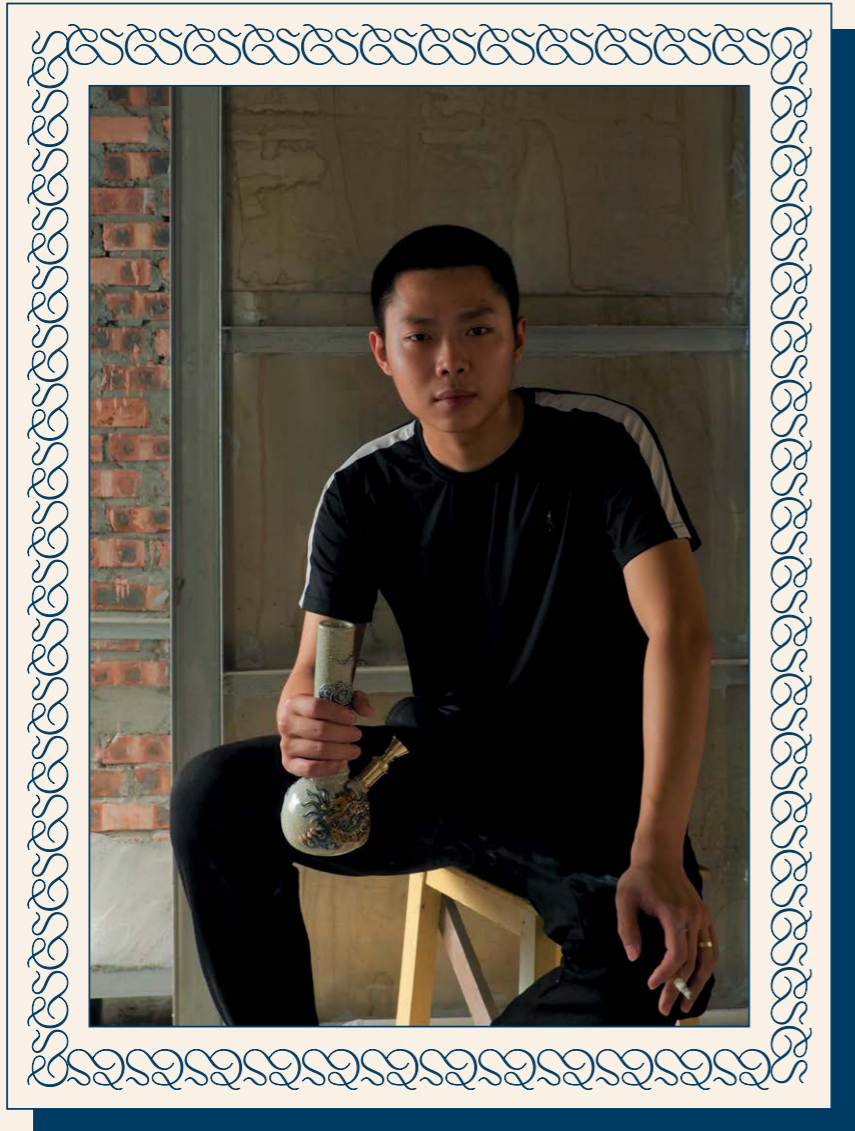




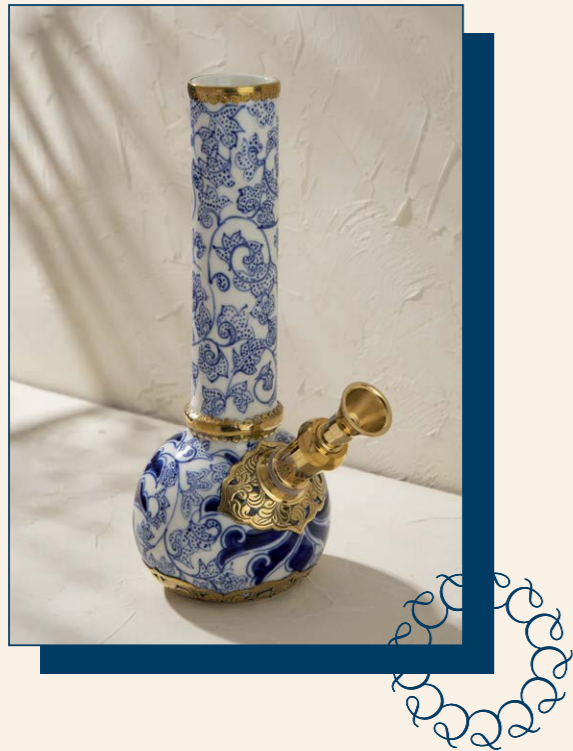
PIPELINE



Five generations of traditional Vietnamese pottery are baked into Minh Le's ceramic bongs.

