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Co-crafting the Meaning of Potter's Craft

Abstract

The article is based on ethnography and the autoethnography of making. It presents an anthropological reflection on pottery craft as a way of life in a 21st-century village in Poland. The individual case of a village pottery shop in the region of Masuria is in focus, a place located in the north of the country. The exchange of knowledge and a participatory mode characterised the ethnographic enterprise. The author's approach combines critical reflections on the social construction of *folk art and craft* in Poland with discursive renderings of craft-related bodily knowledge and the embodied recognition of materials and their affordances. Highlighting the alienating potential of the folk representation of the rural, it follows the meanings of pottery craft having been accommodated in the lifeworld of a modern village potter. The pottery workshop is presented both as an environment where skills and techniques are mastered as well as where experimentation happens and knowledge is built. The author focuses on recognising features of the world that are only made available through practicing the potter's craft. The craft is also a way of establishing meaningful links with the local environment of the potter.

Keywords: anthropology of making; pottery; bodily knowledge; Masuria; folk craft

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Figure 1. *Garncarnia* in February 2021, with the house to the left and the so-called old workshop to the right (photo: E. Klekot).

Late in January 2020, I received an email from an unknown female correspondent who explained that she had just attended my webinar on craft, design and embodied knowledge and that ‘they’ – she switched to the first-person plural – were extremely enthusiastic and interested in what I said. ‘For almost twenty years’, she wrote, ‘we have been developing a pottery practice and our experiences and observations resonate so well with what you were saying!’ ‘We were not aware’, she continued, ‘of academic reflection being so much in tune with what we had been doing’.¹ My correspondent, enthusiastic about the connection between her experience as a potter and my discursive rendering of the processes, agency and knowledge involved in ceramic production, invited me to a pottery workshop located in a small village in the north of Poland, in the region of Mazury. She did not call it a ‘ceramic studio’, though, nor even a ‘pottery studio’, but instead used a slightly antiquated Polish word, *garncarnia*, meaning literally ‘a village pottery shop’; only later did I realise that they used it as the name for their place, not only as a description of the workshop. *Garncarnia* can be both a place where the potter works and sells their products as well as a place where they live. However, due to the COVID-19 lockdown, I was only able to visit *Garncarnia* for the first time a year later, in February 2021 (see Figure 1).

1 The ‘we’ in this case refers to Marta Florkowska and Paweł Szymański, <https://garncarnia.pl/>, accessed 03/01/2024. I am in many ways indebted to both of them, not only as the protagonists of my ethnographic study, but also as generous hosts during my visit to their pottery homestead in Masuria, as the readers of this text and most importantly as friends.



Figure 2. *Garncarnia* in February 2021, showing the so-called new workshop with a wood-fired kiln. (photo: E. Klekot).

Since then, I have travelled to *Garncarnia* several times and spent my time there conducting an ethnography of skills and obtaining knowledge about pottery making, as well as accompanying Paweł and Marta in their everyday life, talking with them, sharing books and articles that I had published on the topic of embodied knowledge and skills and also on folk art and craft. Having practiced pottery for some time, teaching design students in courses co-tutored with a ceramic designer as well as during my previous ceramic-related research, I had already developed the analytical tools for understanding and putting into words the knowledge involved in ceramic manufacturing (Klekot, 2020, 2021a). However, it did not take long for me to realise that with Paweł and Marta, the research had become more of a collaborative enterprise than just my own ethnography of a village potter's craft in north-east Poland in the 21st century. Paweł has been very generous in sharing with me his insights about the pottery craft as his way of life, letting me observe him work, showing me some practical pottery tricks and explaining his findings: both about the properties of clay and about pot making, as well as about the place where he has been living. We also spent many hours talking about ethnography and ethnographic research on pottery, trying to understand the discrepancies between what he had read in books and articles and his/our pottery experience. The way the three of us participated in my research made me think of the methodology of co-designing, which I was already familiar with because of my position as an anthropology teacher at a design college. I had the feeling that understanding the contemporary sense and meaning of the potter's



Figure 3. Paweł Szymański at work in his pottery shop (photo: E. Klekot).

craft had become our common project. We were working it out together in *Garncarnia*, in a small village in Mazury, Poland, both with words and with practicing bodies, co-crafting the meaning, so to speak. An appreciation of the situated, relational knowledge that the three of us shared, combined with our different backgrounds and perspectives, resulted in many insights on all our parts, although it was me who put them into words. Having read my article published in a Polish design/architecture journal, Paweł wanted to discuss it with me sentence by sentence. In some places, my perspective was so different from his own that he almost protested, but then he accepted that seeing

the same things from various perspectives makes the picture richer. If craft means practices that are concerned with the production of objects and meanings (Mazanti 2011, 60), then I have crafted an ethnographic object in the form of this text because of the pottery-related, co-crafting synergy existing between the three of us. It is an ethnography of craft and making, embedded in an autoethnography of an amateur potter-cum-anthropologist and combined with critical reflections on folk craft in 21st-century Poland.

On folk craft and social distinction

During the COVID-19 pandemic, when I could not travel to *Garncarnia*, I spoke with a ceramist friend who had been my first pottery teacher and was also a fellow co-curator of an exhibition on craft at a design festival. She was a co-founder and an active member of the New Craft Association,² and when I mentioned my contact with the *Garncarnia* people, she remarked: 'Oh, they are *folk craft*, aren't they?' Here it was, the distinction. Classifying a craft piece, or its author, as *folk craft* means formulating a judgement of taste: a complex cultural tool for social distinction used in a habitus-based way and embodied as such (Bourdieu 1984). My ceramist friend left no doubt that in her opinion the *Garncarnia* people were not *new craft*, as she was herself. She based her opinion on their self-presentation on the *Garncarnia* webpage, which features their village workshop, their products and their activities.³ However, the people from *Garncarnia* did not call their work *folk craft* either, even though Paweł Szymański had his own entry in a publication dedicated to 'contemporary folk art of the regions of Warmia and Mazury' (Beba 2008). In trying to find their own way of combining rural life with pottery handmaking, they had been struggling both with the concept of *folk craft* and with the open-air-museum-style reconstructions of so-called traditional techniques and their spectacularization. Nevertheless, their self-presentation was formulated in the sentimental poetics of an idyllic, simple life in nature, slightly anachronistic and escapist. The distinction between *folk craft* and *new craft* made by an art academy-trained ceramist catering to urban audiences – educated, lifestyle aware, mainstream contemptuous and trend setting (a proponent of the New Craft Association being *Vogue Living*) – was informed, on the one hand, by the complex history of craft within the modern field of art (Adamson 2007; 2013) and on the other by the long-standing relationship between the Polish intelligentsia and the rural makers of the objects identified as *folk art* and *craft*.

