

CONTEMPORARY MANIFESTATIONS OF TRADITIONAL SKILLS AND LOCAL CRAFTSMANSHIP IN LATVIAN CERAMICS

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Abstract

This article examines the significance of traditional skills and local craftsmanship in Latvian ceramics, with a particular focus on their contemporary expressions in amateur art. Modern ceramics are diverse in their forms and applications, but author here focuses on the preservation and application of traditional skills. A qualitative case study approach is applied here, analysing specific cases in Riga and Ogre to assess the role of conventional skills in contemporary ceramics in Latvia. Despite the availability of distance learning opportunities, territorial belonging is still characterised by local preferences regarding ceramic materials, processing and firing technologies, as well as close links with regional traditions. The knowledge and skills of local craftsmen, passed down from generation to generation and acquired through training, are also important. The author aims to determine whether contemporary ceramicists employ traditional techniques and their specific features in the local context, and to analyse the economic, social, and aesthetic aspects of these skills.

Keywords: *ceramics, ceramist, craftsman, traditional skills, case studies, local craftsmanship, contemporary manifestations.*

Introduction

A craft product combines both art and craft. The aesthetic appeal of an object is as important as its functionality. The object environment around us evokes certain emotions and allows us to trace and explore the interaction between traditional

Culture Crossroads

Volume 33, 2026, <https://doi.org/10.55877/cc.vol33.606>

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ISSN 2500-9974



techniques and innovation [Buckley 2022]. Although the everyday ceramic object may be simple or even seem visually primitive, it contains the artist's perceptions, emotions, life and creative experiences, and particular tastes that change under different circumstances. Today, a craftsman is not only a master who creates material values with his hands but also an artist, designer and entrepreneur.

The artisan often serves as a mediator, facilitating cooperation between the local community, business and socio-economic objectives [Pret and Cogan 2018]. The role of the artisan has expanded considerably today, as ceramic objects have evolved from everyday household necessities to interior design elements and lifestyle symbols. Consumers' desire to resist globalisation and the uniformity of mass production is fuelling demand for artisanal products, which embody handmade quality, creativity, and thus become a unique aesthetic asset. The product also acquires the value of its territorial and cultural origin, local aesthetic traditions, and close connection with local materials and craftsmanship. Ceramic artists also embody these values, creating a national identity narrative. Using craft methods, raw materials and compositional principles typical of peasant culture, they preserve traditional craft skills and create a link between the past and the present, thus strengthening the collective sense of belonging [Sirica 2024]. The different visions of the craftsmen ensure diversity.

In ceramics, as in any craft, tradition is a body of knowledge and skills constantly renewed and reinterpreted. It is a changing process that evolves with time and society, ensuring the continuity and relevance of tradition across all ages and cultures [Bronner 2011: 30]. Therefore, the ceramicist creates objects in the material and preserves, maintains and updates the intangible cultural heritage, continuing the tradition and becoming a carrier of local identity. Ceramics acts as a powerful and distinctive channel of cultural information that simultaneously incorporates traditions, present trends and visions of the future, forming close links with other applied arts [Sessions 1997]. Ceramic craftsmanship is the continuity of the maintenance and inheritance of tradition, which ensures the continuity of culture and the transmission of knowledge between generations.

Handicrafts reveal the tastes and perceptions of a society in a particular era, as well as the ceramic craftsman's technical mastery and prevailing creative solutions.

The aim of the article is to investigate the traditional knowledge and skills that have been preserved in contemporary ceramic practice in Latvia and to analyse whether and how they are distinguished from modern skills, to promote their preservation as intangible cultural heritage.

Today, there is a growing interest in crafts and the preservation of traditional skills; however, scientific research on the ceramic sector in Latvia remains limited. Traditional knowledge and skills, passed down from one generation to the next or acquired through craft training, form an integral part of intangible cultural heritage.

It is therefore essential to determine whether contemporary ceramicists can identify and utilise these skills in their practice, and how they manifest themselves in a specific local (regional) context. Such research contributes to understanding the sustainability of traditions, cultural diversity and the importance of craft in contemporary society.

