Tradition can be terribly sticky. A person who starts out as a traditional commercial artisan usually stays on this path for his or her entire life. Once a craftsperson has embarked on this solid path, it is rare that he or she will display whatever it takes to break out of this confining amalgam – consisting, in the best case, of a mixture of solid craftsmanship and backward-looking naive design – into the wider spaces of artistic freedom. There are admittedly exceptions to this rule among the ceramists. The Swiss ceramist Arnold Annen is such an exception – and a stunning exception at that.

Annen, who had to manufacture functional ceramics at the beginning of his career, has since...
gained the reputation of being one of the world’s most innovative (and most extreme) ‘porcelain artists’ – employing a unique technique and producing works with unique shapes and dimensions. Following the call to ceramics to many parts of the globe, Annen has quasi reproduced in his work the cultural development of ceramics from a traditional craft to an art form in barely two decades. As his approach, at once eclectic and ontogenetic, evolved in a breathtaking manner, he greedily absorbed every ceramic idea to which he was exposed and refined it to inimitable perfection.

At the time of his birth in 1952 as the son of a hill farmer in the village of Gsteig in the Bernese Oberland region of Switzerland, no one would have predicted that Annen would one day conquer the wide world of contemporary ceramic art. A teacher with an enthusiasm for art introduced the young Annen to the protean material. A creative tinkerer even back then, he built his first potter’s wheel from an old hot plate and an automobile axle, throwing vessels from local clays. Despite his chronically precarious health, a potter’s apprenticeship soon became inevitable. Starting in 1970 he served as an apprentice at the Saanen Pottery. Parallel to this the young adept studied at the School of Arts and Crafts in Berne where he learnt the techniques of slip trailing with a tube, an old way to decorate traditional earthenware pottery. Many years later, he would freely adapt this decoration technique to his own artistic purposes. After completing a three-year apprenticeship, Annen travelled to Geneva to work for a year as a journeyman under Jean-Claude de Crousaz, the famous Swiss master of ceramic painting. Following an inner urge in 1974, he left the Swiss Confederation and travelled to La Borne, one of the ceramics centers of France, a mecca of woodfired ceramics. The Swiss ceramist was fascinated by the techniques of woodfiring, when flames and fly ash leave indelible marks and traces on the pieces inside the kiln.

Europe could not hold Annen much longer: he was drawn to Japan with its century-old tradition of woodfired kilns. In 1977 the restless ceramist travelled to Bizen, one of the ‘Six Ancient Kilns’. Working as an apprentice in the Sakakibara Workshop, he became acquainted with the traditional principles of Japanese pottery-making at first hand. His teachers were stern task masters, insisting on constant repetition followed by returning the practice pieces to the clay pit. During the days and nights lasting firing of the long tunnel kilns, he also experienced the humility of the potter in the face of a kiln which, once stoked, fires stoneware vessels to 1300°C in a process beyond the reach of the human will.

Three years later he travelled from one end of Europe to the other visiting friendly potters and, upon returning to Switzerland, he built a Japanese woodfired kiln, an anagama, on the premises of a fellow ceramics artist – finally he took over a workshop in the Swiss village of Beatenberg. Supporting himself with the production of domestic ware, Annen toiled obsessively to master the classical glazes of Ancient China: celadon glaze, iron glazes.
such as tenmoku and oil spot, and copper reduction glazes. Always a searcher and not one to stay in any place for long, however, Annen made his way to Amsterdam in 1984 by the chance to work in the studio of Barbara Nanning, an accomplished porcelain artist. Here at last Annen found ‘his’ material, a medium that spoke to him like no other, namely porcelain. In Amsterdam he first worked with coloured porcelain clay bodies, throwing thin-walled vessels by inventing the ‘new neriage’ (technique to create intricate patterns) a virtuous and exciting refinement of traditional Japanese techniques. It was not long, however, before Annen discovered his own material, his life’s work theme: pure white Limoges porcelain, usually unglazed and the thinner the more translucent.

After two more years in Hamburg Annen came back to Switzerland in 1989 sharing a common workshop with his partner Violette Fassbaender in Basel since then. This new continuity of place has obviously been propitious for Annen’s unique creativity: the pieces that have emerged from this studio and workshop are nothing less than revolutionary in their treatment of porcelain. Again and again the radical ‘extreme ceramist’ stressed his material with techniques that push the ‘white gold’ nearly up to its molecular limits.

The creative process starts with large, finely thrown and extremely thin-walled bowls. As if this exquisite craftsmanship and formal perfection were not breathtaking enough, however, the porcelain magician applies various techniques to make their wafer-thin walls even thinner: he scrapes the walls of the bowls with a knife to a fraction of a millimeter until only lucid membranes remain. Annen then goes one step further: to these diaphanous bowls, he applies porcelain slip strokes with a slip trailer or even a brush – like colourless calligraphy – and then partially wipes them off. When light is shone through it, the relief ‘letters’ appear like magical writing, creating panoramic landscapes of light.

It was a technical mishap, initially only annoying, that led to the next generation of material miracles. When drying one of his unfired bowls with a gas burner, Annen watched it suddenly spring a hole: the explosive evaporation of the water in the material caused a fine shard to split off like thin ice. It did not take long for Annen to recognise the aesthetic quality of this defect. Soon he was casting oversized freely floating parabolic forms, ultra-thin-walled and footless and deliberately provoking defects of this kind. The resulting ‘floating bowls’, freely swinging, are frequently exhibited as light installations. With their surface of milky ice chips, the result of repeated controlled damage to their eggshell-like walls, they have an aesthetic effect that is best described as transcendent. After viewing these magical bowls, it is tempting to reach the entirely paradoxical conclusion that Annen’s real material is not porcelain but the ‘unreal’ immateriality of light. His most recent works, illuminated sharp-tipped conical forms or oversized bowls with reliefs – works so sublime that the fact of handcrafting is no longer relevant – confirm this impression.
Parallel to this somewhat derealised porcelain, Annen has created a universe of objects that are eerily organic. This porcelain species consists of huge spiky sculptures, assembled from thrown parts of porcelain body to which cork or charcoal has been added; they are inspired by radiolarians (plankton), microscopic living creatures with mineral skeletons. When fired, the objects display a porous-bony-mineral structure; they are the quintessence of a non-living organic form that can be used to emerge something organic and thus point both to the past (as relics) and to the future (as origins).

Annen has received countless awards and honours for his porcelain magic. Most recently he was cited at the SOFA Chicago for the 'Best Artwork 2013'. His work can be found in numerous galleries and museums around the world. Since 1994 he has been a member of the International Academy of Ceramics in Geneva. Despite this worldwide acclaim, he has remained down to earth. This is actually not all that surprising: Arnold Annen would never have reached the pinnacle of his profession if he had not had a great respect for tradition. Tradition, however, is a sticky medium. The less able get stuck in it; the more able know how to use it for their own ends. And it does not hurt if you are a bit of an extremist as well.

Walter Lokau, PhD is a German art historian specialised in 20th century ceramics. For 10 years he worked as a curator at the Keramikmuseum in Staufen in the southwest of Germany, later as a research assistant at the GRASSI Museum of Applied Art in Leipzig. Now he lives as a freelance writer in Bremen. The exhibition is 22 June - 27 July 2014, Extreme Porcelain, Arnold Annen, Galerie Marianne Heller, Heidelberg, Germany (www.galerie-heller.de).