

Cape Verdean Pottery

LEÃO LOPES

The origins of Cape Verdean pottery lie in western and central Africa, on the evidence of its forms, ornamentation, and methods of manufacture. Pottery is evidently among the oldest forms of Cape Verdean folk art. If, as a rule, communities in their embryonic stages place a high priority on the manufacture of domestic utensils, then Cape Verde follows this rule — its society and its pottery began together.

Modeling techniques used in Cape Verde are thousands of years old and are still practiced by many peoples in Africa and by some peoples in the Americas. Other ancient techniques — still used by some peoples in north and central Africa and in Central America — complement those described below. However, they were either unknown to our pottery makers or disappeared over the years. We emphasize molding techniques here.

After making preparations such as choosing a clay pit and transporting, crushing, and kneading the clay with an adequate amount of water, the potter shapes it into a cylindrical block and places it end up on the floor. The potter (traditionally, it is women who hold the secrets of this thousand-year-old art, not only in Cape Verde, but also in the areas mentioned above) opens a cavity in the center of the block using her clenched right fist while holding the piece with her left hand. The right hand pulls from inside out and the walls grow upwards, taking the form projected for the object.

To make the walls uniform and regular, the potter moves around the vessel. Some objects are made in one piece while others (pots, large jars, etc.) are modeled with clay shaped into rings laid on top of each other to form a wall.

After modeling the object, the potter smoothes its surface with a rudimentary utensil such as a piece of corn cob. Then she decorates it, usually by incising a pattern, either immediately or after the clay has hardened to some extent. The motifs still in use are spare but suggest that they once were the equal of the magnificent decorations produced by some of our neighbors.

In some cases the pieces are dried in the open air, at times even without protecting them from the sun, which compromises their quality.

In Fonte Lima, on the island of Santiago, some pieces are decorated after drying with dirt rich in iron oxide, which produces an intense, reddish coloration after firing.

Firing, the operation which gives the objects their final consistency, is done in an open fire. In this process the water in the clay's chemical composition begins to evaporate. A piece attains a reddish color according to the quantity of oxygen around it and the amount of iron oxide it contains. The piece will show blue, grayish, or black spots if oxygen is scarce.

No type of pottery oven is known in Cape Verde. The interiors of the pieces are preheated, and then they are piled on a combustible bed of manure and branches. This pile of large and small pottery pieces usually reaches a meter and a half in height and three meters in diameter. It is carefully covered with combustible material as baking progresses. Exactly 8 1/2 hours are needed to complete the burn. It is usually done at night in a party atmosphere of people playing, singing, and telling stories until dawn.

Techniques for making the utensils watertight are apparently being forgotten, except in

Pottery from the surrounding region of Santa Catarina, including the communities of Fonte Lima and Ribeira de Cariso, is available at the market of Assomada.

