

Heritage Collection

Museum of Traditional Pottery in Agios Demetrios (Marathassa)

By Father Dometios and Gloria London

Cyprus is one of the few places where traditional pottery, handmade from local clays and shaped without mechanical tools, has survived well into the 21st century. Today, ten rural potters still produce unglazed red jugs, jars, cookware as well as decorative, and ritual pots. 30 years ago, 25 potters were active in Kornos and in the Troodos Mountain villages of Kaminaria, Fini, and Agios Demetrios, during which time archaeologist Gloria London initiated a project to record their work.

A new heritage collection of 120 pots donated by retired potters and their descendants is now on display in Agios Demetrios (Marathassa). The collection highlights both the pots and the tools used to make them. The collection

also includes a few pots and roof tiles from the village church.

The impetus for the museum arose when Father Dometios, a Greek Cypriot Orthodox monk whose family has ties to the village, visited local households and saw photographs of potters. Inquiring about the sources of the photos made over the past 30 years, he was informed that “Gloria, an American who wrote a book and made a video about the potters”, took them. As an icon painter who spent many years in Mt. Athos, Father Dometios is actively involved with the Cypriot arts, and has realised and appreciated the value of collecting and preserving the pottery, tools, and history of the industry. He has solicited contributions and has interviewed each donor in order to record the pot names, uses, ages, and the names of the potters responsible for each piece.





Display of pottery manufacture in Ayios Demetrios, 2014. Photograph courtesy of C. Constanti



Behind the vattes (left front row) the bottle second from the left holds the alatera and a green olive. Photograph courtesy of A. Stylianidou-Constanti

The timely decision to record all that remains of the industry has allowed retired potters and their families to participate in the process. Villagers reminisce about their parents or grandparents making and using clay pots. Others remember the days of their youth when they used to crush clay by trampling it under their feet. They also reminisce about how they used to fill pots with water daily,

before carrying them up the steep slopes to their homes in the remote community of Troodos Mountain. Back then, there was a single central source of water – a fountain in the village square. Children would start carrying the smallest jug at age 5, and gradually progressed to larger and larger containers until the age of 12, when they could manage the two-handed full-sized *stamni*.



Traditional red clay vatta for dispensing rosewater



A merreha. Photograph courtesy of G. London

Ever since the first Agios Demetrios potter, Marietta Theori Neophytos (1869–1939) went with her chaperone to Fini village to learn how to make pots from a relative. The pottery craft has been passed down from mothers, aunts, and neighbours to their daughters, nieces, and friends. 4 generations of potters made ceramics in the village. Men would dig the clay from nearby deposits, women would make the pots, and together they fired them in wood-burning kilns. The pots were built from coils of clay piled on top of each other and pulled into shape with wooden sticks. Potters would use a wooden turntable that rotates by hand or foot. Their repertoire of pots produced included deep cooking pots, shallow casseroles and plates or trays to bake and serve *pitta* in. Goat's milk which was collected in a *galeftiri* was then poured into clay jars and converted into *halloumi* cheese, yogurt, and *trachana*, a mixture of dried wheat and yogurt. Jugs and jars were used for carrying or storing water, wine, grape juice (*musto*), milk, or *zivania*, a traditional alcoholic beverage made from distilled grapes.

Women also made beehives, ovens, square bricks, decorated juglets, flower vases, incense

burners and rosewater containers. Most pots have incised patterns. The more elaborate flower vases have multiple tubular additions around their body. Nonagenarians in Agios Demetrios remember their grandmothers, in the early 20th century, arranging flowers in the vases known as *decoratif* or *diakosmitiko*. These decorated pots have always been intended for local use rather than souvenirs for tourists. In October 2014, Maroulla Georgiou, a former potter from Kaminaria village, made a vase with tubular additions. Initially, she used wooden sticks to support the hollow tubes. Once the clay dries slightly the sticks will be removed prior to firing.

