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**RESEARCH
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POTTERY OF CHINAUTLA AND ITS TRANSFORMATION

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Introduction

This work aims to show, despite its limitations, the changes that the pottery of Chinautla has undergone and to explore the causes behind them, especially those external to the community and, fundamentally, those of a socio-economic nature, without overlooking the ecological factor, which profoundly affects the town.

For its execution, the limited bibliography available on the topic was consulted, and field research was conducted.

Undoubtedly, this is a preliminary study that raises some issues requiring deeper investigation, although it does outline, above all, those related to the economic processes of dissolution, among which pottery is included.

1. Chinautla: Its Historical and Ecological Aspects

The town of Chinautla is a pre-Hispanic settlement. Its existence dates back to times before the Spanish conquest, as evidenced by indigenous chronicles and archaeological monuments. The name of the town is derived from the central Pocomam language: *xina*, meaning "hot

water," and *jutla*, meaning "freshwater snail or river snail." It therefore means "jute of hot water."

In the year 1526, when Pedro de Alvarado subdued the fierce people of Mixco by force, the inhabitants of the region across the Río Grande, men of Pocomam origin, stood as allies of the *Mixqueños* (inhabitants of Mixco); they were the people of *Chignautla*. Eventually, they surrendered to the conquerors and later founded the town named Santa Cruz de *Chinautla*, which is the present-day town of *Chinautla*, located 12 kilometers from the capital city.

Its approximate area is 80 square kilometers. Composed by seven villages and nine hamlets. In 1974, the population was 2,376 in the urban area and 30,534 in the rural area, meaning that the rural population accounted for 92.7% and the urban population for 7.2%. Approximately 95% of the population is considered indigenous to the area, while 3% is identified as Ladino.

Agriculture is the main source of income for its inhabitants, especially in relation to daily consumption products. Other sources of income include the sale of river sand, firewood, charcoal, and, of course, pottery, which we will address later. The layout of the town, although of European origin, is pre-Hispanic in character, as the homes of the Indigenous people are predominantly located within plots, while those of the Ladinos are situated along the streets of the town. These constructions are of three types: 1) made of adobe with tile or metal sheet roofing; 2) with walls and doors made of cane and thatched roofs (this is generally the type of indigenous housing); and 3) with adobe walls and/or adobe pillars.

The ecological problems in *Chinautla* are severe. The current town is located in a deep ravine surrounded by high peaks, through which the Las Vacas River flows. This river is also known as *Chinautla* and *Sarjá*, with tributaries *Pencos*, *Arenal*, and *Campanero*, all originating from Mixco. Some years ago, the rivers mentioned above were part of the natural landscape of *Chinautla*; today, those same rivers have become drainage channels for the capital city, and their polluted waters are gradually destroying the town and its inhabitants. Nevertheless, the residents manifesting the deep-rooted connection to the land felt by our ancestors, cling painfully to the soil that saw their birth and holds their dreams, traditions, and hopes, in a struggle beyond human endurance to survive.

Amid such a bleak outlook, the pre-Hispanic pottery of *Chinautla* is rapidly disappearing under the threat of ecological imbalance, rising

unemployment, the invasion of artistic styles different from and foreign to the traditional ones, and the saturation of the market with plastic goods.

In addition to the above, it is important to consider that *Chinautla* is significantly located just a few kilometers from the capital city. As a result, it has not been able to escape, due to its geographic location and its dependence on the city's market, the influence of various national changes and urbanization. All the conditions mentioned earlier have a direct impact on the transformation process that the pottery of *Chinautla* has been undergoing, something we will describe in more detail later on.

2. *Chinautla: Its Historical and Ecological Aspects*

According to Rubén Reina (in his work *The Law of the Saints*), all the Indians born in *Chinautla* consider themselves fundamentally equal because they were born there, as the way of earning a living does not differ between the rich and the poor. In Reina's words, we find a great contradiction: by merely mentioning rich and poor, there is already a significant objective difference in the way of earning a living, and although it may not be overtly expressed or emphasized, both social groups cannot consider themselves equal neither economically nor socially.

Reina notes that they have no need to organize themselves into unions, guilds, or similar associations because they simply don't require it. Of course, given the type of social organization of labor and its division, resulting from a particular process like that of *Chinautla*, they have not needed such structures up to this point.