2 <https://nownowerzemioslo.pl/en/>, accessed 03.01.2024.

3 Only later did I realise that the potters from *Garncarnia* had been considering joining the New Craft Association but were discouraged by the response they had received to their inquiry.

Already in the nineteenth century, members of educated classes appropriated certain objects produced by villagers in many different regions of Europe for the modern field of art, submitting them to the judgement of taste (Klekot 2010; 2021b) and referencing them in several formative debates, most importantly those concerning the distinction between primitivism and ornament (Gombrich 1979; 2002). At the same time, folk art and craft became the foundation for folkloristic representations of the rural countryside, implicated both in the romantic search for authenticity as well as in romantic nationalism (Bendix 1996; Leerssen 2018). As a result, a lengthy process of the folklorisation of the rural countryside and its inhabitants was carried out by the educated classes, in which folk art and craft played an important role in how urban people conceived of the countryside as an archaic and picturesque rural world, charged with the power of primitive expression formulated in a distinctive *folk style*,⁴ attractive because of its formal and social exoticism. The folklorisation of the countryside and its inhabitants – by which I understand the process of the modern aestheticisation of the rural (Brett 1996, 38–51), carried out in a markedly Herderian and Rousseauian mode, under the *aegis* of a distinctly romantic category of *the folk* – resulted in a selective approach to village life and its material culture because not everything produced in villages conformed to educated tastes for folklore and therefore deserved to be called *folk* objects. Such objects had to be knowledgeably selected from the contemporary village material, usually described by the selectors as having already been spoiled by modernity, a mere shadow of their pure, archaic state ‘before first contact’. The creation of folk craft and art pieces has always involved interplay between the rural and the urban: the maker living in a village and the folk enthusiast of intelligentsia origin, responsible for identifying *authentic*, valuable *folk* objects and collecting them in the act of both safeguarding and canon-building.

In the process of preserving such *folk* craft, its enthusiasts (modern artists and designers, academics in several disciplines, collectors of various persuasions) dressed their own cultural creativity as an *act of discovery*, while the makers and their produce gained the status of having been *discovered*, under the condition that they had met the expectations defined through the construction of the folk. Such expectations were usually limited to the formal style – the *folk style* – and social origin of the maker (peasantry), implying their lack of education. Sometimes, they also referred to the moral and personal values

4 The style was in this context understood in an expressivist way: as the form in which a spirit of the times, or of a group, finds its expression. This understanding was influenced by Hegel and German idealism and was dominant in art theory and history well into the 20th century, but since then has been thoroughly criticised.

of the maker: honesty and sincerity, simplicity and naivete. Consequently, both folk art and the figure of the craft maker looked suspiciously like the *alter ego* of the modern artist (Klekot 2021b, 227–262), constructed according to the cultural representation-building practices described by Edward Said in his classic book on orientalism (Said 1978). Unrestrained in their expression by education, their creative practices followed community traditions, not individual whims; they lived close to nature and understood the natural beauty of simple form that follows function and the sincerity of the natural material, unspoiled by machine processing; they worked not for money, but because of a practical need, or for the joy of accomplishing a harmonious object – all these ideal features of folk creativity were extensively quoted both by modern artists, designers and art critics as well as by many academics studying the topic.⁵

In consequence, rural craft- and art-makers were encouraged to provide works and examples of lifestyles that met the expectations of the intelligentsia folk craft lovers. This could mean in practice the maker adopting stylistic choices that went against their own taste and the taste of their village peers, resulting in a process that I call self-folklorisation (Klekot 2024). As that happened, sometimes the village craft makers worked according to two different styles, catering to two different audiences, and providing two variants of their work: the one they called 'ours', which was destined for the local market, and the other they called 'folk', aimed at urban clients. The aesthetic qualities and stylistic features of folk products were ensured by educated experts: artists and designers on the one hand, and ethnographers/ folklorists on the other. They collaborated with organisations seeking to 'encourage the folk industry' by providing instruction to the peasantry in craft and handwork as well as assistance in how to market the products, thereby improving the living conditions of rural peoples. With the advent of a centralised, state-managed economy in the People's Republic of Poland after WWII, a state organisation for just such a purpose was established in 1949, which became widely known under the name of Cepelia.⁶ It coordinated and supervised production and marketing in the entire 'folk sector', from the folk art and craft co-operatives operating in larger villages and provincial towns to individual village producers, from the so-called 'ethnographic and artistic commission' in charge of approving the products, designs and prototypes to tastefully designed retail spaces in the bigger towns of Poland and the world: e.g. Brussels, Paris, New York (Więck-

5 For an extensive analysis of the topic based on Polish-language sources, see Klekot, 2021b.

6 The name Cepelia is a phonetic abbreviation of Centrala Przemysłu Ludowego i Artystycznego, or Central Bureau of the Folk and Artistic Industry.

owski 1987, 155–158). To be sure, what qualified as ‘tasteful’ examples of art and craft was defined by experts on folk culture, or the intelligentsia.

The intelligentsia played a key role in the modernisation of Polish society, in the construction of a modern nation-state, and in defining the Polish model of citizenship. In modern Poland, as two Polish sociologists rightly remarked not so long ago, the ideal citizen was not ‘a member of the bourgeoisie, as in Western Europe, or a gentleman, as was the case in Britain; nor was he a businessman, as in the United States, but a member of the intelligentsia of nobility heritage’. ‘However’, they note, ‘since the beginning his nobility had been to some extent “appropriated” and artificially reconstructed in adapting to the needs of new, post-feudal social relations’, meaning that ‘in the first place, it consisted of good manners, refinement and culture’⁷ (Smoczyński & Zarycki 2012, 211). Having appropriated the value system of the nobility, however, the intelligentsia presented itself – in contrast to the nobility and the gentry – as inclusive and democratic, supporting the emancipation of the middling classes. Nevertheless, in its vision of a modern society of equals, the intelligentsia was making extensive use of its cultural capital to construct social distinctions and hierarchies grounded in the judgement of taste. In the II Republic of Poland (1918–1939), the intelligentsia essentially made the national elite, grounding its status in its cultural and social capital, while in the People’s Republic of Poland (1945–1989), despite the official, ideologically informed critique of social relations in the historic forms of Polish state, the narratives of popular culture ‘naturalised the noble elite as the precursor of the elite of the nation’ (Smoczyński & Zarycki 2012, 205). Therefore, because of the (self-)ennoblement of modern social elites, folk art and craft in the Polish context were not only implicated in modern mechanisms of social distinction but also provided such elites with an opportunity to re-enact the power relations underlying premodern social inequalities.

