

# ariana



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geneva

Press kit  
March 2018

## Women Potters of Africa

A journey to the heart of a contemporary tradition

Musée Ariana, 16 March – 9 September 2018

This exhibition is designed and produced on the basis of an original concept by the Musée des Confluences in Lyon

musée des  
confluences

Press visit on demand : [presse.ariana@ville-ge.ch](mailto:presse.ariana@ville-ge.ch)

Exhibition opening on Thursday 15 March at 7 pm

Musée Ariana

Musée suisse de la céramique et du verre

10, avenue de la Paix

1202 Geneva - Switzerland

The logistics of the exhibition was supported by the company Henri Harsch HH SA.

Press pack downloadable [here](#) or on our website: [www.ariana-geneve.ch](http://www.ariana-geneve.ch)

Un musée  
Ville de Genève  
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## PRESS RELEASE

**Geneva, March 2018** - Between 1991 and 1995, eleven European ceramists, united on the initiative of the French artist Camille Viot, went to live in villages in West African countries like Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Cameroon and Nigeria. Having observed the women potters in action, and at times worked alongside them, they brought back around a hundred examples of pottery for daily use, selected for their aesthetic qualities by the ceramists, whose principal aim was to bring to light a contemporary savoir-faire in the shaping, decoration and firing of everyday objects. Several hours of films, interviews, notes, drawings from real life, tools and a large number of photographs all describe in detail this shared adventure and the main steps in the making of the pieces, from the extraction of the clay to the firing. Above and beyond their production, the ceramics also reveal a social identity transmitted from generation to generation, markers of the daily reality for these women, whose creations are an essential part of domestic life.

In this exhibition, designed and produced on the basis of an original concept by the Musée des Confluences in Lyon, the Musée Ariana is presenting around sixty terracotta items selected from a collection now held, conserved and studied at the Musée des Confluences, where they were recently exhibited (Potières d'Afrique, 28 June 2016 – 30 April 2017). Significantly, Africa is coming to the Ariana too for the first time.

All the objects in the Women Potters of Africa exhibition are from a donation made by the ARgile Association to the Musée des Confluences. This association was set up in 1985 by ceramist Camille Viot and his wife, Marie-Pascaline. Its mission is to support reflection on contemporary ceramics, notably through its publishing activities. Trained at the École supérieure des arts décoratifs in Strasbourg, Camille Viot not only practices his craft in his studio in Haute-Provence, but also carries out important didactic work by organising exhibitions and publishing works centred on ceramic traditions at home and around the world.

*"The pots presented here are everyday items. They have been individually chosen for emotional reasons, without documentary objectivity. They are all charged with the significance of the encounter. We are committed to exhibiting them, for they are a Manifesto: though removed from their context, far from the sounds of laughter and the gritty light, they still express through their visual presence the time taken to create them, the daily battle to survive, the symbiosis between the senses and the material, and the perfect management of means and needs. African ceramics are indeed a rare example of everyday ceramics which have strongly maintained the physical relationship in their fabrication. These pots are as beautiful as plants, the fruits of a vigorously-harmonised vital force..." (Camille Viot)*

The art of ceramics is thousands of years old: it is a total art that unites the four elements. Humans, in this case, women, meld their bodies with it in powerful, everyday but natural gestures, using techniques in harmony with the environment. Ceramics is an art, a craft, a tradition and a rite. The duration of the creative act is inscribed in the object that embodies it. The Ariana is an institution dedicated to the art and history of ceramics. The museum focuses in particular on decompartmentalisation and transversality between this art and other disciplines. Its permanent display, moreover, also relates the technological and artistic influences and exchanges that have fostered socio-economic changes and relationships over the centuries, especially between East and West. Global awareness is a much more effective way of shedding light on each of its constituent elements and enriches our understanding of them. Africa is little-represented in the Musée Ariana's collections. Yet, the museum is an important bastion today that perpetuates an art of ceramics that is still very much alive, despite the fact that 90% of European porcelain and faience factories have disappeared, victims of the inexorable competition, mainly from Asian centres that employ other materials much less expensive to produce – at least in the short term.

## Introduction to the Visit

Strolling through the exhibition on the lower ground floor of the museum, visitors will be able to discover the wide variety of forms and colours of these large, everyday pottery pieces, not often generally shown in Europe. The exhibition focuses on their intrinsic beauty, while at the same time explaining their fabrication methods and techniques: shaping, decoration and firing. In passing, the presentation also evokes the very real competition from aluminium and coloured plastic utensils manufactured in Africa or from enamelled cookware imported from China.

