



# Ceramics Space

Ceramic Worlds



Néprajzi Múzeum  
Museum of Ethnography

[neprajz.hu](http://neprajz.hu)



## What is the Ceramics Space?

The Ceramics Space of the Museum of Ethnography is a two-part gallery that can be visited free of charge, even outside exhibition opening hours. It is not a storage area, nor is it an exhibition furnished with detailed explanations. Think of the two parts of the gallery as the two hemispheres of the human brain. The left hemisphere is in charge of logical thought, rational perception, and language use, while the right side is responsible for visuality, creativity, and imagination. The Ceramics Space takes this duality as the model for museum collecting and conceptualisation. In the area corresponding to the left hemisphere, ceramics of the world are grouped logically, according to geographical area, ceramics centre, and shape, while the right hemisphere area offers an intuitive response to the myriad worlds of ceramics and explores their interconnections.

## Why ceramics?

Because ceramics are everywhere: they have existed for millennia with ever-changing forms and functions. They are made and used by women and men, poor and rich alike. Although largely supplanted in modern households, they are still to be found in the form of roof tiles, urns, cups, ashtrays, and even swallows' nests. Because each piece of pottery is a microcosm: creator and user, function, style, material, pattern, colour, sound, volume, and inscription all have their secrets to tell about the power of clay to connect peoples, epochs, societies, and customs. Because ceramics represent one of the most common materials in the museum's collection: we have over 35,000 ceramic objects from five continents. While only a tenth of these can be put on display, this is hopefully sufficient to give visitors an impression of the collection, a sense of the museum's passion for collecting, an awareness of its scientific mission, and a glimpse into the infinity of ideas embodied in the museum's artefacts.

# Pottery

*"In the beginning God created / human beings  
from the dust / This aroused the potter's envy  
/ Out of dust He made / but one man / Potters  
meanwhile turn out milk jugs / by the thousand  
until they die"*

(writing on a ceramic bottle)

Pottery is one of the most ancient crafts. Thousands of years ago, the agricultural revolution resulted in a need for containers in which surplus grain could be safely stored. These were the first pots and grain bins, and making them took special craftsmanship, a knowledge of ceramic raw materials, and technical skill.

Since the extraction and processing of clay was tiring and dirty work and the tools required were simple, even primitive, potters occupied a lowly rank among the master craftsmen in the increasingly urban middle-class dominated Europe. It was perhaps in an effort to counter this prejudice that potters first began to compare themselves to God, who, after all, had created human beings out of the mud. It may also explain why in Hungary, as elsewhere in Europe, the "patron saints" of potters included Adam and Eve. The first human couple is often depicted on pots used by the potters' guilds, along with the most important tools of the craft.





# Technology

The raw material used by master potters comprises very fine particles of silicate minerals smaller than 0.02 millimetres in diameter. When mixed with water, the clay can be moulded into shape, and once fired, it will last indefinitely. Pottery making has undergone continuous changes and technical innovations since pre-Neolithic times. The first pots were hand built, fired in open fires and decorated with earth colours. Later, pots were thrown on hand-operated wheels, fired in different types of kilns, and finished with a variety of glazes that rendered the earthenware vessels watertight.

The invention of the foot-driven wheel was a truly revolutionary innovation in Europe. Wheels of this kind were already used by the Romans and resulted in better-quality pots and a wider variety of shapes, while at the same time boosting output. The production of stoneware, earthenware and porcelain required different technologies, different raw materials, and increasingly high firing temperatures. The shapes of the pots were adapted to the needs of the people who used them, while the various methods of decoration reflect differences in taste according to period and region. Although it has never been the Museum of Ethnography's aim to provide a comprehensive overview of ceramic-making techniques, its diverse collection nevertheless features examples of every method of production and decoration.



# Sounds

The simplest ceramic instruments are the chimes, rattles and bells that belong to the idiophone family, which create sound through the vibration of the instrument itself. Rattles, which produce a sound when shaken, were typically made from plants, although many ceramic versions have survived. These have been used since the very earliest times to provide rhythmical accompaniment or during rituals.

