The Jar Makers of Thrapsano in Crete

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THE VENDEMA

Thrapsano is a village of about 1500 inhabitants in the province of Pediada, 30 kilometers from Heraklion. It is known all over Crete as the village of the jar makers. Every year guilds of jar makers set out from Thrapsano to settle in other parts of Crete, where they make and sell jars during the summer months. This system of work is called vendema and is the main part of it called the vendemiero.

The vendema begins on May 21st and lasts until September 4th. The departure of the groups of jar makers from Thrapsano takes a festive aspect. The guilds separate as soon as they come out of the village, each taking a different direction to reach its destination. Each guild stays throughout the summer months at the same place and sells the jars it makes to the people of the neighboring district. About 30 or 35 guilds are set up to work from Thrapsano in the past, about two hundred men, that is, approximately half the male population of the village.

The guild consists of six technician members:

1. The Master Potter: he is the chief craftsman. He is a master at shaping the jar; it is he who picks the craftsmen, who are called coupel. He is also the business manager of the guild.
2. The Second Master: he is the exclusive assistant of the Master Potter. He makes and prepares and lays out the coils on each separate “brim” and also does the first “dry” movements at the turntable, the “dressing” and the “milking.”
3. The Wheeler, sitting opposite the Master, but at a lower level; he turns the (hand-operated) turntable. The Wheeler also acts as Kiln-man, whose job is to get the wares in the kiln, cover it, build it up and monitor the temperature in the oven.
4. The Clay Worker: he has to pound and sieve the dry clay for the jars. During the first days, all the members of the guild help the Clay Worker in order to produce without delay the number of clay required to begin work.
5. The Woodcutter: he cuts faggots for the firing of the kiln and loads the bundles on the pack animals.
6. The Kiln-beater: he brings the faggots and the dry clay from the hills, loaded on the Master’s animals. He also brings the jars to the buyer’s house, two on each pack animal, and provides water for the making of the jars to prove that they are sound.

When a guild has arrived at the site where it plans to work, the Master negotiates the renting of the field where the workshop is to be put up. The most suitable field is the one which offers the three essential materials required for their work: clay, water and fuel. They build the kiln or repair the old kiln, if there is one. They put up huts made of tree branches, where they can have their meals and take a rest. Of all the work involved in ceramics, only the kneading can be done inside the hut. The turntables are put up in the open. The men work in the sun so that the “brims” may dry quickly. It is out here in the open that the buyers come to meet the jar makers.

Every member of the guild, with the exception of the Carrier, has his own pack animal, which he uses to carry from his village both the articles for personal use and the tools he needs for his job.

Work for all the members of the guild begins at the time of the morning. First they prepare the dry clay brought in the previous evening by pounding and sieving it. Then, if they had a rainy day before, they empty the kiln. They begin work at the turntable at about 6 o’clock and finish at about 5 in the afternoon, usually making 10 to 16 jars in the twelve hours. While they fire the kiln, they do not work at the turntables. The setting in the kiln, that is to say placing the jars in the kiln, is done at about 10 or 11 o’clock in the morning. The firing of the kiln begins early in the afternoon; it lasts four to five hours and ends at sunset.

The craftsmen have several breaks in the course of their working day. Those who work at the kiln have a hot apple and coffee at about 9 in the morning, and at noon they also have a bite wherever they happen to be. They drink wine or raki (a kind of ouzo). Those who happen to be travelling take dry food with them for lunch and return to the kiln in the evening. Then the company eats the food prepared for all, which usually consists of dried meat and bread. They spend all their time cross-legged on the ground around a deep dish, a kind of roughly made tureen, in which they dip their spoons; they eat bread with it and drink wine or raki, and talk. They all drink from one mug, which they pass around.

The Master makes a point of:
1. They work at the jars during the first forty days, producing 400-500 pieces.
2. During the last ten days they fire the kiln and sell their output.
3. During the vendema they keep a common cash account, a kind of pool for expenses paid and money received from which they pay the rent for the field and their eating and drinking expenses.
4. The Master takes all the guild’s business transactions; he makes arrangements with the owner of the field, he sells the wares to the buyers, he sees to the production of the guild. A personal account for each member of the guild is also kept. It is called testotato, tally. A daybook is kept in which both collective and individual expenses are entered. At the end of the vendema, the profits are shared on the basis of these entries. Each member’s share is fixed.

