

CONTEMPORARY GREEK CERAMICS

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My story goes back to the time of the legends, when Keramos Atticos - Attiki being the land where Athens is situated now - son of God Dionysos and Ariadne, was nominated protector of the tile makers, the potters and the clay artists of the time. Whenever heavy clouds darkened the sky and raindrops started to fall, all of them begged him on their knees to protect their sensitive production which was drying under the sun.

And Keramos, always efficient, kept going everywhere, protecting and covering, until his name became synonymous with "keramos" - the tile - and later in time with the "shelter", with the "roof". Protector of the guild of "Kerameis" - ancestors of today's ceramists - he is the eternal and unique patron of all the clay workers in our country and in the whole world, where the Greek word "kerameiki" remains unchanged and the art flourishes. This primeval art, which has drawn a long line in the journey of man from the caves to our era, appears to us broad and many faced since it is not only an art in the strict sense of the profession, but craft and fine-art linked into one entity.

Ancient Greek Ceramics, give the best example of utilitarian works, most of which are works of art as well. Red-and-black ware with excellent decoration can be seen in many museums throughout the world and in other collections, forms which were produced and exported from the mainland, from the islands and from the Greek colonies in Italy and Asia minor.

During the years of The Roman Empire, tradition went on, and the ware of this era is similar to, though not the same as, the Greek. The decline of this art during the years of the Byzantine Empire was due to religious and other reasons. A different type of utilitarian ware appeared, glazed this time with restricted decoration, though not in the mainland of Greece.

With the fall of the Byzantine Empire and the subsequent Ottoman occupation ceramics art was influenced by and practiced according to the Ottoman methods and ways.

During this period, which lasted for four hundred years, the art was practiced in mainland Greece and in the islands by families of potters who usually passed on the knowledge from father to son. The entire family was involved in the work, and each member, according to his own skill, did what he could. The men produced the pottery and the women and children usually helped with the decoration and finishing. They made flower pots, cups, plates, pitchers, oven-proof earthenware, charcoal stoves, or special utensils for various uses, such as apiculture and cheese making. At the same time the manufacture of small, medium and large jars for oil, wine and various other goods continued. The location of the workshop was usually determined by the presence of appropriate soil for clay and wood for firing. The decoration, ranging from simple to elaborate, depended on the talent and the skill of the potter and was influenced by the area where he worked, by tradition and by the conqueror of the time: byzantine, islamic, majolica.

For an outsider wishing to follow this profession there was no other way but to train with a master. But "masters" reserved the art for their sons, and their secrets were tightly kept. They used outsiders for heavy jobs, far from anything that could let them become efficient craftsmen. So in order to succeed they had to have the patience and the stubbornness of a mule, a keen eye and a sharp mind in order to master this craft.

Despite this, individuals emerged, who went far beyond the average, becoming renowned and beginning their own dynasties, many of which still exist today. To mention a few, we find the Hadziyiannises and the Kourdzises in Lesvos, the Atsonios, the Delavinias and the Sklavenas in

Maroussi, the Rodios in Skopelos, the Anetopoulos in Volos. This last one, together with Dimitris Sarris, Efstathios Dilaveris, and others who had their workshops in Attica, specialized in the manufacture of antefixes, relief decorative elements and terracotta sculptures from red clay. They were less expensive than marble and just as decorative.

In the twenties two events opened a path for the evolution of contemporary ceramics. In 1922 the wave of refugees, which brought clay artists from Asia Minor to all regions of Greece, was the first. Dimitrios Magdalinos is a characteristic example of a refugee potter whose creation was original and charming. Despite the fact that only 25 decorated terracottas have survived, they are enough to place him among the best.

The second is the establishment of factories according to European models. The Greek factories, followed the example of the European ones in which tradition and evolution was not interrupted by foreign occupation. These new establishments used artists who were given technical and financial support and in this way they could produce high quality products which had artistic value as well. The factory of KERAMEIKOS, founded in 1908, had to close down in 1912 because of World War I and resumed work in 1920 under a German director. It was the largest and best known of the time and hired artists from Asia Minor, Russia and Europe. The factories of AKEL in Lavrio and KIOUTAHIA in Faliro also based their production on the skills of the artists they hired.

The best known of the folk artists, Minas Avramidis, born in Kioutahia of Asia Minor came as a refugee to Athens in 1922, worked for a while in the factory of Faliro and, after many years of wandering, settled down in Thessaloniki. His pieces have personality and, are valuable for collectors, but because of their low cost at least during his lifetime, never managed to pull him out of poverty. After his death, his children took over the family tradition.

Panos Valsamakis, the first educated, well-known and popular artist in the field of ceramics in our country, was born in Kydonies of Asia Minor at the beginning of the 20th century. In 1922, although his family came to Athens, he went to study painting and ceramics in Marseille, at the Fine Arts Academy. In 1930 he returned to Greece and became director of the creative department of KERAMEIKOS, which shut down during the German occupation. In 1943 he became director of the second AKEL factory, the Lavrion Ceramics Corporation. In 1958, he left in order to start his own workshop in the potters' village of Maroussi. His career reached a peak, and he is rightly considered the father of contemporary Greek ceramics. His wall pieces, reliefs and ceramic sculptures decorated middle class buildings and brought about a series of Valsamakis-like imitations.