In addition to the normal shapes, there are three unusual types in the collection: the *vatta*, the *merreha*, and the *alatera*. The red clay *vatta* is a rosewater dispenser and differs in shape, colour and use from the wheel-thrown *vattes* produced by male potters in Varosia, outside Famagusta. The white-clay *vattes*, which have a narrow, bulging neck ending in a small cup-like shape, were used to hold beverages. The handmade red clay *vattes* were not intended as carafes or juglets for drinks, but rather were used during

ritual ceremonies at home or at church.

Each Agios Demetrios *vatta* had a long spout (*kannouroui*) opposite a loop handle. A three-dimensional clay snake, pursuing or devouring its prey, can be found slithering along the handle. The *vattes* are 23 cm tall. Their necks and upper bodies are covered with incised lines and appliqué designs.

On the right side of each handle, the letter *lambda* was incised in the wet clay prior to firing. Some women inscribed initials on their pots, in order to help non-potters such as clients and middlemen identify the maker. The potters themselves however could recognize the work of every woman, even without the letter.

The two *vattes* are among the few pots whose life-history has not been fully documented. They were collected from Agios Demetrios church. Over the past century, only two potters marked their work with a *lambda*: Lefkothea (“Lefkou”) Ioannou (1918–2001) and Xariklia

(“Loulla”) Krokou (1931). Xariklia used the first letter of her nickname, Loulla, because the X, was reserved for her mother, Xristothea (Christothea) Yiangou. Both Lefkou and Loulla were active potters from 1950 to 1980. In order to identify which woman made each *vatta* which was collected from the church, we compared them with other pots made by them.

Four pots from the heritage collection, marked with a *lambda*, come with complete details regarding their manufacturing. The two pots donated by Loulla’s daughter have a *lambda* incised to the left of the handle. Two jugs contributed by Lefkou’s daughters have a *lambda* incised to the right of the handle, the same as on the *vattes* in question. A small juglet made by Lefkou sometime before 1980, and presented to G. London, has a *lambda* on its right side. All the evidence suggests that Lefkou made the two *vattes* from the church.

The second unusual shape is an imitation



Jugs, jars, and beehives donated to the Museum of Traditional Pottery in Ayios Demetrios. Photograph courtesy of A. Stylianidou-Constanti

solid *merreha*, a rosewater dispenser. Elpiniki Pilavaki (b. 1933) made the 10 cm tall piece more than three decades ago. Her son, Themistocles, donated it to the museum. Although the upper portion is broken, incised wavy lines and stipple patterns are still visible on the lower and upper body.

A miniature shallow bowl, an *alatera*, is the third, rare shape. It was made by Elengou (Eleni) Michael Vasiliou (1905/06–1989) and donated by her 75-year-old daughter, Kikka. It fits into the mouth of a bottle or *botis*, as a lid, but it has a dual function. Kikka recalls bringing the two pieces to a table and removing the *alatera* to the tabletop. The bottle “lid” was also a salt cellar. The *alatera* is the only pot shaped from a ball of clay in the “pinch pot” technique. Its small size of just 7 cm wide likely means that other such products have been lost over the years, or may have been repurposed as toys for children. For the first time, we can add the red clay *alatera* to the rural ceramic repertoire as part of the heritage collection in Agios Demetrios.

Museum visitors can enjoy a multi-media experience. In addition to the pots and tools on display, there are videos of village potters (London 2000; Theodosiadou and Avgousti 2007) and drawings of pots for children to colour in and decorate. Old photographs of villagers have been being digitized. A catalogue describing the life history of each pot, and a genealogy of the potters, is currently in progress. Pottery classes open to all ages began in August 2015.

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Maroulla from Kaminaria shapes a vase with tubular additions.
Photograph courtesy of A. Stylianidou-Constanti

generosity of the village residents, especially Mrs. Anthoulla Frixou Yiangou, Mrs. Avgoulla Loizidou Norris and the Village President, Mr. A. Konstantinou.

Please call Father Dometios (99317150) to visit the Museum, or visit us on Facebook <https://www.facebook.com/ayiosdemetriospottery>.

References

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