

Bridging Worlds in Clay: The Ceramics of K. K. Broni, A Ghanaian protégé of Michael Cardew And Peter Voulkos

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Abstract

Kingsley Kofi Broni was a renowned ceramist with extensive exposure and experience in studio art practice. He was one of the most experienced and influential figures in ceramic studio art in Africa. Broni was trained by the famous Michael Cardew at Abuja, Nigeria, Peter Voulkos in the United States, and David Leach, the son of Bernard Leach, in England. Broni had the experience of meeting Bernard Leach while in England and attended exhibitions of Modern ceramists such as Hans Coper. His extensive education, talent, and hard work, coupled with his diverse cultural exposure, make him one of Africa's most accomplished ceramists of the postcolonial era. He is credited with numerous national and international awards. He taught for 28 years in the premiere College of Art in Ghana, at the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST), Kumasi. Broni has had an extensive exhibition record and has a large body of work in his private collection. This study seeks to unearth and document the contribution of the artist Kingsley Kofi Broni and position him within the broader development of ceramic studio art in Ghana, revealing the significance of his work within the history of Modern ceramics internationally.

Keywords: ceramic art exhibition, glaze, Michael Cardew, K. K. Broni, Peter Voulkos, Modernism

Introduction

It is rare for artists to span three distinct worlds but for two it is more common (Okunna, 2012). Kingsley Kofi Broni is one such rare individual who has been able to bridge multiple worlds, cultures, and phases of human history. Raised in Ghana, he was surrounded by traditional arts which though greatly compromised by industrialized, touristic, and colonial interests nevertheless survived his generation. The traditions built on numerous generations of transferred skill and knowledge were woven into the practices of everyday life. Broni, as he grew within this environment, would first embrace the 19th Century Arts and Crafts ethic of beauty through function via Michael Cardew (Harrod, 2013a), Bernard Leach (Scollon, 2007) and his son David Leach (Margrie, 2005), but would also move on to embrace the late Modern aesthetics as developed and exemplified by Peter Voulkos (Scollon, 2007). Voulkos and the American West Coast brand of modern craft denied function to forge a new direction (Coplan, 1966) and to break its connection with established genres and traditions which Bernard Leach had encouraged. Broni was greatly influenced by Voulkos and his cohort (Peterson, 2000), ultimately using the latter's example to find his own creative voice which he brought back to his home country, Ghana. Broni viewed the creative energy he found in California liberating and he was able to blend these influences towards his own unique vision and produced one of Ghana's and West Africa's first fully modern ceramic artists. By simultaneously lessening the significance of these traditions of West African traditional pottery and European functionalism in his work while still building upon them, he found a way to reverse the European cultural cannibalism of the early 20th century (Hildyard, 1999) and took from the Modern west what he needed only to return home to make work that was both thoroughly Modern and uniquely African.

Methodology

The study began as an inquiry into the life and work of K. K. Broni. This was necessitated by the fact that little was known about him in the corpus of literature on ceramic art despite the immense contribution he had made in the field. The study employed orthodox descriptive research methods, document analysis, and library research methods of the qualitative methodology.

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Unstructured interview guides were prepared to solicit information from the artist and other respondents. Three specific visits were organised with the artist for the interview, aside from the close relationship that had existed between him and the authors, particularly the first author who was tutored by Broni both at the undergraduate and graduate levels. Again, photographs of the artist's works were taken by the researchers from the artist's house.

The impulse for this research became stronger when the second author visited Ghana on an educational trip and visited Broni in his house. Besides his vast collection of ceramics (Fig. 6), Broni had kept an archive of documents, in the form of certificates, citations, exhibition catalogues, awards, and publications. To crown it all, the third author curated an intergenerational group exhibition, *Orderly Disorderly* (2017), which featured reproductions of significant works from Broni's vast oeuvre and research data provided by the first author. The authors examined these documents and compared their content to the information solicited from the interviewees. Library research was also carried out to substantiate and compare the information received from the artist with what is captured in secondary literature.

Traditional Ceramics Production in Ghana

Traditional ceramics production in Ghana can be dated as far back to about 4000 BC (Asamoah-Mensah, 2013). According to Anquandah (2006), pottery products have been found in ancient sites which date to around 4000-3000 B.C. Traditional ceramic production in Ghana flourished in all the sixteen regions of the country because of the availability of raw materials and demand for the products. Before metal and plastic products became common, ceramic wares were the main sources of utensils for cooking and eating, fetching and storage of water, tapping and storage of wine from the palm tree, herbal preparations, and many more household stuff as pertained in most traditional societies (Breduah-Mensah, 2013). Pottery styles differed slightly from region to region, dictated by the kind of staple food consumed by the local people. The communities where this activity thrived were very popular because of the importance of the craft to the socio-cultural and economic sustenance of the people (Anquandah, 2006). It is believed that there were over 40 major potting centers across the country in the past 4000 to 5000 years (Anquandah, 2006).