The number of craftspeople and participation in various types of fairs are increasing. The Latvian Ethnographic Open-Air Museum's fairs – “The Folk Applied Arts Fair” in June and the “Contemporary Crafts Market” in early September – have become very popular and well-received events. Many Latvian craftspeople attend both fairs, which provide an opportunity to get acquainted with a wide range of traditional craft skills, various creative methods, materials, and creativity. In addition, regular fairs are organised in practically all regions of Latvia, with the participation of ceramic artisans being very active. Finally, the public's interest in crafts and ceramics is stimulated by the increasing number of workshops organised by craftsmen. The public is actively involved in this process, both in terms of demand for the craftsmen's products and their willingness to learn new skills by taking part in masterclasses organised by the craftsmen themselves.

Nowadays, ceramics show an increasing rapprochement and connection with global aesthetic trends. However, in recent years, we have also seen the emergence of other professions as craftspeople, for whom ceramics is only one part of their creative and economic activity or even an episodic one. In this situation, the professional level of the craft is declining, the variety of products is decreasing, and a narrow specialisation of the craftsman's skills is taking place. The artistic quality of individual products also declines as perceptions change significantly. Whereas previously it was believed that the quality of a product was determined by the craftsman's practical skills and experience, today every product is valued for the simple fact that it is handmade.

Handmade crafts are becoming increasingly popular today, and one reason for this is the difference between art as an intellectual process and craft as a physical activity [Markowitz 1994]. In a digitised world, where art is increasingly being transferred from tangible form to virtual environments, there is a growing desire for physical presence and material experience [Enhuber 2015]. Contact with the material provides a sensory experience that promotes psychophysiological balance and contributes to a subjective sense of satisfaction and physical well-being.

Research into the development of craft is essential because it offers a new perspective on the nature of art and shows that previously undervalued practices can become part of the contemporary art world [Kaijzer 2022]. Craft skills have historically been undervalued in terms of their standing as an essential part of art due to the fear that their inclusion in the discourse of art could threaten its hierarchically superior status.

The question of the meaning and integration of traditional skills into contemporary ceramic practice is fundamental to preserving traditional values.

It is necessary to analyse the extent to which contemporary ceramic craftspeople use traditional skills and techniques in their professional activities and to identify the presence and impact of these skills on the development of ceramic crafts. This issue is linked to ensuring the continuity of traditional cultural elements and their adaptation to the contemporary context. Which ceramic skills do craftspeople highlight as locally traditional skills?

Countries with extensive and long historical traditions, such as Indonesia and China, also emphasise the need for knowledge of traditional skills. New-age ceramics are highlighted as more design-oriented but do not necessarily fully incorporate the cultural context of conventional ceramics. It seeks to combine the principles of contemporary culture and art with the heritage of traditional ceramics. At the same time, it emphasises the artists' independence and freedom of creative expression, using modern technologies and techniques to create original and unique works [Zhang and Xuemin 2022]. Indonesian researchers emphasise the integration of the needs of contemporary society into ceramics while preserving traditional and local features. This approach attracts buyers in different markets and stimulates people's interest in the craft sector, thus preserving and passing on traditional skills [Safiri, Retnowati and Prihadi 2020]. The municipality of Jingdezhen, China, established a group of experts in 2020 to systematise and collect information on ceramic handicraft skills, and the experts carried out a classification of skills. A 2024 study suggests that this decision has significantly contributed to structuring the system and establishing a unique group system for inheriting skills [Zhang, Tan, 2024]. These examples underline the close relationship between art, design and craft, which allows the needs and demands of contemporary society to be integrated into ceramic products. At the same time, they also highlight the importance of preserving traditional values and the different approaches to ensure the continuity of cultural heritage and the basic knowledge for integrating innovation in the sector.

