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## PROPOSAL FOR DISHWARE OBJECTS INSPIRED BY ELEMENTS OF TRADITIONAL CULTURE: EXPLORING THE CASE OF THE BAMILEKES FROM WESTERN CAMEROON

By

**Corresponding author: DJOUKWO TSANETSE MAJOLIE CARINE** (PhD in Products Design, session 2022, JCI, CHINA);

Lecturer of fine arts in the architecture department; National Advanced School of Public Works.

**Abstract:** In ancient Africa, clay was the primary material used for crafting utensils among local populations, with pottery thriving in various kingdoms. The diversity and quality of these utensils served as a measure of a family's status. However, the advent of globalization and modernism has significantly reduced the demand for pottery in Bamiléké territory. Moreover, the prevalence of imported metal or plastic utensils from the West has replaced locally made pottery, signaling a concerning trend. As specialists in this field, we believe there are strategies to address this situation. One approach involves stimulating interest among the local population in locally produced goods. To achieve this, we've embarked on a creative journey, drawing inspiration from traditional Bamiléké culture to design dishware objects. These designs encompass various elements, including musical instruments, zoomorphic and anthropomorphic forms, adornments, furniture, containers, and more, each carrying symbolic significance within the culture. Our creative process is influenced by Reverend Father Engelberg MVENG's law of abstraction and synthesis. This approach involves representing religious elements in their natural state, emphasizing essential lines, creating decorative motifs, and interpreting them. These culturally expressive objects offer significant advantages in combating acculturation, which threatens the preservation of our cherished cultural heritage.

**Keywords:** Tableware, traditional culture, bamileké, pottery, ceramics

## INTRODUCTION

Among the Bamiléké people, pottery is the most common and significant form of artistic expression. This tradition has been passed down through generations, lending it a deeply traditional character. However, the traditional pottery of the Bamiléké people faces certain challenges that contribute to the lack of interest shown by the population towards it.

Some of these weaknesses include inadequately treated manufacturing materials, highly primitive cooking technology, a lack of suitable enamels for low-temperature cooking,

and the requirement for special enamels for local food pottery. Additionally, the decorative techniques remain unchanged, whether through sculpted work or high and bas-relief, with surfaces often left unadorned and unpainted. The challenge of product design is further constrained by limited local training and skill levels. Artisans tend to replicate ancient models during their learning process to preserve tradition, stifling opportunities for innovation. Moreover, certain religious ceremonies impose strict regulations on

the shapes of specific pottery, further hindering innovation in this sector.

Hence, each craftsman upholds the traditional model's continuity through direct replication. Specific forms mandated by religious purposes may limit artisans' freedom to innovate in iconographic forms or decorations. These considerations, alongside others related to decorative techniques and product design, underscore the pressing need to rethink and redefine ceramic art in Bamiléké territory. To adapt to modern production methods and enhance credibility and originality in the international art market, it must embrace contemporary design and production techniques.

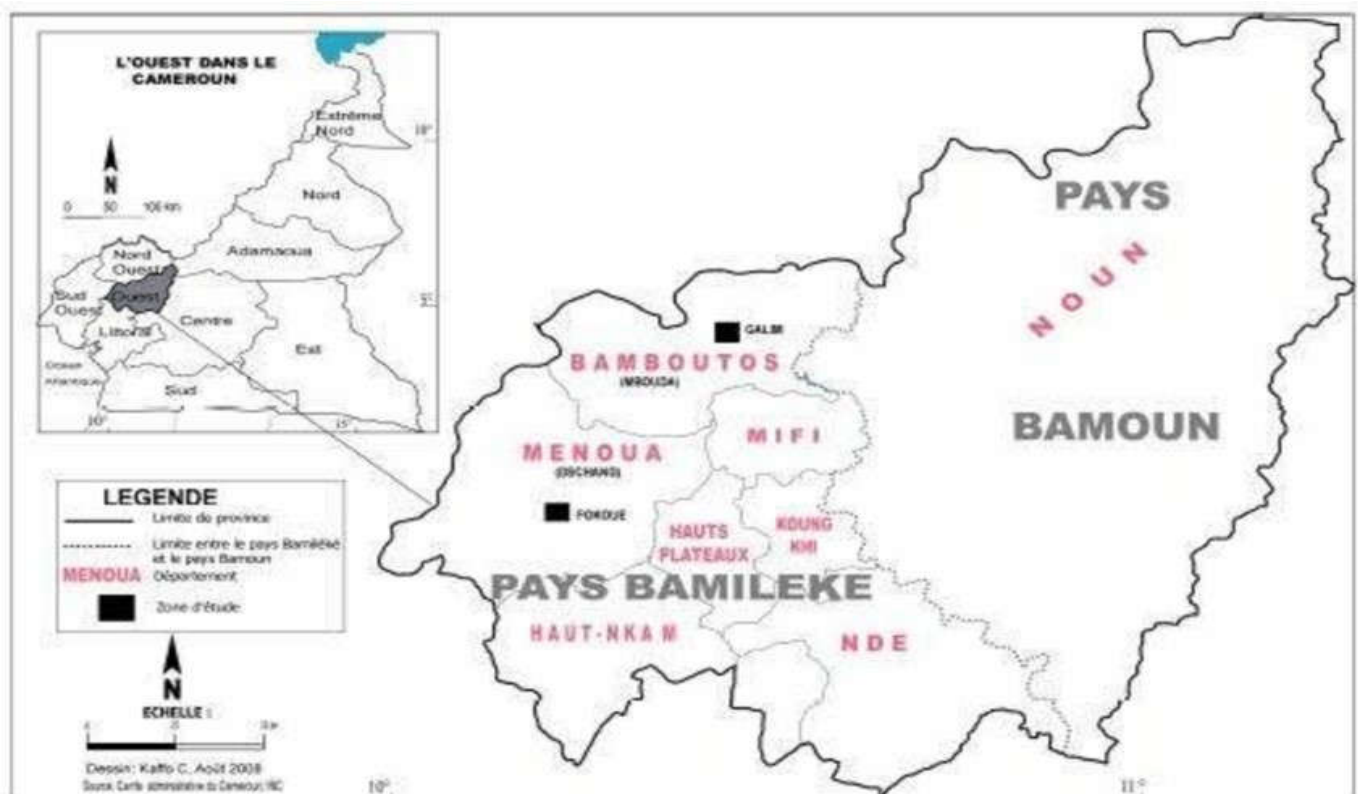
In this context, we propose ceramic art and tableware inspired by traditional Bamiléké

culture. This initiative aims to foster interest in local culture, promote consumption of locally made goods, and reduce reliance on foreign products amid globalization. The study focuses on three key areas: an overview of the Bamiléké people's geographical and historical context, the impact of globalization on pottery art in the Bamiléké region, and the conception and creation of ceramic art within this cultural framework.

### I. The geographical environment of the traditional pottery of the Bamiléké people and brief history of the population

To better understand the context of pottery production among the Bamiléké, it is necessary to give a brief overview of the natural environment in which it was made.

## 1. Geographic location



The Bamiléké country on a schematic map of Cameroon (by DONGMO TEMGOUA Bertrand, What human resources for memory tourism? The profile of agents providing services during the funerals of the Bamiléké people of Cameroon, January 2019, Mondes du Tourisme 16(16) DOI:

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Cameroon (474,000 km<sup>2</sup>, more than 15 million inhabitants) extends from the Gulf of Guinea to Lake Chad, between the 2nd and 12th degrees of north latitude (ImageI-1). It is a synthesis of

Africa both in terms of artistic expressions and climates, landscapes, societies and lifestyles.

Its western part is made up of a set of high plateaus which extend on either side of an alignment of volcanic buildings oriented North-East/South-West, marking the great break known as the "Cameroon line" (defined by the German geographer PASSARGUE in 1909), a real rift which runs from the Gulf of Guinea to Tibesti. This line is marked in the Grassland by Mount Oku (3008 m), the Bambouto Mountains (2740 m) and elsewhere by Mount Manengouba (2411 m), Mount Cameroun (4094 m). This mountainous arc therefore divides the Grassland into two: to the West, the plateaus of the North-West province and to the East, the Bamoum and Bamiléké plateaus. (Picture I-2)

<sup>1</sup>Jean-Paul NOTUE-Bianca Traca, 2005, Bandjoun : trésors royaux au Cameroun.5 Continents Editions, Milan, P 23.

