8-2-1988

The Integration of Ghanaian traditional pottery and American contemporary ceramics

Vesta Elizabeth Adu Gyamfi

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarworks.rit.edu/theses

Recommended Citation
THE INTEGRATION OF GHANAIAN TRADITIONAL POTTERY
AND AMERICAN CONTEMPORARY CERAMICS

By
Vesta Elizabeth Adu Gyamfi
August 2, 1988
Approvals

Adviser: Professor Robert D. Schmitz
Date Oct 25, 1988

Associate Adviser: Mr. Richard Hirsch
Date 10/25/88

Associate Adviser: Dr. Peter Giopulos
Date 10/25/88

Special Assistant to the Dean for Graduate Affairs:
Professor Philip Bornarth
Date 11/3/88

Dean, College of Fine and Applied Arts:
Dr. Robert Johnston
Date 11-3-1988

I, Vesta Elizabeth Adu Gyamfi, hereby grant permission to the Wallace Memorial Library of R.I.T., to reproduce my thesis in whole or part. Any reproduction will not be for commercial use or profit.

Date: August 2, 1988
List of Illustrations

Plate I. Potter doing open-air firing
Plate II. Samples of Ghanaian traditional Pottery
Plate III. Samples of Ghanaian traditional Pottery
Plate IV. Traditional Royal Pot of Ghana
Plate V. Pots by Richard DeVore
Plate VI. An "E.T." Pot
Plate VII. Another Sample of "E.T." Pot
Plate VIII. A sample of my vessels
Plate IX. A sample of my vessels
Plate X. A sample of my vessels
Plate XI. A sample of my vessels
CONTENTS

Title---------------------------------i
Approvals---------------------------------ii
List of illustrations-------------------iii
Dedication-----------------------------1
Acknowledgement------------------------2
What I Learned from my Study------------4
Introduction----------------------------5
My Cultural Background----------------7
American Impressionism----------------8
An Integration of Ghanaian Traditional Pottery and
American Contemporary Ceramics--------14
Technical problems Encountered--------18
Conclusion-------------------------------21
Bibliography---------------------------23
Dedicated To

and the Unborn Child.
Acknowledgements

The reality of this project would not have been realized without the helpful sponsorship of International Telephone and Telegraph (I.T.T.), which gave me the opportunity to go for my masters degree.

Acknowledgements of great gratitude are also extended to my husband Mr. Kwame Adu Gyamfi, for his patience and endurance. Even though newly married, with a six month old baby, he sacrificed so much to enable me to come to the United States to study for my Master of Fine Arts degree. I am ever grateful to him and my son, Adu Gyamfi Jr.

A large debt of gratitude goes to my special friends - Mrs. Joyce Stuber, Mr. Boakye Achampong, Prof. E.K.A. Azzii Akator, Jeannette Arosemena, Margaret Dimond, Vida Osei, and all my colleagues who gave me moral and spiritual encouragement throughout my studies.

Great appreciation is also extended to the Dean of the Fine & Applied Arts Dr. Robert Johnston, Dr. Paul Bernstein, Dr. Peter Giopulos, and Debra Holmes, for their love, concern and support through my M.F.A. program.

My warmest appreciation is due to Mrs. Barbara Letvin, Mr. Luvon Sheppard, Mr. Robert Keough, Dr. Kingsley Elder and family, and the Orthodox Presbyterian Covenant Church for their encouraging support and enthusiasm; and for always making me feel at home whenever I was near them: thank you for your hospitality.
Thanks also to the Professors of the Ceramic Department: Professor Robert Schmitz and Mr. Richard Hirsch for passing me 'through the mill to make me shine like a gem.'

To my mother Mary Ownsu Sekyere goes special thanks for everything she has given me to make me what I am today.

Last of all, to my God and Creator, goes my fervent thanks, for I owe everything to him.
What I Have Learned from My Study

The best pots show control, not necessarily precision but a sureness of shape and of the collective message of the piece. If there is change in shapes within a given form, there must be clear articulation between those shapes. I have learned that there are certain proportional relationships that convey certain feelings such as elegance, earthiness, stability, and energy, both positive and negative. When decorative, all aspects must be considered: the placement on the pot, compositions within specific areas, the number of colors used, their relationship to one another, the kind of materials used etc. All these need to reflect back on the nature of the pot form in order to be seen as a unified whole. "A most important aspect of all ceramic surface design is the way in which it may (or may not) pick up and relate to the plastic qualities of the pot to which it is applied". {1:52}

_________

Numbers in parentheses refer to numbered references in Bibliography; those after the colon are page numbers.
Introduction

Each of us is a product of the past. We know the past through how we lived; and that helps us to understand the present.

