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8

Guatemala, Central America

1977

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PRE-HISPANIC CERAMICS IN GUATEMALA

Traditions of Guatemala reproduces in its section called archive articles on Guatemalan non-wheel ceramics of pre-Hispanic origin that were published in now out-of-print journals, a circumstance that makes consulting them extremely difficult.

These articles by researchers Charles Arrot, Robert S. Smith, and Lily de Jongh Osborne were published several years ago in **Antropología e historia and América indígena**, from where we have taken them.

The importance of the texts we now reproduce lies in the fact that they constitute the first contributions that systematize the study of non-wheel ceramics in Guatemala, which is why **Traditions of Guatemala** makes them available to its readers.

THE DIRECTION

CERAMICS MADE WITHOUT A WHEEL. CHINAUTLA. GUATEMALA*

Robert S. Smith

Santa Cruz Chinautla is located in the central part of the Department of Guatemala, approximately 12 kilometers northwest of the capital city. It is a town of about 2,000 inhabitants, predominantly indigenous who speak the Pokomán dialect (62%).

The National Indigenous Institute of Guatemala, directed by Lic. Antonio Goubaud Carrera, has published a socioeconomic synthesis of this indigenous community, which includes a summary of its industries (1948, pp. 17-19):

"In Chinautla there are three industrial specializations; two of them are dedicated to by men and one by women. The largest industry that men are dedicated to is the manufacture, using very primitive methods, of charcoal. Three quarters of the men are dedicated to this industry and use it all year round, representing the total income of the family. The sale of this product is carried out entirely outside the municipality.

The smaller industry for men is lime production. Four families in the municipality are dedicated to this. It is an exclusive industry for men. They are dedicated to it throughout the year and manufacture it in "Los Jocotales" and "Cañaveral," representing the total annual income of the families dedicated to it. The sale of the product is carried out inside and outside the municipality.

The industry corresponding to women is the manufacture of jars and pots. About 300 women are dedicated to this industry for four or five hours a day, for seven months of the year, representing half of the total family income.

* In *Antropología e Historia*, Volume II, Number 2 (June-December 1949), pp. 58-61.

The special earth or clay is extracted from a single point on land owned by Eligio Vázquez and Margarito Choc, and the place where the clay is extracted is called "Río Salayá." The clay is bought by those interested in quantities called "montones" (piles) that vary from Q5.00 to Q7.00 quetzales depending on the size of the pile that the landowner has prepared, costing more or less one quetzal per quintal of clay. They buy the clay once a year during the dry season, which is enough for them to work with throughout the year. The landowners look for laborers to dig the earth; there have been times when they have to dig up to 15 meters deep, which is very dangerous, so they only extract it in the months of March and April. The men help their wives carry the clay; they don't know how to make jars, only the women know this industry. There are two kinds of clay: one red and one white. To make very white jars, it is necessary to add a little white earth".

Once the female artisan is ready for work, she dissolves the clay with degreasing volcanic ash that she finds in the countryside and kneads it very well to obtain a perfect mixture. Then, on the base of an old jar, they begin to form the base of the new vessel.

This hemispherical section is left to dry until the next day, from which point they complete the body of the vessel by successively adding rolls of mixed clay until reaching the neck. Next, she introduces her left hand into the vessel at the same time to support it, to help with the external shaping done with the right hand using a wooden instrument. To facilitate turning the vessel, it is supported on a smooth board.

The next step is to shape the neck, which is raised from the body of the vessel itself; the handles, shaped separately, are attached to the sides.

Once the jar is ready, they put it in the sun to dry for one or two days, after which it is polished, generally with a green stone in the shape of an axe. Some jars are painted with red designs on a buff background; others with white designs on a red background, which recalls the white-on-red ceramics of the last pre-Columbian period before the conquest. In the ancient ruins of Chinautla, shards from such a period are found in large numbers. A chicken feather is used to apply the paint. Some jars have a scalloped rim, which is made with the fingers.

The process for firing the vessel is extremely interesting and is always carried out between two and three in the afternoon. For this purpose, they build the fire by first piling pieces of firewood (in the rainy season) or cow dung (in the dry season) in a perfect circle. Then they group the vessels upside down. Using an old shard, the potter distributes embers among the vessels to achieve a slow fire that is occasionally fanned with pine kindling. Once the fire burns uniformly, semi-dry grass is added as needed. The fire intensifies rapidly and then slowly goes out. Then the grass is removed so that the vessels cool down. The firing process lasts approximately one hour, counting from the placement of the firewood to the removal of the grass. Cooling takes half an hour. Finally, the carriers arrange the load of vessels to take them to the market.

The pitchers, jars, and pots manufactured in Chinautla are exclusively for domestic use. They are sold in large quantities in various parts of Guatemala, directly or from the capital.