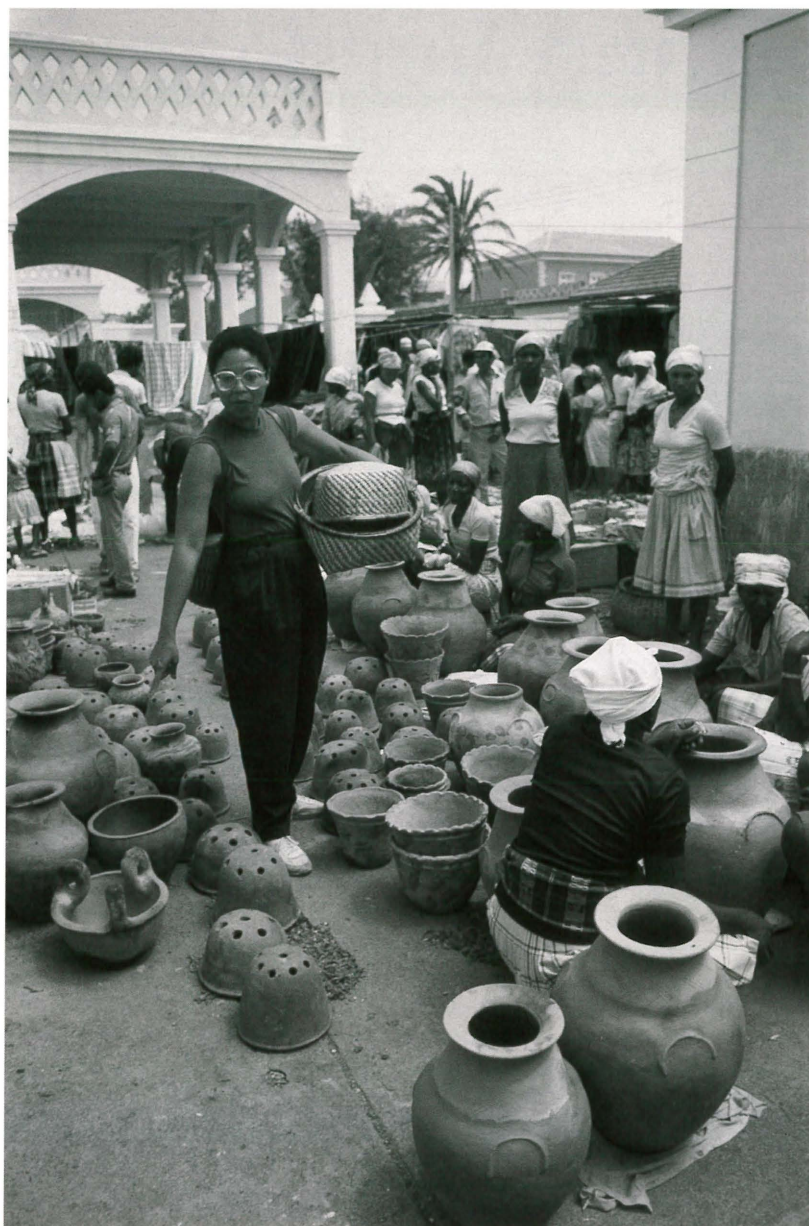


Photo by Ray Almeida

Trás-di-Monti, on the island of Santiago, and on Boa Vista, where polishing with pebbles is still done. It seems, however, that today the polishing is more for aesthetic effect than function. In Boa Vista's greatly diminished production, polishing is applied only to small decorative pieces and to a few objects of domestic use.

Nevertheless, according to our research, waterproofing methods that use vegetable resins, ashes, bran, etc., were practiced until quite recently. These methods must have been widely known since it was customary to "cure" water jars and pots at home. People knew how to control the exact degree of

porosity the pots needed to maintain cool, good-tasting water.

To this day, the shape of utilitarian objects produced in Cape Verde follows African tradition, except for those from Boa Vista. In the 1960s (we believe) Boa Vista's pottery production was influenced by forms brought by a Portuguese pottery maker, resulting in a sometimes bizarre and not pleasing hybrid style. The use of a potter's wheel, which was never fully introduced to the island (the pottery maker didn't teach the secrets of his technique to anyone), had negative results. Local pottery makers copied models which appeared to them to be "superior" and mixed them with

traditional forms, producing objects quite different from those done before. For example, Boa Vista's *binde* (small bowl) has the shape of a Portuguese flower pot. Many other objects sprouted feet, wings, wavy mouths, and unnecessary lids, which had not been part of the tradition. The forms of ornamentation that had been previously applied with a certain degree of refinement disappeared; the new forms of ornamentation were mechanical friezes drawn on vase sides or jar lids.

Besides large pieces, in some places one can find small statuettes called "toys," often made by children and adolescent potters.

Continued on page 40

Arts and Crafts: Cultural Expression of a People

MARIA ESTRELA



Baskets such as this *balaio tinté* are for sale in Socupira market in the capital city of Praia, Santiago.

Photo by Diana N'Diaye



Marcelino Santos, working at the National Crafts Center in Mindelo, S. Vicente, is weaving *pano d'obra*, the most elaborate of the traditional Cape Verdean *panos*.

Photo by Pete Reiniger

MARIA ESTRELA is a researcher in traditional crafts and the Director of *Atelier Mar*, an institution in Mindelo that carries out research, training, collection, publication, and exhibition of traditional crafts and produces ceramic ware for daily use.