### The climate

From a climatic point of view, the orientation of the relief, the altitude and the distance from the sea give prominence sometimes to the effects of the Atlantic monsoon, sometimes to a more contrasting continental situation. The climate is said to be "Cameroonian" mountainous. Temperatures are relatively low and maximums do not exceed 22 to 23°. Minimums often reach 13°; white frosts are not rare at altitude. Precipitation is quite significant, more than 1600 mm of rain per year. The climate has two main seasons: the dry season which goes from mid-November to March and the rainy season which extends over the rest of the year<sup>2</sup>.

### Clay

By its structure, clay comes from feldspars, which constitute almost 60% of the earth's crust. This explains why in many cultures; clay is the basic element from which God creates man. Speaking about African ceramics, Jean Dévisse distinguishes common clay from kaolin, which he describes as noble and rare clay. From the outset, a line of technical choices separates those who, in ceramic production, are content with common clay and those who seek kaolin. Black Africa, he says, has generally used kaolin for uses other than pottery.

## 2. Brief population history

### Origin of the term Bamiléké

The term "Bamiléké" was unknown to the populations of Grassland in the 19th century. It is in fact an administrative term, a neologism, and very quickly widely used during the colonial era, resulting from the deformation of the local expression mbalekeo, both misheard and mispronounced, which means in Bali language "people below". Tradition reports that one of the German explorers, surprised and impressed by the very humanized bocage landscape that he saw from the heights of Mount Bamboutos, asked his guide-interpreter, originally from Bali, what the people of this region were called. The guide immediately replied: "mbalékéo", which meant: "these are the people from below".

<sup>2</sup>SUCHEL (J.B), 1972, "La répartition des pluies et les régimes pluviométriques au Cameroun", GEBET, CNRS.

<sup>3</sup>HAUSSONNE, M, 1969, *Technologie céramique générale, Faïence, Grès, Porcelaine*, 2<sup>ème</sup> ed. Paris, 2 vols.p.14.

<sup>4</sup>Référence faite à la Bible, au coran et à d'autres textes religieux.

<sup>5</sup>Devisse Jean, *Pour une histoire globale de la céramique africaine*. In: 2000 ans d'histoire africaine. Le sol, la parole et l'écrit.

<sup>6</sup>J.L. DONGMO, 1981, le dynamisme bamiléké, (Cameroun), thèse d'État, Paris tome I, p 57.

<sup>7</sup>Le pays Bamiléké comme la région Bamoum ne seront pénétrés qu'assez tard par les Allemands, après 1900.

The inhabitants of the Grassland have kept the habit of characterizing their close neighbors in relation to their geographical location at altitude. So there are "people at the top" and "people at the bottom". The term mbalékéo, roughly transcribed, and also interpreted as a proper name of a people, quickly became "Bamiléké" for all travelers and colonizers. It will therefore designate all the populations of the region itself. Despite its imprecise historical and anthropological meaning, we will use this term because it is widely used in Africanist literature. Louis PERROIS and J.P. NOTUE estimate that out of the 2.5 million Bamilékés in Cameroon, over 1 million reside in the high plateaus, known as the "Chieftdom." Chieftdoms are prevalent

among all tribes in the western and northwestern regions. They represent small nation-states with defined territories, populations, and unique cultural practices. The leadership of chiefdoms is held by a king known as FO, although their authority is primarily ceremonial and constrained by councils and wise individuals within secret societies.

The data highlighted illustrates the strong connection between the natural environment of the Bamiléké people and the art of pottery. However, the influence of modernity and globalization is expected to lead to a decline in this traditional artistic practice.

## **II. Globalization and its impact on the art of pottery in the Bamiléké region**

The phenomenon of globalization has had a considerable impact on artistic practice among the people concerned.

### **1. The advent of modernity and globalization in Africa**

Due to advancements in science and technology, many industrialized nations worldwide are producing a wide range of plastic or metal items. With globalization, these products have entered foreign markets for sale. Their exceptional design and cost-effectiveness have quickly supplanted the local religious significance of traditional pottery. Consequently, the cultural values embedded in local pottery-making techniques and styles have been disregarded by the populace. Without intervention, the unique cultural heritage risks vanishing under the onslaught of these industrial goods. While it is crucial to embrace progress, it is equally important not to sacrifice our own culture for the sake of another. Faced with this crisis, African artists must recognize the depth of their cultural heritage and take action to preserve it.

### **2. Pottery facing modernity and globalization in Bamiléké territory**

In ancient Africa, clay was the primary material used for crafting utensils among local populations, and this art of working with clay thrived across various kingdoms. The quantity, variety, and quality of utensils owned by a household symbolized its financial standing and social status. Even religious figures required small pottery items for rituals associated with

ancestor worship, religious ceremonies, and witchcraft.

However, with the influence of globalization and modernization, the demand for Bamiléké pottery has declined compared to earlier times. Imported metal and plastic utensils from Western countries have replaced locally made pottery among the Bamiléké community. Furthermore, there are traditional regulations within this population that limit pottery-making to infertile or menopausal women, which has significantly hindered the development of the local pottery industry.

The aforementioned factors have contributed to a decline in ceramic production in this region, posing challenges in establishing a presence in both national and international art markets. Therefore, it is imperative to redefine and assess this situation.

Since the 20th century, the influx of Western influence has greatly impacted various aspects of Bamiléké life, particularly in pottery production. Foreigners introduced the concept of "modernism" to the local population and strongly encouraged its adoption, leading to the displacement of traditional Bamiléké pottery by Western vessels. This shift has resulted in a significant erosion of ancestral beliefs and customs. In response to this issue, we intend to draw inspiration from Bamiléké cultural elements to create tableware items.

## **III. Design and creation of ceramic art among the Bamilékés**

This part will be structured around three points: the statement of the methodologies used in the study, the process of creating the works, their presentation and analysis.

### **1. Statement of methodologies used**

The law of abstraction and synthesis of Reverend Father Engelbert MVENG for the creation of works.

To conduct this research, we will use Reverend Father Engelberg MVENG's abstraction and synthesis method. He claims to have discovered the fundamentals of artistic creativity while studying Bamoun and Bamiléké art. Jean-Paul Notue's research revealed the extremely decorative nature of Bamiléké art. The arrangement of themes and rhythmic patterns in these works aligns with greater artistic

production concepts from the beginning. Engelberg Mveng's law of creation describes four steps or moments of abstraction and synthesis that painters use to produce decorative themes.

The "O" moment marks the outset with a focus on imitating nature, drawing from Greek and Western realism, aiming to encapsulate the essence of the object itself; this phase represents the ultimate goal. Transitioning to the "L" moment, the artist distills the object down to its essential lines, entering the realm of abstraction. For instance, when starting with a buffalo (or a toad), the artist omits intricate details, opting to capture only the general silhouette of the animal, eventually refining it into abstract lines.

Moving on to the "M" moment, the artist establishes clear baselines with distinct patterns, transforming the primary motif into a fixed logo brimming with meaning, capable of functioning as a symbol and a literal representation. These established, standardized lines evolve into a symbol, with its significance tied to human existence on Earth and experiences within the environment.

The "C" moment is intertwined with the creation of compositions. Depending on the chosen motif, the artist crafts decorative or sculptural compositions. This mode can be employed independently or in conjunction with other modes.

In essence, we can summarize this law as follows: To create a pattern, the artist progresses through four stages or moments of abstraction and synthesis. The "C" or "S" represents composition or synthesis. Artistic creation involves varying levels of transformation from one stage to the next. Objects can transition into a pattern and seamlessly integrate into the composition following the 0-) M-) C formula. Similarly, the 0-) L-) M-) C formula facilitates the transformation of objects into patterns through linear abstraction.