Similar processes of folk art and craft construction were part and parcel of European modernisation efforts elsewhere as well, but similarities can be misleading: modernisation processes were grounded in the social histories of nation-state elites, which differed depending on the country. Not only did differences exist between the intelligentsia’s notion of an ideal citizen and a bourgeois culture builder (see Frykman & Lofgren 1987), but also the social origin of the Central and East European intelligentsia varied in different parts of the Russian, Austro-Hungarian and German empires. Pre-modern social hierarchies shaped the national and ethnic identities of modern Europe, and romantic nationalisms appealed to socially embedded value systems with a much *long(er) durée*. Even similarities between the ‘people’s republics’ should

7 If not stated otherwise, all the translations from Polish are by the author.

not be overestimated, although elites everywhere in the Soviet bloc used folklore as a convenient tool for policing social and ethnic differences in the form of aesthetics.

The Polish intelligentsia in late socialist times (namely, the 1980s) became much less fond of the folk and the folk-inspired fashions provided by Cepelia. The visual language of its self-expression changed from the rustic, but elegant 'peasant style' of the 1970s into the 'Solidarity style' of the 1980s (see Klekot 2021b). The transformations of the 1990s proved fatal for the majority of Cepelia co-operatives, even though the organisation itself survived, transformed into a foundation.⁸ The early 21st century saw an increase of interest in 'folk art and craft', both because of a strong regional bias in the internal politics of the country (as a result of the 1999 administrative reform as well as the impact of EU's promotion of pro-regional politics) as well as a generational change in the cultural production sector (see Klekot 2021c).

A village pottery shop in the region of Masuria

The region where *Garncarnia* is located has a complex history, one that has been especially turbulent and difficult in the 20th century. Its fate after World War II resulted from decisions concerning the Soviet sphere of influence in Europe: according to the Potsdam Agreement of 1945, the historical province of East Prussia was divided between Poland and the Soviet Union. Consequently, the territories experienced a substantial change in population: most pre-war inhabitants (2.33 million according to the 1933 census) either perished or fled during the final phase of the war, or else they were forced to emigrate between 1945 and 1947. In the territories under Polish control, the southern part of East Prussia, which included a population of 1.275 million in 1933, only 120 000 pre-war autochthone residents of Polish heritage, or the Masurians (*Mazurzy*), remained in 1949, with the total number of inhabitants in 1950 reaching barely 378 000 (Eberhardt 1995).

The new settlers were from various places, spoke different dialects, and sometimes different languages, differed in ethnicity and religion, and had dramatically different war experiences. As Sakson (2011, 212) notes: 'Some of

8 In January 1990, the parliament, while preparing a new legal framework for co-operatives, adopted a law that would put an end to Cepelia. However, already in December 1989, anticipating the legal measures being taken to put an end to the socialist enterprise, a foundation was established, with its statute approved by the Minister of Culture and Arts on the 29th of December. The following thirty years of Cepelia's existence, which are part and parcel of the social and economic history of the Polish transformation, reflected many of its delusions and all of its discontents. The last Cepelia-run shop closed in November 2020, following a long decline of the organisation itself, which is currently being liquidated.

them came willingly, others were coerced, travelling in rail transports guarded by soldiers and militia. There were people looking for opportunities of making up for the losses inflicted by the war that had left them stripped of everything (or freed from everything); and people who really believed in the mission of developing those lands, or people for whom they were an open treasury with no owners.' Roughly half of the settlers who moved to the former East Prussia came involuntarily: a substantial number of them were ethnic Poles from the territories lost by Poland to the USSR (ca. 143 000 by 1950, plus an additional 31 000 between 1956 and 1960); some settlers were also of Ukrainian heritage, resettled within the borders of post-WWII Poland in organised deportations aimed at 'fighting Ukrainian nationalism' (ca. 55 000); other, voluntary settlers (ca. 200 000 by the mid-1950s) were recruited mostly from poor and overpopulated villages in central Poland (Domagała 2015).

Painful memories of violence committed by different parties during WWII, silenced for decades if the perpetrator happened to be the Soviets or the Communist authorities (those expelled from the territories lost to the USSR were called 'repatriates', which denied their victimhood and obscured the coerced nature of their migration), combined with a foreign material culture, architecture and landscape, contributed to rather difficult beginnings. The new residents either occupied individual farmsteads or became workers employed on the extensive state-owned farms (PGR⁹), large properties confiscated from the Prussian gentry and transformed into PGRs. The number of state-run farms varied depending on the organisation recording them, but data from early 1990s indicates that just before they collapsed with the advent of the market economy, they had comprised approximately 68 % of agricultural land in the region.¹⁰ The social cohesion of local communities was difficult to achieve, though; on the one hand, the Communist Party government imposed homogenising educational policies on both migrants and the autochthonous population, not leaving any room for unorthodox versions of Polishness, while on the other it suppressed independent civil society. However, despite the political transformation in the 1990s, a 2012 report found that 'the local communities of Warmia and Mazury'¹¹ still suffer 'the curse' of the eternal

9 Państwowe Gospodarstwo Rolne, or State Agricultural Enterprise.

10 [http://encyklopedia.warmia.mazury.pl/index.php/Pa%C5%84stwowo_Gospodarstwa_Rolne_\(PGR\)](http://encyklopedia.warmia.mazury.pl/index.php/Pa%C5%84stwowo_Gospodarstwa_Rolne_(PGR)),
http://encyklopedia.warmia.mazury.pl/index.php/Struktura_obszarowa_gospodarstw, accessed 05.01.2024.

