



## Behind the façade

# TONI CUMELLA

Caterina Roma

Once upon a time, in 1880, Josep Regàs, the step-grandfather of our artist today, founded a pottery that flourishes nowadays producing contemporary ceramics applied to innovative architecture. Regàs was born in a traditional ceramic village in Catalonia (Spain), and worked all his life throwing earthenware cooking vessels and dinnerware. His son, Antoni Cumella (1913-1985), inherited the family business, the love of ceramics and a restless creativity. It was back in the beginning of the 20th century, and he joined the new European

movements in the arts, with the influence of Japanese ceramics and the British studio pottery. Cumella became one of the leading potters in Spain, using stoneware to throw magnificent vases and reaching perfection with his glazes.

And that's how we finally get to our topic, with this grandson and son of potters, again baptized Antoni Cumella (1951), who in turn inherited not only the family business and the restless creativity, but the grand name of his renowned father, a shadow that could have been too heavy to carry or too easy to use, but none of



Aichi Spanish Pavilion



Aichi - colour samples

the two happened: he was to be a new talent in the ceramic field.

The young Toni (short for "Antoni") Cumella did initially take another path and studied industrial engineering, then devoted his passion to photography, capturing urban landscapes with his camera. However, he always kept one foot in the family pottery, which by then had already timidly started to produce some architectural pieces to keep the business running. When Cumella the father passed away in 1985, his son found himself in charge of the ceramic factory, a standing and a great deal of creativity.

Pretty soon, that creativity started to flourish, and today he comfortably navigates in a no-man's land, where studio potters don't venture and industry doesn't bother to waste its huge infrastructure. He's an artist whose tools fall in a fine line between art, craft, technology and industry.

Toni Cumella works together with architects to find the best ceramic solutions for one-of-a-kind creative buildings, and then produces the required short or medium series. He talks passionately of the projects he's working on, and firmly believes in the future of ceramics to make the urban environment a more human-scale place to live in. His innovative proposals are a constant dialogue between craft and technology, a resource that he uses as a means, without prejudice, avoiding the awkward theology of craftwork.

Ceramics for architecture doesn't necessary mean stacking thousands of bricks or laying kilometres of pavement, but the fact a piece is mass-produced does make one reflect about the boundaries of artistic ceramics. Where does craft finish and

Aichi Spanish Pavilion, detail





opposite pages -  
Villa Nurbs tiles

left and below  
Santa Caterina Market and detail

ware, using their own glazes and moulds. That was probably the best of schools, where he faced highly technical challenges.

It all started by the hand of the architectural studio PER, which helped him to believe in his project of turning the workshop's direction towards the development of ceramics applied to architecture. And nowadays, after all those years working in restoration of unique buildings, Cumella is entranced with the practical research of taking ceramics to its limits and using it to literally build works of art.

When Enric Miralles & Benedetta Tagliabue commissioned him for the roof tiles of Barcelona's Santa Caterina market, the family workshop made a step towards the execution of large-size projects and an international projection. From then on, it hasn't stopped. It would be difficult to select only a few projects to define Cumella's stoneware creations because each collaboration means beating a different challenge – one of the biggest was making the roof tiles of Villa Nurbs (Girona, Spain), a revolutionary building by the architect Enric Ruiz Geli. The pieces, inspired by the reptile scales, were extruded, modelled on a digital mould, and finally hand painted by the artist Frederic Amat. A combination of processes that turned the tiles into unique ceramic pieces which some might not consider craft, but they are definitely not an industrial product either.

Close to nature were the mould pressed and hand glazed pieces made for El Bulli Foundation (Girona), that mimicked the black stone of the shore in front of the restaurant. The façade of the Spanish pavilion of the World Expo in Aichi (Japan), by the architect Alejandro Zaera Polo, or the ceramic latticework of the Libon Oceanarium, by Pedro Campos Costa, are also great

industry begin? What's the role of function in art? Cumella's ceramics, whatever their sizes, are unique as a whole, and the expression of an individual experience, ability and sensibility. In his words, the difference between these notions is a matter of conceptualization and discourse, of the intellectual risks one takes to accomplish creative projects.

Between 1989 and 1992, the factory gained a huge amount of experience working for the restoration of masterpieces of Catalan Art Nouveau architects like Gaudí or Domènech i Muntaner. Cumella could faithfully reproduce in stoneware artworks originally made in earthen-





examples of the validity of this historical material for the latest trend.

Sophisticated technology works together with handwork at Cumella's studio: extruding, pressing, casting and revolving are the most common techniques to shape clay, and the glazes are usually applied by dry string, comb and stencil, as well as screen or digital printing with self-adapted equipment. Their knowledge in making glazes is probably one of the factory's greatest treasures: its walls have never known a commercial glaze, and they have mixed up to 67 different glazes for the roof tiles of Santa Caterina market (Barcelona) or a dozen types of white for the Lisbon Oceanarium.

A good example of this playful interaction between technology and arts created at Cumella's is the use of a robot to texture the slabs for his next project: programmed with a contemporary classical music piece, it provides a random effect,

so each piece is different, as if handmade, but the texture begin and ends at the same place, so all tiles are interchangeable.

With craftwork as an attitude, technology as a means and art as the leading agent, the innovative work of Toni Cumella was recognized with the Spanish National Crafts Award in 2009.

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**Toni Cumella**

(Granollers, 1951), son of ceramist Antoni Cumella, studied industrial engineering at the University of Barcelona before entering the family business in 1970. After his father's death in 1985, Cumella redirected the workshop towards architectural projects, working together with the studio PER. From 1989 to 1992, Cumella worked on two major architectural projects: the restoration of Gaudí's Batlló House and Park Güell. After that, the studio began to develop ceramics in the context of contemporary architecture with projects like Enric Miralles and Benedetta Tagliabue's Park Diagonal Mar, Parc Dels Colors and the Santa Caterina Market in 2005, Jean Nouvel's Plaça Sardana, Alejandro Zaera-Polo's Spanish Pavilion at Expo 2005, the Law Courts in Terrassa and the Catalan Police Headquarters in El Vendrell with Josep Botey, and several installations with the artist Frederic Amat, like Enric Ruiz-Geli's Villa Nurbs in 2009. Nowadays, the studio is developing new projects with Renzo Piano, Kengo Kuma and Amanda Levete.

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