Until the recent past, say about 30 years ago, ceramic products had occupied a very important place in the homes of many Ghanaians. It has become commonplace in some traditional homes in Ghana today to say "wash the pots" when one literally means wash the dishes. Traditional ceramics production in the past concentrated on utilitarian wares with some evidence of figurative forms that were used for burial purposes (Adjei, 2015). These were fired in the open (bonfire) in an uncontrolled environment, a technique that is very common with traditional ceramic production in most parts of the world (Vincentelli, 2000). Firing usually reached temperatures between 500°C and 900°C, leaving the wares porous, which makes the ware able to be used on fire (Vincentelli, nd). This factor has a lot of influence on the type of clay (body) they used and the limitations it imposes on the forming technique, mainly coiling and pinching. Anquandah (1998) observed that potting was hand-built by pressing and moulding using the coiling method. It is also important to know that many of the products were also used for cooking and therefore the normal clay could not have helped them achieve the fireproof result.

Traditional ceramic production in Ghana, like in many other places in the world is practiced by females (Vincentelli, 2003) and it is a family business which is transferred from the older generation to the younger generation by natural adoption of the skill or through apprenticeship for those not living close to the potting community. These women produced pots that were, spherical, semi-spherical, or oval. Some communities produced very large pots that could contain about 20 gallons of water. Today traditional ceramic production still thrives in some communities but few of the centres have survived. Today people travel from the cities to the potting centers to place an order for some of the products which have been able to compete with the modern gadgets and products which made the traditional products lose their essence. One such product is the *apotoyoma*, the grinding bowl. This could be found even in the kitchens of the rich, because of the special taste it is supposed to add to food prepared in it. Again some kinds of traditional ceramic ware are used for growing ornamental plants in the offices and important places.

Michael Cardew in Ghana and Abuja

Michael Cardew (1901-1983) a pioneer of the studio pottery movement and revivalist of the slipware tradition in England also spent a long working life in Africa, particularly, in Ghana and Nigeria (Harrod 2013b). It is believed that Michael Cardew introduced 'modern' ceramics production to Ghana when he taught at Achimota College and later at Vume in the Volta Region of Ghana where he set up his pottery center with one Kofi Atey and introduced new designs and forms and fired stoneware products.

He spent three years in teaching at the Achimota College, Ghana from (1942-45), and also set up the Vumepottery centre from 1946-48. Cardew later moved to Nigeria as a Pottery Officer in Abuja, from 1950-1965 (Onuzulike, nd) where he encouraged traditional potters such as Ladi Kwali, (Okunnan 2012) in the modern expansion of traditional pottery in Nigeria.

The introduction of the potters' wheel for ceramics production in Ghana, which is ascribed to Michael Cardew, brought a new dimension to the craft by way of the material, form, firing, and finishing— what is referred to as the Anglo-Oriental style which was championed by Leach and Hamada. This approach to ceramics expression by Leach (Cooper, 2003) was a blend of Eastern aesthetics of form and decoration with the English practicality (Watt, 2015).

The clay used on the potters' wheel was very plastic to enable forming. Ironically, the craft which hitherto was female enterprise became male-dominated at the formal educational level. Ceramics became accepted by males with the introduction of the potter's wheel for forming, kiln for firing and glaze for finishing.

K. K. Broni and His Early Years in Ghana

As mentioned earlier, traditionally women produce ceramic wares and pass the skill on to their daughters as part of traditionally held gender roles (2004). It is against this backdrop, that Kingsley Kofi Broni defied the gender traditions that existed in ceramics and took up pottery making despite the associated taboos. Kingsley Kofi Broni was born on the 20th of September, 1945 at Jamase in the Ashanti Region of Ghana. He studied at Jamase Presbyterian Primary and Middle School and completed his Standard Seven Education in 1958. Broni's art career formally began when he met David Dobson, a Scottish sculptor from the Royal College of Art who was the head of Sculpture and Ceramics at the School of Art at the then Kumasi College of Technology, now the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology in Kumasi, Ghana. Dobson recognized the determination and commitment in Broni and advised him to sit for the Ordinary and Advanced Level Certificates for him to pursue his university degree in ceramics. While at the Kumasi College of Technology, Broni came into contact with clay and learned how to throw on the potter's wheel with a high degree of skill while emphasizing functional forms (Fig. 1). Working as a junior employee he was able to hone his considerable wheel working ability.

