Ceramics Space

Ceramics of the World

Néprajzi Múzeum
Museum of Ethnography

neprajz.hu

What is the Ceramics Space?

The Ceramics Space 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.

Prestige products before the wheel: Pottery in pre-Columbian America

The fired clay objects produced in the agricultural civilisations of the American continent between 3000 BC and 1500 AD have many distinguishing features that set them apart from those of other continents. The tools and techniques used by these cultures were extremely simple. Rather than using wheels, potters shaped the clay by hand or in press moulds, and they lacked the kind of sophisticated firing kilns typical in the Old World.

Although rudimentary in terms of technique, these ancient American ceramics are of exceptional artistry. Alongside human and animal decorative motifs one can find a variety of closed-form pots in the shape of plants, animals, or human beings, colourfully painted or decorated with relief work.

These pots make up over a third of the Museum of Ethnography's American archaeological collection, the second largest group of objects after stone implements. Because they were widely used as grave goods and offerings, the objects were buried intact and have survived for centuries undamaged.

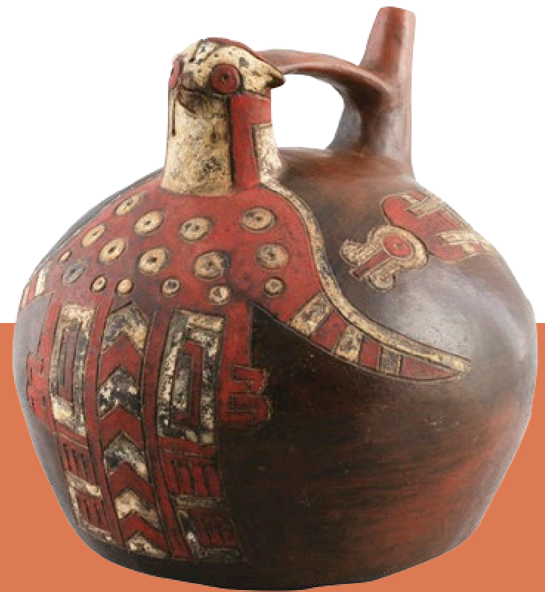
Pottery in post-Columbian America

The colonisation of America also left its mark on ceramic art. Trade links with the rest of the world and encounters among the traditional cultures of the Native Americans, European immigrants, and African slaves led to the spread and synthesis of new techniques, shapes, and decorative styles. Potter's wheels, closed firing kilns, and lead glazes came into general use.

Representations of pre-Columbian gods and rulers were supplanted by figures from Christianity and ordinary mortals.

Modernisation and urbanisation in the 20th century prompted demand for decorative household ceramics. Earlier traditions were preserved in the more isolated parts of the continent, while elsewhere traditions were revived by virtue of tourism and cultural movements among the Native American and African American peoples.

The ethnographic ceramics acquired by the museum's American Collection over the past 150 years belong to various periods, locations, and cultures, and as such bear colourful witness to this continuity and change. More than half of this collection originates from Mexico but it also includes valuable ceramics from the territories of Suriname, Venezuela, Columbia, Brazil and Paraguay.



The cradle of ceramics: The Far East

The earliest artefacts, dating back some 20,000 years, originate from the territory of China. In the course of millennia, ceramics spread gradually throughout the Far East. Generally speaking, technical developments in pottery making (glazing, porcelain production) can all be associated with Chinese ceramics centres.

Porcelain, which requires firing at high temperatures, was first made in China in around 600 AD. It is named after the hill Kao-ling, one of the sites where the main ingredient, kaolin, was first mined. Porcelain ware reached Western Asia via the Silk Road, spreading to Europe in the Middle Ages. When manufacturing took off in Korea and Japan from the 16th century, the porcelain trade became global, although porcelain making was confined to East Asia right up until the 18th century.

Blue and white porcelain appeared in China during the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368). Its production required a cobalt pigment that was obtained from Persia. This style of porcelain conquered the European market in the 17th and 18th centuries, being collected primarily by the nobility and wealthy merchants.

In the 19th century, ethnographers concentrated almost exclusively on collecting ceramics that were either in use or in private collections, and the vast majority of the museum's collection dates from this period. Ceramics were purchased mainly with an eye to their function: the most sought after items were pots, storage vessels, statuettes, figurines, ritual objects, vases, smoking accessories, cooking utensils, toys, model buildings, lamps, and effigies. Most of the museum's ceramic artefacts are pots.

African ceramics

Both basic pottery-making techniques are to be found in North Africa. Wheel-thrown pots that were kiln fired and glazed were typically made by men, while women generally produced hand-built, open-fired pots. The ceramics culture of sub-Saharan Africa belongs to this latter type, comprising mainly round-based vessels that were suitable for use in cooking on open fires and that could be stood on the ground and carried on the head.