Coming from a society of strong African cultural background and influences to the exposure of a new society which is diametrically different (traditionally) to the society from which I come, has helped me to see things differently and work differently. Everything I see and record in my memory is classified according to how it affects the sensations within me. Though I seldom stop to think about it, these memories of the past and the present work have been translated into my present work.

However, in my graduate work, I have modified my strong cultural influences in order to accommodate other concerns. The process of understanding one's experiences and growing with them, to me is creativity. I observe the traditions in America through my studies and my social interactions and I cannot help but take what I have observed and create a bond between it and myself.

It has been an uphill task for me. First, there is myself as the observer. To learn to see, understand, interpret and acknowledge the good aspects of American contemporary ceramics. I spent long hours talking and arguing with my professors and colleagues to better understand what I see and feel. There are experiences that remain in the peripheral area of my consciousness. Other experiences come from within, wordless bits of sediment rising from the
subconsciousness. For me, the semiconscious experiences have been derived mainly from my interaction with the two cultures - African and American.

I have always been interested in exploring what kind of objects could be made by utilizing this realm of memory and sensation as a source of inspiration. I wish to convey an essence of place, time, and sentiment as well as provide the viewer with a visual and spatial experience. From the onset I envisioned the work drawing from certain references, exploring certain concepts, and dealing with color in a specific way. These intentions have for the most part been followed through. Nonetheless, the physical process of creating necessitates a synthesis of idea and the actual presence of the material. At this juncture, change becomes inevitable. Additions and alterations have occurred during the process of development. Hopefully, these changes have served to strengthen and enrich the work.
My Cultural Background

"The creative act is not performed by the artist alone; the spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualifications and thus adds his contribution to the creative act." (Duchamp) 2:xxi

Almost a century ago, Marcel Duchamp invented "readymades" and demonstrated that art spectators could have an active art-creative role. A readymade is an object or part of an object that had been made, perhaps industrially, for some non-artistic purpose. These could become works of art by virtue of being discovered and named. The discovery and naming of primitive art clearly enriched the sensibilities and artistic vocabularies of the industrial world. Nevertheless, even today it is by no means certain that the original makers of these artistic things are most often thought of as the insensate tools of something very like a natural force that we call culture; in other words the shape an object de art takes is necessarily perceived as inevitable, formed by culture. Rather than being people, artists become tools of culture.

Rattray in his book Religion and Art in Ashanti, has written an interesting chapter on traditional pottery in Ashariti, which is the tribe from which I come. Traditionally, everywhere in Ghana pottery is similar in technique, structuring and function, with many interesting local variations. These potters are not deeply concerned about their ceramic technology or ceramic form. Most of their
PLATE I. Potter doing open-air firing
production is in unpainted utility wares, serviceable but not too elegant. Their decorated pottery is usually in the ceremonial wares with techniques that permitted shapes to warp, colors to change, and fire clouds to occur at random to enhance the surface decoration. The hallmarks of Ghanaian traditional decoration are simple, nonfigurative and figurative sgraffito, sometimes representational, or narrative relief carvings, often made with a powerful and dynamic mass of clay sometimes placed on top of the lid or around the central portion of the wares.

With limited technical means but deft skill, using only a few compositional systems and fewer elements these potters organized and reorganized their convex picture spaces into a myriad of complex stories. Ordinarily, they produce moderately pleasing decorations, but with royal wares, powerful statements of mysterious decorative - expressive duality that we call art are produced. Visually, the best of Ghanaian decorations of pottery wares are at once simple and complex, clear and obscure, easily perceived and impossible to read by their use of traditional abstracted symbols.

Ghanaian traditional pottery is mostly made to be used by the Ghanian people, both the living and the dead. Many of the exotic forms are found as grave offerings and some of them are made for mortuary use (pots for burying a still born baby). The greatest amounts of pots are made for storing water and herbs, cooking, and for brewing traditional drinks.
PLATE II. Samples of Ghanaian traditional Pottery
Unpainted polished brown, red or black wares are more common in the southern part of Ghana. In contrast, painting is usually done on pottery wares in the north. It is usually monochromatic - red color on white body, with sectioned design patterns occasionally made with broad red lines, placed over the entire mid-section of the pot. In addition to that, a thin hematitic pigment is sometimes applied as a slip to bowl exteriors, that often have fire clouds. The same pigment is used to paint designs on bowl interiors or the insides, or outsides of other vessel shapes. If the slipped surfaces are not polished, the painted lines are, and the resulting contrast between shiny lines and dull ground helps intensify the difference between otherwise closely related colors.

