

## AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF TRADITIONAL BLUE POTTERY OF MULTAN

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### ABSTRACT

The province of Punjab is the land of art, culture, heritage, civilizations and various innovative skills, that the people of this fertile zone are blessed with. Blue pottery is an emblem of Multan's cultural and artistic identity. Blue pottery being a representation of art is a well-known and most widespread practice in Multan. This study aims to investigate traditional blue pottery production focusing on the comprehensive features of the blue pottery making procedure. The intricate designs and vibrant blue hues reflect the city's rich history and artistic heritage. The principal objective of this study is to revive the traditional craft of Blue Pottery prevailing here for centuries, which is also known as Multani Pottery or Multani Kashi. The techniques and motifs used in blue pottery have been passed down through generations, preserving ancient traditions and connecting the past with the present. It is gradually being replaced with Industrial blue pottery for its more functional products. It will provide an insight into the methods and techniques of the centuries old traditional blue pottery which is becoming a dying craft, and how it can be improvised through various methods, thus providing awareness to the new generation and employment opportunities to the existing artisan. To obtain a deeper understanding of research matter, qualitative research tools, and techniques including participant observation, formal interviewing and ethnographic methods were employed. The findings indicated that potters mainly follow traditional methods which is a tiring and time-consuming process of pottery making by gathering raw-material and using specific tools. Numerous designs and patterns of blue pottery are drawn on ceramic items and tiles depending on the requirement of the customer as well as the size of the item.

**Keywords:** Ceramic, Blue Pottery, Traditional Craft, Industrial, Artisan

### INTRODUCTION

The ceramic artistry of Pakistan, particularly in Multan, is a prominent area that stands out as the cultural, historical, and artistic hub of Punjab. The craft of pottery has ancient roots and has been practiced for millennia. Over time, the art of pottery has transformed, with various cultures and nations cultivating their own distinctive styles and methods. The ceramic artistry of Pakistan, especially in Multan, is notably significant and represents the cultural, historical, and artistic essence of Punjab. Multan's blue

pottery enjoys worldwide acclaim and is recognized as a hallmark of Multani craftsmanship. This age-old ceramic tradition is commonly referred to as Multani pottery, blue pottery, or Multani kashi. The Persian word Kashi is derived from Kashan and is widely used in Sindh and Multan to refer to all glazed terracotta products, including tiles. Conversely, in Lahore and Delhi, ceramic items are still known as Chini, likely due to the fact that their base material is a blend of siliceous sand and

lime rather than clay. The term Kashi or Kashani is thought to have first been introduced by the calligrapher Yakut al Mustasimi (d. 1298 CE), while Ibn Batutta (1304-77 CE) mentioned Kashi ornamentation on mosques in regions such as Mesopotamia, Isfahan, Tabriz, and Mashhad. Kashi may also originate from the term kas, recognized in both Arabic and Hebrew. A kashigar is an artisan skilled in the art of ceramic decoration. It is believed that the technique for crafting blue tiles was brought to Multan from Central Asia during the 12th century under the Ghaznavid and Delhi Sultanate reigns. Some scholars argue that the design of foliage branches and tree leaves, along with the vibrant use of color (primarily blue) in Kashi work, indicates Persian influence. Since Persian arts themselves have been shaped by Chinese (Mongol) influences, some historians suggest that Kashi work originally came from Kashighar, China. Over the centuries, blue pottery has evolved into a unique and recognizable style. Anecdotal evidence from master potters in Punjab and Sindh suggests that Iranian and Chinese craftsmen settled in these regions, sharing their expertise with local artisans. The monuments from the Sultanate period in Multan and surrounding areas reflect the remarkable skills of the Multani kashigars (tile makers). The intricate kashikari found at the Shrines of the Sufi Saints in Multan, including Shah Rukh-i-Alam, Baha'ud din Zakariya, Shah Shams-Uddin Sabzwari, and Shah Yusuf Gardezi, exemplify the high-quality tile work achieved by the kashigars of that era. However, due to diminishing patronage over time, standards began to decline, prompting many craftsmen to seek alternative occupations. Nonetheless, a small number of artisans remain committed to their traditional craft (Qureshi, 2010).