### **Erwin Panofsky's iconographic method for analyzing works**

Iconography encompasses the study of the meaning of images. Art historians define it

broadly as a discipline focused on identifying and categorizing works of art. The term "iconography," also known as "schema," is used more expansively to elucidate the meaning of art within a specific cultural context. Erwin Panofsky, in his work "Studies in Iconography" (New York, 1939), presents three aspects of iconography.

Firstly, the pre-iconographic aspect establishes the primary or natural subject, blending descriptive and expressive elements. Secondly, iconography identifies secondary or general subjects within the artwork. Lastly, there is an interpretation of the iconography itself. Panofsky delves deeply into iconography, examining stylistic and formal features that artists may employ unconsciously. For historians, these features unveil the temporal and spatial choices made by artists, along with the cultural milieu in which the artwork was produced.

The study of iconography encompasses the analysis of developmental processes, changes over time, and the interplay of representational styles within art.

### **2. Process of creating works**

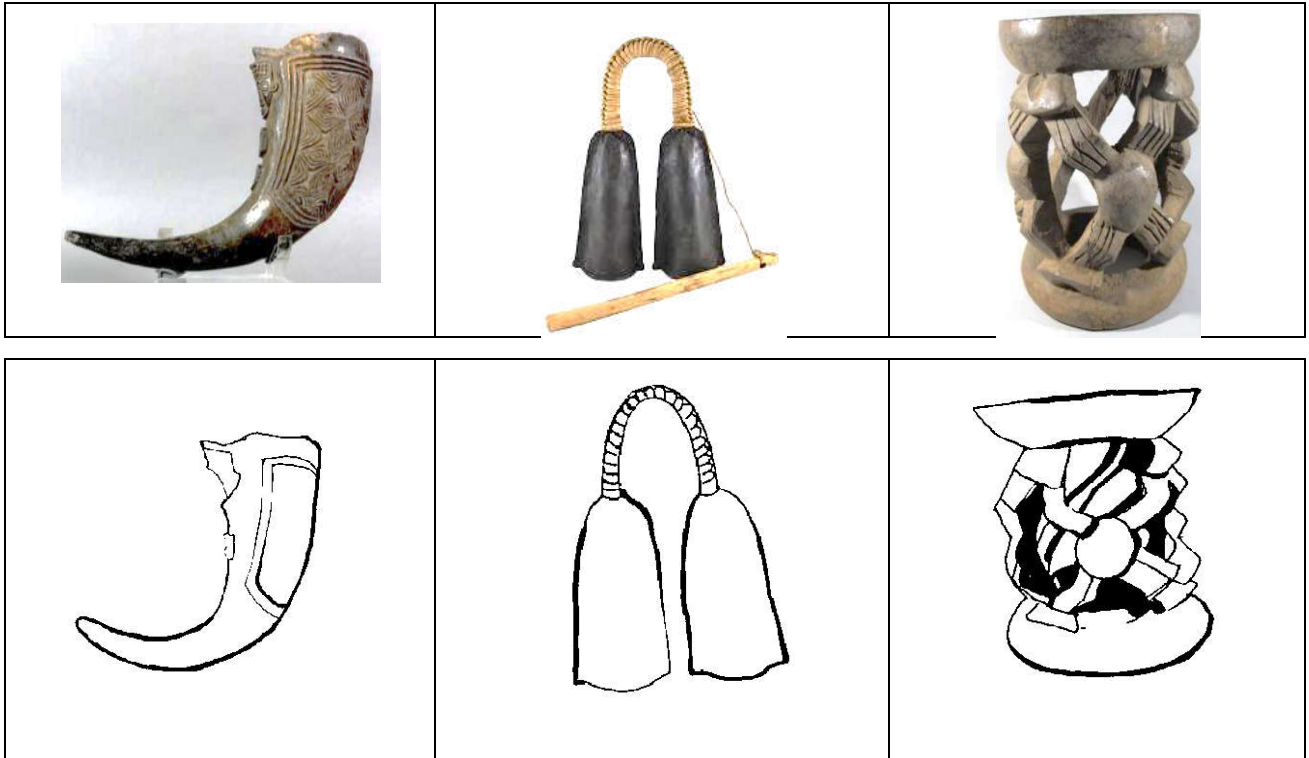
This section aims to present everyday artistic items, particularly tableware and vases, inspired by the cultural elements and decorative motifs found in Bamiléké art. This approach stems from an observation: the traditional ceramic art is currently under threat due to globalization. Over time, traditional ceramic objects, once commonplace and imbued with religious significance, have been replaced by plastic or metal items from industrialized nations. As a result, there is a risk of losing ancestral culture unless steps are taken to revive this ancient art form. The production we are offering is a response to this ongoing trend.

The creative process is structured around the following steps:

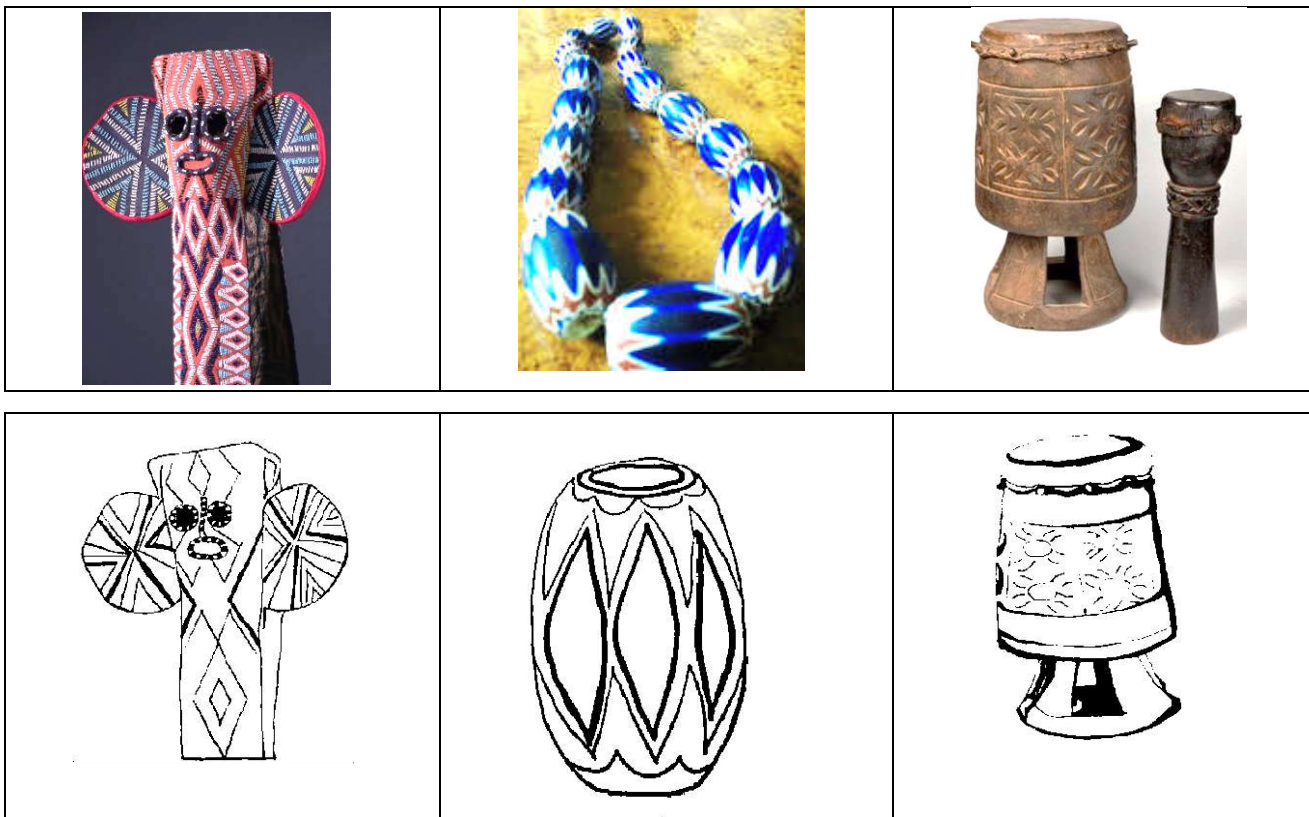
1. Expressing natural elements in the design of objects.
2. Outlining the foundational patterns.
3. Creating decorative objects and motifs.
4. Preliminary work on paper to prepare for the artistic process.