Ghanaian bowls often have out-curving sides but their entire inner surfaces are considered design fields. Because of variations in firing atmospheres (open firing) these color differences are not always easily seen.

The appearance of foreign wares in the market has not affected the traditional pottery that much but their production is on the decline due to the fact that the younger generation is not much interested in learning the profession.

The Ghanaian potters have always put their greatest decorative energies into relief, and they have developed an inventory of vessel shapes that has also influenced other potters in neighboring countries. Among these forms are flat plates or dishes; helmet or soup-plate shape; flare-rim bowls with perpendicular
walls; and cooking pots with low centers of gravity and sharply angular upper shoulders.

The vessels are usually finished by scraping and polishing. They seem to have been made by hand molded or coil rather than slab built or thrown. These differences take on greater significance if the pragmatic conservatism of both groups is considered. All the methods are about equal and produce comparable results; but all require a certain amount of training and practice before the requisite craft skills can be learned. Learning took place within the communities, and their size and nature require that emphasis be placed on results rather than processes. So long as craft products meet certain minimum standards, the first easily taught and successfully learned process might effectively foreclose any experimentation.

Finally, I would like to say that art is a form of human behavior. The extent of the Ghanaian's ancestors behavioral activities should be examined in order to understand their art. The assumption made is that the art of any group is more likely to conform to, reflect, and express the general patterns of behavior of that group than to diverge from these patterns. To put it another way, genius may have its place, but the social, economic, ecological, and historical contexts are to idiosyncrasy what a lake is to a raindrop.
PLATE IV  Samples of Ghanaian traditional Pottery
American Impressionism

What did I expect to see in ceramics in America? If I could answer this question then half of my problem is solved. I arrived in America totally ignorant of what ceramic art is in this place. After visiting several museums and shows, I came to my own personal conclusion about contemporary American ceramics. One thing that struck me most is the new painterly tone in clay which is not restricted to the wall as murals. It is also felt in new expression in vessel-making where the use of color, pattern, and composition is conversant with concerns in contemporary painting. However, some works are merely painterly and are primarily concerned with the genre of ceramics, whilst others are ceramic and are primarily concerned with the genre of painting.

I also realized that pottery is not a subcategory of any other discipline, it has its own extraordinary history and its own set of aesthetic imperatives. It is within this discipline that America's greatest achievement in ceramic art can be found. American pottery is unlike any other in its diversity of approach, informality, scale and vigor of surface treatment. It has embraced all the various movements in art--from conscious design to abstract expressionism.

Nonetheless, there are number of ceramic works that lie quite outside the general trends in pottery and ceramics. The work does not gravitate toward any particular movement, style, or philosophy.
Though their final solutions are quite diverse, their foundations are often grounded in or identified with the principle of a vessel. But they are not the least perceived as pottery per se.

More often than not, their structures give hints that within them are contained some mysterious energy which contributes to a kind of ceremonial quality. For instance, Richard DeVore has consistently made vessels that are an embodiment of an extremely personal statement. His vessels like shells found at sea, reveal subtle visual and tactile surprises upon close examination. Their multiple staining, glazing and firings gives them a time-worn character. The insides of these seemingly simple bowls contain small convolutions whose quiet, mysterious nuances add to interesting relationships of interior and exterior space. (see plate V)

Paul Soldner has been another ceramicist I found myself responding to. He has a keen interest in the process of raku. According to A Potter's Book of 1940, raku has been long known in America, nevertheless Soldner has been largely responsible for helping to develop a distinctively American sense of raku, although the process was not new to American potters. Through his teaching positions and numerous workshops, lectures and demonstrations, throughout the United States, raku has become an integral part of the American Ceramic artist's repertoire, and later mine. {3:211}

These few examples illustrate how a number of potters developed an uncompromising sense of independence from being
Figure 13-2. Richard E. DeVore, stoneware, 14" diameter, 1977. Courtesy of the artist.