THE CLAY

The blending of the raw materials has been a well-known process since the earliest days of ceramic art. The practice usually is to prepare the clay and store it for some time before it will be used, but in Thrapsano kneading the clay immediately precedes the shaping of the clay object. In general, the choice of dry clay and its preparation determine the kind of clay that will result; the resulting clay, in turn, is directly related to the ceramic object to be shaped. Hard clay is composed of thickly -grained earth, which gives a porous surface; it allows water to evaporate faster during the drying and firing.

The district where the proper clay is to be found has already been located by older jar makers in previous years, the information having been passed on from generation to generation. Jar clay is not used by itself, but mixed with other kinds of clay. Two out of ten sacks of jar clay consist of clay that is more resistant to fire, but less malleable than common jar clay. The characteristic stages of the procedure in Thrapsano are as follows:

A) the blend is prepared with dry material, after the dry clay has been sieved, B) the kneading begins, with two raw ingredients, earth and water; C) the clay is used immediately after it is kneaded. The process of preparing the clay seems to have been determined by the working conditions of the vendema: the material could not be stored up.

About 60 kilograms of clay are necessary for each jar, that is, about 800 for a day’s work. On the eve, the members of the guild spread the clay on the ground, inside the hut, opening a well in the middle. At dawn the next day they throw water into this well. Three or four men knead facing each other; they bend forward, and they push the clay into the water with their hands. This process reminds one of kneading bread dough. The water and the clay are thus transformed into a large lump of mass which is divided into three smaller lumps, one for each of the men who now begin working at it. The movement is centrifugal, and the whole process is carried out with their hands; while kneading they also turn the mass of mud upside down several times.

Then they begin to trample the mud with their feet in a small-like movement, from the periphery to the center. Supporting themselves on the left foot, they spread with their right foot with quick, brisk movements; they advance in this way, making deep footprints in the mud. When they come to the center, they use both feet, in exactly the same way as grapes are trampled in the wine press.
During the whole procedure, the feet knead the clay while the hands break it up and move it about. In other words, it is the feet that do the most important work, while the hands assist without really taking part in the kneading proper. The clay is kneaded three times. In between these three stages of kneading, it is divided into portions and each portion is shifted, first upside down, and then from the center to the periphery, or vice versa. Each time it is shifted, the clay is concentrated into a lump at the center of the hut, or in several lumps forming a circle inside the hut, in which case it is kneaded every time at a different spot, in the snail-like motion described above; this is the principal way the kneading is done, namely, always from the periphery to the center of the lump of mud.

The process of kneading is exceedingly impressive. One admires the balancing of forces in each man's separate movements and in the coordinated movements of the group as a whole. It is not an ordinary muscular exertion, but a systematic and gradual combining of rhythmic efforts achieved by a group of men working in perfect harmony. It is reminiscent of the movements in classical tragedy rather than of the perfunctory physical activity of wine pressing.

**SHAPING THE JAR**

The jars are made at low turntables operated by hand. For each jar there is one wheel, or turntable, operated by the Wheeler, who does not, however, take part in the making of the jar itself. The revolving movement of the turntable cannot be continuous, nor can it be very rapid. These two facts, which are due to the very structure of the turntable, have a decisive effect on the way it functions. The technique of fashioning jars on the turntable is not based on centering the mass of clay from which the final form will develop, but on the use of bands of clay fashioned at successive stages. This is the technique most suited to the turntable. Consequently, the form produced is the result of both the tool and the technique. Due to the unsteady rotation of the turntable, the jar is necessarily asymmetrical.

The technique for making a jar is based on two principles: a) the clay must be very moist; b) the shape is built up by means of superimposed strips of clay.