### **Step 1: The Natural Essence of Cultural Elements**

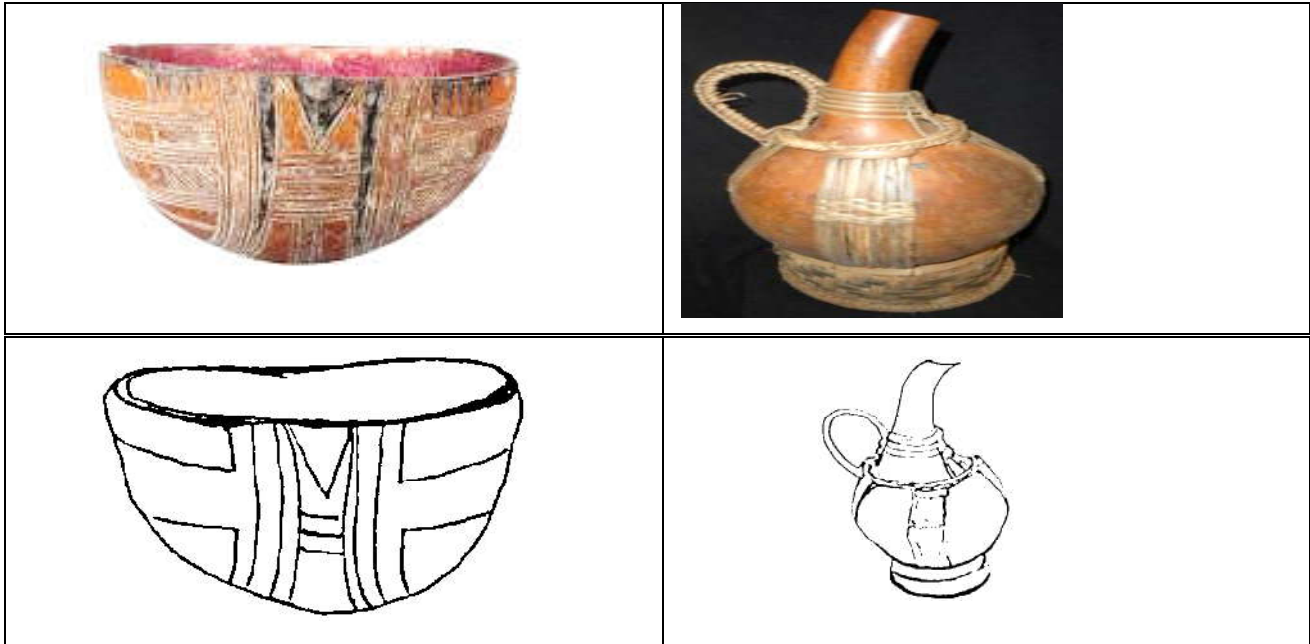
The ox horn, the double bell and the stool



The elephant mask, the pearl and the drum



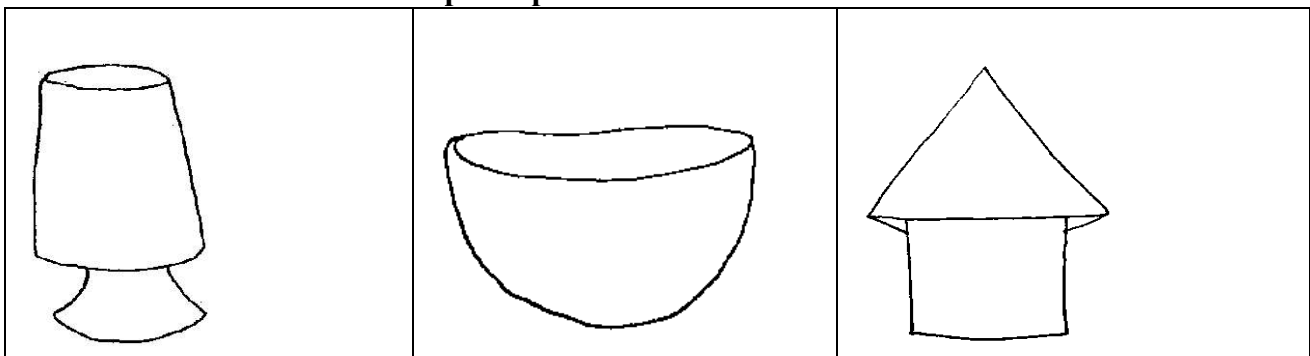
Divinatory calabash and ordinary calabash

