

Traditional Crafts: A Lesson From Turkish Ceramics

by Henry Glassie

Henry Glassie is Professor of Folklore and American Civilization and Graduate Chairman of the Department of Folklore and Folklife at the University of Pennsylvania. Among his major books are Pattern in the Material Folk Culture of the Eastern United States, Folk Housing in Middle Virginia, All Silver and No Brass, Passing the Time in Ballymenone, and Irish Folktales.

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Tradition builds the future out of the past. Craft shapes nature into culture. Traditional crafts record the twisted flow of time and the continual alteration of the physical world.

Traditional crafts depend entirely upon individuals who answer a personal call to creativity while serving society through the reconstruction of the environment. At work in a web of connection, the creator of craft is surrounded by problems. The young potter who has lost direct contact with the old practitioners of his trade and must push on unguided by deep knowledge, the woodworker whose local market has died and who must learn to respond to whimsical new clients, the old basketmaker who has outlived his co-workers, cannot find an apprentice, and must struggle on alone, the weaver who cannot find the tools or materials to continue her craft—each faces one of the host of problems posed in a world no longer dependent on the hand and heart of the artisan. As an American student of traditional craft, I too was beset by these problems. They preoccupied me, confused my view, and urged me to Turkey, where I carried out field research in 1984 and 1985 to learn the nature of a tradition at the fullness of its energy. Inspired by brave American potters who have held steady and by the scholars who have lovingly documented their craft, I choose to tell you about Turkish pottery. We begin in the market.

In the cities of millions and the small country towns, vast quantities of pottery are sold in shops and stalls by men who form the crucial middle link in the chain that connects the potters to their customers. These small entrepreneurs, who buy at the kiln and sell on the street, power the Turkish economy and function as the craft's natural critics. Their evaluations are not confused by facile distinctions between art and craft. We may accept academic distinctions, conspicuously based on medium, subtly based on social class, and then extend them inappropriately to the whole world, calling painting on cloth "art," while terming painting on pottery or stitching on cloth "craft," so that the creations of working people are denied the status of art. But Turks begin with a more egalitarian vision. They have one word, *sanat*, that brings together all handwork, art and craft. Then they make more difficult discriminations based on excellence. The manager of a stall full of pottery points easily to those pieces which are *bakiki sanat*, "true art," and those which are but the result of necessary labor. Works of true art carry the impress of their maker, displaying eternally the care of the hand, the vitality of the soul, the capacity of the designing mind.

Excellence appears in both of the great varieties of traditional

Turkish pottery. Divided by technique, pottery is either earthenware or it is *çini*, painted underglaze on a composite body. For centuries the center for *çini* has been the city of Kütahya. Unglazed earthenware — useful jugs and pitchers, chimneypots and flowerpots — is made in hundreds of small shops across Anatolia. Glazed and decorated utilitarian earthenware flourishes particularly in northwestern Anatolia, at the western edge of Asia, with its finest and most widely distributed made in one agricultural village in the mountains that lift south of the Sea of Marmara: Kinik.

There are 75 wood-fired kilns and pottery workshops attached to half of the 300 houses in the dazzling whitewashed village of Kinik. Across from the teahouse next to the mosque, we enter the shop of Osman Kaya and Mustafa Baydemir. When they were lads, they learned their trade from Mustafa's father, Aptullah, who learned it from the younger brother of the man, Şahkir Aga, who brought the knowledge with him out of Bulgaria during one of the massive shifts of population that marked the contraction of the Ottoman Empire. They are in direct touch, along intimate family lines, with the source of their tradition, and they work as part of a communal enterprise, making, they say, the same ware that everyone does in Kinik. A mile from the village, six feet underground, they find the earth that they stir and mill, which Osman turns and Mustafa decorates. He dips each piece in a thin white slip, and while the surface slides, he runs color over it in trim patterns of green, red, and black, that gravity pulls into surprising, endlessly variable designs. The technique, mixing control and chance, calls to mind marbled paper, one of Turkey's gifts to world art. Osman and Mustafa hire laborers to help with the preparation of their "mud"; the rest of the work is theirs alone. They must decide whether the weather requires the turned ware to be fired before decoration and how long the ware must wait after decoration before it is glazed and fired finally. Old partners, day after day they work serenely side by side, preparing the next load for the trucks hauling north to Istanbul, south to Kütahya, east to Gaziantep. Their skill — Osman's ability to turn with speed ware of great size and perfect form, Mustafa's command over a drippy liquid medium — marks them as masters, producers of excellence. Their control over the whole of their technology — from mining to sales, their direct connections with the source of their art, their co-workers, and their market — makes their work for us an ideal instance of traditional craft.

