

THE FOLLOWING MATERIAL IS
COPYRIGHTED

THEREFORE, IT IS SUGGESTED
THAT IT NOT BE REPRODUCED OR
USED FOR PROFIT-MAKING
PURPOSES.

FOR EDUCATIONAL AND
RESEARCH PURPOSES ONLY

UNIVERSITY OF SAN CARLOS OF GUATEMALA
CENTER FOR FOLKLORIC STUDIES

INGUAT
LIBRARY

TRADITIONS OF GUATEMALA

8

Guatemala, Central America

1977

ARCHIVE

CURRENT POTTERY OF GUATEMALA SAN LUIS JILOTEPEQUE (1)*

Charles R. Arrot

Every work of art, every form of expression is a portrait of the artist. To be more precise, it is a portrait of the artist's soul. And not only of their own soul, distinguishable from others, but of the soul to which the ethnic group to which they belong historically, culturally, and peculiarly belongs and from which they cannot escape.

This is as true of a clay pot as it is of a stone cathedral, a pitcher, or an orchestral poem. "The vessels are what the potter is." However, even this broad concept is nothing more than a part of the complete truth for someone who has seen many, many clay pots made and has kept many thousands of them in memory. The vessels are the souls of the potters who made them. Nothing less. Whoever doubts it, let them prove the contrary. First, however, one must see and consider the clay pots that are made today in San Luis Jilotepeque

It is unlikely that someone, born into the heritage and tradition of European thought, would immediately respond to the strange beauty of Jilotepeque pottery. The shapes are truly rare. Let's take, for example, the Jilotepeque pitcher, which is the most important vessel produced there: its shape, reminiscent of that of the largest examples of gourds, is like a slightly flattened globe at the top and bottom. On this sphere goes a wide, elongated

(1) San Luis Jilotepeque, is a municipality in the Department of Jalapa, located in the East of the Republic of Guatemala. (Editor's Note).

neck, somewhat flared at the rim. Well above the shoulders are three handles. This is not a European shape; it will not be found there as a native sprout in either clay or metal. Nor is it a Chinese shape, with which Europeans have become quite familiar for almost three centuries. On the contrary, it is quite different from what one knows, and the new is, of course, inevitably unsettling and even disconcerting. Therefore, after the first look, one may not grant it merit, or, noting its possible value, decide to value it until a greater understanding is acquired by "living with it for a while." (Fortunately, man has learned not to trust his first and hasty opinion too much). Meanwhile, for someone of European descent, it is easier to understand the pottery made in Chinautla, because there, although native, the generally ovoid shape suggests those of the Near East, even those of ancient Greece.

On the other hand, color and texture are universal qualities, common to all peoples, and respond to the human-animal in the same way throughout the world. Consequently, no matter one's heritage, it is equally unlikely that one would fail to respond to both of these qualities present in Jilotepeque pottery. These vessels are covered with slip, that is, covered with a strong red clay paste (2.5 YR when dry) which, when fired, acquires a penetrating yellow-red color, vibrant with life. And the surface of the vessel is invariably smoothed and polished in such a way that at first glance one wonders if it does not have a thin glazed finish (glazed?). But this is not the case: at various stages of its manufacture, the surface of the vessel is carefully smoothed using a flexible piece of leather, after the red slip has been applied and the vessel has dried sufficiently. The final layer is spread over the surface by rubbing it to obtain luster, using a deer's eye, a type of seed similar in appearance to the North American buckeye. It is impossible to estimate the amount of patience and labor invested in the smoothing and polishing process. But in the end, the luster is obtained and maintained, although it is not increased during firing. It is a pleasure to behold, and all the care and effort on the part of the potter are justified.

There is still one more attraction in these vessels, which is irresistible; it consists of the drawings and representations worked into many (not all) of the vessels, in a strong black color that contrasts pleasantly with the bright orange-red slip.