Dobson also recommended Broni for the Asante Mampong Council Scholarship to go to Abuja,

Nigeria to further develop his skills in pottery under Michael Cardew and that became the turning point in Broni's career. Cardew had spent three years (1942-45) in the then Gold Coast as a ceramist at the West African Institute of Arts, Industries and Social Sciences, Achimota, and founded the Volta pottery at Vume east of Accra. From 1950-65 Cardew worked in Nigeria as a Senior Pottery Officer in the Department of Commerce and Industry, during which period he built and developed the Pottery Training Center at Abuja in Northern Nigeria (Harrod, 2013a; Benfe, 2013; Moloney, 2001; Dick, 2001; Stichbury, 2001)

In Abuja, Broni studied under Michael Cardew for three years from 1962 – 1965 during the latter part of Cardew's mission. Here at Abuja Broni learned glaze composition using local raw materials. In Abuja he also met Ugandan and Zambian potters who had come to Abuja to work with Cardew and to learn glaze composition and application (Adelabu, 2013). It was here that Broni learned the art of using wood kilns for firing glazed wares to stoneware temperatures (Cardew, 1969; Dahn, 2001), (Fig. 2).

In the United Kingdom: The utilitarian Leach-Cardew tradition

After the three years in Abuja, Broni returned to Ghana for three months before travelling on to the United Kingdom. Arriving in England he enrolled for the Ordinary and Advanced Level Certificates at Loughborough College between 1965 and 1966. During his studies, he funded his education by working for pottery studios in Stoke-on-Trent. As a hired potter he produced quality pots between school sessions and on holidays. Mr. Dobson who had resigned from the Kumasi College of Technology and had returned to England assisted Broni in attending Loughborough College of Art. After 8 months Broni left for Cornwall where he was invited by Michael Leach, Bernard Leach's son, to work in his pottery studio (Broni, personal communication, January 7, 2013). His time at the Leach studio ended after three months so that he could return and continue his education at Stoke-on-Trent. After returning, Broni enrolled at the North Staffordshire Polytechnic in 1967 where, in his own account, his creativity matured besides becoming more technically accomplished (K.K. Broni, personal communication, January 7, 2013). The influence of the Leach tradition on Broni had begun indirectly under the direction of Michael Cardew at Abuja. Now in England, Broni continued to tap from this tradition in his interactions with Bernard Leach himself and his son Michael Leach and again having David Leach, another of Leach's sons, as his tutor at North Staffordshire Polytechnic. Derrick Emms, who had also been a student of Bernard Leach, was another instructor of Broni (Obodo, *et al*, 2016).

Derrick Emms established a quality ceramics program at North Staffordshire imbuing his students with the same values and aesthetics that he had gained in his own education and from his time in Bernard Leach's studio. It was under David Leach and Derrick Emms's tutelage that Broni further developed his knowledge of glaze formulation.

Broni stated that at this time all of his forms were Cardew-influenced and somewhat repetitive as he had been fully engrained in the Leach tradition (Broni, personal communication, January 7, 2013). During the second year of his study at North Staffordshire, he had the opportunity to visit several ceramics exhibitions. According to Broni (Broni, personal communication, February 3, 2014), of these exhibitions, it was Hans Coper's exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London which had the greatest impact on him. He spent several hours looking closely at Coper's unique forms and surfaces. Even then he could not break away from Cardew's influence and his emphasis continued to be on utilitarian pottery. According to Broni, it was Coper's work that inspired and influenced him while in Britain. Due to his fondness for Coper's work he attended his exhibition three times always making sure he had an opportunity to speak to the artist personally (personal interview with K. K. Broni, 2013).

Upon the completion of his Master of Arts in Design degree he enrolled in a one-year Post-Graduate Diploma in Art Education at Birmingham University in 1972. His time in England was productive as he further developed his skills and knowledge of ceramic processes but, by his own admission, his work still lacked the creative spark he longed for as he saw within the work of Hans Coper. He had grown up in the ceramic traditions of his home country. He had mastered the British utilitarian Arts and Crafts ethic of Leach and Cardew through the avenue of what he described as "benevolent colonialism". But still, Broni's desire to learn and his curiosity led him to travel again and experience yet another world.

