

# The People Who Influenced Me Most

MARO KERASSIOTI (Greece)

This year I count 50 years, 54 together with my educational ones, where clay has been the extension of my hands and my thoughts.

Playing, teaching or working I have learned how to confront this material some times a friend, some times as an opponent, but always as a gift from Heaven, a companion who is always there, silently waiting for me to decide about the time of our encounter.

Many times in my life I have felt blessed for this gift since the smallest or the largest piece of work which comes out of my hands, the most important or the absolutely unimportant, hide in them both the art and the craft of clay, the skill of the maker, the time and the effort which the ceramist has spent for them, until he finds them good enough to be considered “finished”.(Although some times we really don’t know where to stop, and the word “finished is never said!)

Most of us spend our lives in the seclusion of our studios, and besides our everyday problems, we mainly think about clay and glazes, success and failure, kilns and moulds, pots and sculptures; We think of the ones we have made. and the ones we plan to make, which will certainly will be the best ever.

“Clay people” – as a rule– become silent and humble since they know that they are unable to always win the daily battle. They cannot confront earth, water and fire, the three elements of Nature which deal with ceramics.

I had my first encounter with clay at the neighborhood where I was born and grew up in the center of Athens. There lived a man who in his yard across the road produced clay pipes and their fixtures, round shaped angles and” T” shaped junctions, which he laid out in the sun to dry. I do not recall the presence of a kiln, may be he was firing them elsewhere.

He was a lonely and silent person who was preparing his own clay and molds and he was working from dawn to dusk, non stop.

I spent hours on end watching him prepare his clay: Bring in a truckful of soil, sift it, throw it in a rather long ditch, add water.

He spent the next day walking in the slur in order to stir it, emptied the water to let it become dense, and then cut the clay in rectangular large pieces to mature in the shade. Before starting his work he first wedged the clay with his feet, then with his hands on a law bench and finally he cut out the slabs he needed for the day, sometimes more than a hundred. He was the one who first gave me a lump of clay to play with, and helped me form an animal with my eight years old hands.

I consider him as my first teacher.



Later thanks to my father I encountered ancient Greek ceramic art— my Greek heritage—through the masterpieces at the National Archeological Museum. As a teenager I explored the ancient graveyard of Keramikos, and I learned the myth of Keramos, protector of the ancient Greek guild of potters who, gave his name to the international community of clay workers, the “Kerameis”.

Keramos being the son of the God Dionysus and the Queen of Crete Ariadne, a God himself never died, he is always alive through our art.

When I was eighteen I was admitted and entered the School of Fine Arts, Faculty of Sculpture which I abandoned one year later having realized that ceramics was my one and only passion; it was exactly what I wanted to exercise as a profession throughout my life.

At the same time I discovered Maroussi, a suburb of Athens which was known as “Ceramic City, a place gifted with excellent clay deposits and abundant running water. Many potters from the Greek islands and Asia Minor had settled there to build their workshops and wood kilns and make their living selling their goods to the Capital Athens. They were producing flower pots, tableware, pitchers and various decorative items.

It was there that I was introduced to the first artist potters who had established their studios in the area, and I had learned from them that clay is a monstrous monkey who can imitate anything, and one has to be very careful not to exceed the limits. The artist has to dig deep down inside himself, stick to his personal style and learn; learn as much as he can about his art in order to tame the monster.

Three of them, artists, had studied ceramics abroad, the fourth was a local potter who permitted amateurs to share his kiln and his heart. All four, were my first idols, all four for different reasons.

They all had different styles and different attitudes towards clay.

Panos Valsamakis, considered the father of Modern Greek ceramic art, was both a painter and a sculptor with excellent knowledge of clays and glazes, knowledge which he unfortunately never wanted to share. At his studio I could only look. Questions were not answered; from the very beginning he had set his rules. Yet, it seems that this little was enough for me, since it let my curiosity grow and I found out that there existed a Library where I could borrow books and learn from them.

Ira Triandafilides was a refugee from Russia, who had come to Maroussi, rooted and died there. She was an overwhelming personality known to the locals as “The madame”, or “the crazy one”. She was receiving all kinds of visitors and clients in her house, showing them around her beautiful gardens, her wood kiln and atelier and she kept no secrets. She would explain all her tricks, but her ways were so unusual and unique that nobody could understand and follow.

From her I learned that rules are made only to be ignored, and that your own way is the best to follow, save that it can lead you to the desired result.

Manos Danos was trained as a medical doctor, and he had given up medicine to devote himself to ceramics. He was the brother of my piano teacher who had introduced me to him, saying that he was the black ship of his family, a doctor who abandoned his science in order to commit himself to mud. After a while I also abandoned music and committed



myself to mud, and she wanted to kill herself for her idea to get me in touch with Manos. Yet many times I feel grateful to her and her idea, because between me and Manos flourished a deep friendship, and because ceramics had become since then the essence of my life.

Alecos Kardiakos was a traditional potter, who was lending his knowledge and his kilns to whom ever wanted to share any of the two. He had given me plates and colors to decorate, and had taught me how to fire a woodkiln.

He was enjoying his life in full, having a good time from morning to night, yet a hard worker with a sharp eye which could see even behind his back.

From him I learned that life is a gift, sharing is a gift, working is a gift, and also that you can be loose and at the time firm, as long as your work is properly done.

Since then I had the opportunity to have other teachers and influences, first from the ceramics school which I attended for four years in Athens, later on in Florence Italy from the school I attended there, of course from my Italian boss Nello Bini the sculptor in who's studio I worked for one year, and certainly from the artists I met at the various symposiums I attended in many countries for fifty long years and who boosted my knowledge.

Last but not least, my husband, the sculptor George Georgiadis, an everlasting friend, teacher and companion, an eager listener to my anxieties, to whom I owe the liberty to dare, no matter how difficult a task seems to be at the beginning, following his motto "One step at a time, nothing is created whole".

All these influences shaped my artistic personality, my art and my style which runs always around a certain axis which derives from my Greek origin.

Again and again I work around them, from a different angle every time repeating endlessly what has become my second nature: My love for Greek mythology, my love for animals and the sea, and finally, my interest in the protection of the environment.

Torsos, angels, Harpies and mythical monsters, Guaa, (animals of my personal mythology), trees and sea shells, polluted coasts and imaginary sea creatures, are swirling about in my mind, each one and all together creating my world, what it is for me the essence of ceramics for a true clay believer.