### **Research Hypothesis**

This research provides a detailed understanding of the process of making blue pottery, decorative patterns and designs and tries to examine the major challenges faced by potters associated with the blue pottery industry in city Multan. The objective of this research study is to revive the traditional art of Blue Pottery. This research provide awareness to the new generation about the traditional methods, materials and product utilization, hence to promote new and innovative

designs on a regular basis for the blue pottery items. Moreover, this research is to explore blue pottery as a traditional craft and its exceptional style, outstanding services and exceeding customer expectations. Furthermore, to document the historical evolution and cultural significance of blue pottery in Multan from its origins to the present day.

### **Literature Review**

The art of blue pottery first developed by Mongol Mughals is inherited from the land of Persia. They used it as an innovative architectural art for the decoration of tombs and mosques. The foreign Persian skilled potters made pottery from Fuller's Earth and started decorating it with blue glaze used in tiles. It was first developed by the innovative Mongols Mughals used it as an architectural part as tiles in their palaces and decorate their mosques and tombs. (Khurana, 2011). The term pottery is derived from Latin word 'Potium' and French word 'Poeteric'. The literary meaning of these terms is drinking vessel. Pottery included all the objects that are made from clay. The objects made from clay are hardened by fire. Pottery is an uncommon art of manufacturing artifacts from clay. From the beginning of human history, it has been indispensable part of human life. Per to the historical evidences, pottery was present before ten thousand years around Nile River. In 1980, the modern ceramics introduced in Nepal. Several kinds of ceramics, porcelains, and earthen ware items are produced in modern electrical apparatus by employing scientific techniques for daily use (Shrestha D, 2018) Pottery is a renowned global practice of making baked vessels or earthenware. It is widely spread application of various indigenous people across the globe. Regarded as the oldest art of representation, it is still an unbroken heritage among the people of many countries particularly Uganda and Africa. Pottery is a distinctive art of making artifacts from clay that fabricates numerous kinds of items made of ceramics and clay including plates, mug, flowerpots, vessels for distilling rice, vase, water and grain storage jars, stoneware bowls, cup and pitcher, etc. ( Kayamba & Kwesiga, 2016).

### **Research Method**

To study the traditional craft of Multan blue pottery, extensive field work and ethnographic research method has been adopted. The researcher conducted structured and semi-structured interviews with local artisans, historians and cultural experts. Extensive visit has been done in pottery workshop to observe the techniques and processes involved in the making of traditional blue pottery products. Moreover, discussions with artisans to understand the challenges and innovation in their crafts. Photography has been done to document the material and processes involved in pottery making.

### **Analysis of Materials and Processes**

#### **Raw Materials**

Clay is the cheapest and most abundant raw material found in Pakistan, the most desirable of which is collected on the sites of old river beds and lakes. Clay is easy to shape when wet and enjoys a unique degree of plasticity. It shrinks when dry and shrinks further when it is fired. Dolowitz are used in white ware, available in the northern areas, Jhelum and Mianwali districts while limestone is found in the Salt range area and Sargodha.

#### **Kneading**

Preparation of clay is an important process. Typically lumps of clay (measured quantity) are kneaded individually in round piles. These are kneaded further with a little water to form a doughy consistency by a repeated process of spiral turning, twisting, pressing and patting. The dough must become plastic enough to form easily and hold shape but not be too slippery as it would be difficult to control. It must be kneaded enough to remove pockets of air to make the clay smooth and homogenous. It is then stored under wet jute sacks in a shady area that must be watered daily to retain moisture.

#### **Wedging**

The clay is formed into a block or wedge after which the potter is easily able to cut the piece and proceed to shape them.

#### **Shaping**

The earliest artifacts show that vessels were modeled by hand, using fingers and thumbs to pinch, roll and squeeze the forms. Coiling long

rolls to form circles was also popular. Later the development for the slow or hand turned wheel was popularized and after that the kick wheel rotated by foot went on to become the potter's principal tool.

