



*The private kiln owner  
the author 'discovered'*

# A Porcelain Painter's Odyssey

By Siobhán Cool

Following months of anticipation, weeks attending study lectures and days on a slow bus in China, our FOM Study Tour group had reached Jingdezhen, the birthplace of porcelain, where construction workers still unearth shards of the ancient stuff and even the street lamps are sheathed in it!

At our first stop, a preserved Ming-era pottery compound, we marvelled at demonstrations of ancient methods. To see the wet wares hand-formed reminded us that even a rudimentary object, such as a rice bowl, was once the result of many hours of labour. I was enthralled to see artisans painstakingly yet deftly creating designs in cobalt underglaze paint with nary a reference book nor pause for rest. Their worktables were covered in brushes, rags, tools and paint palettes and they were engrossed in the beautiful task at hand.

By mid-afternoon we had arrived in the city centre's commercial porcelain district. Eager to discover the small, privately-run kilns that I knew were part of Jingdezhen's history, I stole away and began my quest. Leaving the main thoroughfares, I followed a young man hauling a cart filled with inverted vases down a side lane. When he stopped at a door to unload, he waved me away with a warning that the vases were still wet. Was I standing on the doorstep of a private kiln? Momentarily struggling with my inner voice of caution, I plunged through the little door with a shrug and a deep breath!

It took my eyes some time to become accustomed to the dark. Dusty shelves lined each wall of the small, windowless space, a cluttered table was wedged into a corner and vases lay at random around the room. I spied another narrow door and ventured further into the gloom. "Nee how, uncle?" I offered as a ridiculous conciliatory gesture for my trespass, but no-one appeared. At the second doorway, I saw a larger internal room and at last spied the working kiln. A short, thin man emerged from behind a curtain and greeted me graciously with a curious smile – he could see I was a misplaced tourist! We began a dialogue with a smattering of English and a series of gestures. I convinced him to show me his workstation, where I marvelled at the simple materials, the dingy, dusty state of the area and the ultimate beauty of the works this man created. Then he and a colleague demonstrated their painting techniques and I showed them mine. They found my Western images intriguing. After more happy banter, we shook hands and I took my leave.



*A family of artisans taking a break to play mah-jong*



*An artisan demonstrating cobalt underglaze painting*

Walking alone in the alleys for the next hour, I came across a young woman fixing transfer images to cheap tiles, found a paint supplier from whom I purchased horse-hair brushes and painting palettes, discovered a family of purveyors too intent on their *mah-jong* game to bother with me, and spotted a young boy sailing his paper boat in a bucket of water at the foot of his parents' porcelain stall.

When finally I wended my way to the rendezvous point where my fellow travellers were being besieged by eager vendors, I was both exhausted and exhilarated. The back alley sojourn had transported me back through time, to the zenith of Jingdezhen, when its porcelain, despite then being more precious than gold, was produced by skilled and passionate artists who loved their art for art's sake.

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**Siobhán Cool** paints each week in her teacher's studio and dreams one day of studying porcelain painting at one of the world's major porcelain centres; the Sèvres porcelain factory. She spent 12 fabulous days on the FOM Jiangxi tour in May 2009.

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*Photos courtesy of the author*