Broni in the West Coast of America: A shift from utilitarian to sculptural ceramics

In 1972, K. K. Broni left Britain for the United States and enrolled at the University of California, Berkeley for a Master of Arts Degree in Design which he completed in 1974. At Berkeley, he lived close to the beach where he often collected seashells and fossils and absorbed the formal influences of aquatic life. Seeking further natural organic sources with sculptural potential; he borrowed bones from the Biology Department of the University abstracting and distorting them he translated them into the clay (Fig. 3). He was equally inspired by fruit forms from which sculptural pieces were developed. The transition from his tradition and previous training both under Cardew and at Staffordshire were difficult at first. The shift from utilitarian to sculptural forms and his shift away from the potters' wheel, the area of his greatest strength, was at first disorienting. But it was during this vulnerable time that Broni found his own unique creative voice.

At the University of California, Berkeley, he was tutored by Peter Volkous (Coplans, 1966 Slivka 1961). Under the direction of Volkous and other participants involved in the radical transformation of West Coast ceramics, Broni made work that would have been impossible anywhere else. Volkous through his negation of the ceramic form's utility opened its untapped expressive potential for many ceramic artists (Durden, 2011). This was exactly the liberating approach that Broni needed and he responded with an outburst of production (Chattopadhyay, 2001). While at Berkeley Broni also had the opportunity to sit under the instruction of Robert Arneson a leading figure of the West Coast Funk movement (Scollon, 2007; Cisneros, 2006), who was a visiting professor from the University of California at Davis. This period in Broni's career has become legendary as Broni experimented with the fluid plasticity of the clay against his body creating unique sculptural forms that function as indicative signs of Broni himself even leaving behind hairs embedded in the clay. These body-formed pieces exist in the liminal space between performance and sculpture and were a risky and radical departure for Broni. Though many of these experiments do not survive, they indicate the opening of creative floodgates for Broni. In 1974, after being told by Volkous that there was nothing more he could teach him, Broni obtained his M. A. in Design with a thesis titled "A New Ceramic Approach to the Development of Colors and Forms Related to Nature". The benign title of his thesis belies the radical shift that occurred in Broni's thinking at this time and the impact that he would have on ceramic production and education in his home country. At the end of this fertile time of experimentation, Broni moved to the California State University of Santa Barbara where he studied with Michael Antz. In a remarkably short period, Broni was accepted and vetted by the faculty at that institute and was awarded a Master of Fine Arts degree in Ceramics in the very same year, 1974 (Obodo, et al 2016). For the next two years, he remained in California doing research and working for the Charlico Ceramic Company. These diverse influences enriched Broni's work. What does remain from this period are the organic sculptural forms inspired by nature that continued to influence his work upon his return to Ghana.

K. K. Broni's Teaching at Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi.

Having completed his training in 1976 he left for Ghana for a teaching appointment at the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology in Kumasi, Ghana. The art program there had received the remains of Cardew's project at Achimota including ceramic equipment and materials. It was only fair that he would be among those to develop the ceramics course that grew from the seeds that Cardew had planted. What had once been a British colonial interest was now in his hands and under his guidance.

Upon his return, Broni left behind the strict functional parameters of the Leach and Cardew tradition to produce uniquely Modern African ceramics. This new body of works was informed by the expressive idioms of Euro-Western Modernism but now specifically rooted in Ghanaian tradition and culture. He also developed new forms inspired by the tropical forest in Ghana. He often searched for skeletons and rotten tree trunks for sculptural forms, some of which he exhibited in Europe and some African countries. He has also developed a keen interest in rock and termite-cave forms.

A good example of how Broni was able to bring these worlds together is found in forms such as his "Tea-Bread" sculptures (Fig. 4). This local bread, produced in Ghana, is made in many homes. Broni had memories of this bread being made and the kneading process that is necessary to prepare the dough. There are clear parallels between bread making and ceramic processes. Mixing of materials to a proper consistency, kneading – wedging, forming, waiting for the dough to rise and the clay to dry and of course the "baking". These conceptual connections bring together the studio and kitchen the public production and exhibition of art and the domestic sphere. The "Tea-Bread" sculptures are truly Modern works though rooted in Ghanaian tradition. The works of other significant African artists of Broni's generation and younger, working in the crossover between Modern or Contemporary western and African formats, have been greatly celebrated. The growing list includes the Ghanaian El Anatsui, an Alumnus of KNUST's College of Art, the London-based Nigerian artist Yinka Shonibare, as well as the Kenyan Magdalene Odundo. These artists continue to enjoy much patronage in exhibitions and art media, but K. K. Broni's innovation and significance in Modern and Contemporary African art have been tragically overlooked. These direct, minimal "Tea Bread" sculptures are profound in their simplicity. They bear the trace of the hand of the maker, produced with an efficient expressive gesture as skillful and evocative as any Pollock drip. Broni brings high art and the intimacy of the family kitchen together with an object that confirms the artist's presence. I am here and I made this. As Broni stated himself;

