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How a Korean enameller is reinventing a centuries-old technique

Kwangho Lee has adapted his country's traditional 'chibo' process to make colourful contemporary designs for the home

By Jonathan Foyle

September 16, 2016

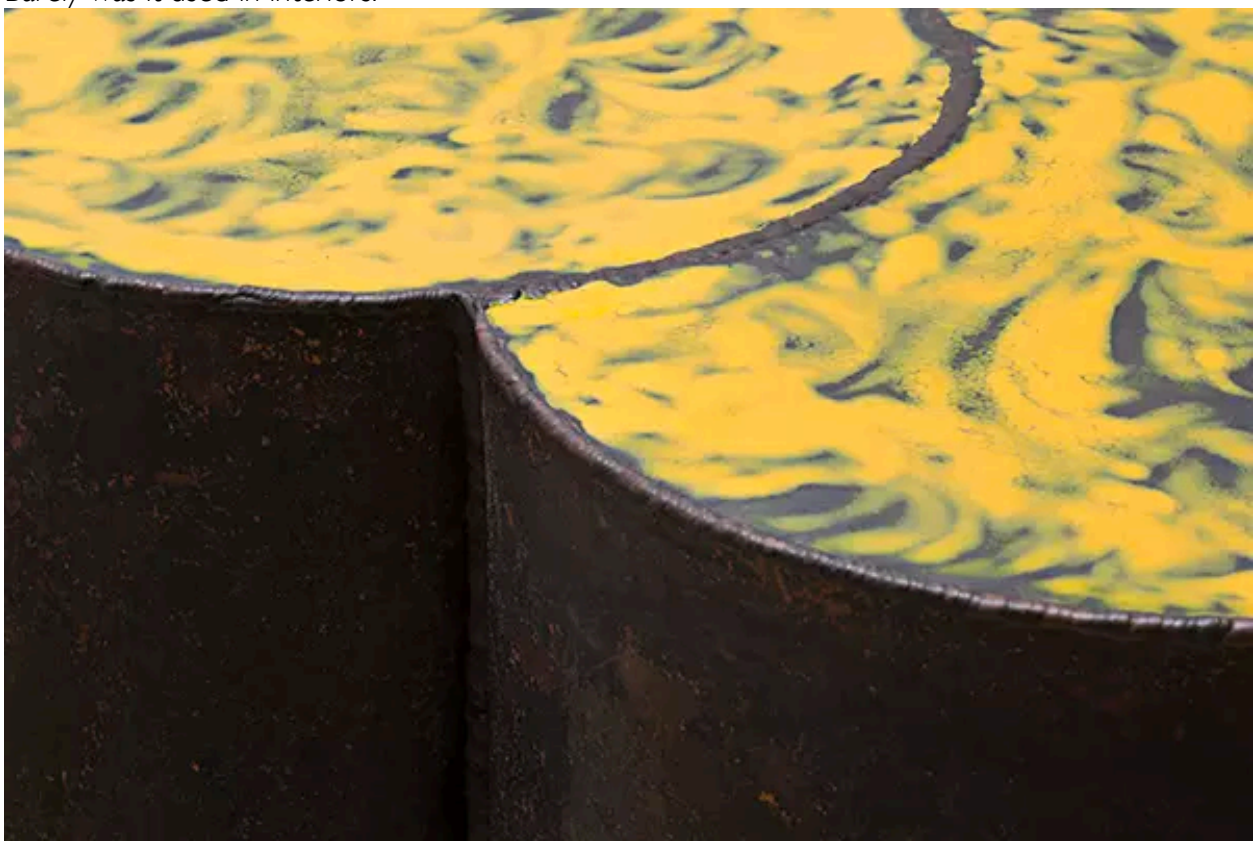
The celebrated South Korean enameller and designer Kwangho Lee was born in 1981 in a small city called Guri, just 10 miles east of downtown Seoul. Then, Guri was still a rural settlement about to be engulfed by the country's major conurbation. Lee recalls that it had been down at heel. "In my early years of childhood, my family wasn't in such good conditions. We lived in a very small house, sharing a tiny room for the four of us," he says.

Yet their remove from the stir of Seoul had benefits in those days of ebbing rusticity, as near his house were forested mountains and brooks to play in, close to nature. Lee also enjoyed spending time with his maternal grandfather, a farmer who made everyday objects such as baskets, sesame-dusting brushes and brooms, "mostly made out of hay or wood, things he'd pick up by simply looking around".

His grandfather would easily knock up cages for his chickens or the farming tools needed to raise cows. "In my memory he'd always be busy with his hands, and to me it was all very natural to think of him as a crafting grandfather. I also remember people praising him for his good handiwork."

The impression ran deep, and talent for making things flowed in the family's blood. Lee reckons his mother "pretty much has good craftsmanship as well, in needlework and crochet, and as for my dad, his penmanship is outstanding". But Lee was the first in his family to harness intense heat, using furnaces to mould surfaces with the dripping-hot, glistening colours of enamel.