Methods

The study uses a qualitative case study methodology, which allows for an in-depth analysis of the transformation and preservation of traditional skills in contemporary ceramic practice in Latvia. A case study is particularly appropriate when the research aims to understand complex processes based on real-life contexts in which cultural, social and material interactions are important [Yin 2014; Stake 1995]. The methodology is based on an interpretive approach that emphasises the production of meaning in a particular cultural and social context [Gertz 1973].

Five qualitative interviews were conducted with various community members to gain a deeper understanding of the logged-in issue and to illustrate the situation within the sector. The empirical data and insights obtained served as the basis for

analysing and interpreting the research themes. A qualitative case study approach was used, focusing on the study and analysis of a specific “limited case”. The research was conducted in Riga and Ogre between May and October 2024. It was essential to include a comprehensive view of the ceramists, teaching staff, organisers, sellers, and buyers. To this end, a purposive sampling approach was used to select respondents, considering the following criteria: occupation, location, working age, different educational backgrounds, main occupation of ceramics, and different practices of selling ceramic products. A total of six interviews were conducted, lasting between 90 and 120 minutes. Five of them were conducted face-to-face, and one was conducted remotely. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with persons aged between 35 and 60. Three craftswomen were interviewed – ceramist artist O-TP-1, from Ogre, and ceramicists R-TP-2 and R-TP-3, from Riga – the opinion of a professional teacher from R-TP-4. The study includes information and data on the markets held in Ogre provided by the organiser, Ogre Culture Centre. The owner of the retail chain of shops, O-TP-6, was interviewed and provided information on ceramic products sold in the chain’s shops – the interview with O-TP-5.

The conversation reveals the ceramics buyer and the various markets visited from the perspective of a ceramics buyer and a visitor to multiple markets. A qualitative content analysis method [Mayring 2000] was used to analyse the data. The data from the interviews were initially grouped into thematic categories using an inductive approach procedure, which enabled nine categories (vocational training of craftsmen, importance of place of residence and work, specifics of occupation, materials used, target audience of consumers, marketing mechanisms of ceramic products, understanding of local tradition, traditional skills used, transfer of skills) to be created from the interview transcripts. A deductive categorisation approach was applied based on the established schema, in which themes were grouped according to the defined purpose. This approach highlighted the link between the categories created and the notion of tradition, deepening the understanding of the problem under study. The research captured each respondent’s experience and opinion, analysing the similarities and dissimilarities. To ensure the ethical use of the data, an agreement was signed with the participants, allowing their names to be used in this research and publication.

Traditional and contemporary ceramics: A theoretical view

The sustainability of tradition in a rapidly changing environment raises questions about preserving tradition and the conditions for its transmission. The logical question is: What exactly is tradition or traditional in ceramic crafts? Nowadays, it is difficult to define this concept precisely: tradition is present in the everyday life of ceramists as much as it is integrated into the cultural perception of society. Tradition is not a direct reflection of the past but a model of the past created in the present.

This symbolic construct has emerged through interpretation [Handler and Linnekin 1984]. In practical work, traditional techniques are closely merged with incoming innovations and different possibilities, which makes it difficult for the craftsman to distinguish between the conventional and the familiar.

However, in the twentieth century, and especially at the end of the century, approaches to studying tradition underwent significant changes. Folklore studies, anthropology, and sociology, in particular, became the dominant disciplines, shifting research toward an interdisciplinary perspective. At the same time, interest in tradition grew from more than an abstract cultural phenomenon. Tradition helps organise human communities, and individuals actively participate in its implementation. This means that the contemporary understanding of tradition emphasises preserving historical values while adapting and transforming them in a rapidly changing era (Bula 2011:159). The modern understanding of tradition as a dynamically evolving phenomenon enables a broader society to practice traditional skills.

Intangible cultural heritage was first proposed as equivalent to tangible cultural property at the 1982 World Conference in Mexico City, emphasising the importance of preserving the diversity of traditions and cultural practices [UNESCO, 1982]. This approach highlights the close connection between intangible cultural heritage and tradition as a crucial element of identity and cultural sustainability. To strengthen these principles, the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage was adopted on 17 October 2003 and entered into force in Latvia on 20 April 2006 [UNESCO 2003]. This Convention protects not only the traditions themselves but also the living heritage as a whole, which forms the identity of communities and ensures its sustainability through the creation, transmission and transformation of cultural practices [Seitel 2001]. The Convention highlights the importance of master practitioners in preserving and transmitting traditional skills.