The vast majority of the museum's aerophone instruments, which produce sound by making the air vibrate, are wind instruments. The museum's extraordinarily rich collection features whistles (including whistles made from water-filled clay pots), ocarinas, pipes, and horns. Pottery whistles dating back thousands of years have even been uncovered during archaeological excavations. These are hollow inside, the air reaching the opening of the windway via a mouthpiece. Although they typically feature one or two holes that can be used to change pitch, they are unsuitable for playing tunes. The ocarina is a relatively new type of instrument and features eight, nine, or even ten finger holes.

The museum's collection features a variety of drums belonging to the membranophone class of instruments, in which sound is produced by different types of membrane. The collection includes ceramic pot drums, long drums, chalice drums, kettle drums, and conical drums. The membrane that produces the sound is stuck directly to the ceramic body of the drum or attached using strips of leather. This family of instruments also includes the putipù, or friction drum, which consists of a sound box closed by a stretched membrane, with a cane attached in the centre. The instrument is played by rubbing the cane with wet fingers. The produced sound can be altered not only by the style of playing but also by the thickness of the walls and the size and shape of the ceramic sound box.





## Colours

What gives a ceramic object its colour? There may well be as many different customs and preferences as there are continents and nationalities, yet the starting point for all of them is the basic colour of the fired clay, known as terracotta, and the natural-coloured clay slurries or engobes.

With technological developments and demand for both practicality and decoration, functional and ornamental ceramics alike became more colourful. At the same time, in the last thousand years the colours of ceramics throughout the world have been determined by the metal oxides used to produce them. The most commonly used colours are green, blue, red, black, and yellow. Shades of green range from the jade green celadon glaze used

in Asia, through Turkish green and cobalt green to the so-called pottery green made from lead oxide commonly used in Europe.

The colour blue was achieved using cobalt oxide, while the names of its various shades, including Chinese blue, Damascus blue, Mohammedan blue, Delft blue, and Haban blue, clearly illustrate the direction of its spread. The iron oxide content of the clay determines the shades and depth of the colour red in the terracotta, which include Roman red, iron red, and bolus red. Black is obtained by reduction firing without oxygen, while yellow is produced by the addition of iron oxide. But all these colours merely serve as a background for a multitude of shades, decorative elements, and patterns.

# Flavours

Some of the ceramic pots used for cooking and baking are basically imitations, being cheaper, more rustic versions of the more expensive metal utensils used in elite households. But anyone who has cooked a tagine in a clay cooking pot or sampled traditional Bundt cake at a village wedding will know that the use of ceramics has a dramatic impact on both the cooking technique and, ultimately, the flavour of the food. Along with containers for pickling and fermenting, these pots, casseroles, and other items of cookware have played, and continue to play, an important role in the domestic preparation of foods and drinks that have acquired an iconic status in the respective culture, from stuffed cabbage to couscous and fermented corn beer.

Since an interest in everyday culture and daily human life lies at the very heart of ethnography, it should come as no surprise that every one of the museum's collections features kitchen utensils. Ethnographers working in the Carpathian Basin have systematically collected the regionally distinctive pots used for processing dairy foods, pickling cabbage and beetroot, cooking grains, grinding poppy seeds, and draining pasta, while ceramic items associated with the cuisines of non-European cultures have been collected more haphazardly. Gastronomy-related objects in the museum's collections, representing the myriad worlds of ceramics, include a dish for crushing chillies, an egg coddler, a teapot and a cheese strainer.







# Storage

*"The beauty of a pot lies in its emptiness, which the user must explore."*

(ceramicist Júlia Néma, 2010)

In determining the function of a ceramic object, the user becomes co-creator with the potter. In the case of ceramics, this function is typically storage — originally the storage of harvested or gathered grains and surplus foodstuffs. Unsurprisingly, ceramic culture is least developed in those parts of the world where a lack of suitable plant species meant that grain was never cultivated in sufficient quantities to necessitate the production of fired clay pots for storing harvested produce or cooking it for food.

Ceramic objects are fragile yet durable. Besides being resistant to (gentle) heating, acids and alkalis, and fluids they are easy to clean, making them ideal for the long-term or temporary storage of many different substances. Although ceramic pots are used universally for storing water, they have also been adapted in a huge variety of ways for storing milk and alcohol, from Japan to South America and the Alföld (Great Hungarian Plain). Where glaze is applied to the interior of the pots, the liquid is kept sterile, while in the absence of glazing, continuous evaporation helps to keep the water cool. Ceramics have also been produced for the household storage of various solids. Over the centuries, collaboration between potters and users has given rise to pots of different shapes, sizes and constructions for storing flour, salt, tobacco, saffron, sewing kits and human ashes.

