

# WEST AFRICAN POTTERY

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POTTERY plays a conspicuous part in the daily life of West Africa. One sees it even in the cities; out in the country, it is almost ubiquitous. But if he goes into a country market to buy specimens, the visitor will have to search for them. Going past the stalls of food and drink, beyond the array of imported goods, past the work of blacksmiths, weavers, and basket makers, behind the stalls of the sellers of firewood and charcoal, he will perhaps find the pottery near the market's extreme margin, where the vultures are doing their useful and necessary work.

Pottery making is probably the lowest in the hierarchy of native handicrafts. The raw materials cost little, the tools and equipment almost nothing. Fuel is needed only in small quantities, and is of a kind which would not otherwise be used at all—grass, brushwood or palm sticks. The products, indispensable for daily life but breakable and difficult to transport, are correspondingly cheap. For the same reasons perhaps, it is very largely a woman's trade. Rattray was informed in Ashanti that "it was not worth the while of the men to make them".

Why, therefore, does it make so strong an appeal, even to people who are not generally interested in native handicrafts? It is perhaps partly a tribute to the technical skill needed to achieve such perfect symmetry, on such a large scale, without the help of a wheel. The chief interest, however, is simply the beauty of the pots themselves, especially when seen in their natural environment and in the context of actual use. All pottery, even the simplest, is a humble form of art. Industrialization has made art expensive, civilization has made it conscious—or so we are in the habit of saying: what exactly we mean by it is another question. The peasant potters of West Africa, like all other artists, are unconsciously affirming something about their own character and, more significantly, something about the nature of the world—that beauty is not an illusion of the senses, but an aspect of reality. Whether the art is conscious or instinctive, cheap or expensive, as permanent as obsidian or as fugitive as a movement of dance or music, makes no difference to its ultimate meaning, which is its beauty. The traditional

pottery of West Africa is as worthy of attention, and as significant for the future, as folk music or as any other popular art form anywhere else in the world.

### Technique

The methods of making are at least as old as the Bronze Age, and were used everywhere in the world (except in Australasia) at some stage of history or prehistory. In some places (e.g. parts of North Africa) they still survive side by side with later techniques. The essentials, which persist through all minor variations, are that the pots are not thrown on the wheel but hand built by coiling, beating, or modelling. Secondly, they have no true ceramic glaze, the shiny surfaces seen on many modern West African pots being obtained by other means. Thirdly, they are fired, not in kilns but in open "clamps", or within a circular mud wall so rudimentary that it can hardly be called a kiln. A description by René Caillié shows that the technique has not changed since the beginning of the nineteenth century, and in fact can hardly have changed much since pre-historic times. Shards and pots associated with the Nok Terracottas of Central Nigeria prove that the same methods were used about 2,000 years ago. This "Archaic" pottery shows variations of style from one world region to another and from one district to another, but it has no consistent history of technical evolution and progress.

The word for pottery making in some West African languages is "building", and it does in fact grade imperceptibly into building in the ordinary sense. The logical boundary between the two is perfectly clear; a 'pot' only becomes a ceramic product if it is fired. But in finished appearance, the large granaries made in the Savannah Belt are in fact huge unfired pots. The finest examples are to be seen in the corn-growing country north of Sokoto, where they are made to a height of over fifteen feet, with corresponding girth, and are finished, just like a pot, by polishing with white micaceous clay. These gigantic specimens of "potters' architecture" were described by Clapperton in the early nineteenth century, and are still being made in the same way today.

At the other end of the scale, the potters easily and naturally cross the dividing line between potting and free modelling in the round. This style, as might be expected, is especially favoured for ritual pottery; examples are the jars made in the Ivory

Coast, of which the entire upper half becomes a portrait head and shoulders; or the peculiar and sometimes grotesque funerary urns of the Dakarkari tribe of Northern Nigeria.

There are many variations in the style of decoration, but only the barest mention of one or two of them is possible here. Tiny roulettes, made of wood or string, are impressed into the clay by rolling in the palm of the hand. Besides producing very charming patterns, they consolidate the surface, strengthen the pot and assist evaporation by increasing the surface area. Cooking pots, in which porosity is a disadvantage, are given a handsome black lustre by embedding them, red hot, in a heap of damp leaves, so that the pores are filled with carbon. Another method is to baste the pots as they are taken hot from the fire, with a decoction of locust bean pods.

### Firing

The firing is astonishingly simple, but as in all ceramic production it is the key to most of its useful properties. The method is to make a circle of stone or lumps of earth, lay a few small sticks across it, and to stack the dry pots, mouth downwards, on top of each other to a height of four, six, or more feet. They are then covered with dry grass or palm leaves. Over this the rest of the fuel—branches or more grass—is laid. The actual firing is usually completed in about two, and never more than four, hours. The inner layer of grass leaves a coating of soft white siliceous ash, which acts as a protective blanket to the ware. But for this "blanket", and the open texture of the clay itself, it would be impossible to fire these large pots so rapidly without serious losses.

