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The Unique Timelessness of Handmade Ceramics



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Ceramic has been used as a tool for artistic expression since the dawn of time. From prehistoric days, ceramic items have been used for myriad purposes and produced through various manufacturing methods. Over the past 100 years, the ceramic manufacturing industry has rapidly evolved, becoming more automated with the aid of modern technology. As a result, the ceramic manufacturing industry has matured, producing equipment for making ceramic products that are more flawless and less prone to defects and waste in mass production. Mass production has enabled the creation of lightweight, uniform, defect-free ceramic wares, making them affordable and functional.

In these modern times, the question arises: is it still relevant for ceramic producers to create handmade ceramic wares which are imperfect and require a considerable amount of time to produce? With the advent of advanced modern technology, are handmade ceramics still significant? What unique characteristics differentiate handmade ceramics from factory-produced ones?



Ceramics and Food

What are handmade ceramics? Handmade ceramics refer to objects or products crafted by skilled individuals through the manipulation of raw materials, namely clay. The creation of handmade ceramics by skilled artisans goes beyond utility; it serves as a platform that enhances the artistic experience of feeling, seeing and enjoying the food presented on it. Using handmade ceramics enhances the dining experience, fostering an appreciation for the artist's craftsmanship through both function and aesthetics.

Handmade ceramics connect users not only through the food presented to them but also to the artisans themselves. The finger marks present on handmade ceramics indirectly provide a unique aesthetic value, completing the presentation of the food served. When using handmade ceramics, individuals become more attuned to the characteristics of the item, including the tactile sensations of texture and weight, adding to the artistic experience. This sensory experience is less pronounced with ceramics produced through mass production. The time-consuming and precise nature of handmade ceramic production can be likened to the meticulous process of preparing food itself, requiring skill, precision and focused attention.

The Process of Handmade Ceramic Production

The art of handmade ceramics maintains characteristics and production methods that have changed little and are still employed by ceramic artists and creators today. A crucial aspect of handmade ceramics is the production process, which demands high perseverance, skill, and meticulous attention. The process begins with preparing the clay which involves careful kneading to eliminate air bubbles to ensure smooth shaping and flexibility. This initial step is crucial as it influences the clay's workability for the final production.

Once the clay is ready, artists begin the process of shaping the ceramic ware using specific tools. This is where an individual's creativity and skill are translated through the medium of clay, which can be molded into various shapes and forms, from simple cups and bowls to more complex forms. Artists must consider the drying time of the clay, as the formed ceramic ware need to



undergo a drying process before being fired in a kiln. Depending on the makers' preferences, the artists can choose few types of clay for their production from stoneware clay, earthenware, terracotta and even porcelain for high-end quality clay. Different types of clay require different techniques and approaches in the making process and the result is different for each type of clay.

After the produced items are thoroughly dry, they are placed in a kiln for bisque firing. Clay subjected to firing at a specific temperature transforms into a hard material known as 'ceramic'. The temperature and duration of firing also affect the resulting product. Higher temperatures make the item harder and more durable, while lower temperatures result in a more fragile and porous outcome. This is where artist need to have enough knowledge to produce ceramic wares with minimal defect in their production.

The firing temperature and method generally depend on the comfort and experience of the artisan. Following bisque firing, the ceramic wares are glazed and fired again for the final product. Glazing involves applying a thin layer of glass on the ceramic's surface, not just for decoration but also for durability and moisture resistance. The glaze can be applied in various colours, textures, and styles according to the artist's preference. Experienced and highly skilled artisans can produce a variety of glazes, making the ceramic products more desirable. The last process in ceramic making is the gloss firing for the final result. The artists can choose to use either gas kiln, electric kiln, wood kiln or even some other alternative firing technique such as Raku and saggar firing. The result and effects of these firing techniques are different from one another.

A crucial and primary feature of handmade ceramics is that each item produced is unique. Each piece possesses its own value and has no identical match, owing to the uniqueness imparted by the artist's hands. This quality not only transforms handmade ceramics into works of art but also provides a special and meaningful feeling to those who own them.



Artistic Interpretation of Handmade Ceramics

Values such as individuality, uniqueness, distinctiveness and freedom of expression are characteristics typically found in handmade ceramics, giving them their own aesthetic value. Additionally, making handmade ceramics can be therapeutic and be considered a form of meditation. The repetitive nature of shaping clay into the final product provides a serene feeling for the artisan. The focus and full attention required during the creative process demand a calm and clear mind. Many creators of handmade ceramics view the act of producing items with their hands as an enjoyable way to relax the mind.

Despite the technological advancements in mass-produced ceramics, the tradition of making handmade ceramics will always hold a special place in the hearts of enthusiasts and remain relevant through time. Skilled artisans of handmade ceramics will continue to create unique works using techniques passed down through generations. Whether for artistic expression, therapy, or simply a love for the craft, the living tradition of handmade ceramic production will undoubtedly continue to stand the test of time.

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