

Podlasian and Polesian Black Ceramic Ware

BY

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The trend of modern taste towards an appreciation of simple shapes and colours in every field of art, and in particular of domestic art, has led to a revival of interest in the plainer forms of folk ceramic from Eastern Europe. It is interesting to note that the Polish "Cepelia" (CPL i A) Organisation is distributing considerable quantities of black ceramic ware from the Belastok region in response to this demand. However, the striking simplicity of this pottery distinguishes it from the more elaborate designs usually associated with Polish folk art, and calls for some comment.

The Bielastok region of Eastern Poland extends over part of the old Byelorussian province of Troki, and incorporates almost the whole of the ancient province of Podlasia, except for the southern part. Although the cities of these regions have traditionally numbered a large proportion of Polish inhabitants, the villages and countryside are populated by a strong Byelorussian minority. Indeed, until the XVIth century Podlasia formed the westernmost province of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania before it was ceded to Poland by the treaty of Lublin in 1569. Southern Podlasia, which reveals very considerable Ukrainian influences, is bounded on the East by the river Bug. Beyond that stream extend the seemingly endless wastes of the Polesian marshes, with their sparse population but exceedingly rich folklore. Polesia, the southernmost of all the Byelorussian provinces, has played a dual role of a barrier against invasions from the South, and a fastness in which peasant life and folk culture was able to flourish unimpaired until comparatively recent times.

Among the numerous peasant arts of Podlasia and Polesia, Pottery plays an important part. In regions where towns were few and far between, and money was hard to come by, the peasants were perforce self-reliant: every village, if not every homestead, could boast of one or several kilns. Styles of course varied from village to village. Thus Horadna was known for its so-called "white" ceramic, decorated with simple overglaze designs in rusty reds. Suprasl and Siamiatyče produced fine glazed or halfglazed pottery in rich browns, ochres or

mottled greens, sometimes with rudimentary overglaze ornamentation. The black ceramic-ware, for which the provinces of Podlasia and Polesia are particularly famous, are manufactured in the villages of Pružany, Klijašče, Hrinkieviče and Čarna Vies Kasciolna. Despite slight local variations in decoration and design, the technique of manufacture differs very little from place to place.

The clay is dug by the village potter from a suitable pit and is brought back to the atelier where it is stored in a trench in the floor. The trench is then boarded over to keep the clay moist. Occasionally sand is added if the vessels are to be used for cooking purposes, as this prevents the finished product from cracking when under the direct heat of the kitchen hearth.

The potter digs from his storage trench the appropriate quantity of clay and kneads it with his hands or his feet to obtain a smooth and even consistency. A ball of the prepared clay is placed on the wheel, and it is then ready for shaping.

The wheel in most frequent use today is formed of two circular slabs of wood of unequal size placed vertically one on top of the other and joined together by a wooden or metal pivot. The base of the pivot revolves in a socket in the floor. The larger wheel is attached to the pivot and turns at a height of two or three inches from the level of the floor. The smaller wheel is attached to the upper extremity of the pivot, but not transfixed by it so that the wheel provides a flat revolving surface free from any obstacle on which the vessel will ultimately take shape. The upper part of the pivot is held in position by a fixed bracket which is clamped to the potters work-bench. The potter sits on the bench astride the bracket and propels the lower wheel with his feet, imparting to it a regular rotating movement which leaves both his hands permanently free to shape the clay.

The general form given to rural pottery will depend on the purpose for which the finished article is intended. Certainly one of the traditional designs will be followed:

1. Pots: (this is the most common shape and serves all purposes, whether for storing or for table use).
2. Platters, basins and bowls.
3. Vases and pitchers.
4. Bottle-shaped vessels.

To cater for the more refined tastes, sophisticated forms have been evolved — particularly jugs, vessels with handles or lids, and twin or triplet pots (*sparyšy*).

Once the vessel has been given the required shape, the potter detaches it from the wheel by drawing a thread or wire sharply across the base, and sets it aside to dry. At this stage the pottery is generally stored on shelves in a drying room until sufficient vessels have been completed to fill the kiln.