**COILS**

Pushing his palm through the moist clay, the Second Potter cuts off strips of clay, which he herbs between his palms and quickly allows to roll down, continually moving his palms back and forth. He keeps his palms high, at a level with his chest, while his arms remain motionless. The strip of clay grows longer by its own force of gravity and so the coil is soon ready. Each respective coil always consists of the same quantity of clay (about 4 to 5 kg). Two or three coils make up a sufficient quantity of clay for one band of the final jar, that is, one brim.

**BRIMS**

Each stage in the shaping of a jar constitutes one section of the final shape, otherwise known as a brim. When one section is dry enough it is ready to receive the next. Thus every section is based on the preceding section, itself becoming the basis for the next section. It is in this manner that the circular form of the jar is shaped on the turntable; the clay bears the seal of continuous human energy. A large jar is necessarily made of six sections or brims and each brim has its own peculiar name: the "base," the "first brim," the "round brim," the "straight brim," the "big brim," the "lip"), each section or brim has its own definite shape. The name of each brim automatically defines the diameter corresponding to each respective level of the jar. A fixed number of coils is necessary for each brim. Consequently, there is a close connection between the quantity of clay coils needed and the form of the brim to be made (according to its curve and height). Thus each brim is ahead of the following by about one hour in time and by about 12 cm of loose clay in height. An additional band called the belt is added where two brims are joined. When the jar finally stands completed on the turntable, handles are attached to it.

**DRYING**

The jar will remain on the turntable to dry till the next day. Then the craftsmen will clear the turntable, transferring the jars to the edge of the wheel-groove behind the Wheeler's back. They will be left there to dry for the following twenty-four hours. Meanwhile, a new series of jars will be made at the turntables. Every morning the craftsmen will transfer the older series of jars a little further away from the wheel-groove behind the Wheeler's back. Thus the first row of jars next to the Wheeler will always be the most recent, and between each series there will always be a difference of twenty-four hours' drying.

This method of making jars by stages was adopted not merely to solve the problem of weight and support; it also facilitates the drying of the clay, because every section or brim dries somewhat independently of the others, since each one dries separately after the preceding one has already become sufficiently dry. In this way the shrinking is gradual. Drying the jar by stages also has an immediate effect on its form; while drying, each section loses the relative symmetry it necessarily acquires at the turntable. Consequently, the final form of the jar cannot be absolutely symmetrical.
FIRING

The Cretan kiln is of the upright type of ceramic kilns to be found all over Greece, actually an upright cylinder, the major part of which is built beneath the surface of the earth. The fire is lighted at the base, it heats the air and the clay wares in the cylinder, letting the smoke escape through its upper end, which leads directly into the open air. The fuel is separated from the raw wares by a built-in floor, the “bottom,” which divides the kiln’s cylinder into two spaces:

A) The lower space, the firebox, where the fire burns; it communicates with the surface of the earth by a wide groove dug obliquely, the stock hole. The firebox has an earthen floor, and for a ceiling it has the lower part of the kiln floor. It has a built entrance, known as a fire hole or kiln eye, located in front of the kiln hole, through which the fuel is pushed in.

Pulling and stretching the clay so that it becomes a thick walling.

Knocking or pulling up: the wall of clay becomes thinner as it is drawn between the two index fingers.

The rib, that is, the final shaping of the rim with the help of a wooden chisel.

A prospective buyer inspecting finished jars.

B) The space above, where the raw wares are set, which is of a greater height than the firebox and communicates directly with the open air, as the kiln has no roof, but is partly covered by the kiln door when functioning. At ground level, part of the circumference of the kiln is left open as a permanent entrance, known as the kiln door or wicket, through which the potter, the jars, and the paste are ushered in and out during the setting or the emptying of the kiln. Both the kiln door and the fire hole remain open for as long as the kiln is not functioning. Both are built with sun-dried bricks; the kiln door is built after the setting and demolished before the emptying of the kiln.

In our day kilns are covered with ordinary galvanized iron sheets, placed loosely together so as to let the smoke out; these lie on the cylinder of the kiln and the raw jars within. The craftsmen place test pieces or sherds over the fire hole to keep them in place. When the test pieces grow white it is a sign that the firing must come to an end. The iron sheets will be taken away to let the kiln cool before the fire hole and the kiln door are opened. The arrangement of the space to be used for the kiln and the actual building of it are relatively simple operations.