11 The southern part of East Prussia, which became part of Poland after WWII, comprises several historical regions, the most important of which are Warmia and Mazury (Masuria); therefore, the voivodship, with its capital in the city of Olsztyn (located in Warmia), has been called Warmińsko-Mazurskie.



Figure 4. The pottery school being built, 2022 (photo: E. Klekot).

beginning, related to the foundation myth of ‘arriving in a foreign land’. The Warmińsko-Mazurskie voivodship is still struggling with its ‘non-defused history’, into which ‘the experience of less or more coerced migration has been inscribed’ (Domagała 2015, 21). After half a century of silenced violence and failed promises of modernisation, the people of the region are still struggling to come to terms with painful memories more than a quarter century later.

Garncarnia is located in a small village, funded by a local landowning family named von Lehdorff, who operate a brickyard and a railway station, close to their family residence in Steinort (Sztynort in Polish), overlooking a lake and surrounded by a huge park. The village includes a derelict station building (no trains are operating), a couple of houses built in the 1930s for the brickyard staff and several blocks of flats built after WWII by the local PGR for its workers. In the early 1990s, Paweł¹² bought one of the houses, renovated it on his own and constructed a workshop corresponding in style with the house. Later, a bigger, new workshop was built, with a big, wood-fired kiln and a smaller electric one; recently, a building for a pottery school was added (Figure 5), financed with EU funding – all matching the style of the 1930s house, with a steep roof of red tiles, surrounded by an orchard, a huge mound of clay be-

12 I collected all the information concerning Paweł, Marta and the operations at *Garncarnia* during several visits between 2021 and 2023; my activities consisted of taking a course delivered by Paweł, observing him working at the wheel, interviewing him and Marta extensively, as well as sharing some of their chores, such as cooking or making apple jam.



Figure 5. The pottery school in closed shell state, November 2022 (photo: E. Klekot).

tween the house and the school, and some clay processing works and outbuildings containing different equipment. Paweł sourced the tiles for all the roofs on his homestead from demolitions of the pre-WWII buildings in the region, saving the tiles because he thought they were better than modern materials, as well as cheaper and more beautiful. He said he knew that the village houses built before WWII had been constructed according to politically motivated rules and plans for landscape design in Germany, but he appreciated the result, especially in comparison with both the post-war and post-transformation developments. Spatial chaos, resulting from war damage and post-war transformations of the former German lands combined with the consequences of the economic transformations of 1990s, has been a characteristic feature of Masuria (Musiaka, Sudra, & Spórna 2021), and Paweł has experienced such chaos all his life.

Paweł was born in Masuria, while both of his parents had immigrated there with their families after WWII. He graduated from a forestry vocational school but never worked as a forester. In the 1980s, he worked for some years on his parents' farm, where in the winter he used to deliver milk to the collection point on a horse-drawn sledge. Then, in the early 1990s, together with his first wife he started a small, local chain of village corner shops; however, his marriage broke up and he found himself with no job, a recently purchased old house requiring renovation and a teenage son to look after. At that point, he heard that a local museum in Węgorzewo (the nearest town) had received a grant to develop a pottery workshop and needed a potter. Paweł had no idea

about what pottery making entailed, but was always good at handiwork, especially carpentry, so he decided to go and ask if the museum would consider hiring a woodworker. The museum agreed on the condition that he enrol in a summer course on ceramics being taught at the museum by a couple of ceramists from Warsaw, and then he would have the opportunity to try and learn more on his own in the museum workshop.

The museum facilitated for him cross-border contacts and exchange trips to some Lithuanian black pottery centres. Paweł fell under the spell of Lithuanian potters immediately: the masculine community, keeping of trade secrets, vodka drinking and misogyny that were part of their lifestyle resonated with his recent life experiences. In Poland too, the village potters used to be men, but the region where Paweł lives did not have a strong village pottery community at that time, nor had the folk potters in Poland developed a strong sense of a trade community, which as a novice he found so appealing. He decided to become an independent potter and learn to produce black pottery. During the day, he worked for the museum, while in the evenings he built his own workshop and experimented with building foot-propelled wheels, new methods of processing clay and wood reduction firing. At the same time, he started collaborating with some archaeologists doing local excavations, trying to understand from an experimental standpoint the processes of forming and firing the earthenware discovered in the excavated burial mounds. He also dedicated a great deal of time and energy to understanding the characteristics of the earthenware pots so that they could successfully withstand the cooking of food in a hot open fire. At the same time, he mastered the technique of ceramic wheel throwing, trying his hand at many different forms, but with a special predilection for the fine, thin-walled, black-fired vessels, inspired both by the works of the Lithuanian master potters and by the late medieval black pottery he knew from museums, excavations and books. He also started offering pottery courses to students at his picturesque place of work. The instruction he provided was always tailor-made to the skills and needs of the (mostly female) students, who came from all over Poland: hobbyists, art students, urbanites looking for an alternative way to spend their holiday time or eager to learn new skills that would help them to change something in their lives.

In the meantime, an intern named Marta arrived at the museum and became interested in visiting his village workshop. She was a cultural studies undergraduate from the University of Poznań, and they shared a fascination with Lithuania and alternative lifestyles. Paweł built for her a special, low-positioned wheel propelled by a long wooden stick, inspired by Japanese wheels, and transported it to Poznań, where Marta kept it in a shared student flat. After she graduated some years later, the wheel came back with

her to Paweł's workshop. As part of the *Garncarnia* team, Marta has not only been a potter partaking in courses, presentations and experiments, but also served as a managing director, a communication officer and a strategic planner, with Paweł being responsible for the creative and manufacturing side of the operations as well as for programme execution and supplies. Since Paweł quit his job at the museum a while back, Marta is now also employed outside of their village pottery household, working in the NGO sector, currently as a manager and expert in the social economy. It was also Marta who reminded Paweł about listing products for sale via their webpage and about the need for more commercial orders. She recalls: 'The clients ask for his mugs and jugs, while Paweł, once he has gotten to know how to make something and mastered it, is no longer interested in it and looks around in search of new things to work on.'