PLATE V. Pots by Richard E. DeVore
identified with any particular trend or fashion. Although they may
operate within a broad framework of pottery, their continual
refinement of highly personal approaches toward form, surface and
color gives their work a strong sense of individuality and
distinction. Having come from a culture which is dimetrically
different to the American culture, I could not help but fully admit
the impressions this individualistic self expressionism had on me.
Henceforth, my work was never going to be the same.
An Integration of Ghanaian Traditional Pottery and American Contemporary Ceramics

"Although Peter Voulkos, Paul Soldner and a handful of individuals have been responsible for providing American potters with a catharsis which aided in promoting attitudes of exuberance and vitality",{4:211}; I do not intend to follow their path. I cannot deny their impressions on me, but I want to pursue my own identity and through long patient searching arrive at forms that distinguish me from any other potter or ceramicist.

I started by basing my designs on my Ghanaian traditional forms, and executing them with the traditional techniques and skills. I then used decorating techniques based on American culture or tradition. As before said in the previous chapter, the painterly force in clay rather found its way into my pottery.

Most of the work done in my first year and part of my second year was experimental. At some point I was committed to the idea that a pot need not necessarily assume a vessel; that the invariable symmetry of the wheel can be a point of departure for creating more vigorous statements of personal expression. I achieved this by altering the shape of the pot through cutting at certain angle and juxtaposing certain shapes, denting or otherwise distorting the basically circular design. By adding low-fire, this further increased a distorted sense of balance. This exploration of form and surface
for it's expressive potential signaled the direction that my work would assume in the future. I soon abandoned any clues about the "pot-as-a-vessel" idea in favor of a much more dynamic, elegant but weighty expression which manifested itself in a series of monolithic totem-like configurations which I refer to as "E.T." pots. (see plate VI)

This "E.T." series, built with a directness and spontaneity, which the soft clay encourages, conveyed tensions and animation which are visual clues to the aggressiveness, and yet subtlety with which my work has become identified. Allowing the clay at times to remain undecorated, with the exception of carbon deposited on few spots or randomly deposited during pit firing, reinforces the power of these growing, twisting organic free-forms.

By the middle of my program, I begin to deal with a more limited range of shapes. In favor of the animated E.T. series, I began to develop a series of more simplified circular forms and also explored more calculated surface treatments after the clay was leather-hard. I achieved a sense of boldness through patterns created by carving and sgraffito. I retained the basic form but had to work on the carved designs on the forms. I had to abandon my association with my traditional pottery and began to fashion for myself works of ceramics that easily distinguished it as works of art rather than tactile objects of the hand-crafts.

To many potters, and I am no exception, the plastic nature of clay invites direct manipulation by hand or tool. This inherent
PLATE VI. An "E T" Pot
quality of clay generated a search for new possibilities of treating
the surface of my pottery pieces. Traditional Ghanaian, as well as
American techniques were explored and expanded with the idiom of
the contemporary aesthetic, thereby increasing my potters'
decorative vocabulary.

The slip decorated pieces of works are illustrative of a new
handling of American traditional techniques. In some instances slip
was applied immediately after throwing, while at other times the
slip was slashed freely onto the pot with a brush at the
leather-hard stage, to retain a fresh sense of spontaneity. The
combination of my freely thrown and decorated, yet well controlled,
pots convey freshness and directness.

Though all decorative processes were approached with the
spontaneity and vigor already described, some of the pots show a
much more calculated surface treatment after the clay was
bisqued-fired.

A natural extension of what I started doing in terms of
techniques and ideas directed me toward an even more innovative
exploration of slips and bright colors which allowed me to
reproduce any visual material in multicolor form. Later these were
translated onto my pots. What gives my work distinctiveness is the
balance that prevails in the surface designs and the application of
colors.
By endlessly experimenting with various slips, engobes, glazes, smoking techniques and types of clay bodies, I began to select the most suitable materials and techniques. Out of earthenware, raku, and stoneware bodies, I chose earthenware even though I was eventually going to adhere to the area of raku technique. Secondly, I abandoned the application of slips on the green ware and underglaze colors and began to use slips for bisque ware. Mode of decorating remained basically the same -- carving on the surface at the leather-hard state, and burnishing.

