

CLAY CULTURE

pottery from poland

by Jenna Makowski

Can you imagine a town where pottery has been made since the year 1380 CE? Natural resources, tenacity, innovation, and a following in Western Europe and the US mean that the occupation is still alive and well in the Polish town of Boleslawiec.

The factory is cavernous, with industrial pipes lining the ceiling and snaking down the walls. Grungy-wheeled trolleys and shelves stacked a storey high crowd the corners. A worker in heavy boots and thick overalls pushes past, balancing a tray of muted, unfired pottery on his palm like a waiter carries plates. I flinch as he brushes by; he doesn't.

I am standing in the warehouse of Manufaktura pottery factory, alongside room-sized train kilns full of pots. Though 20-year-old Manufaktura is a newer producer in Boleslawiec—a provincial town in southwest Poland with six major pottery factories and 40,000 residents—the craft is not. Written records indicate that the town has been producing pottery since 1380 CE.

Exiting the firing rooms, I pass heaps of ruddy, dense, globular clay. Leftovers, my guide explains, and evidence that the town's economic foundation depends on seemingly infinite natural resources. A few miles away, at Boleslawiec's eastern outskirts, the Bobr River provides rich deposits of clay that have been excavated for centuries.

The glazed, chocolate-brown pitchers from 18th-century kitchens that now populate the Boleslawiec Museum of Ceramics more closely resemble earthy clay hues than the pottery sold in the town today. By the early 1900s, local potters shifted from simple glazes to florid decorations painted with sponge stamps. The earliest design from the time period, a cobalt-blue circle-and-dot pattern known as the peacock pattern, is traditionally associated with Polish pottery.





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1 A group of oversized pitchers and cups with traditional peacock pattern designs welcomes people to Boleslawiec. 2 A potter uses a jigger to create plates at the Manufaktura Pottery Factory in Boleslawiec. 3 A worker adds dry greenware to the shelves of a train kiln car in preparation for a bisque firing. 4 A potter specializing in surface decoration adds stamped dots to the raw glazed surface of a plate.

In fact, life-sized pitchers and matching peacock-dotted cups blink at visitors from the main road leading into Boleslawiec, an official welcome to *Miasto Ceramiki*, the Town of Ceramics.

In the painting room, just before the stoneware’s final, 2000°F firing, an potter spins a bowl on a turntable. Pressing a small foam stamp around its perimeter, she creates a chain of circles. I watch her hand closely. It barely moves, yet, within seconds, a string of pigment appears around the entire bowl. She stops momentarily, switching to a smaller stamp. With a flick of the wrist, she sends the table spinning again and, with barely perceptible movement, fills each circle with a tinier dot—a bull’s eye, all around the bowl.

The US Market

A number of businesses import Boleslawiec pottery for sale in the US. “Handmade Polish pottery is like an addiction,” according to Holly Trevino, who, along with her twin sister, Jenny Puckett has imported and sold the pottery through their company Twins Polish Pottery for a decade.

While sitting between shelves stacked with as much pottery as some factory stores in Boleslawiec contain and sipping coffee from a peacock-dot mug, Trevino explains that their customers prefer

the handmade ware to other imported ceramics that are mass produced. Puckett and Trevino’s business had been hard to find at first, up a rural, barely-two-lane road unfurling through green, hilly vistas; unexpected landscape in central Maryland. They sell the pottery out of a climate-controlled addition to their home—their “twin-plex.” “I think people... appreciate the artwork and the history...” Trevino pauses, and Puckett finishes her thought. “And it’s functional! It’s like buying a fine painting you can actually use.”

The two began importing ware from Boleslawiec in 1997, after Trevino returned from a five-year stint at an army base in Germany, near the Polish border, where she first learned about the pottery. They started exhibiting at craft shows in the US, selling out within hours. Now, they order a 40-foot shipping container of inventory annually. “When that semi-truck delivers, oh boy, do they get stressed driving up that road!” Trevino laughs. “And they’re wondering where the loading dock is!” She points at the driveway, where chickens peck around the basketball hoop. “We have just two hours to unload it all...the kids come out to help, and dad—he’s 83—he helps us do inventory.”