All men have a hand in setting the wares in the kiln. When moving them from the drying place to the kiln, the second Potter and the Wheeler stand facing each other; between them is the jar they are to carry. They stretch their arms and clasp each other’s hands by the wrist. They kneel down, lift the jar, taking hold of it beneath the first section. They walk off, with the jar between them.

The Master and the Kiln-man are inside the kiln, standing on the floor. They take hold of the jar, which slips in easily through the kiln door. As they take hold of it, they lower the lip towards the floor, so that it touches the floor of the kiln. The kiln is filled up in a circular fashion. First an outer circle is formed, with jars nearly touching the wall of the kiln, and then the inner circle, which is much smaller. On the bottom of the first jar, another jar is placed upright, that is, bottom to bottom. Thus there are two horizontal layers of jars, filling the kiln.

The jars never touch the floor of the kiln directly, or the bottom of another jar, but are balanced on sherds. Thus the flames pass over the whole of each jar’s surface, so that it is heated and contracts evenly.

As soon as the kiln is set, the men build the kiln door with oblong bricks and mud; this is called sealing the kiln door.

Early in the morning the Carrier brings the twigs for the firing. He heaps his bundles around the kiln. The Kiln-man lights a few twigs, passes them through the fire hole and lets them flare up. As soon as the flame abates, he adds some more twigs, which he pushes with his fork towards the pillar, and right in front of the fire hole. He thus keeps this small fire burning at the same point for about an hour and a half by poking the fire. The fuel for the poking is twigs that flare up easily, such as the twigs of the cypress trees, because the space in the kiln and its walls are still cold, and so are the clay wares placed in it. Then the Kiln-man begins to add more twigs, at a more rapid pace. The fuel used now is brushwood, which produce a smaller flame, but more cinders.

Then the Kiln-man spreads the fire, pushing the burning twigs now to the right, then to the left of the fire hole. This lasts about two hours. Thick, black smoke now comes out of the kiln, followed by the first flames. The sherds become black. The inside of the kiln, which is getting hotter and hotter, is still dark. The hotter it gets, the faster the kiln draws, that is, the faster the twigs flare up; now they kindle fast, almost as soon as they touch the fire, and the Kiln-man pushes them all ablaze right and left. The space inside the kiln turns red, casting a rich glow which lights up the jars, now distinct dark red shapes in the smoky, incandescent air. The rising flames begin to “eat up” the smoke from the sherds, and gradually grow whiter. Now the Kiln-man throws in whole bundles of brushwood, one after the other. The whole kiln is ablaze, the yellow fire crests and quivers, the flames flare up wildly. This goes on for about half an hour.

The smoke is now white and thin, the space inside the kiln turns yellow while the jars become bright crimson; the whole kiln is bathed in a haze of light and heat. In this eerie glow the jars stand still, a finished achievement.

The duration of the firing is regulated according to the size and capacity of the kiln. For the first firing of a newly built kiln the time is longer, because the walls, the joints and the floor are not yet quite dry.

At dawn next day, the kiln is emptied. As with setting the wares in the kiln, now again the Master Potter and the Kiln-man stand on the kiln floor and carry the jars one by one to the kiln door. Then the man who stands by the kiln door bends low and raises the jar, leans it forward till it touches the ground, and rolls it away on its “round birt.” It takes about 30 minutes to demolish the kiln door, take away the iron sheets and the sherds and empty a kiln holding 24 jars.

The day after the potter empties the kiln, they wet the whole surface of the jar with a little water. The next day, or maybe later, they fill the jar with water. They let it stand full of water for at least a month. In this way the particles of lime in the clay are neutralized. Water also neutralizes the pores of the jar by...
dissolving the mineral particles adhering. As a result, the walls of the jar gradually become impermeable.

