The village of Thimi, located between Kathmandu and Bhaktapur on the Arniko Highway, is the traditional center for pottery making in the Kathmandu Valley. Thimi is one of the oldest and most important pottery-making villages of Nepal and is located approximately 7 miles outside Kathmandu, the capital city of Nepal. It is still home to around 10,000 potters, who have been making pottery there for centuries according to their caste tradition. Today the village is composed of nearly 2000 pottery workshops run by families who are members of the Newar Kumale caste, bearing the surname Prajapati. They alternate seasonally between agricultural work and supplying Nepali households with goods made from clay. The proximity of the workshops to one another, as well as the shared caste traditions of the families, have created a working environment of cooperation that has existed for hundreds of years in the village. The development of the pottery tradition has been a community concern rather than a struggle for individual success.

Little innovation or evolution has taken place aside from a few NGO (non-governmental organization) projects to introduce new technology into some of the workshops. This is despite the fact that many challenges have arisen for the way of life in Thimi, including a drop in demand for pottery goods due to the wide availability of metal and plastic kitchen utensils. Many of the
younger generation in Thimi have questioned the sustainability of the potters’ craft as a mainstay in the economy of the village, and have begun to drift away from the family occupation and become tailors or taxi drivers in Kathmandu or studied for jobs in finance, business or Internet technology. Many of the older generation feel a distinct sense of loss as their traditional way of life is threatened with extinction.

In response to the desire to preserve this unique way of life (a desire shared by the inhabitants of Thimi, the rest of Nepalese society, and some foreign development groups), several projects are underway in the village to help make the ceramics produced there more relevant to the needs of a contemporary market economy.

**A Snapshot of Thimi**

Wandering through the streets of Purano Thimi (Old Thimi), one is struck by the extent to which the village has been preserved as a pottery producing center since ancient times. The tiny alleys paved with brick meander through courtyards filled with villagers conducting all manner of pottery processes, from forming the pots with a wooden paddle, to drying them and firing them in traditional straw kilns.

In every courtyard and flanking the narrow alleys are stacks of red and black clay pots in various shapes and sizes awaiting transport to market, (see page XX) as well as ducks wallowing in the murky puddles, dogs napping with their pups, and large straw bales for use in building the kilns.

The traditional unglazed pottery of Nepal consist mostly of flowerpots, water and grain storage jars, large vessels for distilling rice spirits called rakshi, and cooking pots, (see page XX), although the latter have been eclipsed for the most part by metal versions. Potters manage to survive on the little they can make from loading the pots onto a wooden yoke worn across the shoulders, and carrying them on foot from village to village during harvest time, where they trade pots for a year’s supply of rice. Wealthier potters who have a larger production capacity will sometimes hire a truck and take hundred of pots as far away as Gorkha, which is 90 miles (150 km) or about 3 hours drive away from Thimi.

**The Ceramics Promotion Project of Nepal**

The ceramic industry in Nepal has been one of the most underdeveloped in the world, lagging far behind its neighbors, China and India, in terms of methods and technology. Archeologists have excavated glazed pot shards in China from sites dating back to 1500 BCE. In 1982, 40 of the pottery workshops in Thimi banded together with the help of the Nepalese government in cooperation with a German aid organization called GTZ Project and founded Thimi Ceramics stoneware cups, bowls, and plates. Images of finished works courtesy of Chimalaya, a Danish company selling Thimi Ceramics products (www.chimalaya.com).
the Ceramics Promotion Project of Nepal (CPPN). Through the CPPN, the Thimi Bhaktapur Potters’ Cooperative was formed in an effort to begin modernizing the ceramic industry. For nine years after that, the CPPN appointed an American potter by the name of Jim Danisch to work with the local cooperative on introducing the electric wheel, developing modern oil-fired kilns made from local bricks and mortar mixed with rice husks, and on creating low-fire, leadless glazes to suit the indigenous earthenware clay body. Nepalese potters began using glaze for the first time in 1987. The CPPN kept the technological advances locally sustainable, and it began by introducing a locally manufactured wheel that runs on a simple motor attached to a foot pedal that, when pressed intermittently, turns a large concrete flywheel. At the first demonstration of the new machine in the town square, many of the older potters were skeptical and refused to try the wheel. However, it was adopted by several of the newer workshops, and has slowly caught on in much of the village, though there are still many workshops in Thimi that prefer to use the traditional wheel.