The division of labor is based on gender: men work as corn grower and charcoal makers, while women are potters. The household industry provides all families with the basic goods they need and use such is the case with pottery. Families maintain a self-sufficient economy, as they supply themselves with agricultural products they cultivate and with essential goods that they also mostly produce on their own.

Rubén Reina mentions in his work that uniformity in production does not allow for social distinctions between the rich and the poor. However, we believe that such socio-economic distinctions do in fact exist today. The clearest way these are expressed is through rank, prestige, power, occupation, and wealth—all of which are determining factors when it comes to holding positions and assuming leadership roles within the community. Civil rights within the population do not differ from those



Pichinga. Traditional figure. *Chinautla*. (Photograph: Mauro Calanchina).

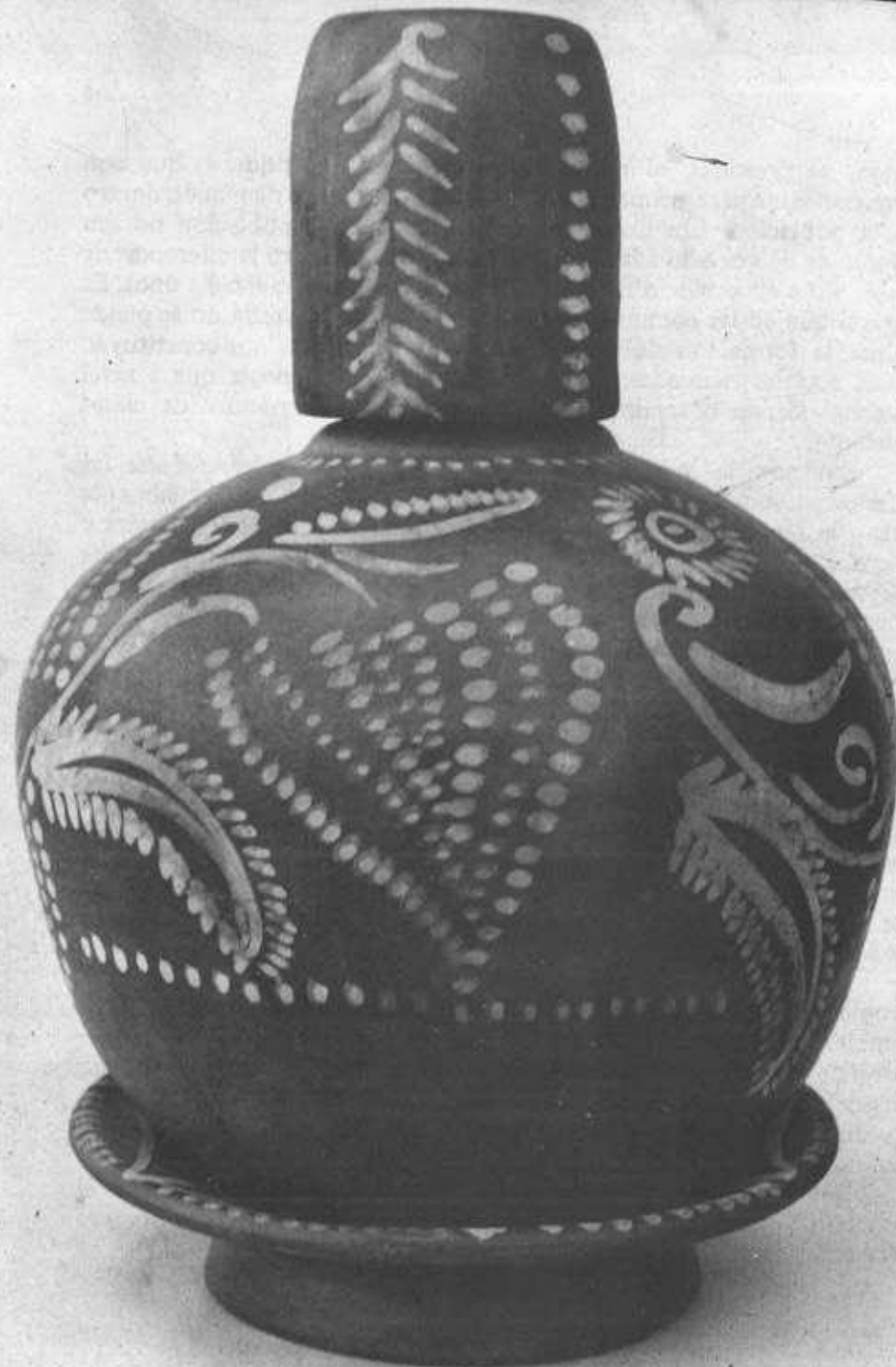
established by the country's general laws; however, differences in status place some individuals in positions of privilege (at least at currently). It is natural that in small communities like *Chinautla*, the formation of large groups of people constituting clearly defined social classes cannot be easily observed; however, it cannot be denied that at the national level they do or will have to participate in the existing class structure.