The temperature reached in these primitive clamps is variable, but it is always very low, just enough to complete the dehydration of the clay, (i.e. at or around 600°C.). This rapid low-temperature firing is done not from ignorance of how to achieve higher temperatures, not simply from motives of economy or lack of fuel, but because in this temperature range the ware develops its optimum tolerance to thermal shock. It can be used for cooking on an open fire without cracking; and, in this respect, is superior to anything short of cordierite (flameproof) porcelain. This is because no glass phase has been developed in the body, which is an open porous structure held together by incipient *sintering*. In use, the thermal stresses are probably accommodated by some adjustment of the pore structure.

### The Future of Traditional Pottery

On the future prospects of the native pottery industry, two questions naturally arise: is it amenable to technical improvement? and is it in any danger of gradual extinction?

As to the first, the potters themselves are for the most part resistant to technical innovation, at least in those areas where it is a woman's trade, (i.e. roughly all the country south of about latitude 11°). In this their instinct is probably sound. For making the large sizes which are characteristic of most native ware, the potter's wheel would have no particular advantage over the methods which are already employed with such consummate mastery. A clay of finer texture would also have to be used, and this would make it much more difficult to fire in the traditional way. Firing at higher temperatures gives better mechanical strength, but it would destroy one of the most valuable properties of the ware—resistance to the severe shocks encountered in cooking over an open wood fire. Any tampering with the traditional methods, even where its effect was not directly harmful, would raise the cost of the ware without any proportionate increase in its market value.

There are, however, a few cases where improvements can profitably be introduced, e.g. in areas where there is a demand for water coolers and horticultural ware. These articles are made better and more quickly on the potter's wheel, and can be fired in proper kilns without losing their porosity. This type of ware has established itself successfully in Ghana.

In some places, the native potters make careful but rather pathetic imitations of imported porcelain shapes. This is a "technical blind alley", unless the material can be glazed and properly fired. Their efforts seem to cry out for systematic training in more advanced techniques, but since the products would have to compete with those of mechanized mass production, development on these lines can only succeed where the ware itself has some special artistic or other merit.

Is the traditional pottery in any danger of dying out? It is sometimes suggested that film records of the processes should be made, "before it is too late". In the present writer's opinion, such fears are groundless. There are no statistics, and one can only judge by general impressions; but these indicate no visible falling-off in either demand or supply, not even in quality. Its imported competitors—buckets, kerosine tins, enamel saucepans—have made some inroads in the larger towns, but so



A beautiful gold head forming part of the treasure of King Kofi Kalkalli, who was defeated in the First Ashanti War in 1874 by Sir Garnet Wolseley's expedition. It is a hollow cast, made of unalloyed soft gold, weighing 3 lb. 6 oz.

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“The Executioner,” a goldweight from Ashanti, Ghana.

*With acknowledgments to the British Museum.*



Red and black vessel from South Eastern Nigeria, unglazed, 20th Century.

*With acknowledgments to the British Museum.*



Stylized portrait of a deceased, pottery; from Akim Swedru, Ghana.

far they have had surprisingly little effect. Some types may become obsolete, but for cooking and similar uses it is not likely to be superseded. Anyone who fears that urbanization will mean the end of native pottery should visit the market in Accra, a city which is growing and changing as rapidly as any in Africa. The pottery stalls, displaying jars, bowls and casseroles made in a village less than ten miles from the town centre, are as busy today as they were fifteen years ago. The reasons which led to the virtual disappearance of this kind of pottery in Europe do not apply nearly so much in the Tropics. The most likely evolution would seem to be towards a state of equilibrium between primitive pottery and glazed domestic ware, both kinds flourishing side by side.

There remains one other question. Is there a tendency for the artistic quality of the native ware to deteriorate as civilization advances? This is a danger which threatens popular arts and peasant industries everywhere in the world. It is not so much a question of whether they will survive, but rather of whether the quality of what survives will be worth having? Only in the remoter districts do the women still make pots not for sale but for their own use, not for their effect on the purchaser but for their effect on the maker—"the lineaments of satisfied desire".

Elsewhere there is a tendency towards standardization and for the potters to be concentrated in certain centres; but this is not necessarily to be deplored.

So long as the demand for their products remains strong, there is not much cause for pessimism. Pots are made and decorated not to be kept and looked at, but to be used and perhaps soon broken. This keeps the style healthy. "As so often is found in Africa, importance lies in the act of creation and not in appreciation of, or preservation of, the finished object" (Ulli Beier, *Nigeria*, No. 51). If a people's primitive art traditions have vitality, civilization and progress do not kill them. New kinds of beauty come into existence. New motives appear, not copies of a foreign style but firmly based on the culture, that is to say the character, of the people. In some markets you may find pots or bowls decorated with incised designs derived from the lines of motor lorries or aeroplanes—lively translations into clay technique of things seen in the mind, not copied from pictures or photographs. This kind of thing is not to be dismissed as childish. It is just as childish, and as genuine, as any other original art.