

## CERAMICS. FROM ANOTHER POINT OF VIEW

To Ruth Duckworth

If we were to take a trip back in time and imagine life in almost any place in the world, and at any given moment of history, or even before history was conceived, we would inevitably discover the making of ceramics as an important activity of some members of the local community. For thousands of years there have always been the potters, the artists that need to make something out of clay, with clay. And through all these years, in spite of the amazing developments of technology, the making of ceramic objects has not changed essentially: it still is the confrontation of an individual with the clay he handles and with the fire that transforms it.

The making of ceramics, however, has been and will continue to be an activity with very differentiated characteristics throughout history. It is certainly impossible to recreate the precise circumstances in which different cultures developed their ceramic work, but it is important to consider that what for us is now a series of developments organised and classified according to certain characteristics or styles, were, at the time they happened necessarily the result of the work of individuals. Of course we know that ceramics has almost always been a group activity, but in any case there would have always been the innovators, individual creators opening or defining the path for the crowd of followers: just exactly as it happens in our day. From the remote past we know the ceramic facts, the many masterpieces made by someone without a name, someone belonging to a certain dynasty, a certain period, a certain culture. The names of these great masters are forever forgotten, but their works remain: that is what really matters.

The creative relationship established between an individual and clay is always necessarily a deeply personal one, because if the involvement is not deep the results cannot be creative. This does not mean that every ceramic artist in the past would necessarily have had the idea of being an artist, at least certainly not the idea of what by modern criteria could be considered being an artist. We must assume or try to imagine very different ideas in the creative ceramist in ancient times, even though I guess it is possible to assume as well that there have always been, in every place, similar ways of playing with the technical possibilities of handling clay, a similar pleasure with the eventual successful results and certainly a universal and quite frequent frustration with the endless ways to fail that every ceramist knows just too well.

It is also very easy to understand that the contemporary look at ceramic art seems to have little in common with the vision of just a few decades ago, not to mention what the Chinese of 1200 AC or the Maya of 1300 AC might have thought of the ceramic products of their own time. These questions however are once again beyond our contemporary capacity to grasp and therefore we tend to look upon the huge ceramic legacy of mankind as a whole, undoubtedly a rather differentiated whole but somehow as an organic development, a body of knowledge that has developed in many ways and in many different places in the world.

One of the characteristics of ceramics is permanence. Permanence because of the resistance of ceramic products which can stand for thousands of years, but permanence also as a human activity, since no culture has ever abandoned ceramics which as a technology and as an art form has always found a place in every society. It holds a particular and peculiar position, always evolving and adapting to the conditions of the time, even if societies have not always been quite aware of its significance. If we think of it, it is very interesting to notice how in spite of its perennial presence, ceramics has never or very seldom (with of course the notable case of Japan) attained, or even claimed a prominent place as a form of art. I believe that this somewhat marginal position in the context of the arts is not necessarily negative, since it in no way hinders the activity of whoever needs to work with clay and it could actually be considered a good thing for ceramics not to be in the permanent limelight which in fact can make art subject to the risk of an artificial manipulation of criticism and market. There is something more natural and real in the way ceramics has been generally appraised, accepted or neglected for its own intrinsic value.

We are together in Amsterdam in an attempt to reflect and try to improve our understanding of the ancient, rich, complex reality of ceramics in our time. This effort is being made by many in the whole world and I would like to contribute with the point of view of someone from a part of the world that in many ways does not belong to the contemporary ceramic community of the developed countries, what could be considered the international circuit of contemporary ceramics. There is something I must recognise from the beginning: my personal view cannot pretend to be objective since my relationship with ceramics is too involved and personal: it is the view of a practising ceramist and consequently it must be marked by the experiences of my almost 30 years of working, mostly in Mexico, my own country. At the same time this particular position has allowed me to experience the very sharp differences in the conditions of ceramists depending on where they work. In this our

supposedly globalised time there are also in ceramics drastically different circumstances between developed and underdeveloped societies.

For multiple reasons the present quite established interest and position of ceramics in the developed countries is radically different from the situation that we live in Latin America and most probably in the rest of the underdeveloped countries in the world. This is easy to see: first of all there is the general poverty of our societies. There are very few schools and art academies that care for ceramics in a serious way: the available technology is limited, museums and galleries have a very scarce presence of ceramic art, criticism is not specialised, collectionism hardly exists, neither do magazines, and a long etcetera that could make of this text a very sad story which it is not meant to be.