The concept of tradition has been interpreted in various ways in historical and academic contexts. Tradition is a set of practices and beliefs linked to the past, accepted by a particular group, and serves as an element of identity formation for that group [Green 1997: 801]. In the 21st century, traditional research emphasises a multidimensional approach to understanding the concept, identifying five key elements characteristic of tradition: reproduction of the past, continuity, fluidity, implementer and symbolism [Treimane and Vinogradova 2018]. These characteristics underscore the tradition's dynamic and adaptive nature, which simultaneously maintains a link with the past while contributing to its relevance in contemporary society.

The debate on globalisation and identity in research particularly highlights the relationship between identity and territory. Two approaches are highlighted in the discussion: the first argues that globalisation leads to the disappearance of

cultural differences and the emergence of global similarities. Thus, globalisation can mean a worldwide homogenisation of culture [Hannerz 1991], which can be interpreted as a decline in the importance of traditions or the disappearance of local cultures. On the one hand, globalisation and the preservation of traditional culture may seem contradictory, but they can also be interpreted as different dimensions of development [Anttonen 2005: 120]. Today, the conventional category has become a global construct, especially in the worldwide tourism, trade, and symbol production markets related to traditional music, arts, and crafts [Anttonen 2005: 120]. Thus, tradition is often used as a symbol of the past. Still, it is not sufficiently appreciated that tradition can also be politically, ideologically and socially dependent, changing how it is used in contemporary discourses.

In *The Craftsman*, Richard Sennett analyses the importance of craft as a form of work, emphasising its fundamental character in human professional and creative development. He defines craft as a process in which an individual integrates technical skill, innovation and deliberate dedication to create high-quality products. According to Richard Sennett's theoretical framework, the prerequisite for excellent working practice is continuous competence development and reflective learning through practical experience. Craft involves not only manual activity but also cognitive engagement that fosters a deeper understanding of the materials and dynamics of the working process [Sennett 2008: 238]. Motivation and the pursuit of quality determine individuals' career paths. Social conditions significantly influence the development of this motivation [Sennett 2008: 252]. The researcher's issue of quality assessment is relevant in the scientific discourse. The problem of quality assessment arises from conflicting approaches: one based on precision and absolute standards, the other based on practical experience and established practices. The divergence of these approaches leads to institutional conflict, as universal quality criteria often conflict with standards established in practice [Sennett 2008: 52]. Historically, quality criteria have served as a differentiating factor that has set craftsmen apart from other ceramic practising communities in terms of the quality of their work. However, given the diversity of contemporary ceramic objects, it is challenging to distinguish craftsmen from other material practitioners based on specific criteria.

The quality of a ceramic object is determined by its material and the skill with which it is worked. Glenn Adamson argues that the specific relationship of art to the material is its essential difference from modern art, which aims to transcend physical boundaries [Adamson 2007: 39]. The author critically examines the notion of the insignificance of skill in the art-making process. The researcher analyses why skill is often interpreted as problematic or marginal in contemporary art discourse [Adamson 2007: 69]. Glenn Adamson also examines the cultural inferiority

attributed to home craft, contrasting it with hobby craft and the avant-garde [Adamson 2007: 139]. The author notes that amateur craftsmanship undermines the value of craftsmanship in the arts, producing low-quality and imitative works.

However, the contemporary understanding of craft promotes the view that craft skills are primarily based on tacit, intuitive, and experiential knowledge that can only be acquired through practical activity. Adamson argues that this distinction between theoretical thinking and pragmatic execution is a modern construct, as such a juxtaposition did not exist in the making process before the Industrial Revolution [Adamson 2013: 74]. The importance of handmade work in the post-industrialisation phase is increasing, giving objects a personalised and exclusive character. Handmade crafts are essential today, contributing to the enduring appeal and unique status of the craft in various cultural contexts.