Twins Polish Pottery is one of the largest direct importers of Polish pottery on the East Coast. They ship nationally, but it’s the



5 Finished mugs and creamers showing a variety of the primarily blue and white patterns accented with reds and greens, created on Boleslawiec pottery.

loyal regulars who keep them motivated. “We are one-on-one with customers,” Trevino explains. “It’s such a treat when customers come up the hill.”

The Heritage Connection/Disconnect

Though her store’s motto is, “You don’t HAVE to be Polish,” Jeanette Kirk was first drawn to Polish pottery via an interest in her father’s Polish heritage. “I’ve tried to incorporate a bit of Poland,” Kirk explains of her small store, It’s Polish Pottery in Cleveland, Ohio, a proud move from the antique mall where she first began. “The magnet seems to be the old map of Poland on my wall! [Customers]...show me where they’ve traveled or where their relatives are from.”

As a fourth-generation American of Polish decent, I’d been surprised to learn that Poland had a national craft in pottery. I wasn’t alone. Trevino and Puckett orchestrated their first pottery exhibit in Michigan, amidst a large Polish community. As Trevino remembers, “We had to explain to everyone what [Polish pottery] was and how it was made. Nobody knew about it.”

A relative newcomer to the American market—a post-Cold War phenomenon—Polish pottery began making trans-Atlantic voyages primarily in the 1990s. Discovered by army families like Trevino’s, busloads from Germany poured in as factories found eager markets in the newly opened west.

More surprisingly, though, is that beyond its niche market stronghold in the US and Germany, Polish pottery seems rare in Poland. In the year I lived in Wrocław, the regional capital of Lower Silesia and only an hour away from Boleslawiec, I had never seen locally made pottery in a kitchen or store. Neither had Trevino. Once, she and her sister were invited to an potter’s home. “I noticed in her kitchen that she didn’t have any pot-

tery,” noted Trevino. “I asked why, and she said it was too expensive.”

Though the prices of Polish pottery have risen since the 1990s, especially as the Polish currency, the zloty, strengthens, the mysterious absence of pottery from Polish kitchens—and from the collective memory of the Polish diaspora abroad—is more likely entangled in the complexities of history.

History

Boleslawiec’s market square is surrounded by flat, round-roofed buildings that dominate the Silesian landscape across southwest Poland, Germany, and the Czech Republic. The Baroque-styled facades have been renovated since the large-scale destruction of WWII, wrought by bombs and massive human uprooting. Prior to the war, Boleslawiec was called Bunzlau, a Prussian town with a majority German population. Key figures in the town’s pottery history include Johann Gottlieb Altman, who began manufacturing products of white clay conducive for colorful decoration; Dr. Wilhelm Pukall, the first director of the Professional School of Ceramics in 1897; and Carl Werner, who introduced floral motifs.

At war’s end, borders were re-drawn and the Bunzlau residents were exiles in a Polish town now called Boleslawiec. Most were pushed out, leaving behind homes, cemeteries, and ruined pottery factories. The annexed land drew Polish refugees from borderlands also in flux further east, largely present-day Ukraine.

By 1946, as the former Bunzlau potters relocated to East Germany, Polish pottery professor Tadeusz Szafran began re-opening the Boleslawiec factories. Artisans like Izabela Zdrzakla and Alicja Szurminska contributed to the craft’s revival—now called Polish pottery—over the coming decades.

Balancing Creativity and Nostalgia

Though Polish pottery is marketed as an old world folk art, its evolution—like its history—is dynamic. Drawing on traditional designs, factories employ potters and designers with an eye toward the influence of market trends and changing tastes. Magdalena Gazur, a designer, graduate of the Wrocław Academy of Fine Art, and recent artist-in-residence at Manufaktura, designs with different audiences in mind. “We tend to sell more traditional designs to the US, but now [we] want...to try something more contemporary,” she says. Although she is unable to reveal more about the factory’s upcoming line of pottery, she adds, “It might work in Germany!”

Just like the twins, who know their customers who travel up the hill, the Boleslawiec potters know theirs—keeping a historical craft relevant by walking the line between tradition and modernity.

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