



Henry H. Glassie. *The Potter's Art*. Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 2000. 152 pp. \$25.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-33732-0.

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Published on H-PCAACA (September, 2000)

## Folklorist Henry Glassie's Observations on Pottery-making

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The renowned and prolific scholar of material culture, Henry H. Glassie, College Professor of Folklore and Co-director of Turkish Studies at Indiana University has recently prepared a volume for publication entitled *The Potter's Art*. Available since January 2000, this slender book, designed by the author and illustrated by his own photographs, has 60 black-and white images and 16 color plates, and is accompanied by Acknowledgments, Notes (90 endnotes), a 51-item Bibliography, and an Index (5-page double-column conflated topical and proper nouns). *The Potter's Art* is the first in a series of books on material culture co-published by Material Culture of Philadelphia and the Indiana University Press, edited by George Jevremovic, William T. Sumner, and Henry Glassie. The volume is an expanded version of the fourth chapter of Glassie's *Material Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999, pp. 143-226) published in August 1999. The volume is an ethnographic report that is also an essay on the nature of art (especially ceramic art) and a demonstration of how art may be studied cross culturally. In this book, Glassie brings to the reader a group of modern ceramic artisans, modern masters of traditional ceramic manufacture from the United States, Sweden, Turkey, Bangladesh, and Japan. He seeks to inform us about the potters' techniques and tastes, their ideas about beauty and significance, and cooperation in the midst of

other life activities, and thereby illustrate the personal and the social, the useful and beautiful, and the material and spiritual aspects of this art.

Glassie is the author of three other volumes published by Indiana University Press: *Turkish Traditional Art Today* (1993, 962 pp., 1061 black-and white photos, 13 color plates, 6 maps), *Art and Life in Bangladesh* (1997, 520 pp. 445 black-and-white photos, 12 color plates), and the aforementioned *Material Culture* (1999, 416 pp., 170 black-and-white photos, 16 illustrations).

There are nine sections in Glassie's latest volume, the first, "The Potter's Art," provides an introduction and essential background. He writes that pottery is "the most intense of the arts" and "coming into being, the work of art, this very pot, creates relations –relations between nature and culture, between the individual and society, between utility and beauty. Governed by desire, the artist's work answers questions of value. Is nature favored, or culture? Are individual needs or social needs more important? Do utilitarian or aesthetic concerns dominate in the transformation of nature?" (p. 17). The goal of his volume is to illustrate how common clay can be made to carry value. In each of the seven sections that follow, he considers particular master potters, aesthetics, and meanings. The transmission of ceramic traditions from parent to child and from mentor to student and methods of production (clay selection through firing) are sometimes considered.

This introductory essay is followed by a chapter entitled "Bangladesh" (pp. 19-34), in which Glassie reports

that there are 680 villages of potters in that nation. His discussion centers on a craft-caste, the Pals, and especially three potters – Gauranga Chandra Pal, Parul Rani Pal, and Haripada Pal (Glassie also profiles the latter in greater detail in Chapter 6 of *Art and Life in Bangladesh*). The craft production of kalshis (earthenware water vessels) is contrasted with the fabrication of murtis (painted clay images of deities which are “vessels with sacred power”), art and skill, use and beauty, and the relationship of working clay as a “hymn to God” are documented.

“Sweden” (pp. 34-35) profiles Lars Andersson of Raus in Skane, Sweden. “Georgia” (pp. 36-47) considers the production of ash-glazed stoneware face jugs at the Meaders Pottery at Mossy Creek and the Hewell Pottery in Gillsville, Georgia. Chester Hewell is the son and father of potters, continuing a local tradition. “Acoma” (pp. 48-56) reviews the harsh environment of the American Southwest and notes that 300 potters in 13 pueblos make “storyteller” figures, partly influenced by tourism. The work of Marvis and Wanda Aragon, Lilly Salvador, and Frances Torivio is considered, and Glassie notes an accommodation to the past and a resistance to modernity among artisans such as Wanda Aragon.

A major section is devoted to “Turkey” (pp. 56-90), and is a distillation of some elements in Glassie’s *Turkish Traditional Art Today*, Chapters 14-17. A shift from the utilitarian to the ornamental production is seen with small atelier shops producing polychrome painted mosque tiles and plates. The aesthetics of decoration is considered, with balance seen as the key to design. Glassie states that painters learn to ‘read’ the designs and unlock its magic (p. 77), and he discusses three classes of modern works are reviewed: calligraphic, geometric, and floral. The work of Ibrahim Erdeyen, Mustafa Oruc, Ahmet Sahin, Mehmet Gursoy, Fevziye Yesildere, and Nurten Salim (the latter a young woman in the “man’s world” of potters). His review of the visit of two Turkish potters Gursoy and Erdeyer) to the workshops of two Acoma pueblo artisans (Aragon and Salvador) is enlightening.

In “Japan” (pp. 91-98), Glassie considers the history of Arita porcelain, in the main tableware (plates, bowls, and cups), and informs us of 170 workshops in the Arita area. The concept of *sensi* (master) is reviewed and we learn that success depends on the efficient management of the masters’ (p. 98). Hiroshisa Tatebayashi and his daughter, Chinatsu, are profiled. “Hagi” (pp. 98-116) is a

style and area of western Honshu where 200 shops produce yaki (statues) and tea vessels (tea bowls, tea canisters, and containers for incense, fresh water, and flowers). Norio Agawa who has a one-man shop and his brother Hachiro Higaki are discussed, and the philosophy of the former is detailed: “only simple things and be taught, complex things must be learned on your own” (p. 100). Yaki production centers on seven home gods of diverse origin (Buddhist, Hindu, and Christian), Japanese heroes (Daruma and Hotei), and lions. Some comparisons of Japanese, Bangladeshi, and Turkish production are noted.

Glassie’s The final essay is entitled “Work in the Clay” (pp. 116-122) and he notes that “confidence, stability, quiet pride, easy cheer – these are what I find in the masters of ceramics” (p. 116). He further states that “I am not a potter, I am a folklorist, a student of ceramics because pottery is a more universal democratic medium than painting, a better place to search for the world’s excellence. I have become an admirer of the sincere worker with clay. I envy the options of the modern potter” (p. 119).

Among the numerous acknowledgements to “masters and colleagues in the movement for the study of a material culture,” first mentioned are geographer Fred Kniffin, anthropologist, Robert Plant Armstrong, and archaeologist James Deetz. In summary he notes that traditional art may flourish in a poor country (Bangladesh), a prospering nation (Turkey), or a rich country (Japan). Glassie also notes that traditional art fares best in alliance with religion (the Hindu Pals, Gursoy’s Islam, Agawa’s Buddhism, and Hewell’s Christianity).

While this volume is written for students of folk art, folklore, art history, and cultural anthropology, it has utility in ceramic ethnoarchaeology – subtly reminding us about the artisans who fabricated and decorated the ceramics. The profiles of the potters and their communities provide a mere glimpse into the craft; more fulsome and in-depth studies, along the line of Carol Kramer’s excellent analysis in her volume entitled *Pottery in Rajasthan: Ethnoarchaeology in Two Indian Cities* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997).

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**Citation:** Charles C. Kolb. Review of Glassie, Henry H., *The Potter's Art*. H-PCAACA, H-Net Reviews. September, 2000.

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