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TRADITIONS OF GUATEMALA



**SAN CARLOS DE GUATEMALA UNIVERSITY
CENTER FOR FOLKLORE STUDIES**

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CERÁMICA COLOREADA OF RABINAL

Roberto Díaz Castillo

Photographs by Julio Santos

Neither in the plaza—despite it being market day—nor in the scattered shops of the small town, could I find any trace of the old multicolored ceramics of Rabinal. Hand-painted **guacales**¹—and others crudely engraved—reminded me of the ancient local traditions. The indigenous people of the past, dressed in white, changed their attire in the face of the flood of new ladino² customs imposed by forced military service and street vending.

An elderly woman, owner of a modest corner store, gave me the first clues to find the existing potters. But it was my friend Matías Jerónimo, busy with the presentation of the **Rabinal Achí**, who guided my steps to the Román family's house.



(a)

María Luisa de Paz Román

Dust and scorching sun. Small houses and adobe huts. Suddenly, between the walls of neighboring homes, a short path that leads to the home of María Luisa de Paz Román. From the hammock where he rests, a compadre of hers—a ladino from Salamá—warns me that the potter will be back soon from the market.

The wait allows me to observe some details of the house, built with whitewashed adobe and a clay brick floor. The kitchen and two rooms, located side by side, open into a breezy corridor. Very close to the house—roofed and damp—is the well of fresh water. There, a pulley, a tin bucket, a cord, and a pail facilitate the transportation of water. At the other end, under an improvised structure of sticks and vines offering some shade, a net full of manure. In the rest of the area, abundant weeds, güisquil vines, dry cornfields, and a few trees.

María Luisa de Paz Román is eighty years old. Her husband, José Socorro Román Juárez, is 78. She says that she learned the craft since she was little, that she lives from it and from selling oranges. She has one son and two grandsons.



(b) Rosa Toj (Morales), Gregorio Román and María Luisa de Paz Román

"One of them," she says, "went to hell." "He doesn't like these stories," she comments, pointing to the ceramics. "That's why I'm tough with them," she adds. And she concludes, "You have to teach them."

The elderly potter is accompanied by Rosa Toj, married to her grandson Gregario Román. When introduced, the young wife corrects that her last name is Morales. After fixing her hair and the silver necklace that symbolizes the marriage commitment, Rosa agrees to pose for a photograph.

This *cerámica coloreada*, which comes from the prodigious hands of María Luisa de Paz Román, is made of very light gray clay. She acquires it in a place called the *Fiesta de la Santa Cruz* or *Capilla del Barro*. The technical procedures used are pre-Hispanic survivals: ground clay mixed with water; hand modeling; sun drying; fire made from pine bark and cow manure; painting with indigo and glue. She acknowledges that Gregario, her grandson, helps her with the task of painting the pieces. "He learned this from his grandfather," she finally points out.

Answering a question, the elderly woman clarifies that the *guacales* are painted with *nij* and not with aniline dyes. But she didn't want to—or didn't know how to—explain the origin of that dye.

In one of the rooms, the ceramist stores the production of several days: censers, riders—probably Saint James the Apostle—whistles³, musicians, moors⁴, and shepherds. All these objects are brightly painted in blue, red, green, and yellow. They are traditional forms, repeated over the years.

I am surprised to find among the representative figures of the ancient pottery of Rabinal, a small church whose white walls and reddish roof distinguish it from the others. The potter satisfies my curiosity and confirms that this is not an old model. She adds that she only started making churches like this six months ago.

My interview with María Luisa de Paz Román, whose generation and work almost disappear with her, makes me reflect. I then think about the harmful results of the policy followed by the Indigenous Economic Promotion Service (SFEI, an acronym in Spanish), which tends to create training centers where the artist's concepts are replaced by directed production, crafted in series and, therefore, of an almost industrial nature; where the collective workshop replaces individual work, and mechanization – the wheel and other tools – corrupts traditional techniques until they are extinguished. In the presence of foreign cultural patterns, creative ingenuousness succumbs. The old forms are forgotten, the 'novelty' of questionable taste is encouraged, and man is uprooted from his immediate past.



(e) María Luisa de Paz Román

Seeing these pieces that María Luisa de Paz Román is capable of creating, I realize the urgency of direct and effective action – entrusted by the State to the University – to safeguard the purest traditions of popular art. And to prevent, even to a minimal degree, the excessive exploitation of its creators.

Guatemala, February 1972



- (f) ... under an improvised framework of sticks and vines that provide some shade, a dung mat.
1. *Guacal*: a pumpkin split in half used for drinking water and other liquids. In the guacales made in Rabinal, a pre-Hispanic cacao beverage called "*batido*" is served, typically offered during social and religious ceremonies.
 2. *Ladino*: non-indigenous.
 3. Whistle: Whistle.
 4. Moors: Dancers who participate in the dance called "Moors and Christians," whose origin dates back to the early days of the conquest.



(h) RosaToj (Morales).



(g) RosaToj (Morales), Gregorio Román and María Luisa de Paz Román.



(d) ... a pulley, a tin can, the necessary cord, and a bucket to facilitate the transport of water.