

# The Yixing Effect: Echoes of the Chinese Scholar

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## The Yixing Effect: Echoes of the Chinese Scholar

Review by Steven Branfman

When I suggested to a potter friend, and one who shares my love and appreciation of books, that I would do my next review on a book about Yixing teapots her reaction was skeptical. “Yixing teapots?” she said. “Isn’t that a pretty esoteric subject? Is the book going to appeal to a wide enough audience to warrant a review in an international magazine?” Her comments caused me to pause. I only had to think for a moment as I quickly reviewed my own interest in Yixing ware and the reaction of friends and visitors when they see my own collection of almost 60 Yixing teapots. Thinking about my personal interest and connection to the wares and the influence that Yixing pottery has had on my own work and love of ceramic art made this a no brainer.

It is easy to see when a writer has a passion of the subject they are writing about. *The Yixing Effect, Echoes of the Chinese Scholar* was a labor of love. Marvin Sweet, the author, is a potter, educator, collector, and writer, and he has used all of his experience, dedication, and skill to craft a book of immense thought provoking content, historical and cultural significance, and aesthetic inspiration. *The Yixing Effect* does not report on an obscure facet of pottery history and style. On the contrary, Yixing pottery and the circumstances from which it originated have affected virtually every person who works in clay. Early on, the author reminds us that the very first teapot was made in Yixing, a fact unknown to many who make teapots.

The Yixing Effect is a handsome volume of 206 glossy pages. The design of the book is pleasing to the eye, with lots of white space framing the text and more than 150 full-color photos. The book is well organized, divided into 4 chapters, and opens with a thoughtful preface by Rick Newby, a scholar and well-known cultural journalist with a particular interest in ceramics. Chapter 1, “The Scholars Path,” explores the concept of the Chinese scholar, and his role and significance in Chinese art, culture, and intellect. It lays the groundwork for the author’s ensuing examination of Yixing pottery. Chapter 2 features 44 Yixing teapots from the author’s collection. Sweet presents the collection with a discussion of his introduction to Yixing ware. He goes on to talk about his subsequent visit to China and his immersion in Yixing pottery and culture while there. A brief discussion on the hallmark of collecting gives us additional insight into Sweet’s personal interests in and reasons for collecting. Chapter 3, “Yixing Ware and its Influence on Early European Ceramics,” is a fascinating contribution to the book by William R. Sargent, curator of Asian export art at the Peabody Essex Museum. In it, he examines not only the aesthetic influences of Yixing ware, but the cultural significance that the import

of Chinese ceramics has had on western sensibilities. His writing is academic and intellectual yet comfortably readable.

Chapter 4, “Contemporary American Interpretations” is the heart and soul of the book. In the chapter, Sweet examines the influence that Yixing ware has had, and continues to have on American ceramic art. The chapter is carefully researched and displays Sweet’s extensive knowledge of the subject. Sweet offers critical analysis of the work and his own interpretations of the connections the artists share with the origins, cultural attachments, and aesthetics of Yixing pottery. Fifty-nine potters are represented through carefully chosen images of their work, followed by statements divulging their personal perspectives and their attractions and connections to Yixing ware. The artists are honest and revealing, and their words give us important insights into the creative process. Accenting the book is a map of the Yixing region, a chronology of Chinese dynasties and periods, a bibliography, and useful chapter notes.

Sweet’s writing is careful and comfortable. His desire to teach, to inform, and to share his knowledge and passion comes through clearly. The fact that *The Yixing Effect* is a book equally at home in the environment of academia as it is in the hands of pottery makers is a testimony to the ability of the author to frame and advance the subject to be widely inclusive and consequential. The extensive text is packed with information, yet it is far from the usual dryness of a text book. Instead, *The Yixing Effect* reads more like a story that keeps you captivated through twists and turns. It is a book that connects the dots and illustrates the often unrealized and unrecognized links and ties between the past and the present, and the inspirations that fuel the creative spirit.

Until recently, Yixing pottery garnered only minor interest among potters and collectors here in America. Not so anymore. Just a brief look at available workshops on making Yixing pottery, exhibitions of Yixing ware by both foreign and American potters, travel opportunities to China, articles in magazines, and the proliferation of books on the subject make it very clear that Yixing pottery is in the mainstream of contemporary ceramic art. *The Yixing Effect, Echoes of The Chinese Scholar* is a welcome addition that will further our knowledge and appreciation of the wares, the history, the culture, and - most importantly - the influence and significance Yixing pottery has had on our own work as potters.