Generally, these drawings consist of geometric bands, quite similar to the drawings that appear in certain native textiles; and representations of flowers, leaves, and birds with occasional urns or washbasins that are Moorish in character. To make these drawings, the coloring is applied by hand, with a small, inflexible chicken feather, and although crudely executed, they

have interest and appeal. The pigment is a black iron oxide obtained at a price of twenty-five cents a pound from a nearby cattle ranch, from which also comes the dark coffee-gray clay (10 YR 3/2), which is obtained for free and with which the body of the vessel is made and which, when fired or cooked, acquires a light coffee color that is not highly valued locally. Observing the nature of the black on red decoration, considered as a whole, it is interesting to note that both are characteristic of the same linguistic group (Pokomán); that the way of decorating of the women of Jilotepeque is in manifest contrast to that of their sisters, a hundred miles away, in Chinautla: while the few in Chinautla who are decorative artists execute their drawings on the vessels in loose lines that are then integrated and truly improve the shape of the vessel, the women of Jilotepeque tend to consider the convex surfaces of a vessel as nothing more than flat spaces suitable for executing their drawings just as a painter does on their canvas. The result is attractive, and the drawings and representations have no relationship to the shape of the vessel; they exist separately and apart.

Such a phenomenon is food for thought. Looking for an explanation, it is suggested that the practice of applying these decorations may not be very old for the potters of Jilotepeque, and that it perhaps arose about a century ago, as an imitation of the decoration they saw on platters, bowls, and other clay vessels that were imported from Mallorca and the Iberian Peninsula. If so, it is a pity, because the natural artistic heritage of these women, like that of all descendants of the Mayans in Guatemala today, tended towards integral drawing, as revealed in the splendid examples extracted in archaeological excavations. There was also a time, of course, several centuries ago, when Spanish artist potters were faithful to the nature of the object they were working on, but that time has passed, and recently it has become traditional in Spain - which is rarely debatable - to "decorate" ceramics in a way that, although good in art, corrupts the piece. Because the classic simplicity of a clay vessel, accentuated as it was by adequate and bold linear drawings, has been substituted by an easily appreciated ornamentation as a deteriorated baroque style. Fortunately, the potters of Jilotepeque have not overdone their black on red drawings. It is true that these drawings are not conceived to highlight the shape of the vessel, as is the subconscious intention of those in Chinautla; but on the other hand, they do not overload it so much as to prevent one from appreciating the shape.

While the pottery technique in Jilotepeque and its sister Chinautla seems the same to someone observing the first operation, which is to develop the shape, in reality, they only have that first stage of manufacture in common.

In both places, the initial step is to raise the vessel on a thick clay disc, stretching it upwards, and then place it on another inverted vessel that has already been made and serves as a model or mold. From here on, all similarity in method ceases, for reasons implicit in the difference in size of the discs made in each of the two locations. The Chinautla disc is a cake eight to ten inches in diameter, while the Jilotepeque disc is twice as large. After placing and removing the disc from the model vessel in Chinautla, a very slight concavity is obtained due to its small diameter, onto which successive coils of clay must be added to shape the form. In Jilotepeque, because of the large disc, there is enough material to reach the shoulders of the model by pulling the clay from the disc upwards under pressure. This results in a wide-mouthed vessel in the shape of an "apaste" with walls that are already quite high and do not need to be raised further. This method of forming the entire lower part of a vessel certainly has definite advantages, the main one of which is the assurance of an exact replica, thus avoiding the careful work of measuring to form the lower part. It is surprising how such a simple technique has remained unique in Jilotepeque.

With the clay disc well attached to the mold, the next step for the Jilotepeque potter is to carefully smooth the exterior with a thick, flexible piece of leather, the first of many smoothings. The form is then lifted and set aside for an hour to acquire a certain firmness, with its lowest part well protected by a piece of cloth to prevent the clay in this area from drying out and becoming less malleable.

At the end of this drying period, the form is lifted from the ground and placed face up on a circle of straw or leaves. The potter kneels or sits on the ground before her work and proceeds to work with the soft clay of the upper part, the part that was covered with a cloth. To form a pitcher, this clay is worked inwards towards the center. To do this, a corn cob is used, which is rolled under the pressure of the fingers and the palm of one hand, while the other holds the clay from below, and then from within. In this way, the shoulders are formed until a circular opening large enough for a hand to enter is left. A very careful operation follows: smoothing and polishing using a piece of leather. After this, the vessel is left to rest again. Then the potter, with a piece of gourd, scrapes the slightly rough parts of the interior of the vessel. This is a tedious operation that usually takes more than half an hour of persistent work. When this is finished, the shoulders of the vessel are sufficiently dry to support the weight of the neck.

