

## CLASS NOTES

CLASS: Ceramics

**LOCATION:** Evanston Art Center, 2603 N. Sheridan Rd., Evanston, 847-475-5300, [www.evanstonartcenter.org](http://www.evanstonartcenter.org).

**NEXT CLASS TIME:** Fong Choo will not be teaching in the Chicago area anytime soon, because of a full schedule (though he will be at the American Craft Exposition Sunday as an exhibitor). But stay tuned for future developments (see *contact information below*). Choo was impressed by the work of teachers he saw at the Evanston Art Center and recommends it as a good place for wannabe teapot-makers to start. Patty Kochaver, a ceramics teacher at the Evanston Art Center, says, "To do the kind of work he teaches, you should take a good, basic throwing class [beforehand]." Upcoming classes at the Evanston Art Center include: "Introduction to Ceramics," 7 to 10 p.m. Wednesdays; "Beginning/Intermediate Ceramics," 9:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. Thursdays, and 7 to 10 p.m. Thursdays, or 9:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. Fridays. All classes begin Sept. 11 and are limited to 14 students. More advanced classes also are available.

**DURATION:** 16 weeks

**COST:** \$385; \$365 for Evanston residents.

**WHO SHOULD TAKE THIS CLASS:** Anybody 16 years and older.

**WHO SHOULD NOT TAKE THIS CLASS:** "It is open to anybody," Kochaver says. "We have a blind woman in the throwing class doing very well, people in their 80s doing very well."

**OVERALL ASSESSMENT:** It was a fabulous and memorable experience working with Fong Choo. Unique and a born teacher, he is an artist who draws an international audience to his classes and workshops. As for the Evanston Art Center, everyone I met there was warm, friendly and encouraging, even to a retro- novice. I would highly recommend the center for anyone wanting to study ceramics of any kind.

**TRY THIS AT HOME:** Not possible.

**FOR INFORMATION:** Fong Choo is in negotiations to teach in Chicago again in the future, but plans are not yet firm. He does give five-day workshops in Kentucky. To contact him, call his studio, at 502-452-8239 or visit [www.fongchoo.com](http://www.fongchoo.com).



Fong Choo gives reporter Mary Daniels a helping hand in shaping what became a tea mug.

Finally, we all sat down at a wheel.

I practiced controlling the speed of the wheel's revolutions with my right foot — not too fast, not too slow. Not too difficult. Then one of the organizers made the rounds, flinging a 2-pound blob of porcelain clay onto each wheel. Suddenly Choo was hovering over me. "Center, hollow, pull," he told me.

#### In the right hands

I froze into paralysis. Sensing my stage fright, Choo said this blob of clay would be "a collaboration." Me, collaborating with a world-recognized artist like Fong Choo. The wild thought passed through my mind: How much would it be worth, if his teapots sell around \$400 to \$500? Half that?

No time for jokes, though. The clay when I put my hands into it on the wheel had the consistency of cream cheese, squishy. I liked the feeling, but the clay ignored me, did not respond. But when Choo put his hands over mine, the clay responded to him at once, leaping upward like a bird in flight.

The firm pressure of his hands over mine was more than I would have thought to do on my own. I gave in completely to it, let his pressure come through my hands. He was consistent in it to close to the end. "Ease off," he said, so I gently and gradually released my hands on my own.

And there it was, a form. It was beautiful. Did I actually do that? Though not a teapot, I had made *something*, a lovely tea mug not only of graceful shape but inviting to the hand.

"There," said Choo "You can drink your tea out of that."

"You made *that* and it's the first time you threw a pot?" one of the other potters in the workshop asked incredulously. I nodded yes, scarcely believing it myself.

I was not the only one with whom Choo did "a collaboration." He went to each student and through the magic of the laying on of his hands, the form rose, became a thing of greater beauty than it had been even in the hands of practiced

potters. I tried one more time, a little more on my own. The results were not as lyrical as the first try, but not bad. The first try actually could have been a rather plain teapot, had I added spout, handle and lid.

#### In control

That afternoon, Choo again sat at the wheel to show us how he puts moats on the base of his teapots to catch the glaze, which can "run" on the bulbous Yixing forms. A handle in the making can be "ornery" he said.

"You can't tell I'm a control freak?" he asked. "Everything you do, it's a lesson."

Early the next morning, he showed us how to make our own tools — push sticks and trimming devices.

During a break, I talked to another potter, Debra Favra. "I love teapots, and I love the whimsy in Choo's teapots," she said. "I am more interested in them as a sculptural form than a functional form. He gives you a new way of looking at things as a canvas. You need to know how to put it together so it looks like it belongs, and he's fabulous at that," she added.