# Doubled

Different tableware is kept for everyday use and festivities — eating Monday lunch and Christmas dinner from the same plates would be unthinkable! Even today we have duplicates of certain household objects: at least two sets are needed, one for daily use and one for celebrations. Generally speaking, this has been true of household ceramics from at least the middle of the 19th century.

Every potter would make a wide variety of plain or simply decorated pots that were quick and cheap to produce, as well as more expensive, lavishly embellished pieces that required far more work. Highly decorative items that were made to order, featuring names, dates, and inscriptions, demanded intensive and meticulous work and were thus time-consuming to produce.



This becomes clear when looking at the pots produced in one particular location — the town of Mezőcsát in northern Hungary — which, while identical in shape, were made for different occasions. There is a simple version of each type of pot, made for everyday use, as well as a richly, or at least more richly, decorated version intended for representative purposes. Interestingly, it is almost exclusively examples of the latter that can be found in the museum's collections, while there are few, if any, of the "everyday pots" that were produced in far greater numbers in most ceramics centres. Being in constant use, the cheaper pots were soon damaged or broken. Their worn glaze and chipped rims made them less appealing to collectors, who were far more interested in the lavishly decorated Miska jugs that were reserved for festive occasions. These jugs have become the symbol of Hungarian folk ceramics, and there is no such thing as an "everyday" version.



from 10 to 12 different locations. Salt-glazed pottery bottles for mineral or medicinal water came from furthest afield, originating from the town of Nassau in western Germany. This type of pottery was impossible to produce in Hungary, where the necessary raw material is unavailable. Other items used in the village were made in the faience factories of Nyitra, Pozsony, and Trencsén counties in the Kingdom of Hungary, or in the Altrohlau stoneware and porcelain works that now belong to Karlovy Vary in the Czech Republic. Almost the only local products found in Átány were earthenware pots from Apátfalva (or BÉlapátfalva). Cooking pots had to be obtained from Gömör, in the mountains of northern Hungary, and from Gács in Nógrád County (now Halič, Slovakia), since the clay from the Great Hungarian Plain was not fireproof. The nearby ceramics centres produced clay tankards, plates and bottles that were not fire resistant. When designing these wares, potters took into account the individual tastes of the villagers who made up their clientele.

## Local tastes

So did individual villages or micro-regions have shared tastes? Were members of a particular community keen to have pots of the same shape and design in their kitchens and the rooms they kept for best? For almost two decades, Edit Fél and Tamás Hofer carried out systematic research into the peasant lifestyle and material world of the village, providing an overview of the local society in the village of Átány in Hungary's Alföld (Great Hungarian Plain). One aspect of their internationally acclaimed work was the comprehensive collecting of everyday objects, as a result of which 800 ceramic and glass items were acquired by the museum from different owners and users in this one village alone. This substantial volume of material clearly illustrates how it was not only locally produced pots that were in use in what had been thought of as a self-sufficient peasant culture. The ceramics used in households in Átány came

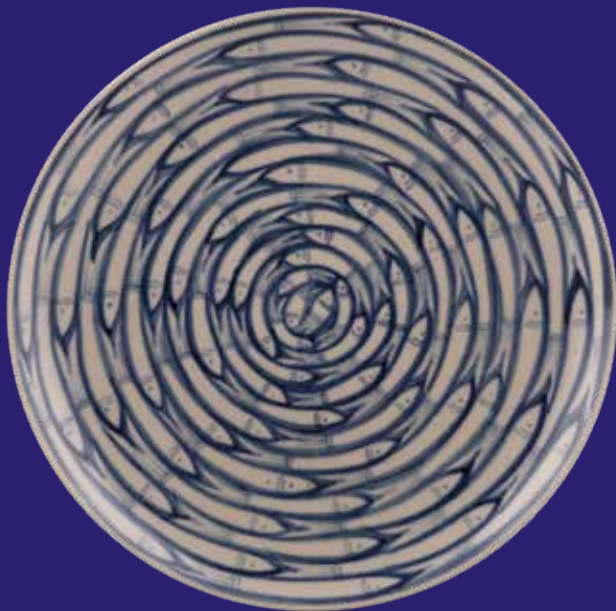


# Sets

Individual ceramic objects should be seen not just in their own right but as parts of a whole — whether a dinner service or a series. While manufacturers and collectors tend to talk in terms of series, words such as “set” and “service” are more everyday ways of referring to a collection of matching objects that are used together. In the world of ceramics, the most typical series are table settings for festive meals, sets of soup dishes, sake sets, tea and coffee sets, or pálinka sets.

