

CERAMIC SCULPTURE

The Anthropomorphic Vessel

The making of pottery is the longest lived handicraft or art form of which we have continuous knowledge. In some parts of the world, pots are being made today which aren't markedly different in technique and general appearance from those excavated in cultural contexts many millennia old. Yet within this space of time, pottery has at various periods and in different places, been the vehicle of the most sophisticated and cutting edge artistry, its technical difficulties bent to serve the subtlest demands which could be made upon it. Its history is therefore not only long, but complicated.

In nearly all cultures the words used to describe the various parts of the vessel are anthropomorphic in nature. That is, the use of names for human body parts as names of the formal parts of ceramic vessels; mouth, lip, neck,

Tz'u Chou Vase, China, Sung Dynasty, 11th century.

belly and foot. The generally accepted explanation for this is the animistic relationship that most primitive cultures have with their environment. Animism is the cosmological view that everything is alive and to some degree even sentient. Pottery forms were so highly appreciated that they were assumed to be alive with a living spirit, given personal names, assumed to have the same body parts as humans and sacrificed and buried with the dead as any other living thing.

The Mimbres culture of the American Southwest (1000-1200 AD.) buried pottery with their dead. The unique aspect is that all of the vessels had holes in them. The vessels were shot with arrows because it would be cruel to bury a living thing in a grave with a dead human.

Mimbres Transitional
Black-on-White, 7" dia.
ca.975 A.D.

Sections of an Egyptian wall painting,
showing pottery-making. 1900 B.C.

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