# AMERICAN CRAFT MAGAZINE BOOKS

August/September 2006

## **The Yixing Effect: Echoes of the Chinese Scholar**

by Marvin Sweet, 2006, Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, China. Holter Museum of Art, Helena, MT, 406-442-6400. 210 pages, texts by Rick Newby and William R. Sargent, illustrated. \$45.

The tradition of Yixing ware, first introduced to the West 350 years ago, has been a potent influence on contemporary American ceramics. The scholar and ceramist Marvin Sweet reveals why in this illuminating book, which offers a brief history of Yixing ware before discussing its impact in the United States. William R. Sargent of the Peabody Essex Museum contributes a chapter on Yixing's influence on 17th- and 18th-century European ceramics. Historical Yixing teapots are illustrated as works by 59 American ceramists, among them Annette Corcoran, Randy Johnston, Richard Notkin, Bonnie Seeman, Richard Shaw and Susan Thayer. The artists' comments the Yixing influence conclude the book, which accompanies a touring exhibition that opened at the Holter Museum of Art (through August 6).



*December 2006*

## **new books**

### **The Yixing Effect**

Echoes of the Chinese Scholar  
by Marvin Sweet

In this well illustrated book, Marvin Sweet examines how the Yixing teapot has captured the imagination of contemporary American ceramic artists and why it has become a compelling source of inspiration. Since Yixing ware arrived in Europe more than 350 years ago, the teapot (which was invented in Yixing) has been used as a model for Western ceramics. Sweet concludes that the reason for this link between Western potters and Yixing was the same influence that inspired the Yixing potters: the Chinese Scholars.

“A teapot is the most complex composition of all pottery forms because of all of its component parts: the base, the body, the rim opening, the spout, handle, lid and knob on the lid ... but this is not a catalog of teapots,” explains Sweet. “When I selected artists who I felt followed the Yixing tradition, I never used the teapot as my sole criterion. What I tried to recognize in each artist’s work was the presence of the Yixing tradition or the underlying spirit of Chinese scholar art, work that had appropriated that piece of culture, departed from it and transformed it into something new.”

The book gives a brief history of Yixing ware that addresses the collaboration between Yixing potters and Chinese scholars, including their philosophies and aesthetics. It also presents an overview of Sweet’s extensive collection of Yixing ware. The book concludes with a discussion of the influence Yixing ware has had on contemporary American ceramic art, which includes examples of work by 59 American ceramists. 206 pages including afterword, artist statements, index of images and contemporary artists, bibliography, photo credits, author biographies and notes to the text.

Sunday October 29, 2006

# Steeped in tradition

## Chinese teapots hold allure for ceramist



By Emily Young  
Staff Writer

Like any dedicated collector, Merrimac, Mass., ceramist Marvin Sweet can describe his greatest find in detail: Hadley, Mass.; 1990, a pewter-encased teapot from Yixing, China.

“I was in a little antique store in western Mass. when I saw it. My heart started to pound and I bought it without negotiating the price. They had no idea of its value,” Sweet, 53, said while simulating the thumping of his heart.

“The clay is encased in pewter. Encasing clay with thin pewter sheets became a lost art form; they were only made from 1810 to 1850. I loved it because of its rarity and the challenge undertaken by the Chinese scholars to engrave beautiful calligraphy into its sides.”

Most likely, more than one shopper didn’t realize the true value of the Yixing (pronounced Ee-shing) teapot, which for Sweet exists not in its monetary value, but rather its inspirational value.

“The linchpin is the Chinese scholars. They invented the Yixing teapot, nurtured the tradition and patronized the artists who made them.

“But it was their philosophy, attitudes and training that have become the basis for the kinship that exists between ceramic artists in America today and the Yixing tradition,” Sweet wrote in his new book, “The Yixing Effect: Echoes of the Chinese Scholar.”

Sweet spent three years compiling his book. It provides photographs of dozens of Yixing teapots, as well as the contemporary work influenced by this ceramic art form.

