

Traditional Hand-Wheel Pottery in Potravlje at the Museum of the Cetinska Krajina Region - Sinj

- This paper focuses on traditional hand-wheel pottery-making in Potravlje. Potravlje is an active centre of this kind of pottery-making which has been listed as intangible cultural heritage of the Republic of Croatia. Objects which are a part of the Ethnographic Collection at the Museum of the Cetinska Krajina Region - Sinj will be used to present the local potters' skills and artistry, as well as to demonstrate how these objects were used in everyday life rural hinterland in Dalmatia in the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century.

Key words: Museum of the Cetinska Krajina Region - Sinj
museum collections, pottery, Potravlje

THE ETHNOGRAPHIC COLLECTION AT THE MUSEUM OF THE CETINSKA KRAJINA REGION - SINJ

The Museum of the Cetinska Krajina Region - Sinj (hereinafter MCK - Sinj) was founded in 1956 as the *Town Museum - Sinj*. Considering the fact that the museum's activities extended beyond Sinj, the museum was renamed in 1963 as the Museum of the Cetinska Krajina Region - Sinj.

Based on the material kept, the Museum is general, and according to its territorial activities, the Museum is regional. As an institution, the Museum is the central place for research, the presentation and display of the rich cultural and historical heritage of Sinj and the Cetinska Krajina region. The Museum's holdings are divided into twelve

collections: Archaeological Collection, Numismatic Collection, Cultural and Historical Collection, Ethnographic Collection, Natural History Collection, Arms Collection, Orders, Medals and Plaques Collection, Collection of Photographs and Photographic Equipment, Document Collection, Postcard Collection, Poster Collection, and Art Collection. The Archeological and Art Collections are on permanent display and stone monuments from various style periods are displayed on the ground floor.¹

The Ethnographic Collection is not a part of the permanent display. It is kept in the Museum's depots. A minor part of the Collection is displayed in the gallery. The Collection consists of 600 objects, most of which are traditional costumes items and traditional jewelry. Other objects in this collection reveal the economic and housing circumstances in this region in the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. This paper² covers the part of the Collection which presents the usage and the role of pottery in the Cetina region in the 19th and 20th centuries, and which also gives insight into current status of hand-wheel pottery-making in Potravlje.

THE TRADITIONAL HAND-WHEEL POTTERY

Croatian ethnology distinguishes between three types of pottery-making based on the technique: pottery without a wheel, hand-wheel pottery, and treadle wheel pottery. We have little information on pottery without the potters' wheel. Hand-wheel pottery and treadle wheel pottery were present in many places until mid 20th century. Hand-wheel pottery was mostly preserved in the Adriatic and Dinaric cultural areas, and treadle wheel was mostly preserved in Pannonian area (cmp. Randić 1999: 11).

The throwing pan on the treadle wheel is connected by a shaft to the flywheel, which enabled the potter to propel the tray by propelling the flywheel with his bare foot which meant both of his hands were free. These potters used kaolin clay, so no supplements were needed, and they threw by "pulling" one clump of clay which rotated fast. The vessel walls were thinner, they were geometrically shaped and decorated with flowers painted with a brush. The vessels were dried by baking in special, closed pottery kilns. Some were veneered by coloring in metal oxides solutions (yellow, green, brown), after which the vessels had to be dried again.³

At the beginning of the 20th century several pottery centres were established in southern Croatia and inland Dalmatia. These centres were famous for objects made of unglazed clay: these objects were thrown on hand-wheels, air dried, and fired in a fire pit (cmp. Vojnović-Traživuk 2009: 101). Throwing pots on a hand-wheel is a technique

1 <http://www.mck-sinj.hr/index.php/en/> (visited on 1st November 2016).

2 The paper was originally written as a part of professional examination for the museum curator at the Museum Documentation Centre supervised by Iris Biškupić Bašić, Ph. D., a museum advisor at the Ethnographic Museum in Zagreb, who encouraged me to publish this paper and I would like to use this opportunity to express my gratitude to her.