Two beautiful series of photographs show us portraits of these women potters and their journeys to market to sell their pots. Photographs, slide shows and films take us to the heart of their daily work, as they shape, decorate and fire the containers, which are then used as vessels for food and drink or as cooking utensils. Visitors can let these images transport them to the centre of a courtyard, surrounded by the houses of a Nigerian village or to the Banfora market in Burkina Faso.

Two video interviews decipher some aspects of the daily lives of the women potters: one with Camille Viro, ceramist, co-founder of the ARgile publishing house and association and initiator of this programme of research and encounters with West African pottery, and the other with Olivier Gosselain, a researcher in cultural technology at the Université Libre de Bruxelles and a specialist in the ceramic traditions of sub-Saharan Africa.

In addition, the Ariana is also presenting a selection of works by the ceramists who took part in this African adventure. These new showcases are a unique addition to the exhibition and contain works from the Musée Ariana's own contemporary ceramic collections.

## A Life Journey

The decoration of the pieces evolves with changing tastes, but the aesthetics are consistent with the intended use of each object. Thus, polishing improves impermeability, the raised designs make the objects easier to grasp, and so on.

A variety of techniques can be used to print motifs, heighten the lustre by means of polishing, or give extra colour by an additional thin layer of clay (slip). The women potters make use of knives, cloths, pieces of calabash, carved wood, baobab seeds, pebbles, ears of millet, thorny twigs, braided grasses, fruit seeds, bamboo styluses, sorghum canes, dung, dry leaves, etc.

The pottery is fired at a low temperature, collectively, in temporary ovens in the open air. This intense and rapid firing is supervised by the oldest women potters. After firing, some pots are sprayed while still hot with a vegetable decoction that gives them extra colour and brilliance.

Each week, the potters travel to market to sell their wares. The villages can be more than 10 km away and some women walk this distance, sometimes carrying as much as 40 kg on their heads ... Despite the tough competition from recycled aluminium cooking pots, multicoloured plastic pots from Senegal, or from utensils made in China, the terracotta pots still resist again and again. Due to their low cost and thermal qualities, they remain the best way of preserving grain and keeping water fresh.

Clay pot versus iron pot? The fact remains that the wares made by African women potters allow wealthy classes to assert their cultural identity by purchasing one of these vessels, and so help perpetuate these traditions and savoir-faire still very much alive today.

#### **Exhibition Curators**

Isabelle Naef Galuba, Director

Isabelle Payot Wunderli, Project Curator

#### **Three reference works, all published by Éditions ARGile, can be purchased in the museum shop:**

Camille Virot, La Poterie africaine. Les techniques céramiques en Afrique noire, from the "Granit" collection N° 3, 2005

Camille Virot, Poterie nègre. Une collection collective, 2016

Amadou Chab Touré, Assana Diarra, Arnauld de L'Epine, Michel Raimbaut, Youssouf Tata Cissé, Pierre-Alain Uniack,

Camille Virot, L'Atelier Kalabougou, from the "Ateliers" collection N° 2, 2011

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## PRACTICAL INFORMATION

### Musée Ariana

Swiss Museum of Ceramics and Glass

10 Avenue de la Paix | 1202 Geneva

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[www.ariana-geneve.ch](http://www.ariana-geneve.ch)

Open Tuesday to Sunday 10 am – 6 pm. Closed on Mondays

**Entrance fee to the temporary exhibition : CHF 8.-/CHF 6.-,**

**free admission under 18 and on first Sunday of the month**

**on the other Sundays one paid ticket = one free ticket**

**Free admission to the permanent collection**

**Exhibition opening : Thursday 15 March at 7 pm**

**Press visit on demand :** [presse.ariana@ville-ge.ch](mailto:presse.ariana@ville-ge.ch)

### Exhibition curators:

Isabelle Naef Galuba, director

Isabelle Payot Wunderli, project curator

### Heritage Interpretation:

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### Guided tours on request in French, English, German and Swiss German

Free for schools in the Canton of Geneva

Full rate: 150 CHF - Special rate: 75 CHF for social institutions subsidized by the City of Geneva

For groups of up to 15 people - Please pre-book 15 days before the required date (with or without a guide)

### Visitor Services:

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### Social networks

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