The form of kiln used in the firing of black ceramic ware is considerably more evolved than the usual domestic kiln which in small localities serves a dual purpose as an oven for baking or cooking. The kiln is generally built out of bricks and clay covered

with turves: it may be sunk partly into the earth or it may be constructed completely above ground-level. It comprises two chambers placed one above the other and separated by stone slabs or metal slats. The pottery for firing is carefully stacked into the upper chamber which is then sealed off with clay. A fire is lit in the lower chamber and the temperature is kept at a relatively low level (200°-300°C.) in order to eliminate any hygroscopic water from the clay of the unfired ware. The heat is then slowly increased to the appropriate intensity. It is during the final stage of the firing that the much admired blackish-silver hue is imparted to the ceramic ware. This is done by packing the lower chamber of the kiln with a dry resinous wood such as pine or fir logs which will in burning produce a plentiful black smoke. The lower chamber is then sealed off to prevent any air from penetrating into the kiln. The resulting thick sooty smoke fuses into the surface of the pottery and imparts a fine graphite-like hue. When the firing and smoking processes have been completed the kiln is broken open and the sherds are removed for decoration.

The decoration is carried out by a primitive but remarkably effective method. Taking the sherd, the potter executes the design with a smooth polished stone, burnishing the unglazed surface with hard, firm strokes. Thick or thin lines can be produced according to the shape and size of the burnishing instrument. The type of design will of course vary from region to region.

In the simplest form of ornamentation which prevails principally in Kliščele and Sejny, the sherd is burnished all over with a rapid succession of close vertical strokes which do not follow any set pattern. The article treated in this way depends for its effect on the smoothness and evenness of the polish which the potter has been able to achieve. In Hrinkieviče and Čarna Vies Kascielna ornamentation tends towards the linear, with alternate broad and narrow burnished stripes, or bands of stripes contrasting with completely unburnished surfaces. The Polesian black pottery displays more elaborate designs and the folk-artists of Pruzany show a predilection for herring-bone and zig-zag patterns alternating with sheafs of vertical stripes. The whole effect, though basically simple, is very pleasing, which no doubt accounts for the new-found popularity of this unpretentious ceramic-ware.

The distribution of Podlasian and Polesian black pottery was formerly restricted either to the village in which it was manufactured and the immediate vicinity, or within a radius of a few kilometres — seldom more than ten — of the markets in which the manufacturers sold their goods. The increasing interest in East European folk-art has led to a far wider dissemination of Byelorussian black ceramic, largely thanks to the efforts of the "Cepelia" organisation. The works of the peasant potters of Čarna Vies Kascielna and Kliščele now adorn elegant contemporary-style salons in many of the world's capital cities.

It is a melancholy thought that, at the moment when it is achieving a measure of renown, pottery is a dying art in Podlasia. Whereas

40 to 50 village kilns flourished in that region in 1937-1938, the number had been reduced to about a dozen in 1964. Kliaščele which formerly boasted 10 kilns is now left with only 2. In Čarna Vies Kosciolna where 9 kilns existed in 1937, only 2 are now in use. No figures are available for the province of Polesia.

In 1961 an exhibition of the various folk-arts of Podlasia was organised in Bielastok in which many fine examples of pottery were displayed. Black ceramic ware from the kilns of such artists as P. Salaciukievič and Uł. Bubel of Kliaščele, and A. Krašeŭski and E. Piechoŭski of Čarna Vies Kosciolna occupies a prominent place in the exhibition. The Museum of Bielastok also contains a fine collection from some of the lesser known kilns such as Hrinkieviče and Sejny.

NOTE

William Shakespeare 1564—1964

William Shakespeare has always been reverently admired in Byelorussian literary circles. Even before the revocation of the Imperial Ukaze forbidding the use of the Byelorussian language, the works of the great English poet were widely known and read in Polish and Russian translations. Since that time, however, several translations of Shakespeare have been printed in Byelorussian, and his plays are now a regular feature in the repertoire of all the major city theatres. His translators include such well-known literary figures as Ju. Haŭruk, Uł. Duboŭka, I. Siamižon, V. Volski, K. Krapiva, A. Zvonak and Uł. Sachavec.

During the first years of the *Naša Niva* movement, Byelorussian writers had little time for anything other than self-expression — a right which had long been denied them. As literature began to develop into a more outward-looking art, writers began to pay more attention to the great poets of other nations. In 1926, in the first number of a somewhat obscure provincial journal — the *Aršanski Maladik*, there appeared several sonnets and scenes from the play *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, done into Byelorussian by Ju. Haŭruk. During the first Viciebsk Theatre Season in 1926-1927, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was given its first complete performance in Byelorussian at the 2nd Byelorussian State Theatre. This was followed by the publication in 1935 of *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* translated by the same author, although it was not presented to the public until 1946. Shortly afterwards, in 1939, the talented writer I. Siamižon completed his translations of *King Lear*,