3 Miroslav Krleža Institute of Lexicography, <http://www.enciklopedija.hr/natuknica.aspx?id=37080> (visited on 5th November 2016).

which was known to people in prehistoric times. With time pottery techniques were developed and improved, but this technique - using a special mix of clay and crushed stone, using a low hand-wheel and firing pots in fire pits, survived in some parts of the world until the end of the 20th century, and in still lives in some places (Randić 2014: 105). Potters were usually men who took on pottery as a supplemental activity. In the past they used to trade the objects they made for wheat ("you can take as much wheat as you can fit in your pot") (cmp. Petrić 1979; Vojnović-Traživuk 2009). The widespread industrialization in mid 20th century leads to de-ruralisation and migrations of people in villages to cities. These processes resulted in people abandoning traditional vocations because factory made products were easily accessible and they increased life quality. Craftsmen gave up their fire pits, the demand for pottery decreased, which in turn lead to rapidly decreasing pottery making.⁴ Only two pottery making centres were still active at the end of the second half of the 20th century. These centres thus focused on making souvenirs (flower pots, *pitari*, amphoras, baking lids, *peka*, earthen pots, *bakra*, pots and pans) alongside traditional objects.⁵

HAND-WHEEL POTTERY IN POTRAVLJE NEAR SINJ

Alberto Fortis wrote about pottery making in the Cetina region in his book "Travels into Dalmatia," published in 1774, and Ivan Lovrić, a young man from Sinj, confirms Fortis' records in his book "Notes on Travels into Dalmatia by Priest Alberto Fortis", published in 1776. These books reveal that pottery making was a common additional activity undertaken by men, especially the so called Morlachs, based on the exclusive use of clay pots among the rural locals. The pots were exchange for wheat or sold at fairs. Antun Matas also write about pottery in the Cetina region (cmp. Petrić 1979: 351-352).

Mario Petrić, a respectable ethnologist from Sinj, described pottery industry in great detail. He drew a parallel between what Fortis and Lovrić wrote and pottery in the 20th century. Jelena Gamulin conducted field research and noted the whole procedure process and terminology. Branka Vojnović-Traživuk, a senior curator at the Ethnographic Museum Split, also studied pottery making in Potravlje based on Jelena Gamulin's field research and the holdings at the Ethnographic Museum Split.

Nowadays Jure Knezović's (1933 - 2012) sons Ivan (born in 1962) and Filip "Pile" (born in 1965) keep the tradition of pottery making alive in Potravlje. They are supported by the Ministry of Culture. Pottery making in Potravlje is registered as a cultural good and was listed as intangible cultural heritage of the Republic of Croatia in 2013. This was proposed and supported by MCK - Sinj. Pottery making, also known as *bakrarstvo*,⁶ is a male activity passed on from father to son, and this tradition remains even nowadays. Ivan Knezović, is a potter for over twenty years, presents his work through workshops

4 More in: Randić, 2014.

5 Potravlje, Sinj and Veli Iž were the only two remaining centres. The status of Veli Iž was jeopardised after Predrag Petrović, the last potter on the island, passed away in 2015.

6 Potters are called *bakrari* in the Cetina region. The name *bakrari* comes from a cooking pot, *bakra*, which used to be widely made at that time.

for the general public. The workshops are organised with the support of the Ministry of Culture and Sinj Tourist Board. These workshops are aimed at instigating interest with the locals and all those who are interested in traditional pottery making. They also seek to point to the rich traditional culture in the Cetina region. Workshop participants get the chance to see the whole process. The author of this paper also tried throwing a pot.