Thinking through pottery

Craftspeople and scientists share a style of thought, claimed two Polish sociologists, Łukasz Afeltowicz and Radosław Sojak, a style that combines insights stemming from decades-long research within the area of science and technology studies and the history of science with their own empirical research on contemporary craft (Afeltowicz & Sojak 2015). Elaborating on the work of British historian Steven Shapin, especially his social history of science as a community of gentlemen, they pointed to the synergy between two socially different and yet key partners in the development of the experimental sciences, namely the gentlemen and the craftsmen. The synergy led to important changes in the practices of both groups and resulted in similarities in their styles of thought. This observation is in tune with what has become known in Scandinavian academic circles as 'craft science(s)' (Kokko, Alemvik, Høgseth, & Seitamaa-Hakkarainen 2020). According to Afeltowicz and Sojak, the social synergy contributing to the formation of modern science led to changes in the practices of both groups involved, resulting in similarities in their approach to practical solutions and physical tinkering with the equipment, an interest in the cognitive aspects of the enterprise and an appreciation of autonomy when acting (Afeltowicz & Sojak 2015, 194).

However, despite such similarities, acknowledging craft as an activity able to produce scientific knowledge has met with resistance in academia, as Norwegian philosopher Bengt Molander (2022) has observed. According to Molander, the reason for this resistance, still present regardless of extensive critiques of body-mind dualism, is a misunderstanding of the theory in science concept. Combining in his argument Kuhn's social critique of science with the phenomenological approach to cognition as a way of relating to the world and to the root, ancient Greek, meaning of *theoreia*, he concludes that 'there can be

as much theory in the crafts as in any science, with less words, perhaps' (Molander 2022, 231). To be sure, an understanding of theory as a cognitive tool strongly informing the practice and not necessarily expressed in symbols has been extensively discussed in the social sciences, but non-verbal theorising has only recently begun entering into academic discussions, first, and rather significantly, after having been reduced to the sensory register of the visual in the form of visual anthropology, and then in relation to practice-based master and doctoral degrees in arts, design and crafts.

Knowledge in pottery making is mostly situated and embodied (Klekot 2021a), and it is not possible to understand such knowledge without having direct and bodily engagement with the process. Undeniably, certain technological aspects can possibly be expressed through symbols, verbal or otherwise, or even formalised in equations, but most of the theorising in pottery involves practicing rheology. Through the material relation of manufacturing, the maker and the material transform each other (see Malafouris, 2013). The flow of a material, such as the clay on the pottery wheel, converts the maker into a rheology practitioner. When giving instructions, Paweł often repeats that throwing a pot on a wheel means pouring the clay between your fingers. The material used for throwing is a dense suspension, or fluid, being a mixture of different physical phases, with water constituting the liquid phase. The pot grows because the centrifugal force acting on the clay is stronger than the force of gravitation, while the position of the potter's hand influences the flow direction. The process of forming clay pots on the wheel is possible because of tixotropy, a phenomenon that characterises non-Newtonian fluids, with suspension being one aspect of it. Sometimes it is metaphorically called 'memory of the fluid'. It refers to the time-dependent shearing or thinning of the suspension fluid when stress is applied or hardening and softening of clay during its kneading and throwing phases.

Having finished a sequence of throwing movements, the potter reaches out to a small vessel kept nearby. The sludge-smelling, murky liquid – or slip – is crucial for the process of throwing, Paweł explains. It is not just dirty water that became muddy during the work and should be changed every now and then, as is done with water in a jar for cleaning brushes in watercolour painting. In fact, during the process of pot forming, the potter's fingers do not touch the clay material directly but operate through a very fine layer of the slimy fluid taken from the vessel, flowing between it and the wall of the pot being formed. Therefore, the pot is formed in the contact zone of two flowing suspension fluids, set apart by the solid fraction they contain and the size of its grain. Clean water would immediately filter into the pot's wall and changed the throwing properties of the clay. Moreover, the organic substances pres-

ent in the slimy fluid used in throwing – hence, its sludgy smell – add plasticity and facilitate the wall formation process. Thus, when the potter, having finished the pot, wants to cut it from the wheel head, they sprinkle the bottom of it with clean water, because sprinkling it with the sludgy suspension would make it more difficult to pull the pot from the wheel, as I know both from Paweł and my own experience.

Any description of the physical properties of the clay used for throwing is rather complicated because its non-Newtonian characteristics result in non-linearity. It is at this point where Bengt Molander's (2022, 223) observation that 'there are features of the world that are only available – or *made* available – by craft practices' rings especially true. Practicing rheology through throwing a pot does not require any abstract representation of physical processes. However, it is because of the rheologic properties of clay that the process of throwing on a fast wheel, one of the first devices invented by humans to scale production and improve its efficiency, cannot be automatized. The potter's clay is a non-parametric material. Industrial ceramic production exploits different technologies of processing the fluid material: it takes advantage of sedimentation processes, not of changes in the properties of a non-Newtonian liquid set in rotary motion. Certainly, you can throw a pot and use it as model for a plaster mould, from which you can make many similar vessels by casting or pressing. With throwing, though, only limited scalability is possible: you can change the number of potters and improve their skills and efficiency.

Paweł started theorising about his pottery practice almost since its beginning: observing and learning from observation requires attention and sensitivity to patterns, especially those that can be observed by the body but not expressed in words. Induction is the basic mode of arriving at a theory in craft. While mastering his throwing ability, Paweł also read books on geology, material science and anything he could find on pottery: the ethnography, history or archaeology of pottery making. He compared the theories he found in books with his own craft theorising. He was searching both for words to express his findings as well as for scientific explanations of what he had observed while working his locally obtained clay, throwing on a leg-propelled wheel of his own construction, equipped with an auxiliary engine repurposed from a washing machine, and firing it with wood in a kiln that he built in his yard. His close observation of the material behaviours and repetitive actions resulting from his embodiment of skills, his focus on minute details, his persistent detective work in finding patterns and hypothesising about the causal relations between what he had observed made Paweł at the same time a diligent researcher of his own craft and a consummate performer of it. Yet, becoming a pottery instructor required making his practical theorising more explicit. During his

