An Inside Look with Kathy Erteman: Preserving the 1200-Year-Old Nixi Tibetan Black Pottery Tradition

Kathy Erteman reunites with the Nixi potters to continue Aid to Artisans’ work for the Ngwang Choephel Fellows Program

Kathy Erteman, a New York based ceramic artist and designer, has exhibited her work nationally and internationally including at the Renwick/Smithsonian Institute, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and Taipei Museum of Fine Arts. Erteman’s work has been featured in numerous design books and periodicals including the New York Times. In 2007 when Aid to Artisans (ATA) first called Erteman and...
asked if she wanted to go to China to work with the Nixi Tibetan potters, she didn't know what to expect.

In an effort to preserve a 1200-year-old Tibetan cultural tradition, the Nixi Black pottery, ATA in partnership with the Mountain Institute and the Eastern Tibetan Training Institute employed Erteman’s help to work with the Nixi Tibetan potters from the Yunnan province in southwest China. With a long list of tasks to accomplish and not much information on the potters, Erteman willingly took on the challenge.

Five years later after Erteman’s progress with the Nixi potters, the US Department of State’s Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs awarded ATA with the Ngwang Choephel Fellows Program grant for a second time. The two-year cultural exchange program focuses on the preservation of cultural traditions, enhancement of sustainable development and expansion of economic opportunities within Tibetans communities in China.

Over the course of five years, Erteman has visited China three times, working as a design consultant for the project. With more than 30 years of experience under her belt, Erteman utilized her wide range of skills and knowledge to help the Nixi potters improve their designs and techniques, broadened their use of Tibetan artistic motifs, and developing marketing strategies and packaging process.

In continuation of the program, Erteman is back in China for six weeks from June 23 to July 31 to work with the Nixi potters once again. We had the chance to speak to her before her trip to discuss her experiences as a design consultant and her plans for this coming trip.

What exactly is the Nixi Black Pottery?
Nixi Black Pottery is a traditional pottery that has been made for more than a thousand years. They’re used in Tibetan daily life, primarily for cooking, religious ceremonies, or as small space heaters. It is made with two different clays: brown clay and white clay. One is smooth and the other is rough. They mix it together and fired to a very low temperature. What’s special about the Nixi pottery is that it looks like it’s made on a wheel but it’s actually all made by hand. The tools they use are made by hand. They decorate the pieces with carvings or bits of glazed porcelain from discarded tea cups and broken rice bowls then whittled them into shape. They inlay the white bits into the clay. At first it looks like brown clay with white designs. After it’s fired in the kiln, the pottery turns black with white designs.

Looking back on your past visits, what was your most rewarding experience?
My most rewarding experience was watching the potters make the new designs. The communication was so effective that they were able to make them on the first try. By going to Jingdezhen, China’s biggest pottery center, as part of the cultural exchange program, I witnessed how they garnered great respect from potters all over the world. Despite the prejudice against Tibetans in China, the potters were treated like rock stars in Jingdezhen. People saw them and said, “Oh! You’re the potters from Yunnan!” Their demonstration was extremely well-attended and was filmed for local television. Just seeing them experience all that was beyond any expectation I’ve dreamed of.

Have you seen any improvements in how the potters work since your past visits?
We didn’t have much contact after my second trip so I felt it was necessary for me to visit again last
The focused Nixi potters work on the new designs during Erteman’s first visit in 2007.

October. We didn’t know if any of the work we had done in the past had taken effect or if they’d just gone back to their old ways. That was something other consultants have said in the past. You go and have a great experience but then after you leave everybody will revert back to the way they used to work. In 2012, I saw an accumulated effect of everything we’ve done together. The quality of craftsmanship is much higher. They’re more prosperous than they were in 2007. Before there were 80 families involved in pottery making, now there are 120 families involved. I remember the master potter put his hand on my shoulder and said to the translator to tell me that people all over the world now know about Nixi potters because of me and he thanks us from the bottom of his heart.