#### **Throwing**

The clay must be thrown precisely on the center of the potter's wheel (centering) spinning as a homogenous mass around the axis. The spinning throws the clay upwards and outwards. The potter can now start coning by squeezing upwards and steadying the clay with both hands. The depth of the pot must be determined by hollowing out i.e., once the clay has been centered the potter uses his hands to form a hollow. The hollow is then widened as required by moving the thumb to the right. When the clay is widened as desired, the speed of the wheel is reduced. While the clay is spinning on the wheel, pressure is applied to give it desired thickness and height (raising). At this stage, the speed of the wheel is very important as it controls the force acting on the clay. Maximum speed is used to center and hollow out the clay and as the form becomes wider, thinner or higher, the wheel should run slower.

#### **Cutting and Turning**

With the help of a cutting wire or thread, the pot is removed from the wheel. The cutting wire or thread is passed through the clay several times to separate the pot from the wheel and then the form is taken off the wheel to suitable place to dry, this being an essential part of the process to prevent cracking or warping. Next, the form must be turned for finishing touches by being placed upside down on a clean wheel and centered precisely by slow turning.

#### **Tile Making**

Tiles are made with the same kneaded clay used for pottery. After wedging the clay, the potter (*kumhar*) measures the quantity of clay precisely for each tile and spreads it on a flat surface. The amount of clay used must be an inch larger than the size of the tile itself as it will shrink during drying and heating. After drying and trimming in shape, (usually square, rectangular or arched), the tile is handed over to the decorator (*kashigar*) for slip carving, decorating and glazing.

### **Slip Carving**

Slip is prepared with two types of round stones (frit and karund). They are first broken into small pieces and then crushed into powder. The powder is mixed together in equal parts. Water is added to this dry mixture with twenty five percent flour glue to make slip. After thinning the slip with water, the potter applies the slip to the tile twice over to make it smooth and bright. After the drying process is complete, more flour glue is applied for durability. Then the tile is carved with a sharp knife leaving a raised design on the slip.

### **Decoration**

The art of painted tiles is most often seen in Sindh and Punjab on the walls of mosques and public buildings. The designs are intricate and the colors brilliant. The designs are generally floral, geometric patterns, figures or calligraphy and are carved through the slip into the body of the brick or tile with a sharp knife or chisel. Another method would be to draw an outline of the painting by placing a template over the tile and tracing or buffing the outline into it. When the template is removed from the tile, the outline of the motif appears. One color is applied at a time and in accordance to the old tradition, blue is used in contrast to white. In earlier times, slips were stained with metal oxides to achieve the colors. By the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the oxides were tin, cobalt, copper, iron, manganese and antimony. Tin oxide would produce white, gray blue and sapphire, copper would create blue and green, ferric would create pale yellow and black, manganese would create bright red, purple and brown and finally antimony would produce yellow.

### **Engobing (*Astar Kari*)**

Engobe or *astar* is the layer of white colored composite powder applied to the tile to obscure its actual colour to attain a white surface under a transparent glaze. To apply *asta*, the *kashikar* uses the *karund* stone (corundum stone in white quartz, found near Taunsa Sharif, Dera Ghazi Khan). The engobe is made with crushed stone that is ground into a powder and then mixed with water. It may now be laid by hand.