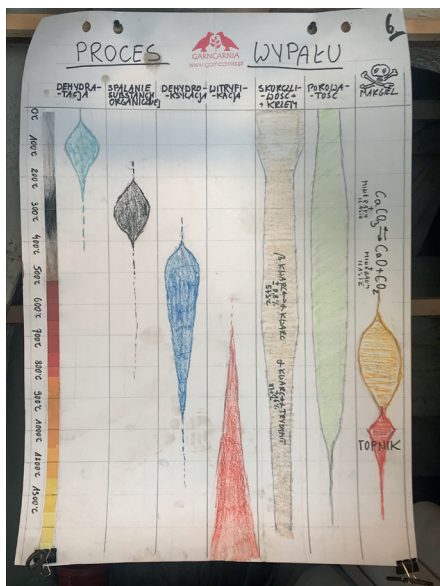


Figure 6. The firing process: a didactic material made and used by Paweł during the course (photo: E. Klekot).

teaching practice, Paweł developed a set of visual materials that he used while explaining parts of the processes to the students (Figure 6); for the sake of instruction, he also divided the processes of throwing, pot-making or pottery tool making into discrete steps that he was able to explain while showing them to the students. However, what he and Marta realised when preparing

courses and teaching them together was that the words and concepts for describing the experience of pottery making and the experiential knowledge built into the process are lacking.

This was when we met. At the time, I had already been engaged for a decade in researching embodied knowledge in craft, especially ceramic production (Klekot 2020, 2021a). I had based my research on collaborating with both craftspeople and designers as well as with highly qualified workers in a porcelain factory. In terms of understanding embodied knowledge, skills and their acquisition, I had benefited greatly from my own experiences in ceramic making under the tutelage of some of my research collaborators. Being an anthropology teacher at a design school, I also co-taught courses with ceramic designers in our school's ceramic studio. Marta contacted me after attending a webinar that I gave on ethnography, auto-ethnography and teaching in the context of ceramic production. It was my attempt at rendering in discursive form an experience of knowledge that can hardly be abstracted from the body, that is situated and relational, sensitive to time and aware of patterned changes, quick in decisions and patient in waiting. In seeking a vocabulary that was at once evocative and corresponded to theorising about their craft, Marta and Paweł have since become especially fond of the term *mētis* that I used for the crafty intelligence of the potter (Klekot 2021a); they even jokingly remarked that the future pottery school they were about to start building should bear the name *Mētis*.

Paweł developed his pottery skills mostly on his own: the Lithuanian potters kept their secrets, although one of them, whom Paweł befriended, took



Figure 7. A pottery trick: drying a candlestick (photo: E. Klekot).

him on a 'formation tour' of black pottery makers, even though Paweł was never apprenticed to anybody. He studied black pottery in the museum collections, both historical and ethnographic, read about and searched for reproductions of pottery-related iconography, talked to producers of the folk *siwaki* style, or graphite grey pottery, from the nearby region of Podlasie, and incessantly experimented both with forming and firing pottery.

On the one hand, he wanted to make pots suitable for cooking over an open fire, while on the other he was fascinated by the late medieval fine black pottery he knew from museums and publications. In studying these forms of pottery and trying to understand the logic behind them, he considered both their functionality and the features resulting from their production: their scale and economy and the economy of a potter's work. Never apprenticed with a human master, he took the vessels he admired as his teachers. His was a 'time-gap' apprenticeship – a concept coined by American archaeologist Marilyn Kelly-Buccellati – 'involving the rediscovery of skills from the past that were lost in the detail but remained alive in the general tradition of a given craft and were revived through the inspiration provided by objects made by previous generations. ... Where there were no teachers, models had to suffice' (Kelly-Buccellati 2012, 204). However, with a time-gap apprentice, because through the process of emulating an absent master they are operating in a similar work setting, they are able to follow the same steps of a set production sequence, 'decoding both the explicit and the tacit information given by a study of the artefacts themselves' (Kelly-Buccellati 2012, 212). The process is not about making a historical reconstruction, though, but about learning new skills or methods and incorporating them into the apprentice's own practice, further developing and bringing new understandings to them, and ultimately making them part and parcel of the 'time-gap' apprentice's own repertoire.

Paweł offered the example of how the thin walls of jugs and mugs, proof of the maker's mastery, are at the same time both a functional requirement



Figure 8. In the 'old workshop': discussing the ceramic forms (photo: E. Klekot).

(lower weight of the vessel destined to carry liquids with one hand) and the result of economic thinking (less clay was needed for a thin-walled jug than for a thick-walled one). To be sure, the thinner the wall, the more mastery on the part of the potter was required, but according to Paweł's experience in acquiring master skills, the scale of production in a medieval workshop must have been the result of real masters capable of forming pottery on a fast wheel. In observing the traces left by his hands during production, Paweł on several occasions provided traseological insights for archaeologists. He also assisted archaeologists by assessing the level of craftsmanship involved in producing the vessels found in archaeological material. However, his relationship with archaeologists has not always progressed smoothly. On one occasion, he shrugged his shoulders in indignation at an obviously (to him) failed reconstruction of a medieval kick wheel published in an academic book, while on another he was ready to argue face to face with an archaeology professor, an acclaimed specialist in late medieval pottery, about his description of pottery techniques based on an analysis of pottery shards. Paweł's experiences with making the same ceramic forms and his analysis of the shards they produced led him to challenge the theory of a 'strip-sliding technique', as he was convinced that the medieval vessels supposedly made via such a technique had been simply thrown on a wheel.

Being a village potter in the 21st century

After Paweł had become a potter and started working at the local museum, the museum's director suggested that he join the Association of Folk Artists (*Stowarzyszenie Twórców Ludowych*). Since then, he has taken part in many folk festivals and fairs, both on his own and with Marta, mostly presenting their skills rather than selling any products. He continues to attend several summer folk or regional festivals and fairs in the region every year, presenting his pottery skills or cooking in pots of his making on an open-fire clay stove of his construction, mounted on a special cart. He does not sell his products, but he lets people try what he cooks and talks to the audience. Some years ago, when Marta used to join him, they travelled more often and much farther afield, sometimes taking with them two different wheels to demonstrate throwing techniques. It was Marta who initiated the therapeutic classes for children with special needs. Marta's favourite Japanese-style wheel allows the teacher to sit in front of the student, and she says that it gives her much better contact not only in terms guiding the student's hands but also for demonstrating the stable and poised position of the body. In throwing, the balance of the quickly moving clay is anchored to the potter's body, and so it is very important to keep the body stable while throwing. Marta's pottery practice seems to be more about being than making, and she appreciates the way it helps the body feel engaged with the matter of the world – both her own body and the body of the student she guides through the subsequent stages of throwing. Marta, like me, counts herself among the urbanities and former urbanities for whom their craft practice is about de-alienation and/or agency (Crawford 2009).