In Kütahya, municipal center of a mountainous state in west-central Anatolia, there are 23 major ateliers for *çini*, an ever varying number of smaller shops, and scores of individuals who use the larger ateliers to help process special lines of pottery. Kütahya's key institution is the atelier — *atehye* or *fabrika* in Turkish — a building of humming wheels, gigantic, cylindrical kilns, and wide, shadowy spaces broken by banks of shelves bent under drying ware. Here novices are trained to be workers and workers are trained to be masters and masters coordinate production.

Of masters, most revered is the designer. Kütahya's great designer is Ahmet Şahin. He went to work in the potteries when he was ten. A master at 18, and now 79, Mr. Şahin owns six chests full of designs and can claim to have created 75 percent of the designs currently in



Earthenware *Sürabi* turned by Osman Kaya, decorated by Mustafa Baydemir in the village of Kinik, near Bilecik, in 1985. Photos by Henry Glassie



Çini plate turned, glazed, and fired by Ihsan Erdeyer, and painted after his own design by İbrahim Erdeyer, Süsler Çini, Kütahya, in 1984. For sale in the shop of the Kilic brothers in the Covered Bazaar, Istanbul.

use. Out of a lifetime of working experience, he draws plans onto white paper. Copies provided to the master of an atelier are placed over sheets of paper, so that holes pricked through the design pierce the pages beneath to create patterns that are placed upon tiles or plates at the biscuit stage. Charcoal rubbed over the paper runs through the holes, and when the paper is lifted, the master's design has been transferred to the ceramic surface.

Up to this point, men have done the work. At a cooperative factory men combined five kinds of clay from three separate locations with chalk and quartz and delivered the mix to the masters, who added dashes of their own ingredients. Boys milled the mud and squeezed it pure to be pressed into molds for tiles or turned into plates. These were fired, marked with the design, and now they are given to women who first outline the design in black with long, swift strokes and then paint it full of color. Afterward, men will glaze the pieces and fire them a second time. The tiles will sheathe the walls of new mosques with gleaming color. The plates will be selected from the outlets that line Kütahya's main streets to become the stock of shops throughout Turkey. With their intricately geometric, lavishly floral, or sacred calligraphic designs, the plates will ultimately hang on the walls of Turkish homes.

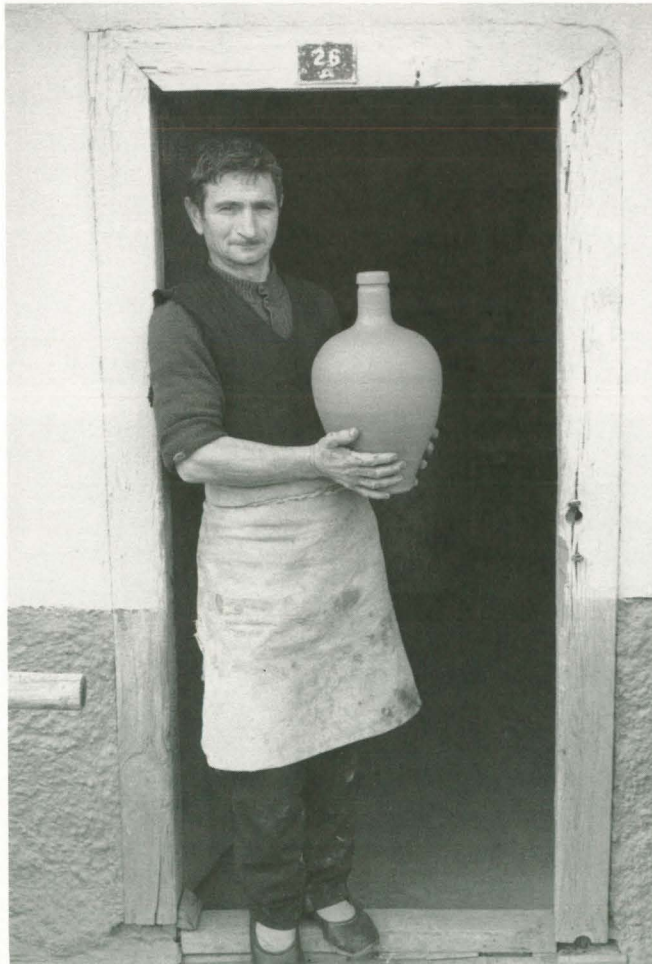
The process of *çini* is complex. Each piece has absorbed the effort of eight to 20 people, of boys who mix mud, masters who turn the plates, mind the kiln, who mix and apply the lead glaze, women who paint, men who sell. The process extends beyond the control of any individual, and while it yields a cheap "people's" ware that serves an enormous market, it raises problems.

