



“IT’S THE LONGING FOR THE INDIVIDUAL”

INTERVIEW WITH
GOLEM FOUNDER TOMAS GRZIMEK

Tomas Grzimek comes from a family of artists. In 1991 he founded the ceramic manufactory GOLEM. Today, he supplies architects and designers worldwide with his handmade Art Nouveau tiles.

Mr Grzimek, you have worked with ceramics all your life. What is special about this material?

Ceramics consist of the simplest substances, clay and sand. In the fire, extremely different and durable things come into being, such as an earthen pot or high-tech ceramics for space travel. I was more drawn to pottery, which gave me the opportunity to be creative and experiment without wanting to make “art” straight away. I preferred to mould a teapot and fire it in a wood fire at 1350 degrees. When designing a vessel, its function was always decisive for me. Even our tiles are not purely ornamental. They are meant to protect or enhance the wall.

You yourself grew up with art. Your father Waldemar Grzimek was a sculptor, your mother, Christa Cremer, a painter, graphic artist and sculptor. Can you remember when you first came into contact with ceramics?

My father’s later partner, Aga Honigberger, was a ceramist and after my parents’ early separation she lived on his family property where she had set up a workshop. Every weekend when I went from Berlin to my father’s in the countryside, I was also with her. It was through her that I got to know the craft.

After school, you were an apprentice with Hedwig Bollhagen and learned from scratch. Afterwards you studied sculpture with a focus on ceramics at the Weißensee School of Art. What was the next step?

After my training I had a workshop with Doret Grzimek in the Oderbruch (a countryside region close to the Polish border). There I made pottery for everyday use – vases, tea bowls, jugs and the like. Along the way I was able to experiment a lot and carry out various firing tests. During this time, I also built my first own free-fire kiln – according to a very simple principle. I stacked bricks on top of each other without grouting them and heated the kiln with wood. Later, other kilns followed in which I could produce salt glazes – that was something very special at the time.

Was it easy to sell pottery in the GDR?

Very easy indeed, because we lived in an economy of scarcity, and there was a lack of almost everything. Things were literally snatched out of our hands. Often people just needed presents. Before Christmas, we regularly held a factory sale, where the buyers queued up.

In 1991 you founded GOLEM GbR with Ulrich Schumann. How did that come about?

At the time, there was a real brick enthusiast at the employment office who wanted to do something for the ceramists in the region in the field of restoration. So, they were looking for someone who could lead a corresponding job creation program. Schumann, who came to ceramics as a career changer and whom I knew only casually at the time, told me about it and I found the idea interesting

right away. I had already done something similar at Hedwig Bollhagen – making spare parts for monuments – and knew roughly how to do it. So, we contacted the authorities and promptly won over the people in charge. They actually had something else in mind: a short-term measure for a few hundred employees. But my conviction was that such a project only made sense if you started with a small group that you could train and then take over to build up a business in the long term.

You have chosen an unusual company name. What is the idea behind it?

After my partner and I had experimented with Schumann and Grzimek in all possible variations for a while without any results, the Golem came to mind. According to legend, Rabbi Löw created this strange creature out of clay in 16th century Prague with the help of fire and magic to protect the Jewish community. It possessed special powers, was of enormous size, threatening in its form, but also had a positive connotation. We were concerned with the image of creating something living out of clay. And our golem was also supposed to be a little scary – after all, we wanted to intimidate our competitors. (laughs)

Why did you change your concept?

We started with ten people and two kilns in an empty former cattle shed of the LPG, a collective farm that was common in the GDR. By the way, we still produce there today. In the beginning, we produced almost exclusively bricks in historical formats and shaped bricks. demanding things like terracotta. But in the course of time, more and more extensive orders were added.

In 2001, GOLEM – Kunst und Baukeramik GmbH was founded, and a year later it started mass producing wall and stoneware floor tiles. Why did you change your concept?

The idea was actually born out of necessity. I was always aware that it was a handicap for GOLEM not to sell an own product range. At that time, we could not have afforded to turn down an order, for example because it didn’t suit the company’s production methods or capacities. We were always working on call. So, I had to find something that we could produce continuously, that we knew how to do, and with which we could make better use of our firing and production capacities. That’s when I came up with the idea of reproducing original wall and floor tiles from the Wilhelmine and Art Nouveau periods, with their particular, historical value.

Be it the airport in Tokyo, Harrods in London, a hotel in Kuala Lumpur, the Schönbrunn underground station in Vienna, Trippen in New York – by now you supply architects and designers worldwide.

Slowly, but steadily, our business started to progress. We showed the first pieces at the trade fair. There was

interest, but we didn't sell a single tile. Nevertheless, I didn't let myself get discouraged. I was convinced that my idea would work. So, I exhibited a few motifs on a trial basis in a shop in the Hackesche Höfe in Berlin, which actually were sold and asked for. When the shop became vacant, we took over the premises, for the first time set up something like a sales department, and subsequently the orders increased from year to year. In the beginning, I had misjudged it myself. I thought the ornamental tiles would be used to create individual design highlights. But it soon turned out that we also needed the matching single-colour tiles, and the mouldings. So over time, we developed more and more new products. Once you realise that there is a response, it is of course all the more fun.

Bettina Raab spoke with Tomas Grzimek.

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You still produce for restoration needs, but the majority is now for re-design. What is the reason that people are turning to traditional, handmade things again?

Even as a student, it was clear to me that at some point it would go back towards craftsmanship. When robots increasingly take over production and everything can be made by machine, people have to do something else. And there are more and more people who don't have much to do with industry and therefore go into the craft sector. In addition, to the same extent that crafts are being revived, they are also being valued more. Basic needs are perfectly served by industry nowadays, but at the same time there is a longing for individual things. In the long run, this will increase. In the past, every tool was a small work of art. Why shouldn't something like that be possible again? Many years ago, I bought a Japanese hand-forged knife for 100 marks, which was an insane amount of money at the time. Today it's my favourite tool in the kitchen. And it gets more and more beautiful with time, gets a patina. Industry simply can't do that.

How did your collection come about?

I don't follow anyone else's lead, I do it the way I think is good. Of course, that is always a subjective decision. But why should I think about what the customers might like? I include what I like in the collection. And if I like it, someone else will like it too. That is my conviction.

Do you have a favourite tile?

Yes, several actually. What I find particularly interesting are the designs by Henry van de Velde, monochrome relief tiles that exploit the property of the semi-transparent glaze. There are some very beautiful solutions there. And I take my hat off to the designers of ornaments. Designing an ornament is at least as difficult as making a good logo.



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