**THE FUTURE**

Boys begin their apprenticeship at about the age of twelve. The apprentices work in the outdoor workshops near the village. They do not join the vendema. Sometimes the Carrier is a young apprentice from the village. But during the vendema the Carrier's job is the most he will be allowed to do. The boy Carrier watches the craftsmen at work and learns all about clay and the vendema. If he is intelligent enough, he may become a Master, a full-fledged jar maker, but that will take him over ten years.

The vendemaroí, the craftsmen of the guild, work in the open to make the most of the sun which dries the clay. Consequently, they are constantly exposed to rain and humidity. They have difficulties in digging up the earth, and the clay they extract for the jars may sometimes prove to be inadequate after the first firing. Under such conditions, about 15,000 jars are made yearly by 30 to 35 groups of potters from Thrapsano. The whole of this output is bought up by the Cretan market, because the jars are needed for storing oil, wine and cereals. Until 1940, in the region around Thrapsano, people used to grow olives and cereals. Not much labor is required for the cultivation of olive trees throughout the major part of the year. Olives are picked and pressed during November and December. The ploughing and sowing of cereals is done in October and November. Harvesting and threshing were usually done only by the wives of the craftsmen of the guild. The craftsmen, therefore, used to spend the three summer months at the vendema. During that period, they made more money than they would have made working in the fields. The working conditions of the vendema, however, are harder than those of farm work. The craftsmen of the guild do not earn a whole year's living expenses during the vendema. Upon returning to the village, they still have to work in the fields, or wait for the halcyon days of October (traditionally called "the little summer") to prepare some glazed pots. They will work on these in the proximity of the village, fire them in kilns, take them round the villages loaded on their pack animals and try to sell them. Before the time for the vendema comes round again, they will also prepare jugs and pitchers, which they will sell to the villagers, who take them along for their personal use when they go to work in the fields.

After 1945, living conditions in general suffered a change, and so did the conditions of agricultural life. The cultivation of vines was introduced, requiring exacting, continuous and intensive care. At present, the cultivation of cereals has nearly been abandoned. The art of pottery making has also been abandoned. Only about ten Masters live in the village now, of whom only three work on jars. There still prevails all over the village a wonderful familiarity with the raw material, passed on from the old man to the child, from the Master to the farmer. One might say that the breath and pulse of the clay has become one with the breath and pulse of these people. On the other hand, one can't help feeling quite clearly that the art of pottery making will not be continued by any of the inhabitants of Thrapsano.

Among the Thrapsano Masters there is only one who has decided to make changes in his working conditions and increase his output. No other potter or jar maker ever considers the possibility of changing his working conditions or the kind of wares he produces. They have all resigned themselves to abandoning pottery; this is quite obvious since there are no children or young men learning the art any more. In the case of an art laden with such a long tradition, total obliteration is more probable than adaptation to new conditions. Besides, changes in technology are inconceivable to an artisan of the guild. Technical and aesthetic experimentation have no place in the vendema. The jar is a human record; it is all there in the completed form: the clay, the kiln, the guild, the life of the craftsmen and that of the farmer, the life of an endless line of human beings.

There is hope of a change, a double change—in the technique of ceramics, and in the public's response to new ceramic wares—resulting in a new balance of offer and demand. But is this possible in the case of traditional craftsmanship?

Potter with pitchers.

Maria Voyatzoglou began her study of ceramics in the studios of Athens and the Aegean islands, working with traditional craftsmen. In 1960, she set up her own studio in Athens and has been working there ever since. In 1962 and 1964, she worked in ceramic workshops in Denmark, and in 1968 in Sweden. As a special art collaborator in the Studio on Ceramics in the Laboratory of Design and Industrial Aesthetics in the School of Architecture at the Thessaloniki Aristotle University since 1968, she has been involved in research on the traditional pottery of Crete. The last two years she has worked with the Orthodoxy Academy of Crete on a project of International Symposium of Ceramics in Crete and the development of an educational program of training for potters. Miss Voyatzoglou has lectured in the United States and has exhibited in several European cities.

Suggested Reading

Casson, St.
1938

Foster, G. M.
1962

Hampe, R., and A. Winter
1962

Shepard, Anna O.
1956