my parents hope I will become. Therefore, in the creation of this dragon sculpture, I have incorporated my personal interpretation on how I would like to be if I am a dragon. It is therefore with great pleasure that I am able to share with you my personalized dragon that looks somewhat more modern, younger, friendlier, slimmer (chuckles) but with the might and perseverance to soar the sky in pursuit of its aspiration. An aspiration that I may one day be able to become a full-time professional ceramist.

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Evelyne Schoenmann’s  
 next interview partner is  
**Irina Razumovskaya**  
 Russia / UK.

Evelyne Schoenmann is a ceramist, writer and curator. She is an AIC/IAC member, and lives and works in Basel.  
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