

Spirituality & Artistic Expression



The only way that we can observe the inner life of a preliterate, ancient society is through its art. Both figurative imagery and decorative design attest to an essential characteristic of our species: the ability to think abstractly. Through art, humans express in material form their spiritual feelings, their state of mind, and their desire to immortalize the surrounding world. Art also helps to fulfill the universal human need to embellish one's surroundings, a desire that existed even among the Neanderthals.

The work of Trypilian potters is among the finest of any Neolithic culture. Their ceramics superbly unite utilitarian purpose with a fine aesthetic sensibility. Their work also embodies their culture's perception of the real and mythical worlds, although this perception is often difficult for us to decipher.

Like all Neolithic peoples, the Trypilians would have made little distinction between the natural and supernatural. To them everything existed on a single continuum. Shamans would have mediated between the natural and supernatural worlds, explained events, divined the future, and cured illness, just as they still do in some societies today. The Trypilians left numerous material clues to their spiritual beliefs, many of which remain mysteries to this day.

Objects of Mystery

Archaeologists often discover things whose purpose is unknown; it is always tempting to suspect that such artifacts had a ritual or cultic function. The most enigmatic objects, completely unique to the Trypilian culture, are hollow, bottomless, bi-conical ceramic artifacts. These come in two forms: a single "monocular" and a double "binocular," the two halves of which are usually joined with an elaborate bridge. Their surface decoration is similar to that of pottery vessels, whether incised with patterns, painted with designs, or left simply plain. The function of these unusual, mysterious artifacts might be as utilitarian as a stand for pots with conical bottoms. Or they may be ritual objects, embodying a deep spiritual meaning.

The small, round or rectangular footed platforms are equally mysterious, but it is easier to imagine a functional purpose for these: perhaps offering altars, trays, or serving dishes.

Some archaeologists interpret baked clay discs like the one exhibited here as among the earliest calendars, through analogy with similar objects found in certain aboriginal cultures of the New World.

Artistic Expression: Incised Pottery

Trypilian pottery decorated with incised lines derives from the Linear Band Pottery cultures of the sixth to fifth millennium BC, widespread in central Europe when the Trypilian culture was emerging. Incised pots enhanced with inlay made of light-coloured clay are concentrated in the eastern part of the Trypilian area, in settlements located between the upper Southern Buh and the middle Dnipro Rivers.

The rich assortment of shapes and sizes derives from the many functions of the vessels—bowls, cups, beakers, large containers for dry-goods storage, pear-shaped jars for liquids, and lids that could serve for drinking if turned upside down. The curvilinear ornamentation almost