Sets and services of this kind are very rare in traditional Hungarian peasant households. Everyday meals were typically eaten from a common pot, with everyone using their own spoon. The personalised tankards and flasks that were used on festive occasions were one-off pieces, while the plate settings required for a big wedding would be assembled from a number of different households.

It was only with the spread of coffee, cocoa, and tea drinking in the second half of the 20th century that potters began to produce cheap ceramic equivalents of the porcelain services used by the elite. In the villages, these would be displayed to visitors in the best parlour, while in urban households they would take pride of place in a glass-fronted china cabinet.





## Series

There are different types of ceramics series, depending on whether the objects were produced as a series to begin with, or whether the museum has placed together various examples of a particular type of item for its own purposes.

Series produced intentionally by master potters, earthenware works or porcelain factories were generally based on size. The same object, whether a pot or a plate, was produced in seven or eight different sizes, designated by different names according to price and volume. Producers might also create series in which the items were identical in shape but decorated in different ways. Certain patterns might be selected from a series of stove tiles, for example, depending on personal taste or the norms prevalent in the respective community.

Museum series are based on different considerations. Here, the series reflects the organisational principle behind the interpretation of the objects, taking into account the comparability of changes in time and place. This approach is illustrated in the museum's series of dated bottles, African braziers, and pipes.



# Inspirations

Some ceramic styles represent a connection between geographical regions or across centuries. This is true of the blue on white design, which was produced in China and exported from the end of 14th century. Chinese and Japanese porcelain was sought after not only in the Far East but all the way to North Africa along the Silk Road, eventually becoming fashionable in Europe, too. In the 16th and 17th centuries, its price rivalled that of gold, while Dutch ships could scarcely keep up with demand for delicate, fragile, skillfully painted blue porcelain.

Europe was consumed by a desire to discover the secret of porcelain making. In 1709, the recipe was successfully identified in Meissen, but until the appropriate manufacturing conditions could be established, porcelain was substituted by faience, which, while still white, was cheaper to produce. The Delft faience factories had been churning out pottery with Chinese-inspired shapes and designs since the 17th century. In the 18th century, blue faience was all the rage in Europe, from England to Italy, and from Portugal to Russia. Masterpieces were created in the 18th century in Hanau, Nuremberg, Frankfurt, Ansbach, and Savona.

Besides other colourfully painted products, blue and white pottery was produced by the Habans in historical Hungary for two centuries. This same decorative tradition was also followed in the 19th century earthenware works.

Where faience was too expensive to produce, blue-painted pots were made for the less well-off throughout Europe using the lead-glazing technique. In the 18th century, Saxon master potters in Transylvania were already imitating blue and white faience, a trend that was subsequently picked up by Hungarian potters in the 19th century.



# Transformations

What's that boot doing on the table?

While planning the exhibition space, even the curators themselves were surprised to discover how many of the ceramics in the collection are modelled either on objects originally made from other materials or on aspects of the natural world. But take a closer look at the pepper-shaped money box, the bottles shaped like a book or a boot, or the porcelain samovar, and the phenomenon appears less surprising. This interchange between material worlds is due to both the plasticity of the clay and the adaptability inherent in the pottery-making process. Some objects reveal a certain degree of imagination on the part of potter and customer that has encouraged them to go beyond the constraints of daily routine and conjure up a new type of object inspired by the world around them. Other objects, such as cooking pots, milk jugs or butter churns that are reminiscent of enamelled iron cookware are evidence of the potters' efforts to offer their customers competitive goods even in the face of changing patterns of consumption.



# Replicas

One key question when it comes to the functioning and credibility of museums is authenticity. Museologists will carry out the most costly investigations to confirm — or indeed challenge — the origins of a particular object. In the case of ceramics, for example, the firing date can be established using scientific methods.