About three kilometers southwest of the present-day town, and located on a high plateau, are the remains of an ancient ruined citadel also known by the name of Chinautla. Here, structures made of cut stone, a ball court, a water basin, and a multitude of shards have been found, most of which are from the late Postclassic period. As it is not believed that the ancient citadel served as a ceramic manufacturing center, it is possible that the site of the modern town or another nearby place served this purpose.

There are still many places in the Western Hemisphere where ceramics are made without a wheel. Five of these, in addition to Chinautla, can serve as good comparative examples for this ancient art. They are: in the United States, San Ildefonso, New Mexico; in Mexico, Coyotepec, Oaxaca; Becal, Campeche, and Ticul, Yucatán; in El Salvador, Guatajiagua.

Of these five distant pottery centers, San Ildefonso uses a procedure that is closest to that of Chinautla. The base is made on a saucer-shaped mold (Puki) and then rolls of clay are added to complete the vessel, just as in Chinautla; the only difference is the use of a saucer as a mold instead of the base of an old jar. Just as in Chinautla, the potters in San Ildefonso are women. María Martínez is the great ceramic artist in San Ildefonso, as was Nampeyo of the Tewa people, in Hano, Arizona. These women, like others, sign their works

and are renowned for their skill, whereas in Guatemala, the work is done anonymously. Another place where individual skill is recognized is in Oaxaca. As famous as María Martínez is Rosa Nieto of Coyotepec, Oaxaca. She is helped in her work by her husband, Juventino, as María is by hers. But while Juventino is a potter, Julián Martínez is only a decorator. Here, then, we have a notable difference between Oaxaca and most other places, where men do not take part in the manufacture of ceramics.

The manufacturing procedures used in Coyotepec (Van de Velde, Paul and Henriette 1939) differ considerably from those employed in Chinautla. Firstly, the vessel is modeled rather than built up in coils. Secondly, it is placed on a round, shallow broken jar base that in turn rests on another broken jar base, but inverted, which provides a small, smooth rotating surface, giving the effect of a wheel. Thirdly, scraping is done with a piece of tin, and smoothing with a wet strap. Fourthly, a real kiln is used, consisting of a cylindrical hole lined with stones and connected to another hole from which the fire is fed through a kind of arched tunnel leading to the hearth. The stone bottom of the kiln is perforated in several places. All the holes are about 8 ft deep and have rustic steps excavated into the sides. Once they have been filled to ground level, everything is covered with shards.

*The system of making ceramics in both Ticul and Becal differs from that used in Chinautla in the way the vessel is rotated. We have already described the Chinautla system, using a smooth board as a base for turning the vessel by hand. In Ticul and Becal, a **kabal** is used, which is a solid wooden cylinder (Brainerd, 1946, 1949). It is about five inches in diameter and of equal height. The potter places it on a smooth hardwood plank, and on it builds their vessel by turning the **kabal** with the soles of their feet, and using their hands as modeling tools.*

The vessel is built up with rolls of clay, just as in Chinautla. Another difference is that here, men are the potters rather than women.

The potters of Guatajiagua in eastern El Salvador employ a very different manufacturing system that has not been found anywhere else so far (Lothrop, 1927, pp. 109-118). The vessel is modeled from a thick, solid cylinder of clay held in the hand. First, the mouth or upper part is made, and after this part dries in the sun, it is placed upside down, and the base is proceeded to be formed.

During the process, the vessel remains fixed, and the potter, usually a young woman, walks at a steady pace around the vessel. Her toes are almost in contact with the clay but never touch it, and her hands, one inside and one outside, work diagonally upwards to shape and thin the vessel.

All this procedure requires great patience and skill, but the resulting vessels are exceptionally strong.

*In this way, we have found ceramics that are manufactured in various parts of the New World without the use of a true wheel, but with something that resembles it, as in the case of the **kabal**, which, according to Brainerd, may have been used by indigenous people since before the conquest (1949, p. 57, see also Mercer, 1897, pp. 63-70).*

*But whether the **kabal** or another similar pivot was used in Yucatán before the Conquest, the fact is that both then and now, a large number of potters work without any kind of wheel. The general question is: Why? Why do these people who see the wheel used in daily life fail to take advantage of it in their own industry? Is it because they don't like it, as the old potter from Becal told Brainerd (1946, p. 192)? Or because they believe they can do it better without it?*

Some years ago, while examining the ruins of Asunción Mita, in Guatemala, with Dr. Kidder and his wife, we located a large Jaguar head as a marker in the ball game field. The excavations to extract it took a long time, and then a great effort by Dr. Kidder and myself to get it out completely. The main road was then under construction, and we had seen a group of workers on the road, about 70 meters from where the ball field was located. To transport the jaguar head to our truck, we thought of obtaining the services of a couple of men and a wheelbarrow. The foreman of the workers kindly sent two of his men to follow me with a wheelbarrow. Once we reached the stone, I explained what we wanted. They spoke in their indigenous language for a minute, after which one helped the other lift the stone onto his back. Having done this, he also put the wheelbarrow on his own back, and both headed at a slow trot to the truck.

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