### **Glazing and Firing**

Glaze is prepared with two basic materials, *karund* stone and *khar* or plant ash. Glass or borax may also be used. Equal parts of powdered *khar* and *karund* are mixed together. A small quantity of water is added and then small balls are made from the mixture by hand, after which they are placed in the sun to dry. After drying, they are placed in a furnace for firing at a low temperature. After the application of heat, they go from a dark colour to white. They are crushed into small pieces and then seven percent of borax and twenty five percent powdered glass is added to the dry mixture. The materials are then mixed by hand and placed in small earthenware pots and placed in a furnace. After four to six days, the pots are removed and cooled; the materials are removed for further preparation. They are crushed into small pieces and then powdered. The powder can now be used for glaze. Water is poured into the powder and it is then kneaded by hand to make the mixture fluid. Twenty five percent of flour glue is added to make it a paste. When the glaze is ready, it is applied to the tiles by hand. After the coating they are set aside to dry. The glaze, besides preserving, the tiles also protect the decoration on them from catching fire. Due to the transparency of the glaze, these decorations show up after the firing, the tile itself shines and brightens. Once the clay has been dried, decorated and glazed, it is placed in a wood fired kiln. This is meant to harden the clay so that it may be easily glazed. Tiles are placed vertically on the edge of the kiln, ensuring that they do not touch on another while other wares such as pots; plates, etc. are set on stilts with the interior of the dishes facing up. The process takes about twenty four hours, until the wood is burnt out completely. Then the wares are left to cool for three days.

### **Process of Traditional Blue Pottery**

The clay which is used in traditional blue pottery is natural clay which is also known as Red clay. It is mostly brought from the bed of River Chenab. Red clay is softened with water for 15 to 20 days and then kneaded. The prepared clay is neatly spread and cut by tools for tile making. The common sizes used for tiles are 8' by 8', 12' by 12', 14' by 14' and 16' by 16'. There are two types of product development methods used in this process, i.e., Slab method and Slip casting. Slab

method, which is traditionally known as *Pathair*, is mostly used for tile making.

Once the clay body is dried, a layer of engobe is applied. Engobe, which is traditionally known as *Astar*, is made from a white stone locally named *Saand*, brought from Dera Ghazi Khan. After the engobe layer is dried, tracing of floral and geometrical patterns is done. The conventional floral or arabesque handmade patterns still used today were developed by his ancestors and passed on from generation to generation. The design is either transferred onto a blank handmade plate using tracing paper or the most accurate method of pouncing is used. Pouncing consists of brushing pigment onto the plate through a paper copy of the design made from lines formed by hundreds of tiny pinpricks. A small piece of cotton cloth is wrapped around a tablespoon full of fine charcoal dust and tied it off to create a small tight bag. The bag is gently tapped onto the pricked lines and some of the charcoal filters through the cotton and then through the pinpricks onto the ceramic surface to leave an accurate impression of the design. Any dust that remains on the surface burns off in the kiln.

Designs may be modified at this stage in relation to available materials and skills. The process of painting is best embarked upon slowly. The emphasis is on taking extreme care with each brushstroke and on holding an awareness of how the painted lines may look after firing. The technique of *kashi* is applied with ceramic pigments and stains. Major colors used in Blue Pottery are copper oxide and cobalt oxide. Copper is turquoise in color and cobalt is blue in color. In local language, they are known as *lajwant* (blue) and *sabzi* (green). These colors were specifically chosen for their cool effect due to the region's hot temperature. Traditional squirrel hair brushes are

used for the enhancement of *kashi* technique. After *kashikari*, a layer of glaze is applied and the product is ready for firing. It is placed inside the kiln carefully and fired at the temperature 950 F. After firing, the kiln is left to cool down. Traditional Blue Pottery is basically used for decorative purposes and for usage in mausoleums, shrines and mosques. On the contrary, Industrial Blue Pottery which is fired at the temperature 1250 F, is used for functional pottery. According to artisan, it is believed that it takes two major principals to provide customers with the best service. First is, pride in the quality of the product, second is making sure that it is provided with the most reasonable price (Akhund, Abdul Hamid, 2011).

### **Motifs and Designs**

The patterns and designs found on all traditional pottery, whether glazed or unglazed, originate from both natural elements and artistic traditions. Common motifs include sunflowers, pipal leaves, rose leaves, fish, ducks, camels, arabesques, and geometric shapes (Figures 1-3). A considerable number of tiles are employed in mosques and cemeteries, leading to the flourishing practice of inscribing and embossing verses from the holy Quran and other relevant sayings. Typically, the painting and drawing work is carried out by experts without the aid of paper sketches, and until one witnesses their technique, it is hard to believe that accuracy and consistency in design can be achieved without models and measuring instruments. The complexity of this craft can be truly appreciated when one realizes that a single tile design, spanning several meters, can consist of hundreds of tile pieces, each measuring no larger than half an inch square. (Aspelund, Karl, 2006).





