

My companion and mentor in life

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There are many people who have influenced the building of my view of life and a sense of value throughout my life. Influencing one's life means to be a mental mentor of one's precious and important life no matter how big or small. I think a true mentor influences one by understanding "oneself" as an individual as well as by his or her own capability.

Meeting senior artists who have already walked the path of ceramic art, I came to think deeply about what it means to walk one way through a lifetime. Through artists' works I feel their broad-minded personalities and it gives me the chance to reflect on myself and change my mind as a ceramist. There are some characteristics in them which I want to follow as a companion. It looks like they are meditating as they are concentrating on potting. By watching them I can think of the responsibility as a ceramist and learn the wisdom resulting from their experiences. Moreover, they make me keep in mind that artists doing creative work have to study continuously as they question their role and responsibility. Creating a work emitting energy is expressed by endless self-reflection and study. Therefore, there is no way for artists to give up.

When I think of a mentor or master who affects my art work and a view of life, there is one name, Choi Hye Young. The moment of encountering her is a momentous. She has been a mentor to me who likes shaping pots from clay. She is an artist specialized in Western painting and has been painting in her daily work since her elementary school days. She majored in painting in her university days and has painted steadily, but she is not an active artist now.

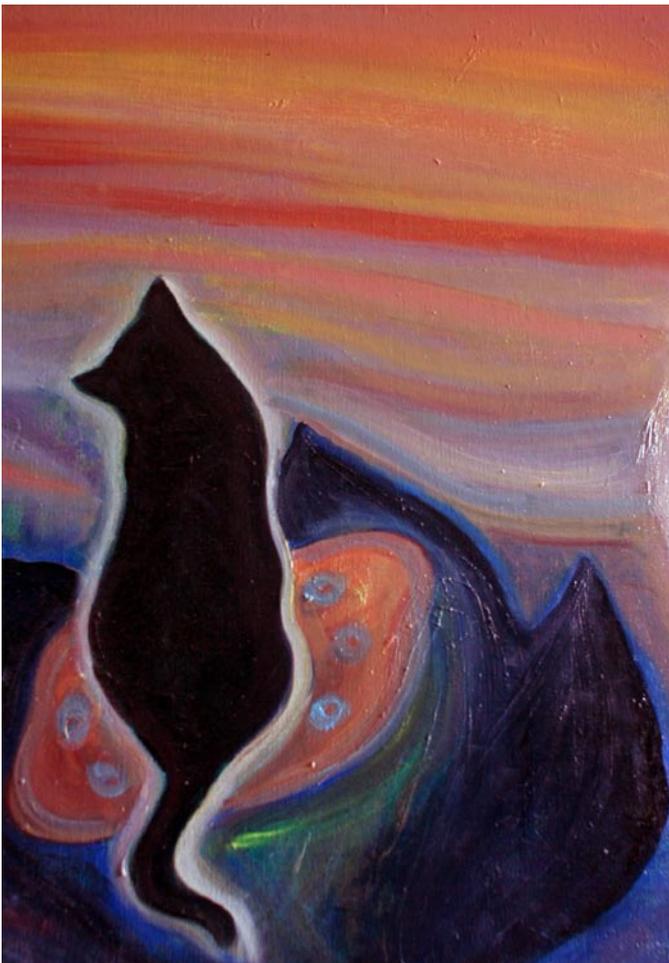
Our meeting started twenty years ago. At that time I was interested in flower bowls because I had studied flower arrangement for a long time. So, I naturally began to learn ceramics as an interest. Although making pots was interesting and enjoyable work, I, majored in domestic science, didn't imagine that I would become a ceramist as I am now. When I made small and big works of art almost every day in my house she visited me and we became friends. She came to be interested in ceramics and we often worked together. Doing clay work together, we had many talks such as life stories, troubles, concerns and inner life with an easy mind. It was our daily life.

Her influence on my art work is great and informative. She gave me an opportunity to understand the Western art history as well as the philosophy of art and made me ponder the essence of art. Sharing the impressions and feelings on my works, I could tell her the process of drawing out my thoughts and motives of my works. I didn't have any formal lessons of ceramics then. I just loved ceramic art enough to study by myself. The more I studied it the more I wanted to know. Therefore I visited a sculptor and learned terra cotta and visited potters to get some knowledge. In the process of my self-education, Mrs. Choi has been generous to encourage and advise me to consider the way of expression and the colors of works after firing in relation with glaze work. She awaked in me a keen feeling of the necessity to study ceramics in-depth.