The CPPN built brick kilns that are fired with a locally produced burner designed especially for the project. The kiln consists of a large chamber for loading the ware on shelves, and a smaller fire-box chamber beneath, where the burners send heat into the kiln. The burner runs on a kerosene drip that is ignited through contact with pressurized steam, sending a flame into the kiln capable of reaching temperatures of above 2264°F (1240°C). The traditional straw kiln is only able to reach a temperature of approximately 1292°F (700°C), and it is not possible to fire glazed ware at such a low temperature.

In 1987, the Thimi Potters’ Cooperative began to create low-fire glazed ware made from local and Indian materials for sale to tourist hotels and restaurants in Nepal, as well as to shops abroad carrying handicrafts made in Nepal. The range of goods produced by member workshops expanded to include all manner of tableware as well as other household items and colorfully decorated garden pots.

The quality of goods, as well as prices, increased. Many Nepali households were not willing to pay such high prices for ceramic goods because, in their minds, clay was a low-quality material, and wares produced in Thimi were thought of as disposable, utilitarian objects. Nepalese have been slow to adapt to the idea of quality, high-end, durable wares made of ceramic.

Within nine years, the CPPN succeeded in its goal of helping to develop a self-sufficient potters’ cooperative and planting the seeds for a local market for wares. Once all loans for materials and equipment granted by the project were paid off by revenues coming into the cooperative, the CPPN ended in 1991.

**Thimi Ceramics Stoneware Project**

While much of Thimi still remains distinctly traditional, seven of the workshops have continued using modern methods in earnest. Thimi Ceramics is one of these seven pioneering workshops. It was founded by Santa Bahadur Prajapati and his two sons, Santa Kumar and Laxmi Kumar. While participating in the CPPN, the two young brothers pursued training abroad in India and Thailand, and then, with the help of the CPPN, established their own pottery in 1985. Thimi Ceramics was one of the first workshops to incorporate the new electric wheels, oil-fired brick kilns, and began making the first glazed earthenware ceramics.
Throughout the 1990s, Thimi Ceramics and several other workshops produced these glazed earthenware goods. However, potters were still finding it difficult to market their new products to Nepalese customers. Even the tourist hotels, restaurants, and expatriate households who made up their market began to falter due to increasing civil unrest and the decade-long Maoist insurgency. Fewer and fewer tourists ventured to Nepal, and expatriates began to leave. In addition, the designs lacked freshness, and the same glazes had been used for over ten years. There were also some technical issues with the ware. Locals complained that the ceramics chipped easily and leaked when liquids were kept inside the pots. The fragility of the low-fired earthenware clay meant that the pots had to be extremely thick and heavy in order to withstand daily use, and this made the goods unappealing to customers.

In 2001, Santa and Laxmi started a new project that has offered much opportunity and hope for the village. The two brothers had visited the Anderson Ranch Arts Center in Snowmass Village, Colorado several times since the late 1980s, where they had been exposed to stoneware production and yearned to bring some of this advancement to their own village so that commerce in Thimi could become more competitive.

A ceramic artist by profession, I traveled in 2001 to Kathmandu with my husband for work and study, and was asked by Santa and Laxmi to join them in a project geared towards creating the first stoneware ceramics facility in Nepal. The two brothers had determined that working with more durable stoneware clay instead of earthenware would resolve many of the technical difficulties that were making their products unmarketable, such as chipping and leaking of the ware and excess weight. We forged a relationship...
that became, with the help of some grant funding from a US foundation called the Ramsay Merriam Fund, the Thimi Ceramics Stoneware Project.

We all felt that the traditional industry in Thimi could be preserved in some form while creating new ceramic products that would be competitive in an export market. We aimed to design and produce simple, contemporary, artisan-made tableware that would retain some of the flavor of Thimi’s traditional culture. The grant funding allowed for the procurement of kiln bricks suitable for higher temperature firings, as well as materials for blending with the indigenous clay to raise the firing temperature, and the establishment of an extensive training program for the potters to become familiarized with the new methods and materials. The potters learned to throw pots much more thinly and precisely and were pushed to adhere to strict quality regulations. While Santa and Laxmi were building the kilns, I worked closely with the potters and designed a range of tableware products that would be appealing to a contemporary export market, while still retaining an aesthetic that is unique to Thimi. (See page XX.) After four years, we sent out our first shipments to stores in the US and in 2005, we began supplying some goods for expatriate customers, as well as hotels and restaurants in Kathmandu. While still out of reach for most local patrons, Thimi Ceramics was for the first time making a unique and viable export product that offered potters in the village a way out of the decline they had been experiencing in recent years.