Chinese scholars first congregated in Yixing during the late 16th century. Known to the Chinese as wenren, or “cultured people,” they studied the philosophies of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism as well as music, chess, calligraphy and painting.

“The common thread in all those philosophies is the love and respect for nature,” said Sweet, who has visited Yixing four times since 1992.

The scholars loved to drink tea while reading poetry or telling stories in the company of friends. However, they needed a proper vessel for pouring the tea. They admired the unglazed, natural pottery that was being produced in Yixing.

They found the high-fired Yixing clay to be durable, yet porous. Using one type of tea in each teapot allowed the porous wall to build a tea patina, enhancing the flavor over time. The scholars began to design pots for the local artisans to make.

In his book, Sweet describes both the educational backgrounds and physical works of contemporary American artists in relation to the Chinese scholars.

Traditionally, American potters designing ceramic ware were self-taught, apprentices or trained as industrial designers. But the educational backgrounds of contemporary American ceramists are far more similar to the Chinese scholars who helped design the Yixing teapots during the 17th through 19th centuries than to the American ceramists from that same time period.

Within the past 50 years, art programs have expanded, with ceramists earning advanced educational degrees in art. Sweet himself was an undergraduate student at Hawthorne College in Antrim, N.H., and received his master’s of fine arts from Boston University. He has taught ceramics at Bradford College in Bradford, The Art Institute of Boston and the University of New Hampshire in Durham.

Many of the contemporary pieces in Sweet’s book are teapots, but not all. Some are sculptures. All incorporate the philosophies studied by the Chinese scholars or some of the four distinct styles of Yixing ware: naturalistic, segmented, geometric, or miniature.

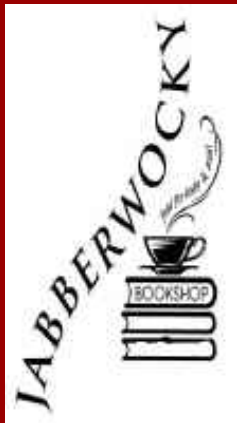
Sweet’s own work, displayed among the Yixing teapots in his personal collection, are heavily inspired by nature. But he doesn’t make teapots.

“There’s been an indirect impact on my own work because the Yixing teapots led me to another love of the scholars, ‘scholar’s rocks and root art,’” Sweet said. “They’re more abstract.”

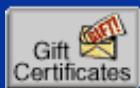
‘The Yixing Effect: Echoes of the Chinese Scholar’

By Marvin Sweet,

206 pages, \$45



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## Store Events - September 21, 7:00 PM

**Time:** Thursday, September 21, 2006 7:00 PM

**Title of Event:** Marvin Sweet

Jabberwocky Bookshop welcomes Merrimac scholar and ceramist Marvin Sweet, for a discussion of his seminal work THE YIXING EFFECT: ECHOES OF THE CHINESE SCHOLAR.

Jabberwocky Bookshop is delighted to host Marvin Sweet, one of the world's leading experts on Yixing pottery, for a discussion of his informative and beautiful book THE YIXING EFFECT: ECHOES OF THE CHINESE SCHOLAR. Yixing pottery, with its aesthetic foundations in Confucian, Taoist and Buddhist philosophy, has been a pivotal inspiration for many modern ceramists. It is a style that began as a marriage of scholarship and craft. The Yixing area of China was a hotbed of intellectual and artistic activity during the late sixteenth century. Scholars, steeped in Confucian idealism, drank tea as a stimulant to study and discourse. They found themselves, however, unsatisfied by the existing method and means of brewing and dispensing. Such refined sensibilities required a vessel that addressed both functional and aesthetic demands. The resulting teapot, designed in association with the local artisan monks, became both a prototype and a lingering testament to the Yixing harmonization of form and function, balance and beauty. Marvin Sweet, in his lavishly illustrated book, chronicles the fascinating history of the Yixing phenomenon, from its origins near Lake Tai in the Ming dynasty, to its impact on contemporary American ceramists.

Art critic Rick Newby hails Marvin Sweet's THE YIXING EFFECT as "...an exemplary work of scholarship that will surely serve as one of the definitive sources on its subject for many years to come."

Marvin Sweet is an award-winning ceramist whose work has been widely exhibited and collected in the United States and abroad. He is considered one of the foremost scholars on Yixing pottery. He lives in Merrimac, Massachusetts.

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