The body of the neck, two centimeters thick, twenty centimeters long, and eight centimeters wide, is formed on the workbench and shaped with the

hands, and then transferred and attached to the rim of the vessel's opening. When shaping the neck, fingers, a corn cob, and a piece of leather are used; all are used at once. To achieve exactly the correct height and uniformity in the rim border requires a good eye and considerable patience. The women of Jilotepeque have both qualities and are the most expert potters in all of Guatemala. A third polishing follows, and then the three handles are attached to the shoulders of the vessel at equal distances from each other. This distance is the distance between the tip of the thumb and the index finger when the hand is open.

The orange-red slip can be applied at any time after the pitcher is finished, even after several days. However, it is preferable to apply it before the vessel is completely dry, because wet slip adheres better. The final polishing follows. This is an operation that, as performed by these women, requires the patience of Job. Piece by piece, the entire surface area must be polished, over and over again. For this purpose, a deer's eye is excellent, a tool quite similar to the polished axe heads of the ancestral Mayans, which are used for this purpose in other parts of the country when found. When the potter finishes her work, satisfied with her sense of accuracy, the surface of the vessel already appears covered with a clear and lustrous shine. The painting of the black designs can follow if desired, at any time before firing the vessel. The percentage of objects decorated in this way is not very high and is much lower than one might think when observing the examples that the women carry to the public fountain in the town, coming and going, from morning to night, to carry the water they need for their domestic tasks. The town fountain is circular and stands in a shaded park in front of the church. The scene, animated around the fountain, is truly beautiful. Almost all the women carry decorated pitchers. But this indicates (as one later discovers) only their personal preferences, their taste for the cheerful and decorative. Because scarcely twenty percent of the vessels made in Jilotepeque are decorated. Decoration alters the price of the vessels by only three or five cents, since sales do not support a larger increase.

Due to the excessive time spent leveling and polishing these vessels, the production of Jilotepeque, estimated per potter per day, is not very high. The making of a single pitcher requires about two hours of work, not including the time spent in firing. For a potter who is also a wife, mother, nurse, cook, woodcutter, caretaker of domestic animals, and often also a farmer (and we mention only a few of her occupations), three pitchers, or the equivalent in other small vessels, is a good day's work; four vessels is exceptional. With one day of the week dedicated to firing the production, another spent going to find

enough clay and gathering the necessary dry waste and grass for the fire, and a third, Sunday, dedicated to rest, their weekly production is not equal to that of potters from other ceramic producing centers.

Their weekly monetary income, at the local price of fifteen cents per undecorated pitcher, is also small. On the other hand, it should be estimated that with more than four hundred women engaged in pottery work in Jilotepeque, the production as a producing center and the monetary income to the village are of some significance.

As expected, only a small percentage of this large production is consumed in the village itself. Possibly ninety percent goes out to other towns and villages. Many producers travel through Jutiapa, Jalapa, and Chiquimula; and even go as far as El Salvador. Some of these ceramics are occasionally found in the markets of the capital, but the author has never found any examples beyond Guatemala City. The men of the area, often the potters' own husbands, are the distributors of the product, carrying loads of twelve or sixteen pitchers or their equivalent, packed in a net along with a dozen or more locally made straw hats, a load they carry on their backs supported on their heads by a rawhide strap. These vendors will haggle in every market they pass through, but their prices are proportional to the distance of any given location from Jilotepeque.

They know their markets well, both near and far, and are good businessmen, but above all, one admires their physical strength. Without hesitation, it seems, they load a hundred pounds onto their backs and set off for places three or four days away on foot.

In addition to the decorated and plain pitcher, the most common forms produced in Jilotepeque are cooking pots of various sizes, bowls, jars, and porrones or pichingas, the latter being very attractive and rare. Some potters of the past, of whom it is said that only one survives, had the habit of making a water bottle in the shape of a duck. These duck-shaped "pichingas" are excellent pieces of animal effigy, truly something worthy of a collector, as they have black painted wings, stylized tendrils or earwigs (?), or alternatively a floral arrangement done in the best Seville style, whose appearance is most appealing.

One does not hesitate to affirm that the pottery of Jilotepeque is the best handmade pottery in Guatemala today, even superior to the excellent pottery made in Chinautla. And after "living with it for a while" so that its examples lose some of their strangeness to our eyes, one gets used to seeing them and comes to like them so much that they even find qualities that they could not exclusively possess. (?) For example, that of all the indigenous

ceramics made in the country today, this is the one that best expresses the mysterious soul of the indigenous people. This, of course, may not be true. And besides, they have other qualities, all of positive merit. One should opine that a vessel from Jilotepeque is the soul of its obscure but sensitive creator.