Words by Dana Covit. Photography courtesy of Minh Le.





In the dark of night, the hot kiln sings. Father, uncle, grandfather, and son work together to control air and gas flow, adjusting the chimney, checking the color of the fire and the sounds of the gas burning. If the night is damp or windy, they'll make adjustments. It's a dance of intuition and expertise, honed across centuries. "I can still remember seeing the blue color of the flame, feeling the intense heat coming from the kiln, hearing the pinging and tinkling of glaze cooling and taking shape," says Minh Le, the 24-year-old founder of Minh Le Studio, thinking back to the first time he watched his dad perform a glaze firing in their family's ceramic studio. "To see a plain chunk of clay transformed into a beautiful, vibrant piece of art that can last more than a lifetime—it felt like my dad gave these pieces a soul, a new life."

Heirloom may not be the first word that comes to mind when you think of a bong. And yet, in the hands of this Vietnam-based studio's skilled arti-

sans, that's what is offered. Minh Le Studio's creations—with their finely hand-painted and embossed surfaces, gleaming glazes, graceful proportions, and accents of brass—could pass as pristinely preserved vessels dating back to antiquity. (While we're here: A hall at The Metropolitan Museum of Art devoted to smoking implements is certainly overdue). The link to storied artistic tradition is not merely imagined: Bát Tràng, the village in the outskirts of Hanoi where Minh Le Studio is based, has been the de facto ceramics capital of Vietnam since the Lý dynasty. Later, during the 15th and 16th centuries, Bát Tràng pottery was a favorite selection by the Vietnamese emperors to be part of the tribute sent to China's imperial dynasty. Still today, tourists flock to fill suitcases with souvenirs.

A fifth-generation ceramicist from a family lineage dating back to the very first ceramic artisans to arrive in Bát Tràng 23 generations ago, Minh Le's journey to bong-making was one of exploration and return. "I've been



"Contained in each design is the great effort of many artisans, and hundreds of years of culture and tradition."





“I’ve been a bellman, hotel receptionist, waiter, security guard, programmer, salesman, carpenter, mechanic ... I found joy, but I also found that being from a family with a great ceramic-making tradition is what makes me most proud.”



- Terracotta ripples spiral overhead in the Bát Tràng Pottery Museum, which opened in 2021; its impressive architecture is inspired by the motion of potters’ wheels and the brick domes of traditional kilns.

- “I wish I could marry you—I will buy Bát Tràng bricks to build our house,” is a popular Vietnamese folk refrain underlining the enduring quality of the local pottery.





a bellman, hotel receptionist, waiter, security guard, programmer, salesman, carpenter, mechanic ... I found joy, but I also found that being from a family with a great ceramic-making tradition is what makes me most proud.” While previous generations made towering vessels, tea sets, and dinnerware from the white clay harvested from surrounding provinces, Minh’s bong were not too much of a departure. “Smoking tobacco is deeply embedded in Vietnamese culture. We even have folktales, proverbs, and idioms about it. You can find a bamboo pipe every 10 meters in Hanoi,” says Minh.

Working closely with family members and artisans throughout the village, Minh likes that the bong preserve traditional craft in an extroverted, modern way. One particularly big-hearted design, called “Blessings,” bears 100 versions of the Fú character, which calls in good fortune and luck. A single piece takes several months to complete because the artisan, an elder

from the village who had previously retired, is the only person who can read and write all of these characters spanning various regions and periods throughout history.

A more minimalist design with a moonstone-like glaze belies its complexity. The style, known as Hòa Biển in Vietnamese, was beloved during the Song dynasty for its unique crystallization patterns made possible by an equal embrace of searing heat, pressure, and volatility. Yet another design, this one delicately adorned with trailing blue vines, evokes history and trade routes, its style likely originating from the Yuan dynasty and Arab ceramicists of the 14th century.

An object can, in this way, also be a portal. The special ones, the personal ones, the ones with stories to tell—they might transport us, bridge time and space. We all know smoking weed can be a transcendent experience. A Minh Le bong just takes us to even higher planes. 🌿