She encouraged me, as I was dispirited by non-professionalism, by saying as follows, "Passion for one's own work, continuous study and sincerity without laziness will lead one to a way to be a true ceramic artist." I was convinced by her that artists have to express themselves not with their scholarly background but with their works. Further, she suggested me that she would like to pay my school expenses if I wanted to study when I couldn't be free from feeling an inferiority complex. In those days, My financial situation was the worst. My husband was running an architectural design office and we were struggling to overcome the crisis of IMF. Although I did not accept her suggestion, it was a touching moment to read her trust in me. She tried to open my eyes to the fact that putting passion into works was more important than an academic career.



One day, she came to me with a white envelope in her hand. As she stretched it out to me, she talked about her opinion of my works and my future. Working with me for many years and observing my hard work in putting my thought into works, she had been impressed with my attitude of dealing with clay. She thought that I might hold a private exhibition some day. She wanted to offer financial support for my first exhibition and she brought money in the white envelope, as much as I needed to rent a gallery at that time. She assured me by saying, "There is no reason to hurry into opening the exhibition and anytime you are ready will be good". I was so touched by her warm-hearted message of support and genuine love in the envelope. I felt like I was a rich person by just one fact: There was a person in the world who paid attention to my works with affection.



When I reached fifty years old, I had time to think seriously about how to live the rest of my life. Looking back on my life, I put my past into shape for four months by writing a journal and going on a journey. Traveling led me to see my life objectively. I am from a large family with many siblings. I was not satisfied with myself because I could not study as much as I wanted. However, as I traveled I came to accept my unfulfilled desire for education as it was without any discontent. Afterward I started to study ceramics at a college with my husband and son's persuasion and came to be free from my inferiority complex a bit. People say that lights are usually followed by shadows. Immediately on beginning the study, I felt there was something wrong in my body. I was diagnosed with thyroid cancer and had surgery to remove my thyroid gland. After the surgery I concentrated on studying as a way to overcome my fear of death and it worked.



Recovering from the cancer I remembered the white envelope and thought, "It's time to do it." In 2008 I held my first exhibition at a gallery located in Insa-dong, Seoul. It took eight years since I received the gift from my friend and was a long and slow way.

Mrs. Choi is an artist who takes time to study the philosophy of art and the philosophy of life. Sharing our philosophy of art and aesthetics as we work with clay together deepens our sympathy and gives us joy. I can talk to her about my philosophy of works with a relaxed mind. We analyze various feelings of the texture of my works by different techniques and by changing glaze. She always encourages me to try new experiments in making works and pushes me to get a tension to study more when we share artists' work in whom I interested.



Her big-mind shows a deep affection with a smile toward my works. Moreover, she always talks positively about changes of my thought expressed through my works. However, she doesn't hesitate to give me her delicate opinions and advices directly. Acknowledging the value of my work, she doesn't miss the detail of works for perfection and gives advice to me. Sometimes, she not only appreciates my works but reads my change of mind and the flow of my thought, and then I feel her trust in me. After my exhibition, she reminded me that my responsibility as an artist is to study constantly and also not to be lazy in growing my inner self. She is my precious and close companion and also a bit of a difficult master.

The theme of her painting is "life." I feel she expresses what she reflects upon and a journey for the perfection of the self based on the Buddhist meaning. She is not a religious person but she strives for being awakened in her daily life. The following passage is from Mrs. Choi's letter to my first exhibition.



Maybe I live to be aware of spiritual darkness.
 Mystery of existence, reason of being and meaning of life
 Thinking of this expansive universe,
 I am just a mere trifle.
 Is there any reason or meaning to being?
 Might the agony in the middle of this delusion continue
 from this life to the next?
 Like a lotus flower not stained in the mud,
 Like Buddha's not disgraced by secular law,
 Like Laozi's saying,
 Empty the mind like nature does.
 I wish to follow the word and the spirit
 My precious friend, Shin Jeung Soon.

It looks like she constantly disciplines herself to be aware of a spiritual darkness by means of ceramics. I wish that she may reach a freedom not bounded by this world or the next one through her ongoing devotion.

"Practice hard, think thoroughly,
 Be cautious and clear in words and acts
 Practice self-restraint and follow the truth,
 Then, your name will be shine."

By Choi Hye Young

Her paintings coming out of her inner introspection of being free bring me something to think about. It's the energy of her works. Loving nature, respecting life and an effort to accept human beings' lives as they are with a peaceful mind is her wisdom. She is one of my important fortunes. May in Korea is a season filled with the beautiful voice of life, in the sky, mountains and fields. I want to express the various colors of life in my works as beautiful, lively and fresh as springtime. Happiness is in me and through various relationships. The completion of happiness may be founded in an infinite nature.

Today, I am headed for my studio.

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