My hands have been my principal tools; the fingers are my major asset just as malleable clay has been my faithful material. With my fingers, I literally manipulate the plastic clay and the forms emerge into lifelike chicks from a shell (Personal communication with KK Broni, February 3, 2013).

Some of Broni's later work was a return to traditional ceramic vessel forms where he first started. Like Voukos, Broni seemed to have returned to his original source of inspiration at the latter part of his career when he started researching new forms developed from the traditional water pot, the "Ahina". These pots are used for water storage; however, Broni with his instinct for creating sculptural pieces succeeded in interpreting them as sculptural forms. Another traditional image that has inspired Broni is the African mask in its varied forms. He employs the mask as a decoration on the pot to dissociate it from its traditional usage pulling it out of its context and recontextualizing it, (Fig. 5a & 5b). The new forms manifest his skill in the art of throwing and his ability and sensibility in glaze composition, application, and surface treatment. His forms can be seen as re-configured vessels with meanings other than utility. Other "Ahina" emphasize natural organic forms that Broni is so attracted to. Bulbous forms with a pocked and crater surface at once references sealife and the anthills located across the landscape of Ghana. Whether a cultural expression such as the mask or natural forms of the sea or land they are fused with the traditional source, the preserver of life-sustaining water, the Ahina. This indigenous form does not only contain the water which supports human life but now through Broni the forms assume new meaning and identity in the land where he was born and raised.

Broni's impact on his students cannot be over-emphasized. His use of natural and traditional-forms, symbols and images within a contemporary discourse has been admired by all and has formed an iconographic reference for many artists and students in Ghana. The later part of Broni's practice shows an amalgamation of his early and mid-career concepts. The vessels he produced still show the organic, material, and process-oriented approach which he learned from Voukos. However, as an African, he has routed this western idiom through Ghanaian culture resulting in some of the earliest, most original, and truly Modern African ceramics. Broni has internalized all he has learned and upon returning home has produced a body of work that only he could produce.

Contemporary Response

Broni's professional career as a ceramist spans over thirty years of successful practice. His exposure in the field of ceramics is clearly unmatched by most contemporary artists. His career has been shaped by some of the greatest and most influential ceramists of the past 100 years specifically Michael Cardew, Bernard Leach, and Peter Voulkos and he reflects the influence of these three iconic figures. What is most remarkable was his ability to learn from these figures but not to be defined by them. His work is uniquely his own. In the history of western ceramics, there may be no more evocative intersections between the traditional, the modern European industrial, the purist reactionary craftsman, British Colonial idealism, and the revolutionary individualistic Modernist than K. K. Broni and the work he produced. It is for all these reasons his career and work is so essential for contemporary discussion. Remarkably, he retains his voice and a strong dedication to the students and ceramic artists in Ghana. In his 2004 article "Traditional Pottery in Ghana", he lists a series of recommendations to improve ceramic production and its economic viability. His insight is pragmatic, focusing on the quality of clay sources, its processing, and storage as well as encouraging collaboration amongst potters as a way to strengthen the ceramics community. He does not rail against these things as evil or bad in themselves but identifies them as inevitable aspects of modernization and provides practical guidance describing a path forward. Broni's work and career span worlds and eras and shows a path for ceramics as a viable aspect of cultural production in the future. For this reason, his work must be engaged by art historians and critics alike.

Over the 28 years that Broni taught at the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, he trained many ceramists who are now doing well in their professions. It is important to recognize that Broni's collection of his works is amazing and needs, protection, and further research. It deserves a proper permanent space for the exhibition. Broni's work is truly a treasure and an essential chapter in ceramic history (Fig. 6).

