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The art of ceramics, apart from being a medium of cultural expression, has always served humans for utilitarian purposes, pots for the collection, cooking and storing goods.

As it happens with all traditional arts, and especially in the old times when transportations were not easy, people made use of available materials existing in their region. This had a direct impact on the course of development of that specific art as well as the genre and form of works being produced.

In Greece, as it happens with all countries located around the Mediterranean, the existing clay is earthenware. Usually it is rich in iron having a typical red colour. Greek ceramists, working with this kind of clay, produced works of art having that distinctive colour. For financial reasons most of those ceramics were very plainly decorated. Using a white slip, artists drew lines or plain patterns on them. In several cases depending on their use, artists either left them unglazed or covered them using a transparent glaze. Thus, among the Greek traditional ceramics we can see a great number of red ceramic objects with a simple white decoration (picture 1). They come in a huge variety of forms and shapes and at the time they were made to correspond all their needs. There were tableware, big storing pots, pitchers, jugs, basins, decorative objects and architectural elements. In some cases the white decoration was made with lime-washing (asbestos) out of need: in that case ceramics were left bisque fired. Such vessels can be seen in the island of Mytilene as well as in other parts of Greece.

Apart from red clay there exist clays lighter in colour, sometimes almost white, for example the yellowish clay of Aegina. We have faience ceramics made of white clay which are mostly produced for tableware.

In Crete and Koroni (Peloponnese), potters used to produce their own clays mixing different soils and other raw materials. This was done in order to enable them to produce bigger objects, for which the available clay was not appropriate. Thus, big earthenware jars appear in our traditional ceramics, the colours of which range from red to very light buff.

Other properties of clay, except the colour, influenced the kind of form and the size of the produced ceramic objects.

As Greek clay is very fine grained and exceptionally plastic, it is ideal for throwing on the wheel. That is why since the antiquity and even nowadays the art of pottery blooms and reaches high levels of technique and aesthetic perfection.



picture 1

As a result, we have a great variety of shapes and forms of traditional objects many of which require high artistry. Today, many artists use the wheel as a main tool to create their works of art.

On the other hand, there has been a great number of artists who have abandoned the traditional strict symmetric forms, and although they start their pieces thrown on the wheel, they transform them in such a way that new, contemporary and free forms appear.

The glazing of traditional ceramics was mainly done using a lead glaze. Lead and its by-products, were abundant in Greece and a very well-known one was the Lavrion lead. The materials available for the decoration of ceramics and the colouring of glazes were mainly: manganese, iron, and copper. Due to the above, we see in Greek ceramics more earthen colours like off-white, brown, rust and green. In other cases we have white glazes with the use of tin.

Considering again clay, I would like to mention that a great part of Greek soil is appropriate for making terra sigillata. Since antiquity those fine grain slips constituted the basic forms for the decoration of objects. There was a great development of this technique by which one could paint or cover a ceramic piece using this technique. In addition, through hard work and observation a great knowledge was acquired about the way objects should be fired in order to achieve a specifically desired aesthetic result.

The terra sigillata decorative technique reached its peak during the classical period of the 5th century B.C., with the creation of black-figure and red-figure vessels (picture 2).

Those vessels, due to their supreme aesthetic quality, were identified with the Ancient Greek ideal and concept for "beauty", and as a result they became widely recognised and appreciated. Even nowadays, several workshops create and sell such copies.

Decoration of ceramics with terra sigillata, due to the suitability of the Greek soil, as I previously mentioned, is a technique applied by many contemporary Greek ceramicists. It is combined with smoke firing techniques such as saggar, pitt, raku and others. There have been many artists working and experimenting on these techniques. I will just mention a few names like Ch. Bahariou, Th. Horafa (picture 3: installation), G. Kypris, M. Marinoglou, K. Panaretos (picture 4:vase), R. Papadopoulos, G. Pontikis (picture 5:wall installation), N. Sklavenitis, etc.

Until the mid-20th century the firing of ceramics in Greece was done in wood kilns, which rented some especially aesthetic characteristics on ceramics. Due to the fact that in our country wood is expensive and scarce, when the electric kilns were



picture 2



picture 3



picture 4



picture 5

introduced in the market, more and more ceramists abandoned their wood kilns.

At present, there are very few artists in our country who continue to use wood kilns for production and the ones who use them live in the country. The above was the result of the high cost of the timber and the labour required for the firings.

One more reason, which played a major role in the ceramics development in Greece, is that the available earthenware clay cannot be easily used for hand building and sculptural forms. The sculptures produced in the past were made with the use of moulds. Taking into consideration the above facts and also that the art of ceramics in Greece has remained until recently closely connected with the production of functional objects, we understand that this was one of the main reasons why ceramics had not been accepted as an art, equal to the so-called Fine Arts, such as painting and sculpture. Artists had a difficulty to consider clay as a means to express themselves artistically. It's only during the last thirty or forty years that galleries have decided to exhibit ceramics and collectors interested in this art spend respectable amounts of money in order to acquire them.

The breakthrough happened during the 70s-80s. For the development of this specific art the fact that for the first time Greeks had the opportunity to study ceramics abroad and return to their country with new knowledge and wide horizons played a great role. At the same time, stoneware clay and other materials started to be imported from abroad.

During that period we identify a high peak of artistic ceramics and as a result, a great number of artists who create sculptural forms. Such as S. Bakatsi, E. Drossaki, B. Gounela, M. Kerasioti, M. Vlandi, M. Voyatzoglou, and others.

We have to mention that even in those cases the available local materials are not abandoned. Low-temperature clay serves for many artists as the raw material for making high temperature glazes and dry slips for the decoration of their pieces.

As far as I am concerned, in my work, I have only used low temperature clays for a very short while. From the very beginning I was highly impressed by the strength of a well fired stoneware item along with the use of high temperature glazes. I use Greek soils as a raw material for some glazes which I produce myself. I do so especially when I desire to use a rich red-black glaze giving an effect of depth. Sometimes I use a low temperature clay to make some kind of patina and give a final touch on my sculptures. I use low temperature Greek clay only when I work on the wheel.

Considering the above mentioned factors I cannot claim that my country's clays and raw materials have played a main role in the development of my work.

Apart from the narrow and strict point of view about the use, or not use of the local materials the landscape and the clays found in an artist's environment may influence him on a different level connected more with inspiration and design. As the above mentioned factors may have an impact on the psychosynthesis of people, their artistic expression can be equally influenced. It is obvious that the artistic style of people living in different environments will obviously differ. An artist's work, who lives in a Northern country and whose eyes catch only landscapes covered with snow, will be different from that artist's work who spends his/her life in tropical forests, by the sea or in countries where big mountains exist. Sometimes, in an obvious or a concealing way we all, more or less, carry within us the pictures we have experienced. Accordingly, I believe that Greek ceramics 'carry' the warm colours of the Greek landscapes, having the vividness and the variety of scenery that our country offers.

Those characteristics can not always be interpreted through our senses and do not have a logic explanation. A work of art can make one recall hidden visions and sentiments and make him exclaim 'Oh! I think this artist must have Mediterranean origin.'