The German philosopher and art theorist Boris Groys argues that contemporary aesthetics and art are becoming communication practices. Contemporary art audiences are more accepting and willing to embrace the concepts and emphases created by mass media, just as modern art often follows the entertainment media and mass communication. In Boris Groys' view, the formation of postmodern taste is market-driven, with its direct source being the globalisation of the information, media, and entertainment markets. The aesthetic taste characteristic of postmodernism is very inclusive, open and even democratic [Groys 2015: 203]. Yet, it often questions community, tradition and cultural identity. Postmodernism's aesthetic preference gradually transforms the particular into the universality of the other, blurring all boundaries [Tang 2021]. Contemporary aesthetics demonstrates the ability to integrate and accept diverse visual expressions accepted by the wider public and actively represented in the media. In this context, the evaluation of ceramic art objects no longer primarily focuses on their functional significance and material quality. Instead, it is the conceptual significance of the idea and its ability to attract attention and shape discourse in the public space that dominates.

Traditional skills in contemporary crafts

Traditional skills are based on the continuous application and transmission of skills to future generations, ensuring the preservation of traditions. The tradition of ceramic craftsmanship is carried on by enthusiasts of diverse interests and varying levels of training, creating a varied and vibrant picture of contemporary traditional ceramics. The totality of his skills determines the excellence of the craftsman and the quality of his work. Knowledge of conventional techniques, such as turning and reduction techniques, the specific characteristics of engobe and glazing, and even wood firing, is essential, especially if these skills are specific to a particular area. Although a broad knowledge of technology and material processing offers unlimited

creative possibilities, some craftspeople are only familiar with specific techniques, working within their comfort zone. Whereas ceramics were previously judged on their utility, practicality and functional qualities, today's traditional craftsmanship places much more emphasis on the aesthetic and artistic aspects of the work. It should also be noted that modern ceramic crafts have access to a much wider range of materials and technologies, which enable the use of material interactions in new firing processes, thereby expanding the visual variety of ceramic products. Traditional crafts also respond to the needs and tastes of today's buyers, who are markedly different from the views and demands of society in the past. Craftsmen in both Riga and Ogre are equally adaptable in responding to societal needs and offer a diverse and varied range of ceramic products.

Material as meaning in ceramic practice

The research gathered the opinions of actively working ceramists on using traditional skills and the possibilities of incorporating them into their creative work. The ceramic artists interviewed particularly emphasised the importance of choosing a conventional material. Clay is the most typical material in Latvia. However, it is essential to note that ceramists no longer produce their own clay but rather purchase it, and the material tends to originate from various regions and countries. As professional craftsmen and craftswomen, they pay particular attention to the plastic properties of the material and its stability during the working process. The territoriality and origin of the material are not as important as the quality of the material itself. Ceramic craftswomen partly use locally sourced material, and from this point of view, the tradition of using only Latvian clay is no longer stable in contemporary ceramic crafts. The ceramic artists interviewed also admitted paying attention to purchasing economically viable materials. The wishes and demands of society also influence them. To this end, white and brown clay, which has a relatively lower cost and a lower firing temperature than stoneware and porcelain, is used. These factors significantly impact the final price of ceramic products, making them more affordable for buyers. In some cases, however, there is a personal and emotional connection to a particular ceramic material, which, alongside practical considerations, may influence the final decision on the material.

“Clay is the closest to my heart, and it has a great deal to do with where we were born.” [personal archive, recording_7, O-TP-1, 11.10.2024.]

“I use white clay for craft production, but in principle, I work with stoneware and porcelain. I would like to work more with porcelain, but the buyers' purchasing power does not allow me to expand my operations.” [personal archive, recording_8, R-TP-3, 15.10.2024.]

