

Pottery is an important aspect of African culture. It is made and used in almost every tribe, usually by women, less often by men. In an effort to communicate something about African culture, Field Museum recently sponsored a demonstration of traditional African pottery making by the Nigerian potter Ladi Kwali.

Ladi Kwali's first name means "born on Sunday"; her second name is simply that of her home, Kwali, one of the villages of the Gwari people of northern Nigeria. As a child she was trained in traditional Gwari hand-building pottery methods by her aunt. As a young woman she was taught to throw pots on a wheel by the English potter Michael Cardew.

Michael Cardew went to Nigeria in 1950 as a senior pottery officer working for the British Ministry of Industry and Trade. He established a pottery training center at Abuja after much research in northern Nigeria. Abuja was chosen for several reasons: the traditional pottery in the area was excellent; firewood was abundant; good clays were plentiful; there were good local sources for the raw materials necessary to make glazes; and water was available. At Abuja, Cardew taught Nigerians and other Africans to throw pots on a wheel and to use stoneware clay and glazes.

The Ghanaian potter Kofi Athey explains to Christine Danziger, conservator in the Museum's Anthropology Department, certain technical details about African ceramics.

However, he was so impressed with the local Gwari pottery, especially that made by Ladi Kwali, that when she came to learn new methods at the training center, Cardew encouraged her to continue making traditional pots also. She was famous as a traditional potter when Cardew came to Nigeria, and he simply taught her and other native potters how to adapt traditional pots to stoneware clay, which could be glazed and fired to high temperatures.

Ladi Kwali's traditional waterpots actually kept the center going in its early years when some people in the Ministry of Industry and Trade thought it was not profitable and should be shut down. The enthusiasm with which Ladi Kwali's pots were received when exhibited in London in 1958, 1959, and 1962 helped keep the center open. In 1962 Ladi Kwali spent three weeks in England demonstrating her craft to audiences of potters, students, and ethnologists. In 1963 she was invited to go on a tour of demonstrations in Germany and Italy.

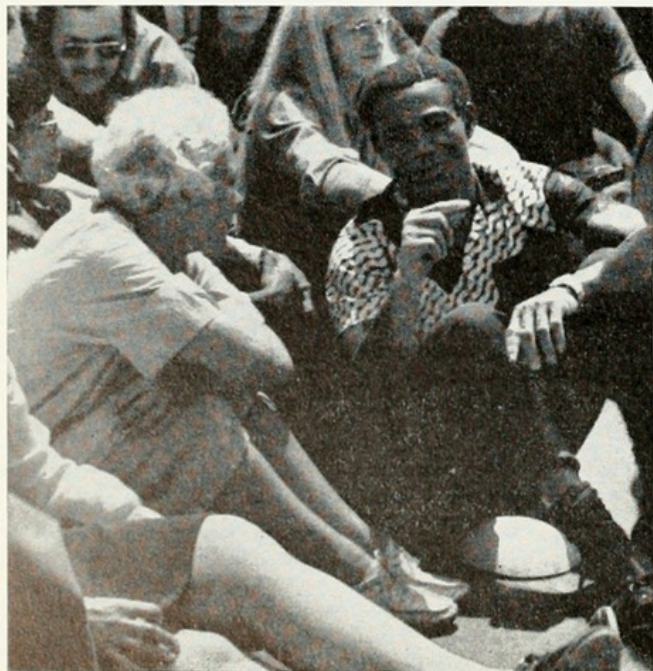
In October 1965 Ladi Kwali achieved additional international recognition in the ceramic world when she won a Silver Award of Excellence for a jar with a traditional pattern which had been entered in the 10th International Exhibition of Ceramic Art at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington,

Ladi Kwali making a traditional Gwari waterpot at Field Museum. She rolls about three clay sausages at one time and lays them in the bottom of the pot until she is ready to add one to the pot.

## an african potter at work

maude wahlman

At this stage Mrs. Kwali is building up the shoulder of the pot by pressing on some of the clay sausages. After each addition of clay she smooths both the inside and the outside of the pot with a tool made from a piece of gourd, which obliterates the marks of the newly added clay and incorporates it into the wall of the pot.





D.C. The jar was brought to the United States by the Harmon Foundation of New York City, and they agreed to leave it on permanent exhibition with the African ethnological collection at the Smithsonian.