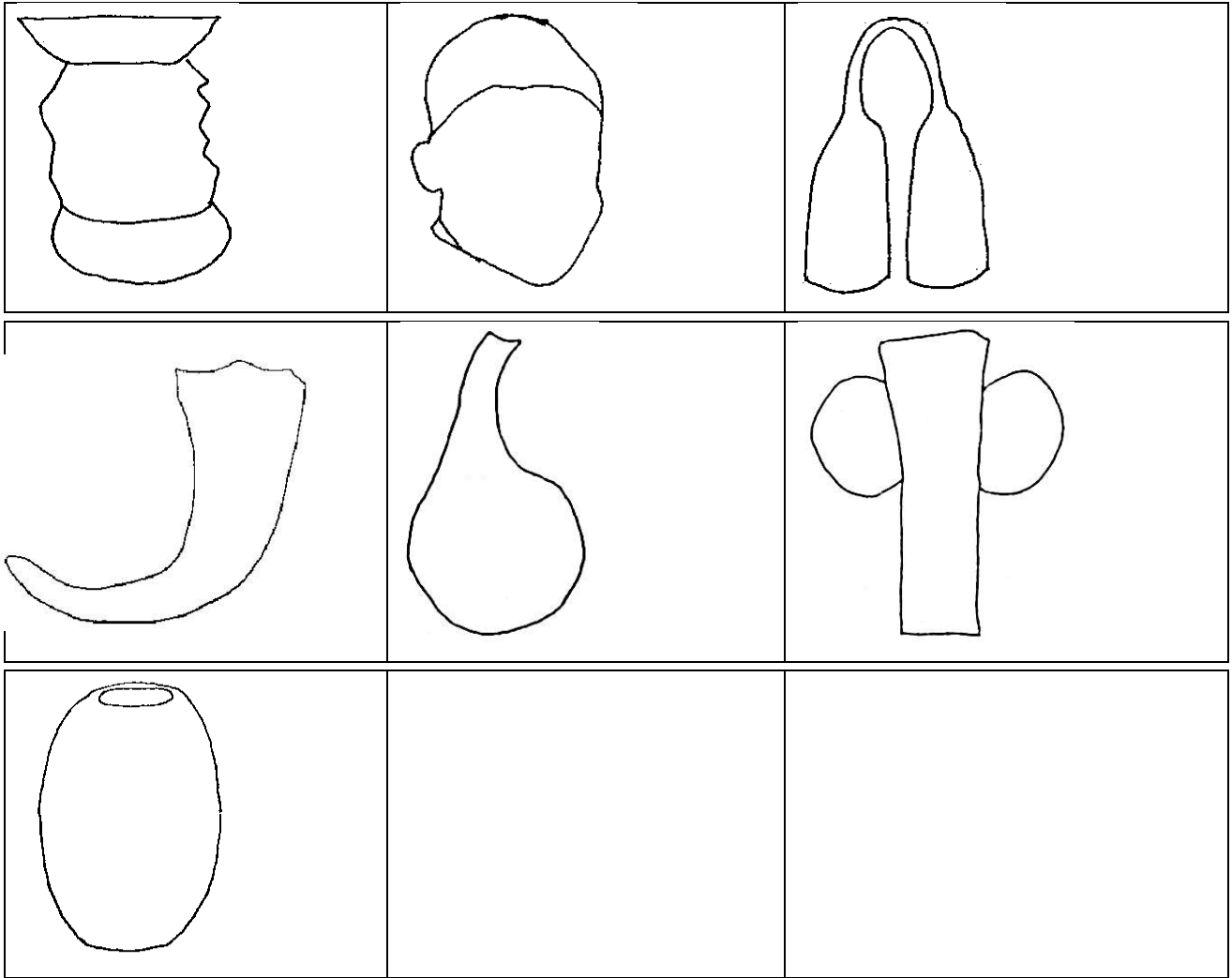


Bamiléké architecture and the Ngoen mask



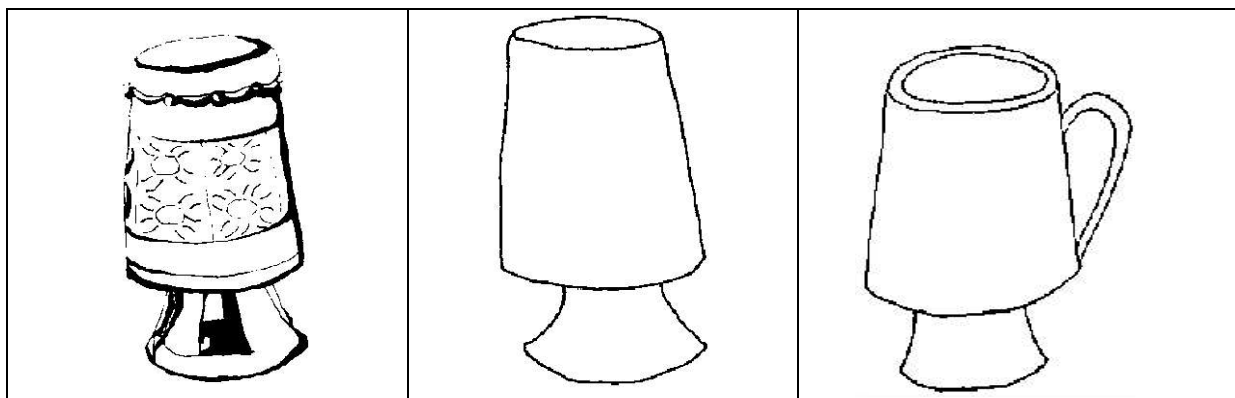
Step 2 Representation of essential lines