So does this mean that an object is worthless unless it's 100 percent original? Doesn't the nature of the authentic objects on which similarly costly authorised reproductions were modelled by highly skilled artisans reveal a great deal, precisely because of the interest they attracted and the social demand for them? And isn't there a lot we can learn from the kind of objects that were mass produced — for example Chinese vases intended for export, where original and copy were produced simultaneously?

But copies of ceramics are created not simply for the sake of museum collections or tourists. Potters in every corner of the world create regionally distinctive miniature versions of everyday items. These were, and partly still are, intended as children' toys, although in the meantime they have acquired a new role. They have become charming souvenirs, nostalgically evoking the homeland or the folk culture of a specific rural region.





# Everywhere!

While ceramics tend to be associated primarily with kitchenware, objects made from clay can be found in just about every area of life.

In some cultures, fired clay has been a standard construction material in residential and other buildings for millennia. Durable, watertight and resistant to wear, the material's good insulating properties and potential for decoration mean that countless clay elements have been incorporated into buildings, from roofs to cellars and even plumbing systems.

Tiled stoves provided heat insulation inside the home, together with smaller, sometimes decorative items such as candlesticks, night lights, lamps, braziers and smokers for heating and lighting. A huge variety of ceramic interior fittings and items for personal use have also been produced, including planters and vases, spoon holders, comb racks, curtain finials, shelves, mirror and photograph frames, holy water stoops and ink pots, as well as money boxes, pipes, and models.

In relation to animal husbandry, it was mainly watering and feeding troughs that were made from ceramics, along with the smokers used by beekeepers. Besides the ubiquitous flower pots, pottery items used in the garden included germination trays and seedling covers as well as watering cans of various shapes and sizes, while wine makers used ceramic airlocks and droppers.



# Taboo?

*"whoever steals this deserves a broken prick"*

(writing on a bottle)

The messages conveyed by ceramic objects are always constrained within the communication boundaries of the given culture, although of course they might occasionally come close to the mark. The museum's collections contain numerous objects, which, in the interests of child protection, are classified as appropriate for over-12s only, due to images or inscriptions that might be considered erotic, pornographic, or aggressive by modern European standards. In their original social context, however, they were entirely acceptable, conveying ritual, humorous, or representative messages as an accepted part of the given linguistic and object usage.



# Messages

*"The Assyrians and Sumerians recorded their words on fired clay tablets. The Hungarians discovered that pálinka bottles and flasks were ideal for the same purpose."*

(ethnographer and writer István Tömörkény, 1912)

Once clay has been dried or fired, any writing, images or motifs that have been etched, engraved or applied to its surface will be permanently preserved. This has long made clay one of the most widespread and popular means of conveying a huge variety of cultural messages, whether in words or images.

The texts typically refer to the person who made the pot or the person who commissioned it. They might also express a symbolic meaning, in keeping with the value system of the individual or of the community in which the item was used. These might take the form of signs (such as a crest), although they might equally be images made up of more intricate details, telling stories or conveying ideas as a sequence of pictures or a kind of comic strip.

The most striking example of this cultural practice in the museum's collection is the Mexican Tree of Life. This particular type of object is known from the 16th century and was used by European missionaries to explain the story of the creation and other biblical scenes to the Native Americans, who were unable to read and write.

Like any decorative object, ceramic ornaments often feature graphic elements that have been taken over from other cultures merely for decoration, with no thought for their original significance. Examples include the Chinese figures, Oriental tree of life, or stag motif that appear on the pottery produced by the Habans of Upper Hungary.





# Bazaar

Objects in a museum can be grouped in an infinite number of ways. Our bizarre bazaar showcases a selection of figures picked out from the museum's various collections. People, animals, gods, ancestors and imaginary beings take their place in the throng, simultaneously illustrating both the haphazardness and the universality of the Museum of Ethnography's collections.

They have created a world in which every visitor, whether from the Far East or Transdanubia, will encounter faces that are familiar and unfamiliar, friendly and frightening.



## View from below

Museum visitors rarely get a chance to see objects from the back or below, yet this perspective, especially in the case of ceramics, conveys important information about the person who made the object, the people who used it, the period in which it was produced, and its life within the museum.