For the first time since the beginning of the CPPN in 1982, potters in Thimi were producing artisan-made works that were entirely new and exciting. Though the Stoneware Project was small and only encompassed one workshop, it was now possible to envision ceramics in Thimi as an industry that might actually draw in young artisans. The idea of themselves as artisans involved in the production of a high-quality craft product was a new concept for the potters in Thimi, and inspired them to take renewed personal responsibility for the venture. In time, this new opportunity may allow the ceramic tradition to hold a place among what have long been considered higher art forms by Nepalese culture such as bronze-casting of religious statues, thangka painting, and jewelry making.

There are currently fourteen potters producing ceramic tableware and other household items along with the owners at Thimi Ceramics. The potters produce various household items on the wheel including, cups, bowls, plates, lamps, vases, tea and coffee pots, as well as flower pots. Products made from plaster molds include incense holders, foot scrubbers, and many varieties of oval and square shaped dishes.

All pots are bisque fired to 1472°F (800°C). A glaze coat is then applied and they pieces are fired a second time to 1904°F (1040°C) for earthenware and 2282°F (1250° C) for stoneware.

It is a sad truth that contemporary culture has in many ways eclipsed the way of life that existed in Thimi for so many generations, but to cling to it so rigidly and not allow for development or change is to snuff out its existence with increasing speed. The answer to cultural preservation in Thimi seems to lie in the adoption of a new way viewing the ceramic tradition in the village, in an appreciation for the art form as it exists in a larger community of artistic traditions important to Nepal’s history. Part of the preservation of these traditions is to maintain their relevance to contemporary culture, and this comes about when the thread of tradition is held steadily throughout a process of modernization.

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TRADITIONAL POTTERY PROCESSES IN THIMI

These traditional pottery wares of Thimi are all produced from the red earthenware clay indigenous to the region. Potters dig clay from beneath the topsoil layer in farmers’ rice paddies.

Most of the workshops in Thimi are contained in mud-walled rooms with no electricity or running water. Potters mix their clay by hacking it into small pieces, moistening it with water, and then stomping on it vigorously with their feet (figure 1). Then the clay is kneaded to remove as much air as possible before forming it into flowerpots on huge wheels. The wheels were traditionally made from wood planks joined and cut into a large, 4-foot diameter circle, but as wood became more costly and scarce, they used truck tires filled with concrete and set into the ground on a ball bearing.

The daily tasks in the potteries are performed by both men and women, and often children when they have time off from school, and the work is sometimes divided up according to gender. Women never work at the wheel, nor do they form the pots with the traditional paddling technique that potters use for the larger forms. The potter stands over the wheel and sets it turning on the bearing with a long pole (figure 2). Once maximum speed is achieved, he puts the stick aside and the momentum of the heavy concrete allows him to throw one or two very crude pots before he must set the wheel turning again (figure 3). The large paddled pots are built from thick, flat coils, pressed one on top of each other as they become dry enough to support the weight of another coil layer. Once the rudimentary form is made, the potter then walks in a circle around the pot, and paddles the sides with a wooden mallet. The inner form is supported by a rounded anvil held in his other hand (figure 4). In this way, the walls are made thinner and the shape refined. These techniques for forming pots are always performed by men. Women are then enlisted for the finishing techniques, such as refining the bottoms of the pots as they are removed from the wheel (figure 5), painting on a dark red decoration made from terra sigillata, and stamping decorations around the rims of the pots with handmade wooden stamps dipped in white talc powder (see figure 4).

Pots are dried in the sun. Men and women build and load the traditional kilns together using large stacks of straw and pot shards covered by ash (figure 6), and tend to the firing, which lasts for four days. Groups of neighbors often fire their pots together in a single, large kiln, and everyone participates in the unloading, once the pots are cool (figure 7).

1 Clay is processed by hand, first breaking up larger pieces, then adding water and stomping on it to mix it.
2 The potters wheels are turned using a long pole until there’s enough momentum and speed to begin throwing.
3 One or two pots can be thrown on the wheel before it needs to be turned again.
4 Paddled pots are built from thick flat coils pressed on top of one another, and paddled and refined with a wooden mallet and round anvil.
5 Women shape the bottoms of thrown pots, add terra sigillata, and stamp decorations around the rims of the pots.
6 Families work together to build traditional kilns using large stacks of straw and pot shards covered by ash. Firings last four days.
7 Finished pots are unloaded once they’re cool and are organized by type. Here the finished pots are shown with greenware set out to dry.