Michael Cardew arranged a United States tour for Ladi Kwali in 1972 to major cities on the East Coast and in the South and to Chicago, Los Angeles, and Dallas. The three people in the tour were Ladi Kwali, Michael Cardew, and Kofi Athey. Kofi Athey is a Ghanaian potter who also studied under Michael Cardew at Abuja, and he is now in charge of his own pottery center at Jos, Nigeria. On May 17, 1972 Ladi Kwali made a traditional waterpot on the terrace outside the west door of Field Museum while Michael Cardew answered questions and talked informally about Nigerian pottery and Kofi Athey prepared the clay and translated for Ladi Kwali. About 450 people came to see the demonstration, some from as far away as Urbana, Illinois and Bloomington, Indiana.

The photos show progressive stages in the building of this pot. It is the kind traditionally used in Gwari to transport water from its source to a larger storage waterpot which is kept in most African homes.

After the pottery demonstration, Michael Cardew introduced a new film, "Abuja Pottery," made at the Pottery Training

Center by the Australian film maker Alister Hassam. Field Museum will acquire a print of this film for future educational purposes. The film shows Ladi Kwali and another traditional Gwari potter making hand-built pots alongside men throwing pots on a wheel. It also shows traditional Gwari firing methods as well as contemporary firings at Abuja. Traditional Gwari pots are fired by making a circle of stones, laying thin sticks on the ground, carefully piling the pots on the sticks, and covering them with broken potsherds and brushwood and grass. The fuel is lit and the pots are fired for not longer than three hours. Sometimes the pots are basted after firing, while hot, with a liquid made from soaked locust bean pods. This treatment gives the pottery a mahogany-colored surface which looks almost like a glaze.

Traditional African pottery is often burnished but is never glazed. In order to glaze a pot it must be made of clay which can be fired to a high temperature so that the clay minerals will bond with the glaze. Some scholars had assumed that African potters could not achieve high firing temperatures. Michael Cardew discovered and explained in his book *Pioneer Pottery* that Africans deliberately use low-firing clays and no glaze. African pots are made mainly to be

used for cooking over an open fire. A pot that is used in this way must be highly resistant to thermal shock—that is, it must not be fired to a temperature high enough to melt the clay minerals into a rigid glass state.

African pots are deliberately made of clays that fire best at about 600°C., leaving the pots in a non-glaseous, porous state with the clay minerals still physically flexible, and thus the pot is resistant to the thermal shock caused by cooking over an open fire. When the pot is placed over a fire, the clay minerals on the outside of the pot react to the intense heat by expanding into the pores. When it is removed from the fire, the minerals cool and contract back into place without cracking the pot. A glazed pot subjected to such extreme conditions would crack. Porous pots also make excellent waterpots because they can sweat and thus cool the water inside by evaporation.

Although Michael Cardew retired from Abuja in 1965 to Cornwall, England, the Abuja Training Center, now operated by the Nigerian government, continues to train Nigerians in pottery-making technologies. All materials used are from Nigeria. After the trainees have mastered the various aspects of making pottery, they may remain at the center and produce pottery and teach

The clay just added here is not in a smooth coil but has been pinched over the neck for the wide lip that will be shaped next. Mrs. Kwali is answering a spectator's questions with the help of Michael Cardew, who is translating back and forth between English and Hausa.

Mrs. Kwali uses a piece of wet leather to form the lip of the pot. This is the hardest step in making a traditional African pot and is more time-consuming than any other stage except decoration.

Shaping the neck of the pot with fingers and the palm of the hand.





new students or they may start a new workshop elsewhere. There are now Abuja-trained potters at centers in Kampala, Uganda and Jos, Nigeria.

The products of the Abuja Pottery Training Center are an example of an evolving African art. The traditional terracotta pottery used in villages is evolving into ceramic ware made to be used in cities. The traditional pots were, and still are, used in African homes for cooking over an open fire; for storing water, food, and fuel; for carrying liquids and food; and in shrines to hold ritual liquids used in ceremonies. The contemporary pots—both those made on a wheel and those built by hand, bisque-fired, glazed, and again fired—are sold to upper-class Nigerians and Europeans in Nigeria and Europe as tableware and decorative pieces. The products made at

The waterpot now in its final shape, Mrs. Kwali rolls a carved wooden tool called a roulette over the side of the pot. She uses another roulette, of twisted cotton, to impress decoration on the shoulder of the pot. The twisted cotton roulettes are made by women; the wooden roulettes, carved with a pattern of simple notches, are made by men and sold to the potters. Potters use several roulettes, each with a different design. Many African pots are rouletted all over. The potters say rouletting is for decoration, but Cardew and other scholars have noted that the process consolidates the surface, strengthens the pot, and assists in cooling any liquid contents by increasing the surface area through which evaporation may take place. Rouletting also gives a pot a non-slippery surface which is useful when a woman with wet hands tries to lift a pot full of food or water. In the audience are Ruth Duckworth, a famous Chicago potter, and a photographer from the *Chicago Daily Defender*.