At that time Maroussi was the center of ceramics. Manos Danos, having abandoned his career in medicine, was experimenting with raw materials, colors and glazes and tried to dominate the field of ceramics. But Ira Triandafillidi was already there: cosmopolitan, born in Vatum, Russia from Greek parents, she found in Maroussi a home and in clay her true inclination. Talented, temperamental and unique, she made deformed vase shapes and, strange animals, painted with glazes and colors that drip and fired in wood kilns which she built herself. She managed to become trendy. Chiefs of state and kings came to visit her workshop. She cultivated the myth around her personality, and traditional potters called her "the Russian", or "Madam", or "the crazy woman".

At the traditional workshop of Kardiakos, amateurs or future professionals including myself fired their first works. At this time, the figure of Georgis Sklavenas, renowned master and trade union leader, appeared more influential. The visit of David Leach to his workshop established his authority.

A group of artists, Eleftheria Drossaki, Gianna Persaki, Kostas Panopoulos, Mary Hadzinikoli, Georgis Georgiou, Panos Tsolakos, who had studied painting and sculpture in Greece, abroad or both, decided to devote themselves to ceramics and many others follow. We thus saw ceramics or

artistic ceramics a new term for the times discerning itself from pottery. This naturally brought about dislike and rivalry between the two groups.

One of the above mentioned artists, Gianna Persaki, founded a four year study school at the Y.W.C.A., and Georgis Georgiou undertook a post graduate ceramics department at the School of Fine Arts.

I was among the first students at the Y.W.C.A., together with my very dear friend, the late Giannis Ioannou, who later excelled as a journalist, a speleologist, and a researcher of Greek ceramics.

It was a good beginning, but it was not enough. The lack of an organized higher education system was obvious. The National Organization for Handicrafts established a program for development in ceramics and offered scholarships to young individuals who were involved in the branch.

Many of us took advantage and studied in schools abroad, especially in Italy. Upon our return, we could work in the Organization, in a program for the development of Greek ceramics, especially that of Maroussi.

In 1963 Maria Voyazoglou and Eleni Vernardaki, who had just returned from Denmark and England respectively, and had workshops in Athens, imported high temperature kilns and began to use stoneware clay. They became well-known, and so did schools abroad which opened their doors to Greek students. So, many young people's dreams and ambitions could be fulfilled. Returning home, they built workshops and entered the production process. They made production lines to earn their living and artistic pieces to express themselves. In both, the influence of teachers and the prevailing trends from the countries they had studied in, were obvious. So we had Greek works which were not Greek at all. They were however, of good quality, which contributed to their commercial success. Yet, through years of hard work, the influence of the teachers subsided and disappeared, and the personal style of each one became apparent in the work.

Our generation started teaching in municipal, state and private schools or even in workshops. Possible deficiencies in equipment were compensated for by eagerness for knowledge, information and, in many cases, talent.

As teachers we teach and learn from our mistakes, from the mistakes and the achievements of our students. They carry fresh ideas. They dare. They learn and experience that ceramics is a way of life. It needs guts and constant efforts which can result in success or in failure. Yet it is not the end of the world but just the beginning of a new project. The simultaneous engagement of hands and mind with clay and fire, the designing, forming, painting and firing till the final result, will surely drive crazy any novice magician as he struggles and suffers. But in the end through endurance and patience he finds his own way, his own self. And these will accompany him for life. The pieces carry traces of this philosophy. They are empowered by the character, the strength and the personality of their maker. Finally independent, artists follow the trends of art, always trying to overcome technical difficulties in order to express their vision. Knowledge makes the hands more agile, bringing out better and better pieces. In their work Greece is present, its myths, its tradition, its nature. Simplified shapes with references to Cycladic or Archaic sculptures, complicated ones which remind of grandmother's embroidery, mythical creatures, animals, and the sea world. Colours stimulate imagination, which then gives birth to an endless cycle of more colours. Forests, trees, birds and flowers are portrayed realistically or in the abstract, conveying also the fear of their destruction, which deeply concerns many of us in a real or philosophical way.....the city as it would appear only in our dreams.....and then the Human Being: static figure, in motion, cut to pieces, deformed.....microscopic, huge, humorous, naked or clothed.

Still, abstract shapes, meanings, visions and dreams expressed in clay start to exist and become works of art. In these, texture and gesture take another dimension. Holes, protrusions and lines, marks and projections, or some perfectly smoothed surfaces become a goal in themselves, to the point that, for some artists, the shape plays a secondary role and perfection or voluntary

imperfection the leading one.

Closing this article I wish to confess that very often I experience ceramics as a labyrinth. Inside complex corridors I look for Ariadne's magic string which will lead me after a full day to a calm sleep with ceramic dreams. I call upon her help. Besides, how can we forget that Ariadne was the mother of Keramos.....