Nowadays, because of her job outside *Garncarnia* (she is professionally engaged in the third sector) and raising their young daughter, Marta does not take part in the trips, and Paweł only visits places in the region. From his perspective, the festivals are not the part of his craft activity that he is most proud of, but they bring in some income, so he keeps doing the work. However, after *Garncarnia* had been listed as a tourist attraction in locally published promotional brochures, the visits of vacationing families arriving in search of a folk potter turned out to be a really disturbing experience. He realised that the tourist audience was not interested in his work, or in the workshop he had proudly built and equipped with his own hands, but instead expected a folk pottery spectacle upon their arrival. Only then did he fully comprehend the painful difference between participating in a folk festival spectacle outside of his place of work and making his own workshop into a spectacle. At home, the alienating power of folklorisation proved unbearable.

Most independent practitioners – be they a potter in a village or a ceramist in a big city, an artist, a musician or a writer – have done work they would not be eager to include in their portfolio, even though they might have learnt

a great deal in the process and put some effort into achieving a satisfactory result. Such work does not fully comply with their judgement of taste. In the case of Paweł, this is the spectacle part of his activities, while his making is where his judgement is the most uncompromising and where he is not willing to compromise his expertise. The discoveries he makes and insights he gains while in his workshop are the most cherished aspects of his craft, and it is the fluency and economy of making combined with the compatibility between form and function that inform his choices. Teaching, which comprises some elements of display but is also embedded in the experience of making and of acquiring skills, occupies the middle ground. Paweł teaches techniques and processes rather than the making of objects, although the objects are the final result. This approach he shares with many contemporary craft practitioners, who instead of focusing on manufacturing objects for their (mostly internet) shops, concentrate more on delivering meaningful experiences to their students, following the demands of the experience economy. However, the construction of a separate school building kept Paweł so busy for more than a year that he hardly had time to sit at the wheel, so from a bottom-line perspective the decision to focus on education did not have an obvious benefit. The school, though, Paweł remarks, will make his mother finally happy with her son: Paweł will stop playing around and fiddling with mud and will have a decent, respectable job of being a teacher.

Once the student has mastered a technique, they can use it to make any objects they desire. However, one of the negative assessments that Paweł employs when judging the object being made is that it is an 'a-technical' (*atechniczny*) object, by which he means that the form cannot be inferred either from the properties of the material or from its formation technique. Not long ago, he received an inquiry from a designer who wanted to produce lamps with hand-thrown ceramic bodies and shades, fired black. 'But why to throw them?', Paweł asked: 'This is clearly a form for casting. Throwing it would be *a-technical*. And why would you want to make a lamp shade out of heavy black earthenware: this is *a-technical*, too.' The comments clearly convey his unwillingness to compromise his making-based judgement of taste. The viewpoint of the designer, as it was explained, was for the lamps to be 'handmade' in a literal sense: in casting, it is not hand that shapes the material but the mould. Paweł thought the planned object nonsensical from the standpoint of craft production.

The principle that form follows function sounds quite modern, and in Paweł's value system it can be combined with the idea that technique should follow the affordances of the material. Discovering the technical and/or functional rationale behind the form a vessel takes has always been gratifying to Paweł, like when he experimented with making pots suitable for cooking on a

stove with an open fire, before finally coming up with a reliable recipe for both the wall thickness and the correct proportions for the foot diameter in relation to the diameter of the body and its height. Since the practice of cooking over an open fire was still in use in many villages in eastern Poland before WWII, he fancied the idea that his wares were much better examples of *folk pottery* than the folk-looking pots sold at folk festivals, which he had never been interested in producing. He never painted his pots or decorated them, and quite early in his career he decided that he was not interested in glazes either. All this went, in his opinion, against the folk pottery style of the time, and he admitted that he felt awkward being called a 'folk potter'. Representations of the folk neither corresponded with the village reality he knew nor with the way of life that he had chosen. With his main inspirations being Lithuanian black pottery and late medieval vessels, he chose to produce forms that were functional, rather minimalistic and tactile: their aesthetics – as he explained – was the outcome of the production process and the most important tool he had – his hands.

The experiments with local clays and wood firing resulted in hues ranging from shiny black, via mat greys, to ochres of various intensity and shades. He worked with local clays, sourcing them mostly from different brickyards in the region. He brought the clay home and processed it himself, leaving it outdoors in his yard, piled in a small mound. The first stage of clay processing is done by the weather and the work of living organisms, from plants and animals to fungi, bacteria and other microorganisms. The exposure to colonisation by different living creatures results in a process that Paweł calls *gnojenie*, a traditional term that literally means 'dungification'. In explaining the process, though, he refers to soil biology and uses the term *edaphon*: in his opinion, the presence of soil biota is a crucial factor influencing the forming properties of clay. Another factor is the freezing and thawing of clay, which loosens the macrostructure of the material. The way in which the pottery material flows and thickens depends on its mineral structure, or the distribution and motion of clay mineral sheets in suspension. However, the presence of *edaphon* alters the material's rheology, improving it from the perspective of wheel throwing.

The process of 'dungification', Paweł explains, happens in nature, too. He has located a place in the forest where he sources small quantities of clay ready for throwing: it is a *paprzyisko* (literally: 'a mucking place'), or a mud pool created and used by the boars. The 'living clay', Paweł says, feels smooth to the hand, more slippery than the 'dead clay', and 'even though you pour the slip all over, the dead clay will anyway feel like a fine-grained sandpaper'. Paweł has been working with materials sourced directly from several small open

mines, located in the brickyards, and one of them he found extremely suitable to his needs, or his taste, as he likes to say. Several types of clay might respond to the needs of a good potter, but not so many would correspond to their taste. A potter appreciates aesthetically the material not because of the way it looks, or even how it will look when fired, but because of the sensory pleasure it gives them while being worked. Here, aesthetics is a question of the senses, not some Platonic ideal of beauty. Once a potter has found their material match, they will not willingly exhaust the supply: with closure of the brickyard providing Paweł's beloved clay, he bought a full truckload of the raw material. The over two-metre-high mound behind his house, now situated midway between the house and the pottery school building, has become a favourite place for dogs to play, and Paweł is gratified that the animals also contribute to the process 'dungification'.