R-TP-4 is a lecturer at the LMA and an active, creative artist who sees clay as a means to foster modern man's connection with nature. She believes that using local clay is crucial in the context of resource conservation and sustainability. Still, she acknowledges that the pace of modern life and urbanisation processes often encourages craftspeople to choose industrially prepared materials with less attention to their origin. However, some artisans still prefer to use local clay by purchasing it from local suppliers who extract and post-process it, such as *Raunas ceplis* or *Jelgavas keramika*, or by extracting it themselves, as is the case with masters in Latgale.

Traditional knowledge and skills

The next stage of making ceramic objects is shaping. According to conventional skills that have been known and used in Latvia for a long time, various techniques are employed, including moulding, casting, and turning. The ceramists interviewed utilise these skills extensively in creating their pieces. However, they all mentioned turning as the most characteristic and traditionally appropriate skill. This technique must be regularly practised in their daily practical work to maintain the quality and craftsmanship of turning. All respondents stated that they use turning regularly, as it is essential to maintain a high professional level, ensure the quality of their work, the precision of their workmanship, and the possibility of repeating their work in small quantities. All three ceramicists mentioned that the material's specificity should be considered a quality, all the more so because it allows the local tradition to be highlighted; however, R-TP-2 particularly stressed the need to work regularly to develop and improve her skills and produce a quality ceramic product. R-TP-3. and O-TP-1. It was essential for them to be familiar with the entire set of technological processes and traditional craft skills, as this fosters an in-depth understanding of the ceramic sector and the practice of quality knowledge transfer.

“The ability to practically apply the craft's skills also helps future ceramic artists realise much more interesting ideas during their studies.”

[personal archive, recording_9, R-TP-4, 18.10.2024.]

“It won't be a big problem if future ceramicists don't know how to make a traditional pot or a candlestick; there are plenty of them in museums. However, the problem is that they won't be able to pass on these skills when they become educators.”

[personal archive, recording_8, R-TP-3, 15.10.2024.]

“In Europe, many art schools no longer have teachers who can teach practical traditional skills, and in crafts, the role of the craftsman is even more important.”

[personal archive, recording_9, R-TP-4, 18.10.2024.]

The fact that Latvia will soon also have to face this problem is evidenced by the survey of participants in the Latvian Ethnographic Museum's Folk Applied Arts Fair held on 1 and 2 June 2024 [Dumpe 2024], as well as by statistics on the number of people registered as ceramists in 2021 and 2022 [Latvian official statistics portal]. The current market participant questionnaires showed that only 39% of practising potters are younger and aged between 30 and 54, with a much higher proportion in a different age group: 57% of practising potters are between 55 and 82. These craftspeople have received a quality education, possess traditional skills, and can apply them in practice. However, there are very few young craftsmen in the ceramics sector, which raises the question of ensuring the continuity of future skills.

Further transfer of craft skills into modern practice

Today, other options are also used to transfer traditional skills. Ceramists and craftspeople regularly organise masterclasses for children and adults to introduce the art of ceramics, educate, or have fun. However, workshops can rarely be called a complete learning process. Ceramists R-TP-3 and O-TP-1 mentioned in their interviews that workshops provide up to 80% of their income. If workshops are an essential source of income for the participants, they are often their first contact with the material and a source of creative inspiration. However, it must be acknowledged that some participants consider these workshops to be a sufficient and high-quality form of training. There is a tendency for participants who have attended several workshops to consider themselves sufficiently professional and capable of organising their own workshops and producing ceramic products, which are often of very low quality.

“I observe at the markets that the masterclasses are often given by dilettantes with little to no knowledge or practical experience. And the people who attend such workshops are not in a position to judge the teacher's professionalism.”

[personal archive, recording_8, R-TP-3, 15.10.2024.]

The ceramicists interviewed have no apprentices willing to learn and practice traditional crafts. However, the respondents employ a self-directed approach to enhance their knowledge and skills in new materials and current technologies. They utilise various digital platforms and participate in symposia to enhance their creativity and professional development. O-TP-1 reads and researches traditional ceramic techniques from Latvia and other regions, then experiments to find our region's pure forms and processing techniques. She is particularly fascinated by wood-firing techniques but lacks the knowledge and skills to implement them qualitatively. R-TP-3, on the other hand, admits that she lacks knowledge of marketing, advertising, and sales platforms, or the use of existing ones, to develop a successful business.