To the Turkish worker, objects, even if lovely, are not art if their makers lacked freedom. So the Kütahya tradition contains a variety of ware that grants the worker control. This is *dik mal*, "standing ware," the jars, bowls and vases athletically thrown by men, shaped handsomely, then given a second turning to "shave" their surfaces and perfect their forms. When these pieces are painted, the women use no pounced designs but improvise *kafadan*, "from the head," recombining motifs learned from the older women in the potteries. In concept and execution their free-hand compositions repeat the dynamic of the great women's traditions of embroidery and rug weaving. Turned and painted by the workers, *dik mal* is *canlı*, alive with spirit.

But the masters of Kütahya fear a decline in quality. They are responsible for a city's economy and a 600-year-old tradition, so the masters cooperate to produce works that represent their art at its peak. Ahmet Şahin supplies designs to all the manufacturers, but he also paints tiles and plates using his own designs, taking time to create masterworks. His plates are turned, glazed, and fired by Ihsan Erdeyer, master of Süsler Çini, famed for shaping clean forms, for glazing neatly, and managing the big earthen kiln he built in 1950. If the heat rises too quickly it will crack the "raw" ware stacked near the top. If the fire gets too hot, colors will run and smudge. The master must build the fire slowly for four hours, then add wood, pushing the fire, judging its temperature solely by its color, waiting for the great flame that will rise about the twelfth hour, rolling over and "cooking" the ware to perfection. Mr. Erdeyer's Süsler Çini



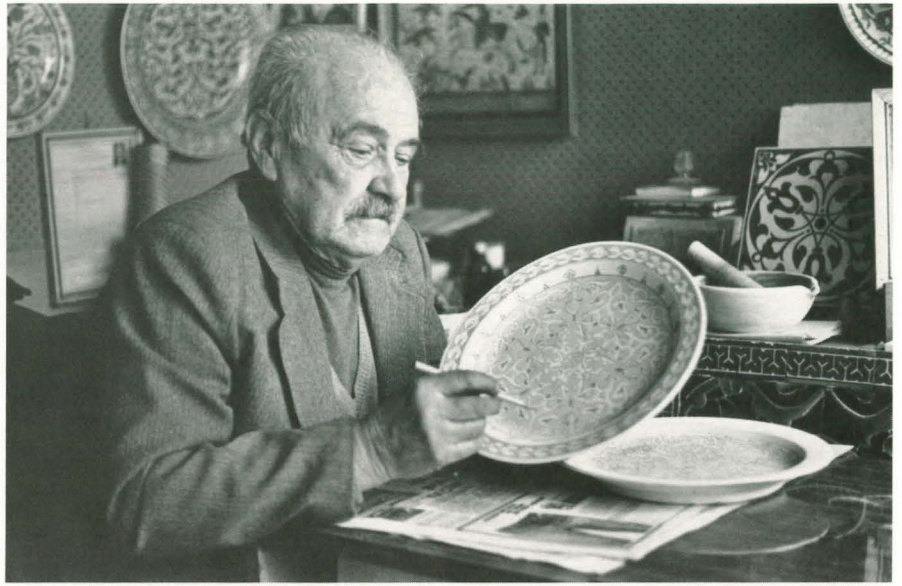
Mustafa Baydemir, master potter, Kinik.



Osman Kaya, master potter, Kinik.



Kinik



Ahmet Şahin, the great designer of Kütahya.



Meryem Kurbaş and friends painting, Metin Çini, Kütahya.



İbrahim Erdeyer and Mehmet Gürsoy, young masters of Kütahya.



produces its own line of *çini* and serves 20 painters of “special” lines, most notably his son, Ibrahim, and Ibrahim’s dear friend, Mehmet Gürsoy. Mehmet is 36, Ibrahim is 25, and with Ahmet Şahin’s son, Faruk, they are leaders in a youthful movement within Kütahya dedicated to the maintenance of excellence in their tradition. They visit the noble old mosques to learn from the tiles of the 15th and 16th centuries. They draw and paint their own designs with precision and create works of the highest quality to inspire their working community, to embody their national tradition, to express their personal styles.

When traditional crafts fail, the problem is survival; when they thrive, the problem is the survival of excellence. The struggle is worth it. Without excellent crafts, workers will find no joy amid labor, they will be reduced to tools, and our environment will lack quality, except as it chances to endure from the past.

At work conserving their own heritage, the master potters in the modern nation of Turkey teach a lesson to the world. They establish ateliers within which apprentices are trained and new masters rise to direct the manufacture of a useful, attractive, inexpensive product that meets the needs of a wide market. The masters charge their workers with tasks that allow a satisfying measure of creativity. Then, they do not retreat into the role of mere manager or isolate themselves as designers only. They keep their hands in, cooperating to create magnificent instances of traditional craft.

Kütahya

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