Clay (*gnjila*, *zemlja/soil*) is mixed with *vrsta* (calcite) which acts as binding agent and makes baking clay at high temperatures possible. Ivan Knezović claims the ideal ratio of clay and *vrsta* is 2:1. He also says that there are several kinds of *vrsta*, but he uses the crystallised one, one which is nowadays crushed in modern machines. In addition to *vrsta*, *pržina* (fine sand), usually for throwing flower pots, *pitar*, because of constant humidity. The clay itself is excavated by a digger and transported by a car. It used to be dug out manually in the past and mules were used for transportation. Clay, which there is an abundance of in this area, is the main prerequisite for keeping this activity alive. The most common type of clay in this area is brown clay, and red clay is present as well. Knezović says that he still uses clay from Hrvace, which is where his father used to get it from. The clay is soaked in water and mixed with calcite, *vrsta*, or fine sand, *pržina*. They are combined together with bare feet. This process is called cooking the soil, *kuvanje*, and in the process soil is softened. Soil used to be cooked on top of goat skin, whereas today canvas is used. It is thrown on a hand-wheel, *čekrk*, with a wooden knife, *kustura*; a wooden spindle is used to make holes on the pot or to make handles on pots and pans; a cloth, *perača*, which is kept in a bowl with water, *gladarica*. A piece of linen was used as a cloth, whereas today other, rougher, materials are used. Once everything is prepared and ready for throwing, *building*, the potter takes a lump of clay and flattens, *spljeska*, to the size he desires and puts it on the wheel which was previously sprinkled with calcite, *vrsta*, to avoid the bottom of the pot sticking to the wheel. The potter holds the wooden knife, *kustura*, in one hand, his elbow pressed against his leg (to ensure that the hand is static), and draws a circle on flattened clay, and uses his other hand to turn the wheel. The bottom is then pressed on four sides. The potter then makes rolls, *turice*, made of clay and calcite mix, kneads them and attaches them to the bottom, thus making walls. The bottom is fortified with extra clay, but it is extremely important to even it out, otherwise it will break when it is baked. Once the bottom is modelled, the next step is modelling the walls. The walls must not be too thick or too thin (the optimal thickness is 0.7 - 0.8 cm). The wall is raised, *ziđa*, by adding rolls to it, row by row until the desired height is achieved. After adding rolls, *čekrk* is turned with one hand, in order to get the proper form and shape of a pot, while *kustura* is held in the other hand and is used to flatten the outside of the pot so that there are no visible transitions from one roll to the next. A wash cloth, *perača*, is then used, a cloth for for making lines or shaping edges, *pelišenje*. The cloth is soaked in water and it helps to model the pot. When the walls are made, the thumb is drenched and it presses the pot from the inside which contributes to clay binding. The process of crafting the pot's belly is known as *kuljenje*.⁷ Clay can be worked as long as it is humid. After the pot is modelled, handles are added, usually from the neck to mid belly. If a

7 *Kuljava žena* (a big bellied woman) is a local expression used to describe a pregnant woman.

lid is necessary, the measurements have to be taken before the pot is dried. Moreover, the fact that clay shrinks up to 8 mm when it is dried has to be taken into consideration. Decorating techniques are simple and mostly include carving simple lines (simple geometrical shapes). Usually flower pots are decorated, while other pots are not.

After it is thrown, the pot has to be dried before putting it into fire. Nowadays, due to increased production (in the past most households made pots for their own needs), the pots are dried in the summer since warmth drains humidity out of clay. The pot is baked over a bonfire lit in a clearing called *žernica*: wooden coals are heaped, lit, and spread out to fit the all pots. The pots are turned upside down and lined next to each other on top of embers. Another set of logs is put on top of turned pots and cooking pots are put on top of them. Cooking lids, *peka*, are pressed against the sides of cooking pots and logs are arranged around them. The pots are baked until they become reddish.⁸ They are taken out of the fire with a long pole called *soja*. Arranging pots properly on the fire is of utmost importance. One needs to know how to position the pot optimally. Also, the fact that clay expands in fire has to be taken into consideration or the pots can break. The last step is called *kaljenje* - the pots are coated with wheat flour mixed with water using a cloth. The pot is then put back into fire until *kalivo*, the pot, darkens (cmp. Petrić 1973: 358 and Vojnović-Traživuk 2009: 105).⁹

