

Pottery in Mongolia?

report from Jane Gibson

A small pottery group has been making annual visits to Central and Eastern Asia and beyond. Most of these countries with names ending in “stan” have people whose names included the suffix “khan”. Were they all really descended from Genghis Khan? In 2025 we ventured to Mongolia, the land associated with the Great Khan to learn more and to explore the pottery of the region. We were informed that the inhabitants of Mongolia and the Steppes have been mainly nomadic and therefore unlikely to have made pots. True or false? A local artist told us that in addition, Mongols considered the air, soil and sky sacrosanct and the exploitation of clay and fire therefore prohibited. He could not explain how the huge mining operations or the pots we saw in museums circumvented this prohibition.

Our journey started in the modern capital of Ulaanbaatar then crossed the vast Gobi Desert in 4x4 vehicles before flying back to the capital. In the desert there were no roads. In the city we visited museums, temples, a monastery and artists’ studios. We learned about nomadic life in the desert, climbed high sand dunes, rode on camels and horses, visited the Flaming Cliffs where the first dinosaur eggs were discovered, climbed cliffs to see petroglyphs, trekked up canyons, visited the ancient capital Karakorum, stayed in Gers (yurts), saw rare wild Przewalski’s horses and huge herds of goats, horses and camels.

And now to the locally made pots - which we were told did not exist. In fact pottery in Mongolia has a long history, with evidence of the earliest known dating back over 11,200 years, significantly older than previously believed. This early pottery, is typically grey or reddish, with a thickness of 7–8 mm. Study of early Mongol ceramics began in the 1970s. Pottery traditions also flourished during the late Mongol period. The vast reach of the Mongol Empire created a unique environment for artistic exchange. Chinese blue-and-white porcelain and Islamic ceramic techniques, such as lustre-painting were traded and copied. Nomadic Mongols didn’t travel with artisans as they expanded their empire but rather relied on settled craftsmen in the regions they absorbed. In the excellent modern museums, we saw many ancient BC pots, found as grave goods, and information about how they were made and fired. There were also porcelain pots from a later period when China ruled half of Mongolia. There were 7th C figurines which looked very Chinese.

Very little remains of Karakorum, the ancient capital city of the Great Mongol Empire (1220-1264). A beautiful monastery, Erdene Zuu, was built from the remnants in the late 1550s. During excavations many fragments of green glazed roof tiles, floor tiles and parts of mythical animals were found. In 2009 the remains of 14 kilns and an art studio were found. In 2014 four large, lidded pots were discovered at the corners of the Great Buddhist Temple, containing gold and silver items.



Pots 4-2nd BCE

Also found were hundreds of Buddhist Tsatsa (unfired miniature stupas placed in sacred sites). The beautiful temples now standing had glazed ceramic roof tiles and end pieces.

In the Middle Gobi steppes we visited the ruins of the Ongi Monastery. Founded in 1660, at its heyday it housed around 30 temples, four Buddhist universities and 1000 monks. Not much remains but it was fascinating to wander around the huge area. Most of the walls were built with unfired bricks but there were fired water pipes and tiles. In the little museum were pots encased in a wooden frame and others in a canvas bag which solved the problem of transporting them on horseback.



Roof tile ends 4-2nd BCE



15th CE Porcelain dish

Between these ancient pots and the modern artists work, there seemed to be a gap in the making of traditional pottery, at least we did not see any pots from this period. Perhaps they were in a different museum or were removed during Soviet times as in other countries oppressed by a Soviet regime. During that era a ceramics factory did exist and was operated in Tov Province, producing a wide range of souvenirs and household items. The factory had its own laboratory and processed its own clay.

Pottery in Mongolia... cont.



Kilns found at Karakorum in 2007



Kiln furniture similar to ours



Temple roof tiles



Fired pipes at Ongi Monastery



Pot for Nomadic life



Work by Odmaa Uranchimeg

We met three ceramic artists at a collective in Ulaanbaatar. We were welcomed by Odmaa Uranchimeg. Her work weaves together reference to Buddhist imaginaries and organic materials. She showed us the moulds she uses for slip casting tiny Buddha statues which she sells to museums. The clay comes from China and is fired to 1040c. She combines her ceramics with diverse materials such as wire to make sculptures and has exhibited in many countries. Next door was Ochirsukh Lhagva-Ochir who was just back from China. He mainly produces domestic ware and some sculpture. He too had travelled widely to many exhibitions and sells much online. The third artist, Otgonbayer Dashdorj worked mainly on installations and sculptures in paper. They were all delighted to meet us and us them. We also saw some modern work on sale in a craft shop.



Work by Ochirsukh Lhagva

Our thanks must go to our excellent local guide, Khaliun, our brilliant drivers and once again to the organiser, Gulnora Khurramova, for another superb trip.

Jane Gibson



Potters Together