TRADITIONAL CRAFTSMANSHIP

When a basket is destroyed, one basket is gone. When the process of making a basket is lost, there will no longer be any baskets... ever. Process, societal context and rank, symbolism, innovation and evolution, are only some of the more abstract concepts that pertain to cultural legacy in craft. All of these are vulnerable to the demands of contemporary life due to the rigors of market demands, mass production, introduction of new materials and the rigid structures of functionality. Traditional craft is readily transformed by these factors of modernity and together with these is the attendant craftsmanship.
TERRACOTTA POTTERY in the Philippines was coeval with the domestication of plants and animals around 5800 B.C. based on evidences from the northern and southern Philippines. The earliest ones were entirely shaped and molded by hand. They were unique in that there were no duplicates ever recovered. The forms include an egg-shaped small stem cup, a wide-mouthed pot with a foot-stand and a half roofing over the mouth, a presentation dish on a pedestal and other configurations.

Pottery proliferated and flowered during the age when metals began to appear in the country. Enumerable forms and surface ornamentations that are incised, imprinted, excised and appliquéd were seen, such that the period was often referred to as the “Golden Age of Pottery” in the Philippines.

The advent of the great cultural traditions of mainland Asia, like those of China, saw the introduction of high-fired ceramics into the country. Introduced were stoneware, celadon and porcelain wares, the vitreous qualities and glazings of which were superior to the porous terracottas. This created such an impact on local production and resulted in the decline in the creativity usually found in native pottery. Local potters began copying foreign forms. It was only during the modern times that native pottery saw a resurgence with the introduction of modern technology.

With the domestication of plants and animals during the Neolithic Age, earthenware pottery was given rise.

The potters’ wheel was not used until contact with the great traditions of Asia, and even that was sporadically since the slow wheel persisted even today. The earliest method was hand molding, with the work placed on a piece of matting, pottery shard or any flat material that can be rotated by hand when needed. Later on, paddles and anvils were used for thinning the vessel walls. The paddles were either plainly surfaced, grooved with parallel furrows or grid-like. At times, the paddle was bound with a cord such that it leaves characteristic patterns on the pot surface. The anvil was a piece of rounded stone or the operculum of a large univalve shell. This was held inside the vessel to counteract the paddling on the outer surface.

Open-firing of earthenware. On the foreground is a recently fired set of pottery, still among the ashes, cooling in the open air.
Pottery may also be fired with no alterations on the surface. Later on, a solution of clay is applied on the surface, or dipped into the solution, such that a thin film of clay, sometimes of a different color, forms on the surface serving as a slip. More invasive treatments were done with the addition of simple decorations such as incised lines using a stylus, or more complex, using a comb-like instrument. Lines, zigzags, circles, squares, dots, running scrolls and other designs were common. These were executed when the vessel is in the leather-harden stage of drying. Appliqués were also done with anthropomorphic faces, ropes and other shapes to beautify the pots. Handles, spouts, ears, foot-rings, foot-stands and pedestals were very popular ornaments.

The wares are initially air-dried in the shade, making sure there are no drafts, so that the vessels dry evenly. When completely dried, these are piled on top of a platform of firing materials like wood, palm fronds, bovine dung, or rice husks, then covered all over with the same materials, then fired in the open. No kilns were used until modern times. Upon completion, the pieces were cooled in an oxidizing atmosphere to produce red pottery, or in a reducing atmosphere to result in blackened pottery.

The modern times saw the advent of potters’ wheels, even mechanized ones, and kilns burning wood or fuels like petroleum or butane gas. Electric kilns have become common. Production has become more mechanical and less personal, with the loss of traditional touch and the patina of a long-gone culture.

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COUNTRYWIDE. In an archipelago with some 36,000 kilometers of coastline and more than 7,000 islands, with mountainous interiors, it is not a wonder that the people should take to water as the most facile mode of travel. This was apparent even during the ancient times when the waterways were the much used highways.