What do you have planned for the potters during your six-week visit?
Besides building a kiln, we’re also going to work on making the porcelain inlay bits in many different ways. Instead of the inlays being found objects, the potters are actually going to make them. This will expand their traditional vocabulary. We’re going to use different materials and techniques. We’re also going back to Jingdezhen for the second time. Before we leave, we’re going to talk about packing their work properly for shipping. Last time when we went in 2010, they packed the pots with a few thin pieces of newspaper with a broken cardboard box around it. When they got there, some of the pieces got chipped, broken, and some broke before they left the village. This time, I ordered bubble wrap and foam-packing material. When we pick the pieces to take for our trip, I’ll teach them how to pack them properly. When we get back to the village, I’ll be staying for another week to share everything we’ve learned to the rest of the potters.

How did you use your experience to consult the potters?
I used my design experience to develop new designs based on the things I saw that were part of their culture. I know how to extrapolate information and purpose it into designs so I was able to rather quickly understand their techniques within five days. I got familiar with the culture and translated that into some new products. Since I’m also a potter, I taught them how to make those pieces using their techniques.
How did the potters respond to your consultation and workshops?
They were incredibly open. Not all of them participated but the ones that did were enthusiastic, interested, and very respectful. It was surprise to me how receptive they were. When I went back to the village last October, one potter had a well-worn and clay-smeared photocopy of the first handbook we gave them. Everything was well-used and well-received. I would say now this time they’re even more receptive than they were before.

What challenges did you face during your timethere?
One of the things that happened was that the Mountain Institute came up with the idea to make an eco-kiln that uses biogas fuel. As a potter, I know that’s not something that’s being done right now. Also, in their village, they don’t have access to materials that make biogas fuel. Since that didn’t work out, one of the head potters, after our trip to Jingdezhen, suggested getting an electronic kiln and using modern methods. I had to really fight against that. The Mountain Institute was really considering it as an alternative. So I sat down with them and explained to them that this would be the end of Nixi Black Pottery. We’d be doing the exact opposite of what we’re setting out to do. In the end, they agreed with me.

Why is buildinga kiln a crucial part of this project?
The reason we want to build a kiln is because the Chinese government doesn’t want them to be firing the pottery in these open pits the way they have been traditionally. It’s bad for the environment. By having an enclosed kiln, all the smoke that makes the pottery black will stay inside. They’ll get the same effect but with more control. They’ll be able to fire bigger pieces. It’ll be made out of basic materials that can be purchased locally. John Neeley, our kiln expert, will be with us to build it. It’s fast process so we’re hoping to build two kilns and be able to test them.

How did your experience with the Nixi potters influence your own work?
I notice that I’ve started to do more hand-building. The techniques I used in my work before were more slick and controlled. Since I started with the potters, my work shows much more responsiveness to the material I’m working with. It’s more of a conversation between what the clay wants to do and what I
want it to do. It’s a surprise to me. I never thought I’d be working in that way. I think it’s a direct result of working with the potters in their techniques and their philosophy.

**What do you hope to see in the future from the Nixi Potters?**

I hope to see better craftsmanship and more prosperity for the potters. I hope we see the potters’ work getting more recognition and collected by different museums and handicraft centers in China and abroad. I’d like to see them follow the Native American potters’ business model and not flood the market with tourist knick-knacks that have nothing to do with their cultural traditions. Hopefully, they’ll continue developing traditional, functional and utilitarian objects and special pieces for ceremony and collection. It seems like in the last few years, special examples have disappeared. So in the future, I’d like to work on conserving and preserving their cultural traditions before they disappear.

To get updates on Kathy’s work with the Nixi Potters, follow [her blog](http://aidtoartisans.wordpress.com/2013/07/12/an-inside-look-with-kathy-erteman-preserving-a-1200-year-old-tradition/).

Photos by Kathy Erteman. For more information on Kathy, visit [her website](http://aidtoartisans.wordpress.com/2013/07/12/an-inside-look-with-kathy-erteman-preserving-a-1200-year-old-tradition/). To see more photos from Kathy’s past trips to China, visit her [Flickr page](http://aidtoartisans.wordpress.com/2013/07/12/an-inside-look-with-kathy-erteman-preserving-a-1200-year-old-tradition/).

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