The buyer's perspective on traditional ceramics in the contemporary context

Market-goer O-TP-5 has a critical view of conventional ceramics, as unglazed or brown-glazed ware does not appeal to her emotionally. She feels that such ceramics are too uniform and boring and do not appeal to modern buyers. O-TP-5 doubts about whether anyone will buy such products anymore. However, she enjoys buying ceramics – the opportunity to experience the market atmosphere, talk to the craftsman, and feel the vessel's texture. The experience of being in the room is so vital to O-TP-5 that she will only buy any craft after direct contact with its maker. O-TP-5 is convinced that crafts are essential to our identity, territorial belonging and creativity. In addition, she feels it is necessary to support local craftsmen and thus contribute to the preservation of cultural heritage. At the same time, she expressed the view that our traditional ceramics are unwieldy and do not evolve with the times. She mentioned the presence of nature in the decoration of the vessels – the imprints of flowers, leaves and other parts of plants on the surface, the range of colours and textures, which give the products a more original look, as a feature that is in keeping with modern times.

The impact of market demand on contemporary ceramics

Regular events and fairs featuring ceramic craftsmen are held in nearly all regions of Latvia, including Riga and Ogre. One of the most widely attended events is the Ethnographic Open-Air Museum Fair, where craftspeople from Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia participate. Despite the large number of participants and visitors, craftspeople face several problems. The first one, mentioned by ceramists R-TP-2 and R-TP-3, is that the criteria for selecting, evaluating, and thus approving craftsmen for participation in the fair are unclear. All the ceramicists in the interviews noted that the high participation fee, which increases yearly, is also a problem. It is also worth noting that visitors to the market are required to pay an entrance fee. Nevertheless, both O-TP-1 and R-TP-3 stress that the Ethnographic Open-Air Museum's fair is one of the most financially successful, while elsewhere, they only sell 1–20% of their products. Therefore, despite the large number of regional markets, all ceramicists carefully evaluate their participation in them to avoid financial losses due to high participation fees and low sales based on their experience.

The Ogre Cultural Centre organises a market in the town several times a year. All vendors, including artisan ceramists, are charged a participation fee. The event is free for visitors, and there are many of them. However, according to the interview with O-TP-1 and the data provided by the Ogre Cultural Centre, the volume of ceramics purchases at the fairs was relatively small.

To gain an understanding of the situation in the retail sector, I interviewed the owner of a chain of shops, as ceramic objects are also commonly sold in souvenir shops. Still, the sales figures vary greatly depending on the location of the shop and its brand. O-TP-6, owner of the well-known retail brand and stores, agreed to the interview. She has created the brand, one of Latvia's most popular craft retail chains in recent years. The brand's origins date back to 2011, when the aim was defined to offer, first and foremost, the products of Latvian craftsmen and home producers to a wider audience in one place. The public has appreciated the creation of such a network of shops. There are eight shops in Riga and its surroundings, including one in Ogre. More than 300 products from a wide range of small producers and craftspeople are represented in the shops. In an interview, ceramicist R-TP-3 outlined the rules for an artisan to hand over their creations in the shop. The craftsman sets a product price, while the shop adds its markup. Both parties need to reach an agreement so that the final price is not too high and the products are available, as the local population's purchasing power is limited. O-TP-6, owner of the brand and shops, points out that, in her experience, ceramic products in shops are mainly bought by middle- and high-income buyers, both for personal use and as gifts.

In an interview, artist and LMA lecturer, R-TP-4, expressed her concern that craftspeople often indulge buyers' wishes so that their products are bought more. She has seen many products in markets and souvenir shops that have little in common with our traditional crafts and the high quality level. For example, a fair number of craftspeople opt for very simplistic solutions, employing unjustified distortions and gilding that have little to do with the object's function and artistic quality.