The green wares were fired in electric kilns to cone 08, and then gloss fired to cone 04 in the raku kiln. They were then taken red hot from the kiln and dumped into big barrels with dried leaves, straw and sawdust to reduce it and also develop the desired effect -- crackling. Throughout this process, I maintained a commitment to produce strong, simple forms for decorative and utilitarian function--e aesthetic and functional. My robustly thrown covered containers or vases are free of superfluous decorations, relying on carvings, slips and raku glazing, and firing for reinforcement of their strength and sureness of form.
PLATE IX  Sample of my vessels
PLATE X
Sample of my vessels
PLATE XI. Sample of my vessels
Technical Problems Encountered

To the potter who was deeply committed to a traditional form concept, to a way of life that involved making unpretentious pottery for everyday use, the new wave of experimentation and selfconscious creation of body of works for the graduate thesis was a great dilemma, at the beginning. Despite the emphasis on self expression, of challenging the established tenets about good taste, of constantly searching for the new, the novel, and the innovative, I still remained committed to creating well designed and nicely made pieces -- which rather posed a difficult problem between me and my professors -- that I was too close and uncompromising. Nevertheless, my pieces individually created were very unique.

For the first few months everything I made was technically awful and blew up. The clay body was not a regular raku clay body. I never wanted to switch over to the raku clay body. I had to modify the earthenware clay I was using by adding some percentage of talc and fine grog. Because I work from very clear ideas, I had the tendency to control the medium; the raku firing was a way to have things happen to the piece -- a way to get color and surface (a crackling effect) to look antique and timelessness.

Raku is scary and with ceramics it is more demanding and a matter of compromise. You have to give up your ego and you cannot dominate it; clay tells you "No, I won't be able to stand it", "I'm too
wet", or "I'm too dry", and may frustrate you. But those limitations are your allies, because they box you in and then you have to be creative. I grew to like the immediacy of the fire and manipulating the fire, being close to it. With raku I was totally involved at all times.

Originally, I used to apply the colored slip when the piece was leather-hard or sometimes at the wet stage and I had the problem of the slips peeling off after the piece had been glazed fired. To solve this problem, I switched over to doing terra sigillatta. With this technique, there was no need to glaze the piece. Besides, I could control the application of the colors. However, the final product did not much appeal to me, so I went back to glazing my pots with clear raku glaze. I also stopped applying the slips to the wet or leather-hard pieces. Instead, I composed a new slip which can be applied to bisque wares; before a thin layer of glaze was sprayed or brushed all over the piece. In this way, I was able to control the peeling off of the colored slips and achieve a nice crackling effect when the wares were smoked in dried leaves.

One significant problem that could not fully be overcome was to maintain the same intensity of colors throughout the firing process. I managed to some extent to maintain the colors but mysteriously, some portions of the same ware would have very intense color whilst other spots had all the colors dissolving or losing its intensity. However, these ambiguities in the color tones gave the wares very interesting visual effects and satisfaction.
I intend to tackle this very problem in my next step in my ceramic career until the problem is fully overcome.
Conclusion

If we are to attempt to understand the beliefs of the Ghanaian and American of the old -- and we must make this attempt if we are to have a sensitive appreciation of their pottery, we must first put on one side our own prevailing conception of each individual as a unique personal being encased within the shell of his own body, influenced only to a limited degree by communication with other unique personalities, and replace it by the concept of selfhood.

Through an examination and observance of potters, their work, and other social, economic and educational circumstances, related to pottery, I have gained insights into the changing role of the American studio-potter. Several shifts in emphasis are noted as regard purposes, designs and techniques in pottery. The notion of making "one-of-a-kind" pottery has become increasingly popular. A continuous form of nervous restlessness is prevailing in the arts. Great emphasis is placed on more experimentation. Materials and ideas are pushed to their limits in search for new and vital forms; forms not necessarily restricted by preconceptions, but forms with which the ceramic artists could identify themselves. Consequently, the ceramic scene has become infused with a bewildering variety which does not stick to duplicate the known formulas of established ideas, but rather to create new and provocative forms.
While numerous ceramicists pursue the more traditional modes of clay vessels based on precepts of the past, others are constantly challenging the frontiers of new emerging styles and attitudes. It is the latter group I find myself in.

Throughout my stay and study in the United States, combined with my background experiences, I have learnt to use color, glazes, engobes, slips and enamels in a more inventive, spontaneous and almost blatant manner to boost up my knowledge in ceramics.

Particularly noteworthy is the spirit of experimentally which now prevails in my work, characterized by critical appraisals of traditional values as regards form, texture, color and craftsmanship.

Finally, I hope to explore further the theme of this project to be able to grow in a much more diversified way yet uniquely personal.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


7. Trowell, Margaret & Hans Nevermann. Africa and Oceanic Art.