Pottery making in Potravlje is nowadays reduced to souvenir making, making flower pots, and especially making baking lids, *peka*, which is praised for giving food extraordinary flavor and is usually tied to the concept of healthy diet (cmp. Vojnović-Traživuk 2005: 157). The pots are sold at local festivals, parties, *derneci*, or made to order. The processes of reviving traditions and the growing popularity of segments of folk culture can be observed, especially in tourism and catering industry. Therefore, traditional handmade objects can be found in many hotels and restaurants in Dalmatia (first and foremost traditional restaurants called *konoba*, inspired by the motto *the Mediterranean as it once was* used for promoting tourism in Primorje)¹⁰, as testified by Mr Knezović.

HAND-WHEEL POTTERY IN POTRAVLJE NEAR SINJ AT MCK - SINJ

The Ethnographic Collection of the Museum of the Cetinska Krajina region - Sinj began to be collected in the 1980s. Hand-wheel pottery-making in Potravlje is one of the segments which safeguards the traditional way of life against oblivion. Hand-wheel pottery-making in Potravlje gained the status of a cultural good thanks to, among others, the Museum. Thus, the Museum plays an important role in continuing the tradition and raising awareness of safekeeping cultural heritage.

8 More in Petrić, 1979.

9 The entire hand-wheel pottery-making process can be seen in a promo video filmed by Sinj Tourist Board, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gSVxHTm7feM> (visited on 5th November 2016).

10 In the 1980s and 1990s people started throwing away traditional handcrafted objects from the 19th century and from the beginning of the 20th century. This has changed in the last decade, and these objects are nowadays used in ethno design which is becoming increasingly popular.

Several objects will be described in this paper which were donated to the Museum of the Cetinska Krajina Region - Sinj by the Rectory of St. Vid in Zelovo. Field research showed that pottery making was not present in Zelovo (which was expected). A hand-wheel and several pots were discovered in Zelovo, but they probably came to Zelovo from Potravlje by trade routes. Potravlje was then known as one of pottery-making centres. This fact opens the door for further research of trade between the two communities, both famous for their handicraft. The craftsmen from Zelovo were known far and wide as skilled carpenters and were famous for their woodwork and smoking accessories. The craftsmen from Potravlje supplied the whole region with their pots. A hand-wheel was also donated to the Museum which is believed to date back to the beginning of the 20th century, based on the fact that the log, *panj*, that supports *čekrk*, is not a forked tree (see Fig. 2 and Fig. 3), and the construction is simple. Petrić writes that wherever hand-wheel pottery-making is present two kinds of hand-wheels can be distinguished based on the way they were made: one simpler and older, and one newer and more complex, both of which have numerous variants. One thing they have in common is a round work surface attached with four couplings to make out a cross, *križ* (1979: 358).

The craftsmen from Potravlje were famous for their product mix because they adapted to customer demands in both rural and urban areas. They mostly made *bakras*, cooking pots, after which potters were named *bakrari*. *Bakra* resembles a cooking pot, but it has two handles so it could be hung above the fireplace, *komoštra*. *Bandeua* is similar to *bakra*, the only difference is the positioning of the handles: the handle on *bakra* is positioned on top, from the lips to the neck, and the handles on *bandeua* are positioned on the sides of the neck¹¹ (see pictures below). Another important object made by potters was a cooking pot, *lonac*, which is an umbrella term for various pots, with a lid or without it, with one handle or two handles, of various sizes and uses. Baking lids, *peka*, is another significant object made by potters. *Peka* is a rounded lid with several clay rings under which a dish is baked. Embers are piled on the lid and around it. Dishes prepared under this lid are still highly valued in the Cetina region and is an important part of gastronomic offer.