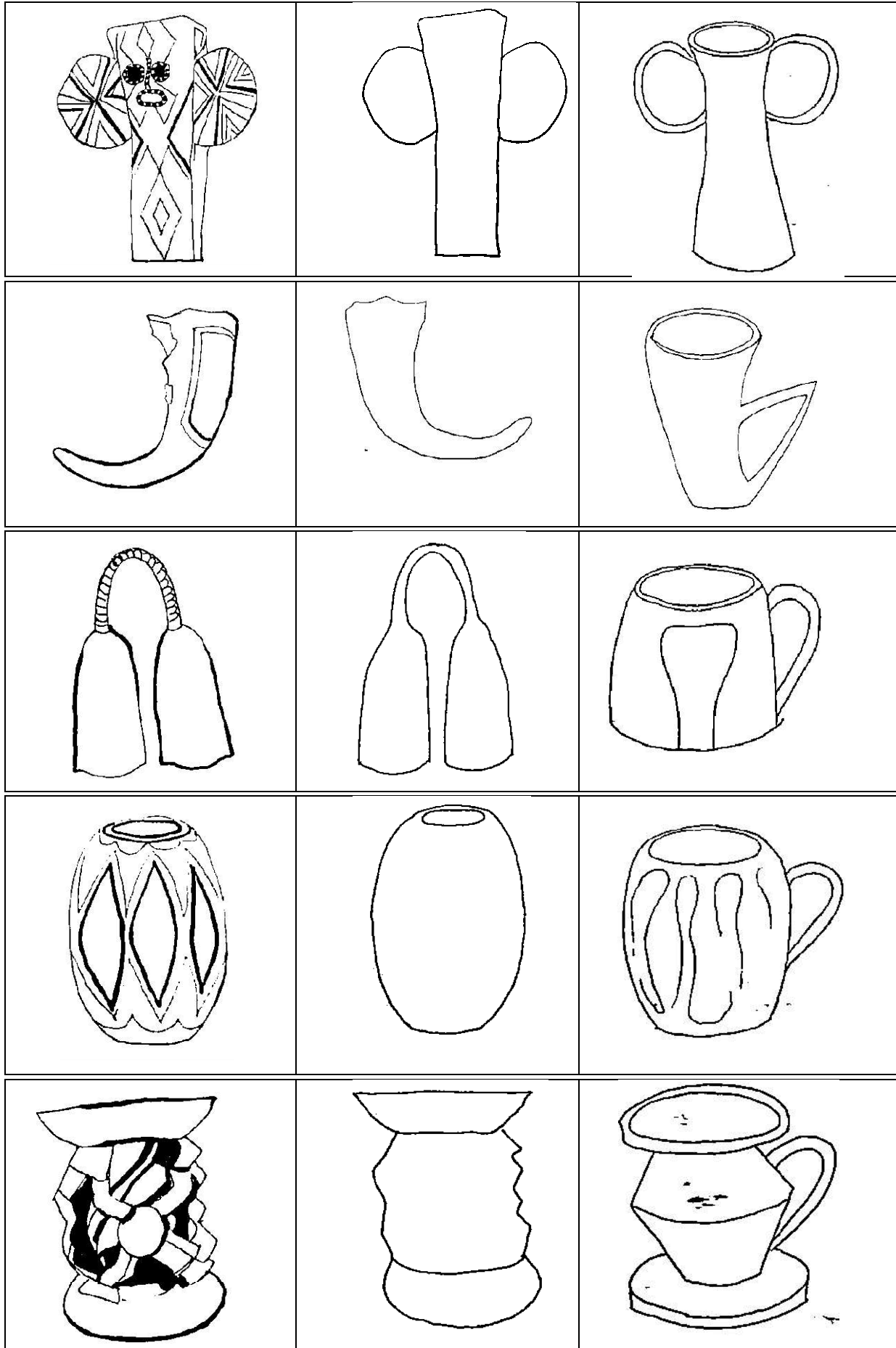


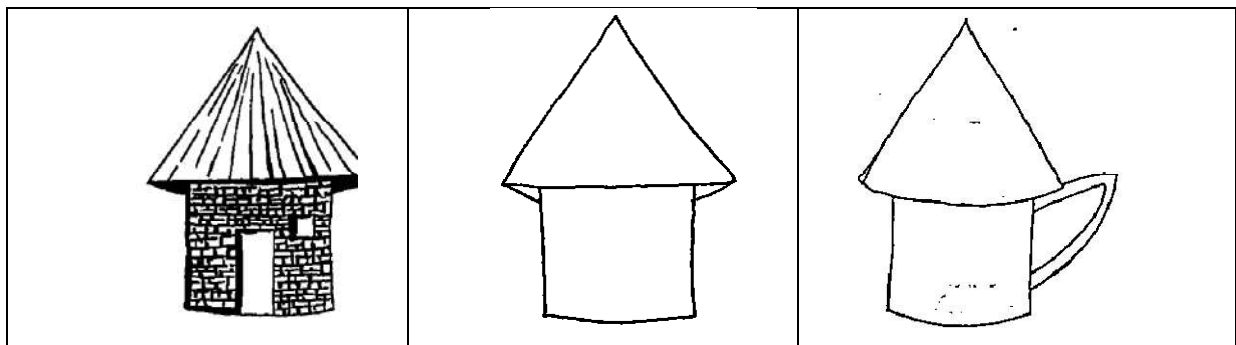
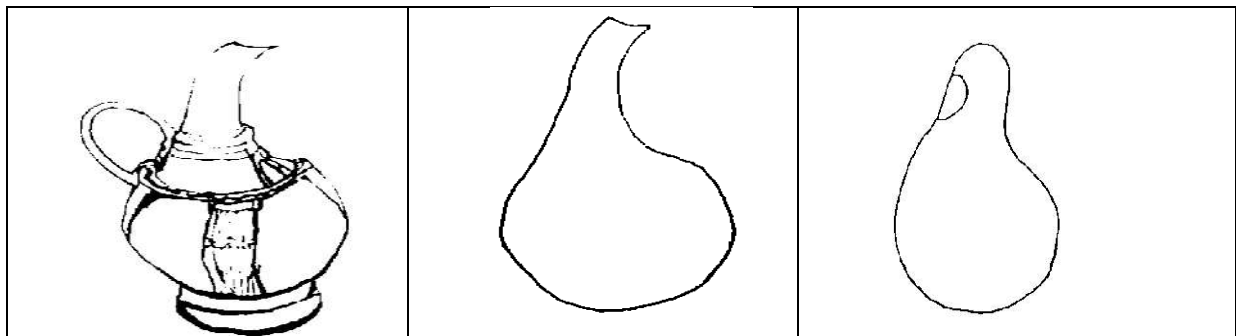
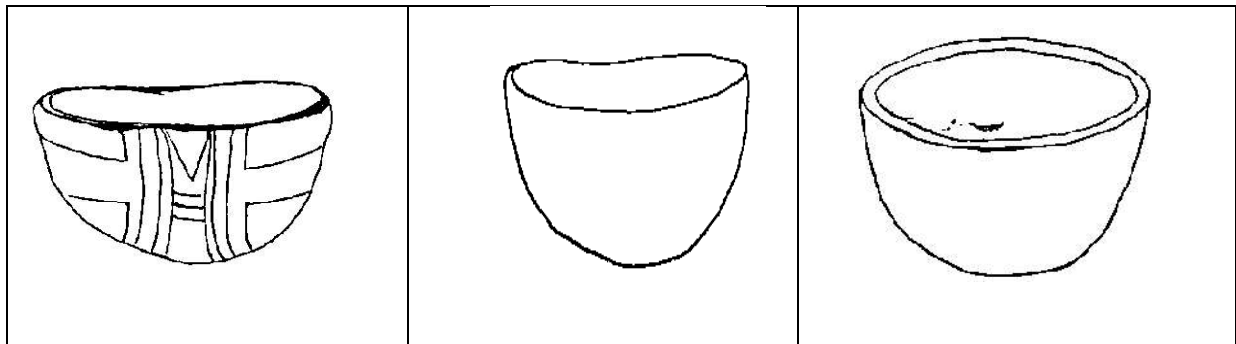
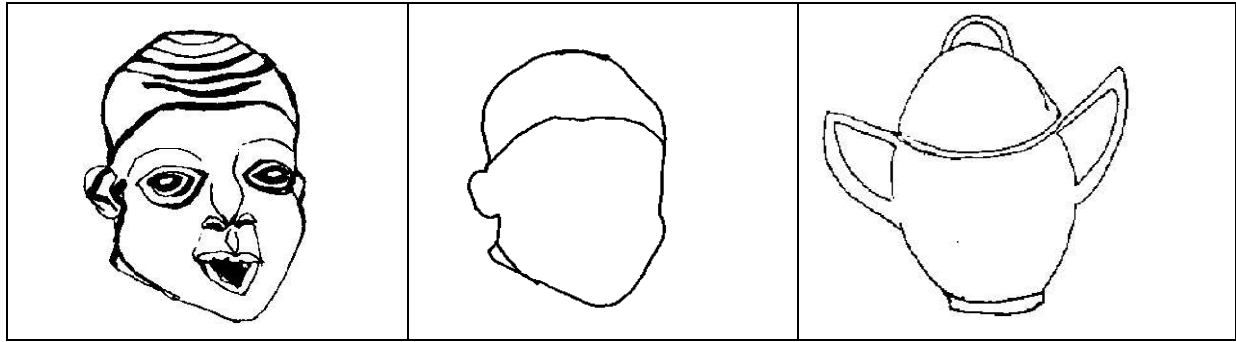
**Step 3 Creation of decorative objects and patterns**

**1. Designing objects**

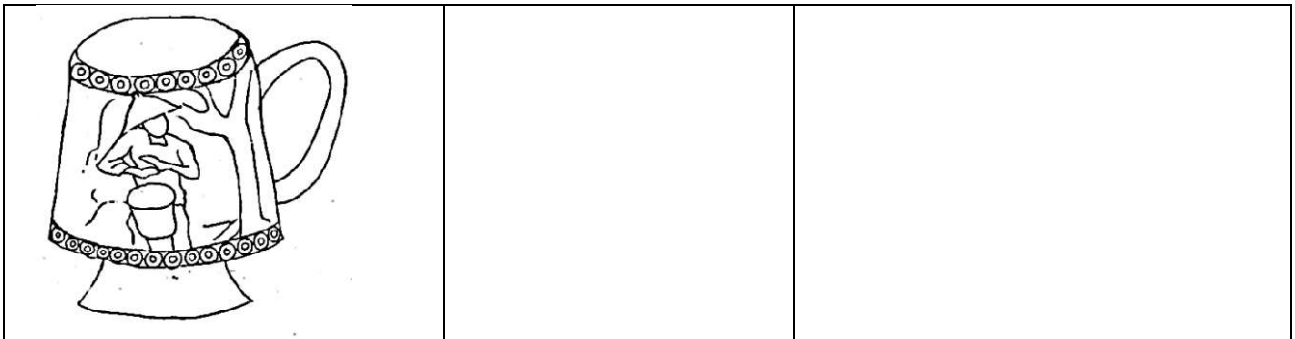
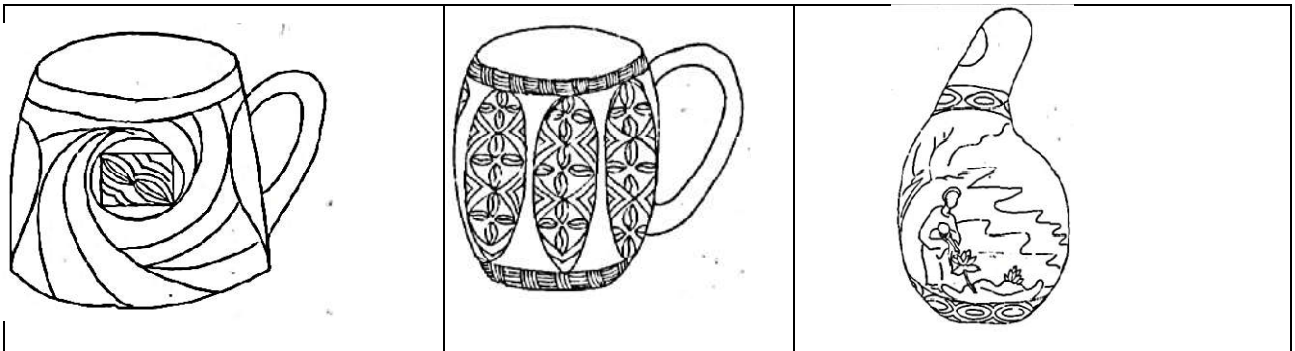
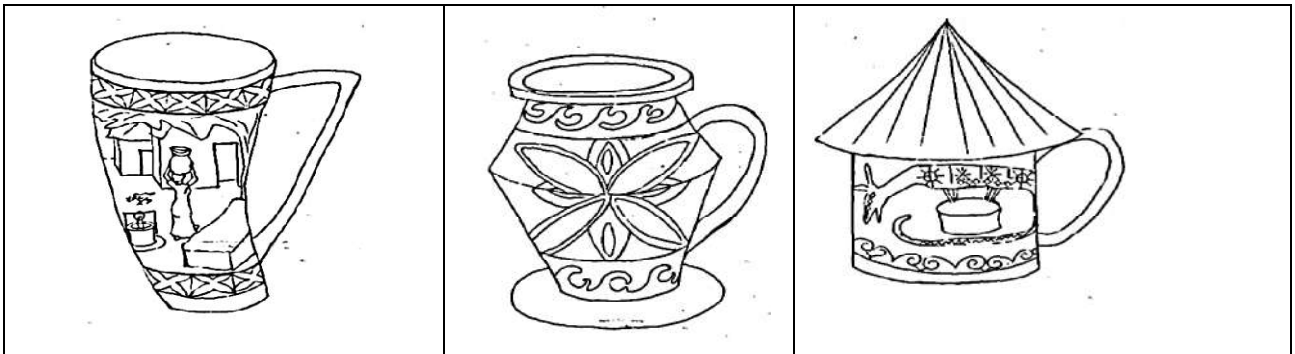
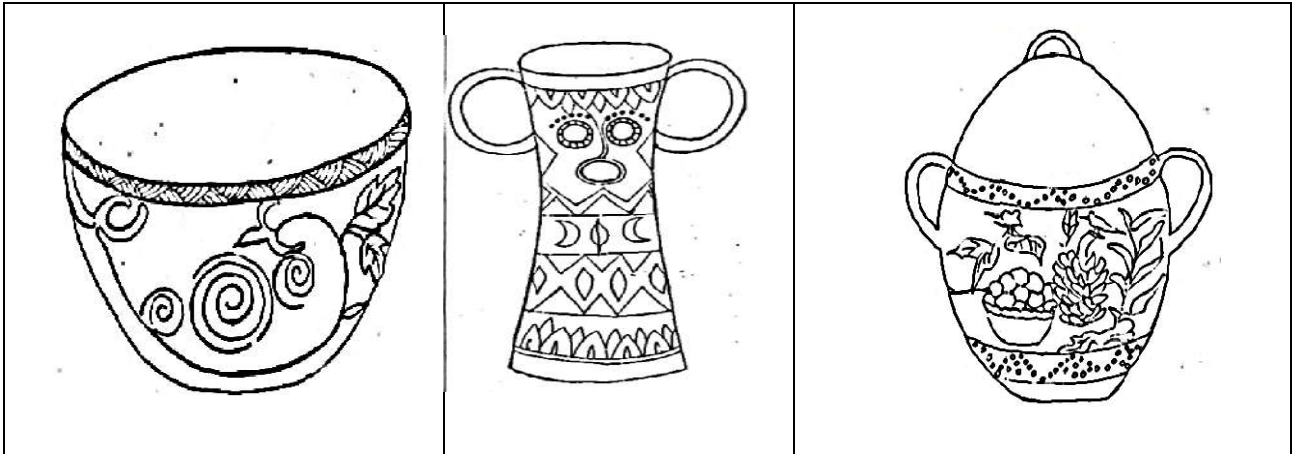