How true. That afternoon, Choo showed us how to make spouts, lids and handles and tiny curly feet, like baby toes. Some he made on the wheel and some he hand-formed. I sat at his side, holding a bat, or plastic disc, upon which he placed the handles, the spouts, the lids, as if they were tiny cookies headed for the oven. He never failed to make the lids exactly the right size for the mini-pots he had thrown.

And then he gave away another of his "ancient Chinese secrets." He took a ruler and laid it across the neck of the lidless pot. He said the spout, after the edge is notched, and the neck or opening of the teapot, and the top of the handle (attached to the side), should all be level. It made the hydraulics of the pot work. I also saw how it balanced the scale of the pot.

At the end, all the tiny pieces stood ready for firing and glazing.

"Mary, he makes it look easy," the rest of the

class warned me in a chorus, when he finished. "And it's *not*."

I hoped my collaboration with Choo would survive the process of firing and glazing, to be done later. (It did, the result — pictured on the cover — looking amazingly like one of Choo's own pots on his Web site.)

As I was leaving, many of my workshop-mates asked me if now I would like to throw more pots, as the experience is addictive.

Yes, I thought, I will try one day again. Perhaps a teapot in the shape of a cat, holding a mouse as a spout, with a curled tail as a handle. If I took a class from Choo again, I might be able to do it.

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## SNOOP

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**7 What is the biggest collection in your home?** Probably DVDs. My favorite DVD is "Forrest Gump" or "Good Will Hunting," one of those two. I haven't had a place to call my own in so long, so I don't collect a lot of stuff.

**8 What music have you been listening to at home lately?** It's usually a mix of everything. Linkin Park is always in there — it's mandatory. A lot of rock. Some rap. I'm all over the map.

**9 What reading material would we find in your bathroom?** Magazines, because I'm always reading magazines. It doesn't matter, really, what it is. Sports Illustrated, Stuff, I'll read anything. I'll read Better Homes and Gardens if it's in there.

**10 Most embarrassing thing in your home that you hide when guests come over?** Probably dirty clothes. The teddy bear stays put; you don't make peace with the teddy bear, you're outta there. [home&garden@tribune.com](http://home&garden@tribune.com)

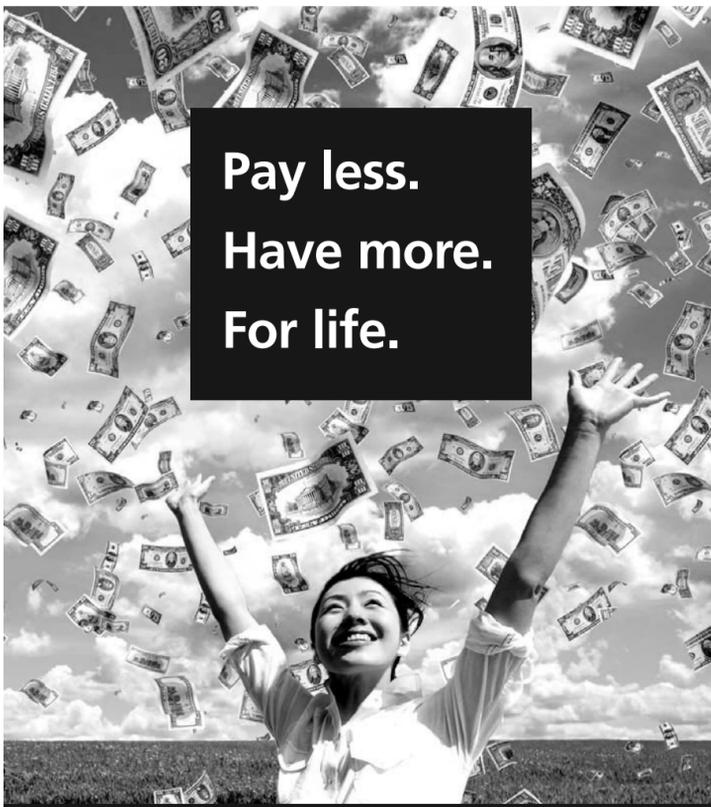
said when I told him this, "It must have been his Master" — the ancient potter that is his Muse.

In one pull with his finger inside the porcelain clay, a graceful shape began to rise and be born from the wheel. "The opening is smaller because it is more graceful," he said. "The belly has to be full to make it sensuous."

As he spoke, I learned that teapot sections have names borrowed from the human body: a neck, shoulder, belly, foot.

Choo is well aware of other erotic references, joking that in one workshop he gave, attendees referred to his sensuous teapots with their alluring feminine forms as "ceramic implants."

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