Craftsmanship is the art of living; it is linked to our cultural identity. We find the social values that characterize Cape Verdeans in the solidarity expressed in *djunta mom*, "the spirit of joining hands," at the time of house building, and in the aesthetic values of materials collected from the land. Traditional crafts preserve the precarious environmental balance in our developing society, in which irrational construction practices and the use of imported raw materials aggressively strive for dominance. Industrially produced consumer goods injure the aesthetic as well as the natural environment of the islands. In agriculture, important values of cultural and biological craftsmanship are

preserved and practiced all over the archipelago in the species cultivated, in the methods of cultivation used, and in the ways of preparing foods, sometimes according to ancient rituals.

Our crafts embody modes of cultural expression and exchange. Foods, basketry, ceramics, tin work, and musical instruments are a means of cultural affirmation. They are points where people come in contact with their deepest and most authentic values. In this archipelago of rocks and winds, forever dependent on uncertain rains, peopled by the encounter of African and European cultures, popular art is revitalized by the products of a craftsmanship rooted in tradition.

LEÃO LOPES
 was formerly Cape
 Verdean Minister of
 Culture and
 Communication. A
 cultural researcher
 and administrator,
 he is also an
 accomplished
 filmmaker and
 graphic artist.

These small houses and human and animal figures were playthings for children in rural areas before they became objects of commercial demand, primarily by foreigners. Market forces caused the objects to decline in quality, especially in Fonte Lima.

Until very recently, it was common to find in Fonte Lima a type of statuette, sometimes 40 cm high, made by more skilled potters. Emigration of some of the potters caused the decline of this art form, which may have some ritual significance, as can be inferred from the following observational account.

When we arrived at the *ribeira* (dry river bed), people had already started the pottery-firing celebration and were waiting for us. In the opening under a large mango tree, where potters gather to make their jars, the *batuku* (*batuque*) (a woman's dance) [Editor's note: See Rodrigues's article.] started as soon as we stepped down from the jeep. We sang and drummed with them, and we helped them decorate the pieces for baking, prepare the fire, burn straw in the center of jars, carry manure, etc. At a certain point we realized that one of the great animators of the community of potters, the one who had arranged for our visit, was absent. We asked, "Where is Mamá?" "She'll be here soon," was the reply. Some time later, I decided to look for her at her house, climbing some dozens of meters uphill. Squatting in her front yard, the pottery maker was intensely concentrating on a small statue, working on the final details. It was the largest "doll" I had ever seen, about 50 cm high. The sun had just set, and the fire down below, next to the mango tree, was a golden glow of celebrating potters around a flaming stack of pots. A magic atmosphere of smoke, fire, and song enveloped the *ribeira*. "Why don't you go down?" I asked Mamá. "In a minute. The doll is almost ready," she replied. "But, Mamá, making dolls in the dark?" "It has to be this way for the celebration."

I was silent, anxious and expectant. She calmly and quietly made the finishing touches, washed her hands, and, after adjusting her hairdo and placing a folded cloth on it, she carefully sat the doll on top of her head. It was the figure of a woman cut short at the hem of her skirt, a bell shape of a diameter to fit on the potter's head. Although larger, it was like the others she made to sell. However, this one would not be fired — the reason for its weight and massive appearance. Mamá rotated the piece so that I could appreciate the finished work. After that, she dragged me down the hill toward the fire in a great explosion of satisfaction. The other potters in the *batuku* circle welcomed Mamá, giving her the *pano* cloth to tie around her hips and forcing her to the center.

The vibrancy and ecstasy of that woman as she merged into the *batuku* rhythm was indescribable in its magical and penetrating harmony.

One moment it seemed that the doll had received the rhythm of life from its creator; then, after growing tired, it was set to rest on a large rock. I was told that the following day the unfired clay doll would be kneaded together with larger quantities of clay for the production of everyday jars and pots which have meant, over the centuries, the survival of a community.

This story suggests the existence of a ritual of mystical nature in this pottery-making community, and it indicates something profound that warrants the continuity of this ancient folk art, in spite of the factors promoting its disappearance.

Plastics, aluminum, urban culture, new concepts of growth and development are all little by little laying siege to the several dozens of pottery-making women who still maintain this important part of our heritage. What can be done? For one thing, anyone with a clay pot — keep it safe!