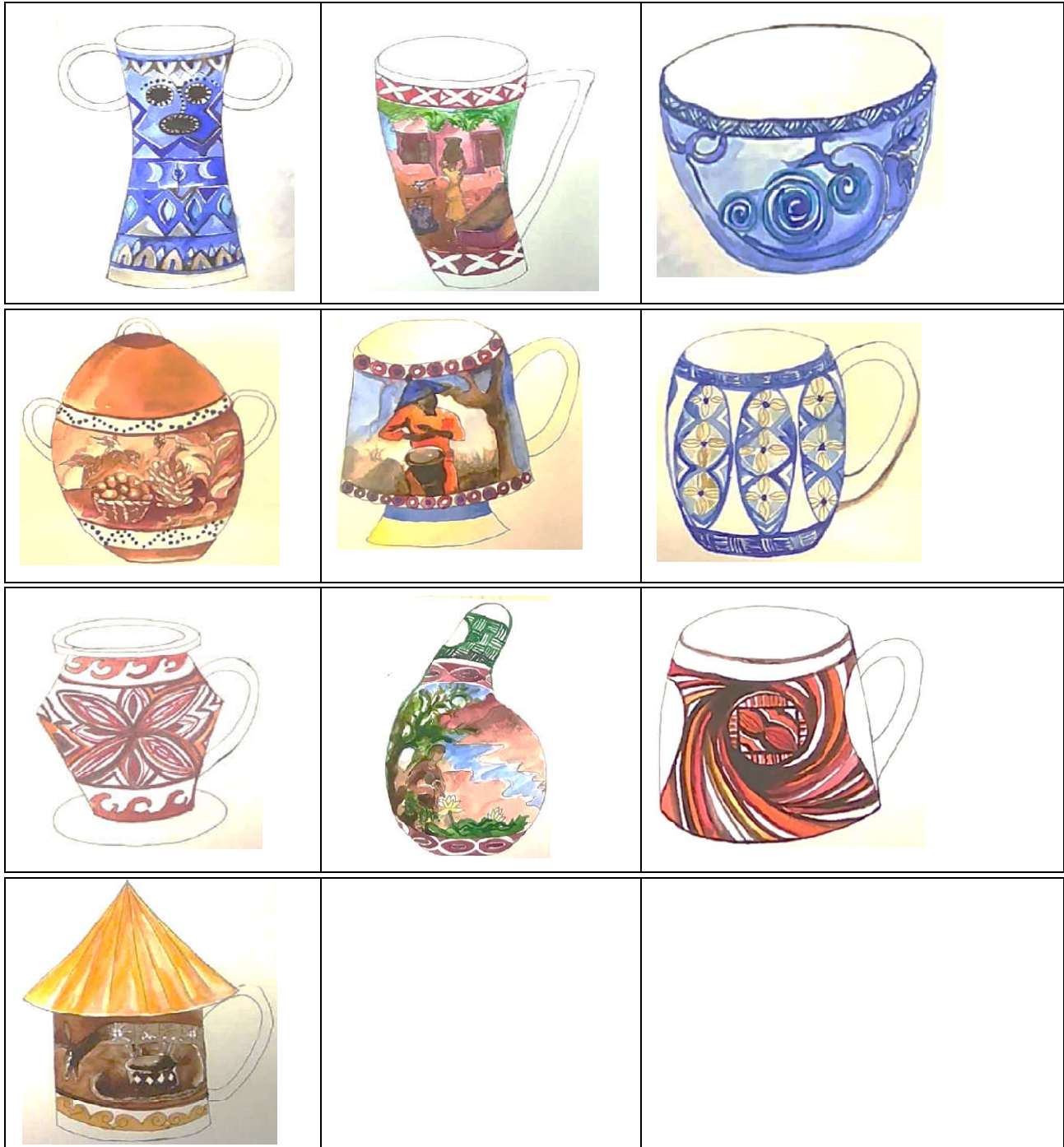




2. Decorative sketch



### 3. Painted decoration



#### **Step 4: Process and method of making objects**

##### **Production of molds and blanks**

After designing the shape and the Image, it is time to start creating ceramic objects. Due to the complex shape and in order to improve the success rate of the product, we will use the grouting method.

##### **Pigment and firing temperature**

According to the Designed Image, Underglaze Painting Process is used. This type of pigment is rich in color and the process is simple and easy to master.

##### **Respect for hygiene**

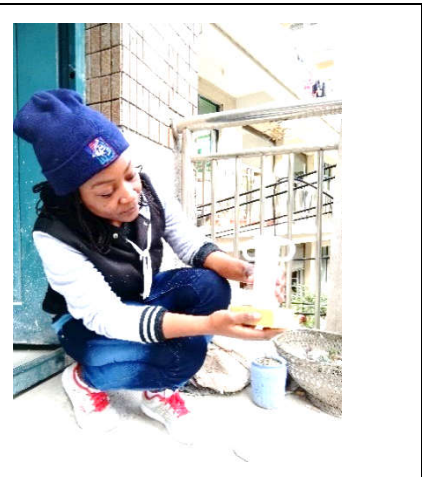
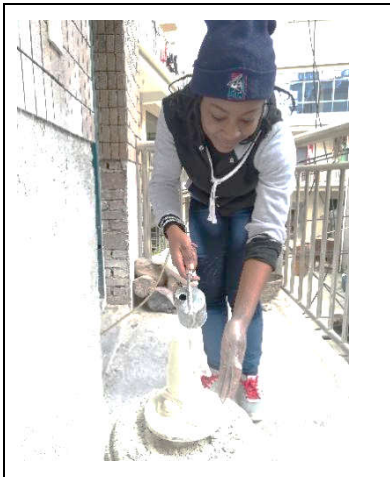
Before representing an image on the object, it is important to ensure that it is clean. It can be cleaned of dust using a sponge.