Ceramic objects were used for various everyday tasks, including preparing and serving food and drinks, storage, trade, and construction, as well as being items for personal use.

Ritual and ceremonial objects typically included vessels, musical instruments, and figurative items. Some locally produced series or individual pieces were intended for a wider context and were designed to meet the needs of tourism and the art trade: examples include the late-19th-century Algerian Kabyle ceramics, which were produced by women and painted with geometric designs; and the red and black Egyptian decorative objects that date from the same period. The collection also features copies of artefacts from Antiquity and the Middle Ages, scaled-down versions of traditional forms, as well as new types of objects.

Besides their myriad shapes, African ceramics in particular employ many different decorative techniques, from impressing, incising, openwork, and sprigging to painting and even metalwork. Neolithic motifs are often reproduced on pottery from sub-Saharan Africa.

The 700 ceramic items in the African Collection eloquently reflect the characteristic features and rich forms of African ceramic art. The highlights of the collection are the late-19th-century North African artefacts, East African pieces from the early 20th century, and items made in West Africa and Egypt in the 1960s and 1970s. Objects acquired in the second half of the 1990s, and the latest acquisitions in 2020, originate from Tunisia and Morocco.

A culture without ceramics? The pottery of Oceania

Before the arrival of European explorers, fired clay objects were unknown on most of the islands that make up the millions of square kilometres of Oceania. This is borne out by the fact that subsistence on most of the islands was based on hunting, and in particular fishing. These activities did not require clay pots, nor were pottery utensils needed for preparing and storing the resulting foods.

Pots were produced on the larger islands where plantation farming was carried out, including New Guinea and the neighbouring archipelago (roughly as far as Vanuatu). These were typically produced by women using the most rudimentary technique, the so-called coiling method. The predominantly light grey colour of the pottery is owing to the low firing temperature.

Pottery played a very minor role in the material culture of Oceania, as also reflected in the Museum of Ethnography's Oceania Collection, less than half of one percent of which is made up of clay pots. Most of these were collected by Sámuel Fenichel and Lajos Bíró at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries in German New Guinea and the neighbouring islands, although the collection also features a small number of items collected by Géza Róheim.

European profusion

The museum's European Collection contains around 600 ceramics. Originating from different parts of the continent, they offer an extremely varied picture. The rather erratic geographical distribution can be attributed to the nature of the collecting. Targeted collecting was confined to central and north-eastern Europe, and primarily to the territories of the former Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, the neighbouring Balkans, and the regions inhabited by the Finno-Ugric peoples, which came to the fore as a result of 19th-century Hungarian kinship research. At the same time, the museum's collection contains only sporadic items from western Europe and Scandinavia.

Items originating from the Adriatic region stand out in terms of both quantity and significance. Beautiful Italian Majolica ware was famed throughout the world and copied far and wide. The collection also features items from important ceramics centres such as Delft in the Netherlands and the Germanic settlements of Gmunden, Hanau, and Langnau. The Bulgarian ceramics include a variety of forms and functions, exemplifying how acquisitions have generally been influenced by the research fields of individual museologists.

Global trends

The Hutterites, or Habans, who settled in Pozsony, Nyitra, and Trencsén counties in the Kingdom of Hungary in the 17th century, were skilled in the production of tin-glazed faience. While early Haban ceramics were still typically German and Italian in terms of shape, Oriental floral motifs in blue, green, antimony yellow, and manganese violet were gradually adopted. In the 18th century, new, locally inspired shapes emerged, along with a predilection for folk motifs: animal figures were a popular choice, especially deer, birds, and beetles. The decorative elements became increasingly dense, and genre scenes and religious topics were later applied.

In the 18th century, delicately painted ceramics from Austria featuring shod human figures or floral motifs, were sought after in the Carpathian Basin. Moravian faience, made using gold from Körmöcbánya (now Kremnica in Slovakia) and decorated with crimson roses, became fashionable at the end of the century, then, from the early 19th century, bowls and goblets decorated in blue gained popularity throughout Central Europe and were purchased in large quantities in Hungarian settlements along the Danube. Stoneware is one of the types of pottery discovered in the process of identifying the recipe for porcelain. It is harder and more durable than faience, while far cheaper and easier to produce. Many stoneware factories were established in the 19th century. The longest-operated factories in Hungary were in Telkibánya, Bélapátfalva, and Hollóháza. The decorative motifs applied on their products initially resembled those used on faience. Later, with the onset of mass production, techniques such as stencil painting were introduced alongside hand painting, while later the decal or transfer method spread throughout Europe. Austrian (Wilhelmsburg) and Czech (Altrohlau) stoneware plates and cups were highly sought after on the Hungarian market and for this reason were often painted with Hungarian-style designs.