This is because marginality, with all its dark implications is not necessarily a definitive hindrance. Not at all. To attest this we need only to think of the many extraordinary contributions that this oppressed, poor, conflictive and many times neglected part of the world has made to universal culture. And I am not only thinking about the extraordinary ancient pre Colombian cultural heritage but also about our century with the contributions of writers like Octavio Paz, Jorge Luis Borges, Juan Rulfo, Pablo Neruda, Gabriel García Márquez, Julio Cortázar, the music of Silvestre Revueltas, Carlos Chávez, Heitor Villalobos, Alberto Ginastera, the painting of José Clemente Orozco, Diego Rivera, Rufino Tamayo, Wilfredo Lam, Roberto Matta, or the architecture of Luis Barragán, just to mention a few of the most important Latin American artists of international recognition in spite of all the limitations of their countries of origin. Their extraordinary achievements could seem difficult to explain considering the difficult circumstances of their countries, but besides their strictly personal motivation, always definitive, there are several other more general reasons that can help us to understand their success.

It is a very evident fact that the prevailing importance of European culture has made it essential for us always to look at it with great attention and respect as a fundamental reference that cannot be neglected. This has become a natural process of appropriation not only of the Spanish culture, but also the rest of the European as well as the Asian cultures. This appraisal, however is always made from a specific perspective, a distance, a feeling of what the poet Octavio Paz called "otherness"; not knowing exactly what we are, but with the absolute certainty of being different, the result of a mixture of the Indian and the European, a clash and an assimilation, nowadays as inextricable as it is evident.

Openness then, has been a fundamental necessity and characteristic of our way of being and consequently also of our art, a very clear experience of receiving and giving away giving back, somehow in a dialogue with the ever present, ever distant other. In such a way and through a complicated process of appropriation we have made very naturally ours not only the languages but also the extraordinary cultural and artistic heritage of the rest of the world, which has meant of course a great deal of cultural enrichment: this, through necessity and also a willingness to include everything. A capacity by the way not always characteristic of the cultures that for centuries have thought of themselves as the centre. In our marginality there is no place for chauvinism. When it shows it is just grotesque.

Another trait of underdeveloped societies is poverty and it certainly is not convenient at all. A serious appraisal of the complex factors that determine the injustice, the corruption, the lack of democratic governments that poor societies experience, as well as the relations between them and the centres of political and economic power of the world is beyond my capacity, but it is necessary to mention it, if the reality of our countries is to be understood at all. Surprisingly enough in the case of art this lack of opportunity is not definitive and it seems to mean only a radical necessity to devote one's energy to it completely, since being an artist in a poor country is often a matter of strict survival. An artist who fails has no social support to fall back on, and it is a fact for serious consideration how in general a certain degree of insecurity or necessity has throughout history been a characteristic of many of the most important creators everywhere.

Openness and necessity, making the best out of any given circumstance, such are distinctive traits of Latin American art. The situation of ceramics in our countries is of course part of this general situation of all art. The ceramic art of the Maya, the Olmec, the Zapotec as well as the Korean, the Chinese, the Islamic or the Greek is our common heritage. We all profit from knowing it and the aesthetics, the sensibility and the techniques this huge legacy transmits. In the same way I perceive the present day communication and exchange among ceramists everywhere. I recognise the natural way in which we learn from the work of so many others, and also the necessity of having the disposition of giving away everything that we may discover on our way. It is just through this clear will to give away that we can reach the mental or spiritual emptiness that opens the way for new developments: one of the essential secrets of creativity: not to conceal, not to treasure.

This is I believe the way ceramic art, as all art, grows, becoming in a paradoxical way through the most individual and isolated effort an accumulation of universal knowledge. There is no place for the exaltation of the

individual, we all are but one link -a unique one of course- in the unbroken chain of this enduring ceramic creative process.

There are still other aspects which make a remarkable difference between the rich and poor countries; very practical ones but very important too. Having met many European, American and Japanese ceramists and comparing our situations it becomes evident that the many advantages available to them have a cost, and many times a high financial cost. Making ceramics in our countries is always cheaper, drastically cheaper. We are able to afford working spaces and assistants, and this means certainly a great compensation for some of the previously mentioned limitations. And probably there is still something else, the fact that there is not such a thing as a receptive ceramic context in our countries does not mean that ceramic work cannot exist. It is certainly with difficulty that ceramists develop, but whenever they do, there is always a context, probably a more open one where ceramic art is integrated, namely the context of art in general. The colleagues of a ceramist in an underdeveloped country are frequently the writers, the painters, the musicians, etc., and this makes for a rich exchange; something that many times seems limited in the countries where ceramics has a more defined and accepted presence.

In any case it seems important to notice how creative work can be made everywhere: that the advantages of any situation imply always a certain degree of disadvantages: that the very limited conditions of many in the world, (a vast majority by the way), do not mean at all an impossibility to create. That the art that needs to be made gets to be made. Somehow.

It is in our nature to pass away, to fade, and if we only think again of the anonymous authors of thousands of masterpieces of the past we become fully aware of our personal irrelevance. Knowing at the same time that the objects that we make are among the few things that may remain almost forever. Such is the quiet and enduring nature of ceramics.

Gustavo Pérez  
1999