Abuja are glazed stoneware oil jars, traditional waterpots, flowerpots, ashtrays, casseroles, tumblers, bowls, mugs, plates, teapots, coffeepots, and cups and saucers. There are plans to sell Abuja pottery in Chicago also.

As much as one admires traditional African pottery, one must recognize the validity of an art form that is evolving to meet new needs, whether the evolution be technological (use of the wheel, stoneware clays, and glazes), economic (exportation of African pottery to other countries), or social (the emergence of a new social class with different ceramic needs).

Africa is changing, just as most parts of the world are changing. Some people lament the changes but still admire what Michael Cardew has achieved, because at Abuja the traditional high level of craftsmanship and design has been continued and adapted to other clays and techniques. Ladi Kwali's traditional waterpot constructed here at Field Museum was made with stoneware clay donated by the A.R.T. Studios in Skokie, Illinois and fired at the Art Institute of Chicago by the Evanston potter James Lorio. But its shape and designs are the same as her pots made at Kwali—the native animals, the chameleons, lizards, snakes, scorpions, birds, fish, and crocodiles. It is now a part of the African collections at Field Museum.

The United States tour of Ladi Kwali, Michael Cardew, and Kofi Athey was cooperatively sponsored through the African Craftsmen in America, the American Crafts Council, and the World Crafts Council as an experiment in international understanding between peoples. Its success will enable other African craftsmen to come to the United States.

#### FURTHER READING

Michael Cardew. *Pioneer Pottery*. London: Longmans, Green and Co. Ltd., 1969.

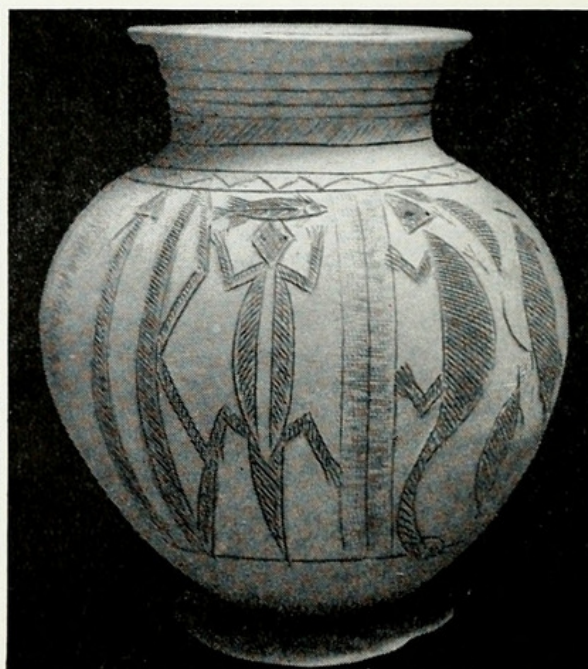
Michael Cardew. "Ladi Kwali," *Craft Horizons*, vol. 32, no. 2, p. 34, 1972.

Charles Counts. "Michael Cardew," *Craft Horizons*, vol. 32, no. 1, p. 22, 1971.

Alhaji Hassam and Mallam Shuaibu Na'ibi (translation by Frank Heath). *The Chronicle of Abuja*. Lagos: African Universities Ltd., 1962. (Available at Northwestern University Library.)

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The finished pot shows the same animal designs that Ladi Kwali has always put on her traditional pots—crocodiles, lizards, snakes, chameleons, birds, fish, and scorpions. At the Abuja Training Center the large waterpots that Mrs. Kwali makes of stoneware clay are bisque-fired, then painted over with a mixture of kaolin and feldspar. This is rubbed off with a wet sponge, leaving white slip lodging in the incised designs. The pot is then dipped in a special glaze which when fired is transparent rather than opaque. After firing, the designs appear as if inlaid in white and the background is a deep green or gray. Photos by Fred Huysmans and Hilda McElroy.







Wahlman, Maude. 1972. "An African Potter at Work." *Field Museum of Natural History bulletin* 43(8), 12–14.

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