Porcelain appeared in rural households only from around 1930, and the museum's collection contains very few types and examples. These include small ornamental statuettes or figurines.

Hungarian folk ceramics centres

In the Middle Ages, demand for pottery was met in the form of locally produced, wheel-thrown pots. The two great innovations of the 15th century were the foot-powered wheel and the use of coloured, glossy glazes. With their spread, techniques were established that scarcely changed until the first half of the 20th century. In addition, local pottery production was replaced by the newly established potters' guilds.

The first potters' guilds were founded in the early 16th century. The beginning of the 17th century saw the spread of colourful painting applied beneath a transparent glaze, along with rich floral motifs. Soon, not only new shapes appeared but also locally specific, ever-changing variations in shape, decorative techniques, ornamentation, and the use of colour and compositional traditions emerged. By the beginning of the 19th century, this had resulted in the creation of styles associated with individual regions, and later with individual towns.

Six main stylistic groups emerged, specific to Transdanubia, Upper Hungary, the Central Tisza region, Southern Alföld (Great Hungarian Plain), the Upper Tisza region, and Transylvania. Folk pottery flourished in the last third of the 19th century: in the census of 1900, potters were listed in 880 settlements. Besides the many large centres, there were locales home to very small groups of potters. The regional and local features of these centres of production gave rise to the great diversity of folk pottery in the Carpathian Basin.

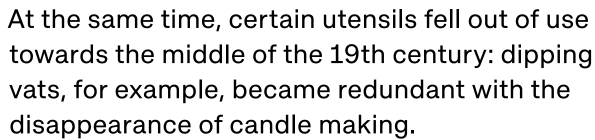
Research into Hungarian folk ceramics in the 20th century was aimed primarily at exploring these ceramics centres and collecting their products. The Ceramics Collection of the Museum of Ethnography contains 25,000 folk ceramic items.

Typology

Most pottery vessels in the Árpád era (1000–1301) were cooking pots and simple bottles. The first pitchers, jugs, and cups appeared in the 15th century. Glazed earthenware bowls and plates, typically coloured with green or yellow glazes, were produced in the 16th century.

The shapes and forms of folk pottery largely emerged in the 17th century and subsequently changed very little. At the same time, new foods required new cooking and baking techniques, giving rise to new types of utensils. Innovations in milk curdling in the 18th century led to the introduction of milk pots (milk churns or jars). The utensils produced in the 19th century for baking pastries and roasting meats were modelled on earlier metal designs. Changes in the way objects were used also had an impact on their appearance.

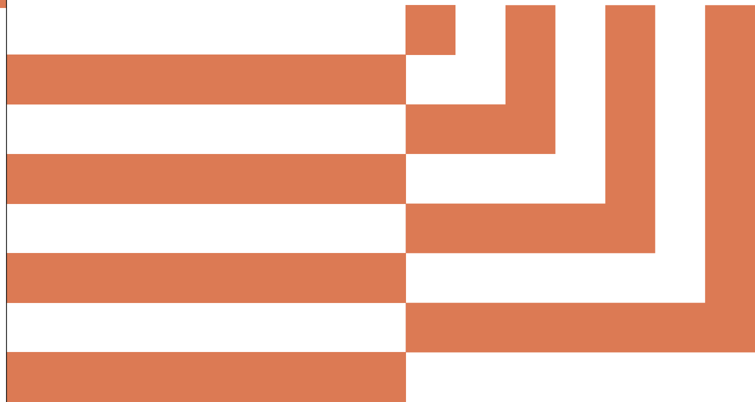
In rural areas, for example, people cooked on open fires until the beginning of the 20th century. Pots placed next to the fire or in the ashes were exposed to soot and smoke, making elaborate decoration pointless unless the items were intended as samples or showpieces.



At the same time, certain utensils fell out of use towards the middle of the 19th century: dipping vats, for example, became redundant with the disappearance of candle making.

The renowned ceramics researcher Mária Kresz recognised how the accurate categorisation of ceramics was hindered by regional differences in folk terms.

In 1965, she and her colleague, Mária Igaz, developed a unified terminology and typology. They compiled a typological table comprising 10 object types and 10 variants in terms of size and shape, resulting in a total of 100 named types of ceramics. This terminology is still in use today in the identification of ceramic objects in ethnographic collections.



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Monday: closed
Tuesday–Wednesday–Friday: 10 AM–6 PM
Thursday: 10 AM–10 PM
Saturday–Sunday: 10 PM–9 PM

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