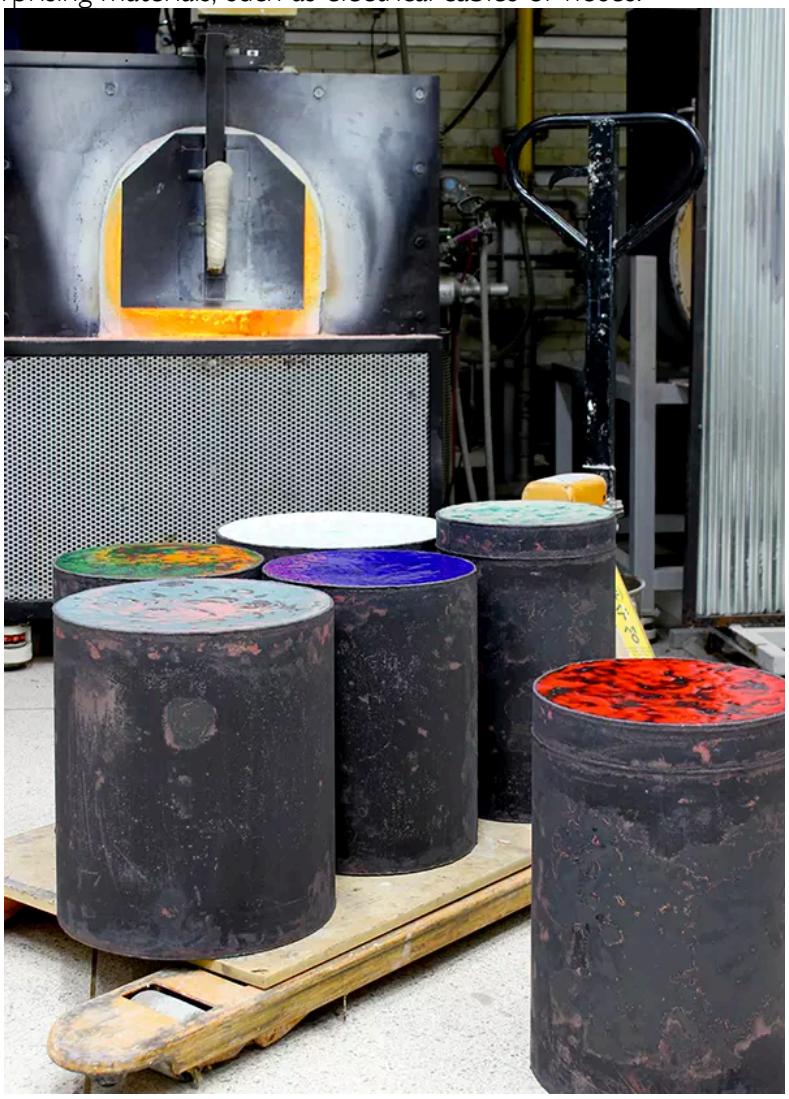
In the west, porcelain enamel was a staple of interiors from the 19th to the mid-20th centuries. Basins, baths, light shades, cookers and kitchen cabinets were clad in the stuff, white as teeth, promising the wipe-clean utilitarian utopia of modernism. At the same time, jewellery made from coloured enamel drew on a tradition dating back to the gilt reliquaries of the Middle Ages. The jewellery tradition of Korea also depended on the decorative and expressive potential of molten glass. Yet, as Lee says: "Enamelled things were not common purchases among the population. Barely was it used in interiors."



Skin series, 2014 © Kwangho Lee

He studied metal art and design at Hongik University in Seoul, and was drawn to expressive functional objects, influenced by his grandfather. "I appreciated the way he looked at everyday objects, and thus in the beginning of my practice the main idea of my works was to give new meaning and function to the most ordinary things, like wired lights and furniture."