The master's marks painted by the Haban potters — found mostly on tankards — have the greatest scientific value in this respect. Many other potters also used trademarks similar to those employed by the Habans (monograms or other engraved identification marks), but nowhere near as consistently as the earthenware works and porcelain factories that were established later.

Dishes that were decorated on the underside provide evidence of the decorative role of kitchenware. These dishes would have been hung up in the kitchen for storage, facing towards the wall. The base of an object is also important in terms of museum record keeping. This is where the inventory number is attached, and, in the case of an inventory error, it is where the corrected number appears, and eventually the new number following re-inventory. This practice is justified by the fact that, in an average exhibition, it is the least disturbing to visitors. It also illustrates how the life of an object is far from over once it has been acquired by the museum.



# Memories

While earlier events, experiences, encounters and relationships live on in memory, it is not always a straightforward task to preserve and recall the past. Souvenirs can be helpful in this respect, whether we make them ourselves, receive them as gifts, or buy them.

In the case of many of the museum's ceramics, we have no way of knowing what memories they once contained, as we have no access to personal experiences. However, things are different when it comes to community experiences. Inscriptions written on ceramic objects, sometimes in a personal tone, typically commemorate significant events.

While the commemorative intention may be signalled by no more than a date or a monogram, there are plenty of other ceramics in the collection that were mass produced with decorative elements and inscriptions that function expressly as the formal conveyors of remembrance. Examples include modern tourist souvenirs, items sold at pilgrimage sites, and ceramics that preserve collective memories by referring to important historical events or figures.



# Survivors

Just like any other type of object, ceramics, kitchen utensils and decorative pottery items are subject to changes in style and fashion. But apart from this, ceramics disappear far more quickly than objects made from wood or metal, being more easily cracked, broken, replaced.

Thrifty households developed all kinds of ways to protect ceramics from cracking and breaking and to prevent the glaze from becoming damaged. Broken pots were held together by a woven wire web, cracks were riveted together, and holes were filled with lead. And if a pot ultimately became unsuitable for use in the kitchen, it would end up in an outhouse or stable or up in the attic. Eventually it became pointless to replace broken ceramics, since metal pots and glass — or later plastic — dishes were both cheaper and more modern.



As a result, earthenware cooking pots disappeared entirely from peasant kitchens within a single decade after the First World War, followed relatively swiftly by pottery tankards and jugs. However, one type of object managed to hold out for many years, withstanding the modernisation of cooking techniques in exactly the same form and size, and fulfilling exactly the same function. These survivors — the milk pots used for milk keeping cool or heating, curdling and separating it — continued to be indispensable in peasant households right up until the late 1950s, when individual peasant farms were eliminated.



# Ritual objects

At first glance, pottery and ceramic objects tend to be associated with everyday activities such as cooking and storage. But look more closely and you'll see that these items are present in every phase of life that is linked with rituals and rites, from birth to death. Ceramics can be found among the most common grave accessories and even have a role in the preservation of human remains. Think no further than cremation urns or the pottery bells at the closures of funeral bundles.

Ceramic objects might depict religious figures or supernatural beings (statues of gods, nativity figurines), be used in rituals (e.g., incense burners, nose pipes, or instruments), or even play a role in the preparations for rites (as cylinder seals or seal stamps).

Statues that depict or evoke a particular ritual might also be included in the list, such as the statue of a figure chewing coca leaves or a shaman sitting on a stool.



## Vessel-bodies

Because of its plasticity, its shape retention properties and its connection with earth, pottery, or rather clay, is a symbolic material. In Judaism, Christianity and Islam alike, it is the material from which the Earth and human beings were created and shaped.

However, as receptacles with rounded shapes, ceramic pots were already regarded as metaphors for the human body, or for the biological body more generally, at a far earlier date. Evidence of this can be found in grain holders and urns in the form of the human body or face known from the Neolithic age. These pots held liquids or grains in the same way that the human body holds its own reproductive seed. Ultimately, human ashes are placed in ceramic urns, bringing to full circle the intimate relationship between human being and object.

This analogy is graphically illustrated by the fact that in many languages pots and their individual parts are named after parts of the human body: a pot has a belly, mouth, lip, neck, shoulder and foot, and there are even such things as "twin pots".





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