THE CATALOGUE

1. **Type/ Object name:** hand-wheel (literary name), *čekrk* (dialect)

Made in: Potravlje

Crafted: in the first half of the 20th century

Dimensions: h = 25 cm, w = 37.5 cm

Inventory tag: MCK-13873

Description: The hand-wheel, *čekrk*, consists of multiple parts: a round wooden board called *čekrk*, a wooden cross which is attached to the board with wooden pegs, so the

11 According to Ivan Knezović, a potter.

board and the cross make up an inseparable whole. A shaft runs through the middle of the cross. The shaft is a wooden spike (*kurelj*) attached to the log (*senj*). The shaft is thick and its shape is irregular in order for it to be stable. The wooden board is propelled by hand. It is used for throwing clay (Fig. 2 and Fig. 3)

2. Type/ Object name: pot (literary name), *ruketnjak* (dialect)

Made in: Potravlje

Crafted: in the first half of the 20th century

Material/Technique: clay, modelled; clay, baked; calcite

Dimensions: h = 15.5 cm; h (lid) = 1.7 cm; w = 24 cm, diam. (rim) = 12 cm, diam. (bottom) = 12 cm

Inventory tag: MCK-14514

Description: A smaller pot. The rim is slightly curved. A handle which extends down to the belly is attached to it. The neck is short and slightly curved inward. There is no pronounced transition from the rim to the shoulder. The bottom is round and flat. The walls are thick. The pot is brown. The pot is made of clay with a little bit of calcite. The ceramics are hard, of good quality, the surface is semi veneered. The pot is covered by a lid of the same texture. The lid is slightly sunk. There is a smaller conical handle in the middle of the pot. It was used for making sour milk (Fig. 4 and Fig. 5).

3. Type/Object name: cooking pot (literary name), *bandeua* (dialect)

Made in: Potravlje

Crafted: in the first half of the 20th century

Material/Technique: clay, modelled; clay, baked; iron wire

Dimensions: h = 19.3 cm; h (with the handle) = 38 cm; diam. (rim) = 14 cm; diam. (belly) = 60 cm; diam. (bottom) = 13 cm

Inventory tag: MCK-14155

Description: A cooking pot, medium sized. The rim is slightly curved. There is a slightly pulled lip on the top. The rim is chipped in some places. The neck is short and slightly turned inward. There is no pronounced transition between the rim and the shoulder. The upper part is spherical, and the bottom part is conical. The bottom is round and flat. Handles on the upper part of the pot are taller than the rim. A wire, *povrstalo*, *povrslo*, is drawn through the handles. There is a curved handle on the upper part, but this one is shorter than the rim. The walls are thick and black due to char. Is made of clay with a little bit of calcite. The ceramics are of medium quality and the surface is coarse (Fig. 6 and Fig. 7).

CONCLUSION

Hand-wheel pottery-making has been present in the Cetina region for a very long time, however, out of many pottery-making centres, only Potravlje still survives. Jure Knezović's (1933 - 2012) sons, Ivan (b. 1962) and Filip (b. 1965), keep the family tradition alive in Potravlje. In this way the tradition of passing the craft from father to son goes on. The traditional pottery-making in Potravlje has been declared a cultural good and was listed as protected intangible cultural heritage of the Republic of Croatia in 2013. This validates its value and opens up the possibilities for the continuation of this tradition in the future. Bearing in mind that Potravlje is the only remaining active centre, I have to point out the importance of studying this area and presenting this part of heritage to prevent it from sinking into oblivion and to enable its continuity. The Museum's activities contribute to this - archiving and safekeeping of materials, exhibiting objects, communication with the general public. The Museum of the Cetinska Krajina Region - Sinj is one of many institutions whose holdings give insight into the traditional skill of hand-wheel pottery.

INFORMANTS:

Ivan Knezović dec. Jure, b. 1962, from Potravlje (potter)

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Youtube video: Traditional Hand-Wheel Pottery in Potravlje.. URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gSVxHTm7feM> (visited on 5th November 2016)

OTHER

Item tags MCK - Sinj (The Ethnographic Collection)

Photos of the museum's exhibits from the Ethnographic Collection at MCK - Sinj