Conclusion

Indeed it is rare for artists to span three distinct worlds but for K. K Broni this is a life experience that undoubtedly shows in the quality and transitions in his work. His experience with the traditional pottery in West Africa, coupled with the Leach and Cardew traditions and the direction of Voulkos and the other participants involved in the radical transformation of West Coast ceramics would only transform Broni's skill and creative orientation into one that is worth looking at. Broni started from a humble beginning and with determination and hard work he managed to explore his skills and passion to a level that is unparalleled when pitted against many of his contemporaries in Ghana.

The core of K.K. Broni's practice is how he can transform all the important influences he had into a personal vocabulary which is characterized by the African identity. He combined western approaches in ceramics production and aesthetics in Ghanaian culture which resulted in some of the most original and truly Modern African ceramics. Broni internalized most of what he learned and produced a body of work that only he could produce. His unflinching love for what he does shows in the body of works he has collected, both his personal works and those of others that show exceptional quality.

The authors argue that Broni's training, practice, and teaching experience make him stand tall among many ceramists of his generation. His contribution to the development of ceramics through practice and teaching in Ghana and the world cannot be over-emphasized. They also argue that his career and the corpus of his collection are essential for engagement by ceramists, art historians, and critics to unearth the potentials for further research and practice that exist for future generations. Broni's work and career span worlds and eras and show a path for ceramics as a viable aspect of cultural production.



Figure 1 The only surviving pot Broni made in Ghana before leaving for Abuja

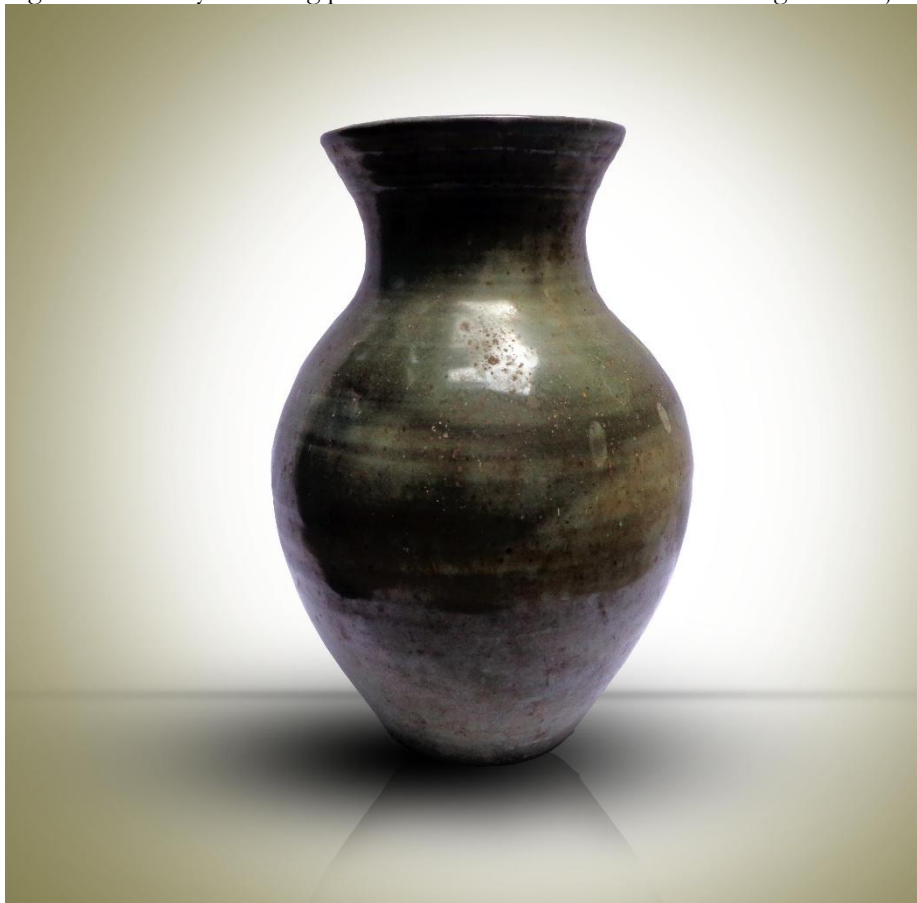


Figure 2: The only surviving stoneware pot Broni made in Abuja



Figure 3a: Bone sculptural forms

Figure 3b: Penguin forms



Figure 4: Tea Bread Form



Figure 5a: *Abina*form with African Mask



Figure 5b: *Abina* Form with Termite Cave



Figure 6: Broni's collection in his house in Kumasi



Figure 7: K.K. Broni (middle), flanked by ceramists Kofi Adjei (second from left), Keaton Wynn (second from right).

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