Figure 1: Tracing of Kashi (floral pattern)

Source: Author



Figure 2: Artisan working on Kashikari

Source: Author



Figure 3: Motif Making on Tile

Source: Author

**Result and Discussions**

Both live and work in the historic area of Mohalla Pir Pathan, producing not just tiles but also a variety of decorative and practical items like vases, lampshades, and crockery, employing ancient techniques and methods. Ustad Wajid and Ustad Zafar, part of the Ansari family, have been engaged in this trade for over 500 years, tracing back to the invasion of Multan by Muhammad Bin Qasim. However, due to a dwindling customer base, his sons have sought alternative sources of income. Ustad Wajid notes that the Ansari and Soomro families were among the earliest to uphold the traditional craft of Blue Pottery. Their forebears were artisans brought to the subcontinent by the Arab invaders. Ustad Wajid, along with his six brothers who are also skilled in this craft, has had to abandon it for economic reasons. He currently operates his workshop on Main Street, Jaan Muhammad Colony, Masoom Shah Road, Multan, and has a showroom at the Multan Crafts Bazaar. Ustad Zafar's family has been involved in this trade for 300 years, yet none of his children wish to carry on the legacy. This highlights the challenges faced by artisans throughout the area. The art of blue pottery stands out as one of the distinctive handicrafts of Multan, which has become synonymous with the region due to its characteristic use of blue and turquoise hues. Traditional blue pottery pieces were typically large vases, pots, and other substantial items, necessitating a wealthy clientele because of the size and cost of materials involved. Artisans have considered the potential to innovate beyond the conventional blue pottery items, leading to the creation of smaller, more delicate, everyday products made from the same materials. This innovative approach and commitment to the craft have resulted in beautifully intricate items such as beads, curtain rods, ashtrays, candle holders, lanterns, coasters, decanters, perfume bottles, and other unique yet practical creations. The skill of traditional blue pottery is facing decline in Multan. Considering the growing international market, it is imperative for the government to initiate and finance initiatives aimed at safeguarding and enhancing this distinct craft. Additionally, it is essential to connect designers with local artisans to collaborate on the development of blue pottery designs and the incorporation of modern techniques alongside traditional practices. Many

craftsman families and 'ustads' (masters) still exist, yet they often go unrecognized, and their talents are rarely fully utilized. The number of traditional artisans is dwindling as they have not been passing down their craft to the next generation due to insufficient work opportunities. Despite government efforts to establish blue tile centers in Multan and other locations, the craft continues to struggle because of inadequate marketing and promotion. Traditional blue pottery is primarily utilized for decorative purposes and serves functional roles in mausoleums, shrines, and mosques. In contrast, industrial blue pottery is made for practical use. The traditional art of kashikari in Multan stands apart from other pottery styles in Pakistan due to its unique process (Azam, Khalid, 2013).



**Figure 4: Artisan working on tile making**  
(Source: Author)





**Figure 5: Traditional blue pottery vase used for decorative purpose.**

### Conclusion

In conclusion, Multan's traditional blue pottery, stands as a vibrant testament to the city's rich cultural heritage and artistic ingenuity. This distinctive art form, characterized by its signature cobalt blue color and intricate designs, not only reflects the historical influences and artistic traditions of the region but also serves as a symbol of cultural identity and continuity. Through meticulous craftsmanship and timeless techniques passed down through generations, Multan's blue pottery has maintained its aesthetic appeal and cultural significance. It plays a crucial role in the local economy, providing livelihoods for artisans and contributing to the broader economic landscape through its appeal in domestic and international markets. Despite the challenges faced by the industry, including economic pressures and competition from modern alternatives, blue pottery continues to evolve with innovative designs and sustainable practices, ensuring its relevance in contemporary times. Its preservation is not only a matter of cultural pride but also an essential effort to maintain the artistic and historical legacy of Multan.

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