The information gathered in the study allows us to conclude that Latvian craftsmen today use a wide range of ceramic materials. Although craftsmen still produce sufficient household items, some are trying to switch to decorative ceramics to be more competitive in the non-Latvian market. In general, the skills of craftspeople are increasing as many realise that traditional education is insufficient and that a deeper understanding of global trends in conventional crafts and contemporary ceramics is necessary. All this can help craftspeople market their work more successfully here in Latvia and abroad. R-TP-4 acknowledged that similar trends can be observed elsewhere in Europe, where this approach is referred to as contemporary craftsmanship, which combines modern design, traditional craft skills, and a high-quality, highly professional approach to material processing.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the community was unable to clearly define what "tradition" and "traditional skills" meant in the context of contemporary ceramics. However, the importance of preserving traditional skills in both creative activity and in

strengthening cultural identity and national belonging was emphasised. Traditional knowledge and skills are seen as essential resources for the development of contemporary ceramics, which simultaneously build on historical heritage and encourage innovative approaches. Although “tradition” and “traditional skills” are not clearly defined, in practice they are identified through specific activities and materials, such as the use of regionally particular clays and traditional turning techniques. This allows a more apparent distinction between traditional knowledge and modern skills.

Also critical is a deep understanding of technological processes and material properties, which is paramount to ceramists. Knowledge and skills at a high, professional level of the craft give greater creative freedom. It was highlighted that working with clay, especially with region-specific materials and turning techniques, is considered a central component of traditional ceramic skills. Noteworthy is the craftsman’s ability to create locally specific forms, compositions, and colour aesthetics, which are highlighted as key aspects of traditional heritage in today’s ceramics.

The aspects mentioned above are spiritual, craft, and skill values that have been passed down from generation to generation and must be preserved. They are an essential part of the development of ceramic traditions, forming the basis of and maintaining the link with historical heritage while opening the way for innovation.

Several aspects and opportunities for the further development of traditional crafts were highlighted. Innovation is based on high-level craft knowledge and skills acquired here. In addition to improving their creative and professional skills, craftspeople often utilise various digital platforms, participate in symposia, and study traditional ceramic techniques in-depth from other regions of the world. They then experiment to discover less-used and alternative forms and processing techniques in their area. Latvian craftsmen successfully employed various ceramics and techniques, utilising local materials such as white or red clay from Spain or other regions.

Some craftspeople have started working more actively in decorative ceramics. These changes are designed to enhance the competitiveness of our products in the international market. Today, competition has become even fiercer, both domestically and globally. An essential aspect of a craftsperson’s work is an understanding of the prospects for future development, which is linked to the fact that nowadays a craftsperson is no longer just a master craftsperson, but also an entrepreneur, marketing and public relations specialist.

To a large extent, this kind of at least basic knowledge affects not only their ability to work regularly, to continue the tradition and skills of the craft, but also, more broadly, to pass on the tradition.

Contemporary crafts are a blend of traditional craft techniques, modern ceramic art, and design. Knowledge of current developments in these fields has also become

increasingly important. Several additional factors also influence the development of modern, traditional ceramics. Professionals and experts in contemporary ceramics, vocational training, intangible heritage, and traditional culture play a crucial role in preserving craft traditions and the successful development of the ceramics sector. The media must also be educated to raise public awareness of these values. Raising public awareness can be essential to promoting the supply of high-quality ceramic products, thereby stimulating demand for aesthetically and technologically superior products. The development process of traditional crafts is ongoing, and it is essential to get the emphasis right. One promising way forward is the integration of high-quality crafts into a modern cultural and design environment, which can strengthen the link with cultural heritage and contribute to the sustainable development of crafts.

In conclusion, both buyers of ceramic products and experts in the field believe that striking a balance between traditional and innovative approaches is vital to preserve craft traditions. This will ensure the sustainability of ceramic crafts in Latvia. Maintaining a balance between traditional and modern methods is recognised as essential for the preservation of intangible cultural heritage and the sustainable development of the ceramics sector.

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