When working with his favourite clay, Paweł realised that some of the vessels had sometimes vitrified during the firing process, almost becoming stoneware instead of earthenware. Earthenware is fired in lower temperature than stoneware because most clays would *flow* (melt) very quickly; that particular clay, however, proved to have the potential of passing the vitrification point without immediately melting, although it could not withstand the vitrification temperature for long. Paweł conducted various experiments and arrived at a firing curve that works – to be sure, he worked with an electric kiln. With wood firing, he would not have been able to reach the necessary level of temperature and time control. He called his discovery 'Masurian stoneware', and the vessels made via this method, especially the mugs, proved a success with customers.¹³

In trying to make sense of his pottery practice in a 21st-century Masurian village, Paweł searched not only for local clays but for local pottery traditions as well. He wanted to know what kind of pottery had been used in Masurian villages in the 18th or 19th centuries, and so he consulted with local historians and archaeologists, and to less extent, with ethnographers: he was interested in the material culture of the common people, not in *the folk*. In his search, he came across a piece of information about a type of pottery created on the von Lehndorff's estate of Steinort, along the shore of Lake Mamry, in a place called Amalienruh, formerly a sentimental hermitage. With the help of a local historian, he identified Amalienruh on a late 18th-century map of Prussia, the

13 I played a small part in the product testing: it consisted of checking the mechanical dishwashing resistance of the earthenware, with the test result being positive, and thus the product proved to be dishwasherproof.



Figure 9a and 9b. The stamp of a 'time-gap fellow potter' and its impression (photo: P. Szymański).

so-called Schroetter's map.¹⁴ It was only approximately 3 km from his house, but currently part of the Sztynort nature reserve. In a thicket in the reserve's forest, Paweł found the vestiges of brick buildings, and when ferreting among the moss-covered bricks and windthrows revealed yet more bricks and shards, he found some fragments of vitrified ceramic material that he thought might have come from a pottery kiln. The same local historian friend provided Paweł with data about the Amalienruh potters, coming from a potter family named Sensfuss, or Sensesfuss, active in Angeburg (now: Węgorzewo) at least since the beginning of the 18th century: Jacob Sensfuss (born 1742, potter master in Amalienruh since 1775), Gottfried Sensfuss senior (1782–1838) and Gottfried junior (1812–1888), who was a potter in Steinort (Florkowska 2006, 64). Meanwhile, at a local curiosities collector's home, Paweł came across a metal stamp with the name of a master potter from Steinort, Gustav Sensfuss (Figure 9a and 9b). It took him a great deal of time and cunning to convince the collector to part company with the stamp, which he had had no intention of selling. Finally, Paweł succeeded in purchasing the stamp in 2018, obtaining it in exchange for a sword that he claimed to have excavated somewhere in the fields (he had made it a couple of decades earlier, out of an old leaf spring, intending to copy a samurai sword). Since then, the stamp, possibly dating back to the first decades of the 20th century, has become one of Paweł's most cherished pieces of memorabilia. Apparently, it has established a link between the two local potters from Masuria, active in nearby villages within the timespan of three generations: Sensfuss has become Szymański's 'time-gap fellow potter'.

14 Karte von Ost-Preussen nebst Preussisch Litthauen und West-Preussen nebst dem Netzdistrict aufgenommen unter Leitung des Königl. Preuss. Staats Ministers Frey Herrn von Schroetteer in den Jahren von 1796 bis 1802, <https://rcin.org.pl/dlibra/publication/12308/edition/829/content>, accessed 10.01.2024.

Conclusion

Co-crafting the meaning of a village potter's craft in 21st-century Poland has been a methodological experiment that I have undertaken, profiting from my ethnographic craft already seasoned within the sphere of embodied knowledge research and inspired by collaborative practices in both anthropology and design. The experiment did present a challenge: while being (auto)ethnographically attentive to my potter part, necessary to grasp the experiences of Paweł and Marta and better share with them my own perspective, I found it difficult to be ethnographically attentive enough to my ethnographic role. I realised that quite often, I used ethnography as my 'way of being'. I felt confident in my craft of being a researcher working as a craftsperson, who, having mastered their craft, achieves a state of 'flow', hardly being able to say where their body ends and the material begins. We shared so many experiences during our pottery practice, and Marta and Paweł so often affirmed how I described them in written text that I started to feel that I was speaking for the three of us. Only later, when I was listening to the recordings of our talks, did I realise that the process was much more nuanced and that my mastery of the word-craft sometimes made me overhear the softer undertones of someone else's words. Also, when reading my notes later in the evenings, I was not always sure whether I was speaking for myself or for someone else. Usually, the recording helped, and I am glad that I had dutifully recorded our evening discussions. However, on some occasions in my different writings (this ethnography included), I have had the feeling that I did not know where exactly the wording reflects my own experience and where it reflects what Marta or Paweł showed me or told me about, or where even they possibly overlap, helping generate a description that resonated with the three of us.

Throwing pots on a wheel is a process that relies on a complex dynamic between gravity and the centrifugal force generated by the potter. It is based on an embodied understanding of materials in motion. It is a human-initiated relationship of making, in which the potter and the material mutually transform one another in the process of their material engagement (Malafouris 2013). In this engagement, the potter modifies the position and attitude of their body in accordance with the flowing material, directing it and making it into a new form: a form it has never taken before but which is in accordance with the material's propensity. The meaning of the potter's craft has also been crafted from a material in motion: conceptual and embodied knowledge, social distinctions, the judgement of taste, the folk craft, and the village in Masuria. It was the propensity to engage their senses that I had tried to follow in the meaning-making process, modifying my own understanding according to the lifeworld that I could share with the *Garncarnia* people, animals, clay mound

and its edaphon, the wheels, slip, the Sztynort nature reserve and all the other social actors involved in the meaning-making entanglements. In the process, the 'features of the world that are only available – or *made* available – by craft practices' (Molander 2022, 222) came to the forefront, and I hope their discursive form has been crafty enough.

AUTHOR

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