**Painting Equipment**



**Operation in progress**



**1. Presentation and brief analysis of the works**

This analysis will be done by considering the work of Jean Paul NOTUE and Engelbert MVENG on the symbolism of the arts of the Bamiléké people.

**1 - pearl-shaped cup**



This cup is inspired by the shape of the blue rosetta pearl (its local name) found in the Bamiléké culture. It is decorated with cowrie shell motifs. In local culture, the cowrie shell was used as currency. Later, it became a decorative object often associated with numerous cults and rituals (divination, fertility cult, twin cult, ancestor cult, medicine, etc.). The cowrie cross is thus a symbol of fertility and a sign of wealth. The line decoration refers to Man. It designates the tracks where the tribes travel<sup>1</sup>. Two colors dominate: blue and yellow. The symbolism of blue has a connection with death, just like the blue pearl which is worn in the same circumstance. Yellow is a symbol of victory. The meeting point between the form of the work and its decoration thus refers to the victory of life over death.

## 2- Chair Shaped Cup



This cup is inspired by the royal Bamiléké stool. It is decorated with the divinatory spider, or tarantula spider, motif. This animal symbolizes wisdom, intelligence and foresight. The dominant color is red. The color of blood and life, red symbolizes power, the rebirth of the king or fo after the death of his predecessor. The relationship that is established between form and its decor is that wisdom, intelligence or foresight allows us to acquire a certain power over the environment that surrounds us; essential notions for all human life.

## 3- drum-shaped cup

<sup>1</sup> R.P.E. MVENG, *Arts d'Afrique Noire, liturgie cosmique et langage religieux*, op.cit. p.96



The shape of the drum, which is significant in the Bamiléké culture, inspired the design of this mug. Many drums, particularly those of the Fo, notables, and Mkem secret organizations, play an important role in religious rituals, accompanying songs, dances, and processions. The cup is adorned with circular patterns and depicts a man playing a musical instrument beneath a tree. The dominant hues are ochre yellow, green, and blue. Yellow indicates victory, blue represents the supernatural, and green, with its association with plant symbols, represents renewal. The circular motif symbolizes the cosmos. This cup, with its form and decoration, celebrates the common desire to overcome life's problems.

#### 4- Elephant bottle



This jug is modeled after the Bamiléké elephant mask, which has deep cultural significance. The elephant, as a regal animal, denotes strength, power, and wealth, similar to the panther, with which it is sometimes paired in artistic renderings. Triangles and diamonds are significant decorative elements on the jug, representing strength, fertility, riches, and femininity, all of which are prevalent motifs in Bamiléké art. The major hue of the jug is blue, which represents spiritual forces. Both its form and design represent the notions of strength, prosperity, and power.

#### 5- Double bell cup



This cup draws inspiration from the Bamiléké musical instrument known as the kwi'fo. The kwi'fo consists of two tall wrought iron bells connected by a metal handle, often reinforced and adorned with links, and it holds significant cultural and religious importance in the Grassland region. Regarded as a sacred instrument, it is considered a powerful fetish and is traditionally passed down from one king to the next.

The cup is adorned with the bow motif, which carries religious symbolism representing the power of binding and loosening, as well as symbolizing unity. It signifies the union, such as the connection between the deceased chief and the successor who inherits the kwi'fo, symbolizing continuity and succession in leadership.

#### 6- Bottle of gourd



This jug is modeled after the distinctive shape of the calabash, a commonly used container among the Bamiléké people. When adorned with cowrie shells, it transforms into a ceremonial or funerary item. The design features linear and geometric patterns, notably the diamond motif symbolizing fertility and the lines representing tribal pathways.

The artwork depicts a scene with a mother carrying a child near a garden, a river, and mountains, alluding to a serene landscape. The dominant colors of green, blue, and ochre yellow hold symbolic meanings: green signifies life, blue represents rain and water, while yellow symbolizes hope and vitality. The calabash, both as a functional container and adorned with decorative elements, embodies themes of hope and life, highlighting the significance of water as a vital element.

#### 7- Bowl of gourd



This artwork draws inspiration from the divinatory calabash, a significant object used in rituals within the Bamiléké culture. The piece showcases a floral decoration influenced by Chinese painting, alongside a spiral pattern symbolizing the snake, the sun, and femininity.

The predominant color of blue signifies the realm of the beyond, the invisible world. Both the container and its intricate decoration evoke a sense of mystery surrounding ritual practices and the concealed aspects that persist despite the presence of sunlight.

#### 8- Cup inspired by architectural form





This cup was inspired by traditional Bamiléké architecture. The typical traditional hut is a parallelepiped with a square foundation, topped with a circular ceiling and a conical or pyramidal roof. The ornamentation in this space includes a dancing crest with a panther motif. Panthers are connected with political and judicial authority. It represents the strength, power, prestige, and grandeur of monarchy. The prevailing color is ocher. The color of the chief's guardians' costumes, and thus his habitat.

#### 9- Mask inspired mug



This vase is inspired by the Bamiléké Ngin mask, traditionally displayed during commemorative ceremonies honoring esteemed individuals who have passed away. The artwork features a decorative motif of dots arranged within triangles, alongside depictions of various foods, particularly fruits.

In Bamiléké art, dots represent grains like millet or beans, while triangles symbolize attributes such as strength, wealth, fertility, and femininity. The dominant color of ocher yellow symbolizes victory, specifically the triumph of life over death. In Bamiléké culture, funeral ceremonies are occasions of celebration, marked by communal feasting hosted by the relatives of the honored deceased.

#### 10- Mask inspired mug



This cup is created in the shape of an ox horn, specifically a libation horn, which represents the clan's togetherness behind their leader, traditional beliefs, and fertility. The mug's decoration represents an ordinary scene, with a woman carrying a jug, which may be filled with water. In addition, the design features a geometric diamond pattern.

The prominent hues are red, green, blue, and ochre yellow, each with symbolic meanings: red represents life, green represents renewal and regeneration, blue represents the sky, and ochre yellow represents victory. The diamond motif symbolizes fecundity. The horn and its embellishments depict the social structure inherent in Bamiléké culture, emphasizing their strong regard for tradition.

The investigation into ceramic art design among the Bamiléké of western Cameroon has brought to light several issues contributing to the decline of this sector in the region. These problems include inadequate processing of raw materials, a highly outdated local pottery production technology, and potters' limited mastery of it. Furthermore, there's a challenge in producing food-grade enamels suitable for tableware. Additionally, the lack of variation in decorative motifs over time is tied to the limited training and skill level of the potters. The technology is traditionally passed down within families, leading each artisan to replicate the traditional model to ensure continuity, and the religious

significance attached to pottery restricts innovation in form.

To revitalize this declining sector, we posed a question: How can traditional Bamiléké cultural elements be integrated into contemporary ceramic design, addressing the aforementioned production shortcomings? This led to the creation of ceramic art objects inspired by traditional Bamiléké culture, aiming to stimulate interest among the local population to consume and popularize these culturally contextualized products.

The term "cultural elements" refers to symbols identified and studied by Jean Paul NOTUE in his thesis on Bamiléké arts symbolism. Combining these identified problems reveals a focus on decoration technology and product design issues. It underscores the urgent need to reevaluate and redefine the Bamiléké pottery industry, embracing modern design and production methods to enhance its relevance and originality in the global art market.

The study delved into three key areas: presenting the geographical and historical context of the Bamiléké people, exploring globalization's impact on Bamiléké pottery art, and detailing the conception and creation of ceramic art within this community. Ultimately, we believe that a nation's cultural elements form the foundation of its artistic expression. Thus, works created within local culture possess a unique character, reflecting the cultural ethos and philosophy of the nation.

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**THE END**