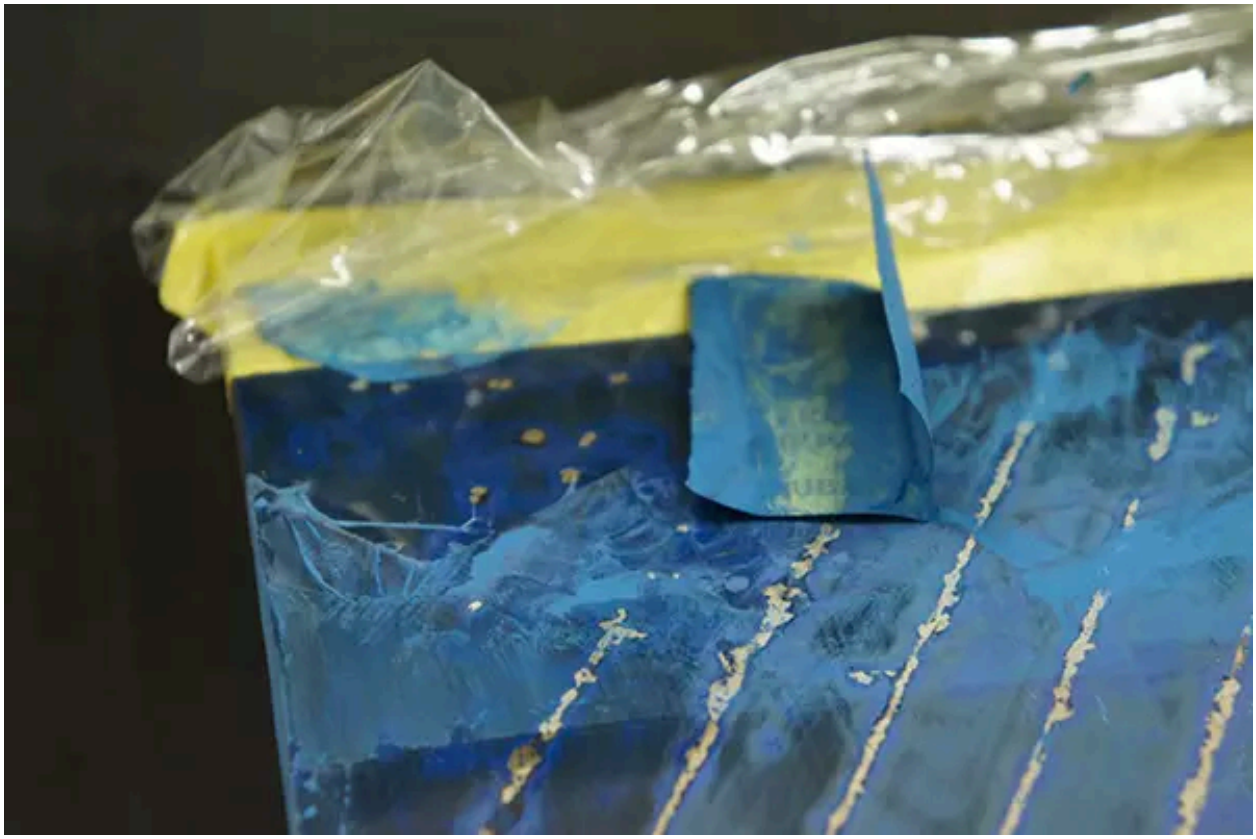
Lee describes his approach as "in-depth discoveries of moments when materials meet, or join, another". For the past couple of years he has made works from marble, copper, enamel and steel, as well as more surprising materials, such as electrical cables or hoses.



Making of the Skin series, 2012 © Yohan Ji

"As a metal craft major, working with copper was an easy approach for me because I was familiar with it," he says. However, when experimenting with the use of enamel in furniture-making for his copper Skin series, he had to break with or develop tradition.

The Korean enamel technique is called chilbo, which roughly translates as "seven colours of gem". Crushed coloured glass is applied wet or dry on to brass or copper sheets and fired, sometimes serially. "A usual kiln for chilbo is quite small," Lee explains, "because the chilbo crafts are always made in small sizes."



Materials for the New Armor series, 2014 © Kwangho Lee

The effect of using a dry brush loaded with glass powder as well as wet enamel mixes can be painterly. Lee wondered how this would work over a much larger surface, if he were to make enamelled furniture. "It's not an easy task for designers of my age and generation to practise further and beyond the original range of techniques that are considered 'traditional'. So I approached it by eliminating the traditional part, and focused only on the technique itself."

He has the copper bodies made from his sketches, leaving rough welds, before applying the enamel paint. "Then I head to a kiln studio in the ceramics department at Hongik University and hit up to 750 to 800 degrees, cook for three to four hours, cool down to room temperature — which can take up to a full day — and release them."

From left to right: Side table from Skin series, 2009; Chair in the Skin series, enameled copper, 2011; Side table from Skin series, 2010 © Johnson Trading Gallery

Making enamelled copper furniture requires patience and the ability to cope with surprises and disappointments. With a chilbo kiln, you are able to open the door and check on the change of colours throughout the firing process, but not so with large ceramic kilns.

Lee says: "The door must be shut tightly the whole time. Therefore I can only imagine and predict the final colour of the enamel and the copper's reaction to heat."

Making of New Armor series, 2014 © Kwangho Lee

The *chilbo* effect and colours are random, and he relies on the process of fusion, which can only be controlled by setting the temperature and duration of firing. He finds it the greatest challenge, yet

the most exciting part of this project. "But there are also times that I'm less lucky and the enamel would crack here and there, especially during winter, due to the huge difference of temperature. Then I have to recook or start over."

Kwangho Lee © Yohan Ji

His works are shown in galleries and fairs around the world. But the majority of his pieces are custom orders, and the range of clients diverse, from individuals pursuing the avant-garde to designers and art collectors. So, as a maker of handmade objects created using an industrial process, how would he describe himself?

"I've found what I can do best, something I can do steadily for a long period of time. People might describe me as artistic or address me as a designer, but for myself I think I simply need more time to experience and experiment."