This gives us reason to believe that socio-economic differences can indeed arise. If we take into account the current trend toward the emergence of small artisanal industries and prominent master artisans, it becomes clear that these groups will inevitably have to differentiate into classes or social strata, in alignment with the national structure, since *Chinautla* is not an isolated or closed community.

Rubén Reina insists that "just as the indigenous man is born to be a corn grower or charcoal maker, the woman is born to be a potter." We believe that this statement falls into an absurd fatalism and determinism. To make such a predestination, one must ignore the social mobility that exists within a community (where there are no castes); it also overlooks the fact that the situation of a population or an individual can change over time and across contexts, and that the opportunities and possibilities for such change do not depend on merely subjective factors. Moreover, it is important to recognize that the prevailing economic system both locally and nationally is dynamic and constantly evolving.

The land is exploited in various ways by small landowners and large estate holders. Small-Scale Agriculture is also a noticeable phenomenon. Many people rent (lease) or borrow small plots of land; for them, owning a small piece of land represents a great achievement. The rent for the land is paid in money, labor, and in-kind contributions, through which large landowners have exploited agricultural workers since colonial times.

Within the indigenous sector of *Chinautla*, the kinship system is not fundamental for inheritance. It makes no difference whether one is a woman or a man to have the right to inherit.



Pitcher. Traditional figure. *Chinautla*. (Photograph: Mauro Calanchina).

2.1 Annual economic activities

During the winter, the most important activities are the planting and cultivation of the corn (June, July, August, September, October, and November.)

In the summer, charcoal production and pottery are the main occupations. This period includes the months of December, January, February, March, April, and May.

Among the specialized production activities typical of December to May are the planting of vegetables and fruits, the manufacture of clay objects, roof tiles, adobe, the trade of ceramics, animal husbandry, and more. The primary activities of men are the cultivation of corn and beans.

3. *Chinautla*: Its pottery

3.1 Description of the Folkloric Phenomenon

Throughout all stages of human development, handmade objects, whether for domestic or religious use, have expressed something of the spirit of the person who creates them, who strives to make them a finished product according to their level of culture.

In *Chinautla*, pieces are crafted by hand with simple red decorations on a white background, or entirely red with white decorations. They are shaped manually, without the use of a potter's wheel.

The potters take the clay by hand and, as they shape the piece, they add piece after piece until they achieve the desired form. They moisten their hands to better manipulate and smooth the piece until it meets their satisfaction. Then, they fire the pieces by digging a shallow hole in the ground, placing the pottery inside, and covering it with sticks, leaves, and dry branches. In other areas where branches and firewood are scarce, they use dry manure to build the fire. A woman or a man keeps watch with a long stick, using it to stoke the flames or to turn a particular pottery piece that has taken on too much heat, maintaining the fire at the desired intensity to ensure the pieces are properly fired. For well-polished objects, before firing, they are soaked and smoothed using a hard object.

3.1.1 Modelling

The clay is obtained by the artisans from nearby mountains and is purchased in "loads." The person who will make the vessels kneads the clay with sand or volcanic ash and, using the base of an old pottery piece as a mold, forms the base of the new one. They insert their left hand into the vessel to support it and assist in smoothing the exterior. With the right hand, they use a wooden tool. To make it easier to turn the vessel, it is supported on a smooth board. The next step is shaping the neck, which is raised from the body of the vessel itself. The handles, modeled separately, are then attached to the sides of the piece. Once the jar is finished, it is left to dry in the sun for one or two days, after which it is usually polished with a green stone shaped like an axe. Some jars are painted with red designs on a white background, others with white designs on a red surface.

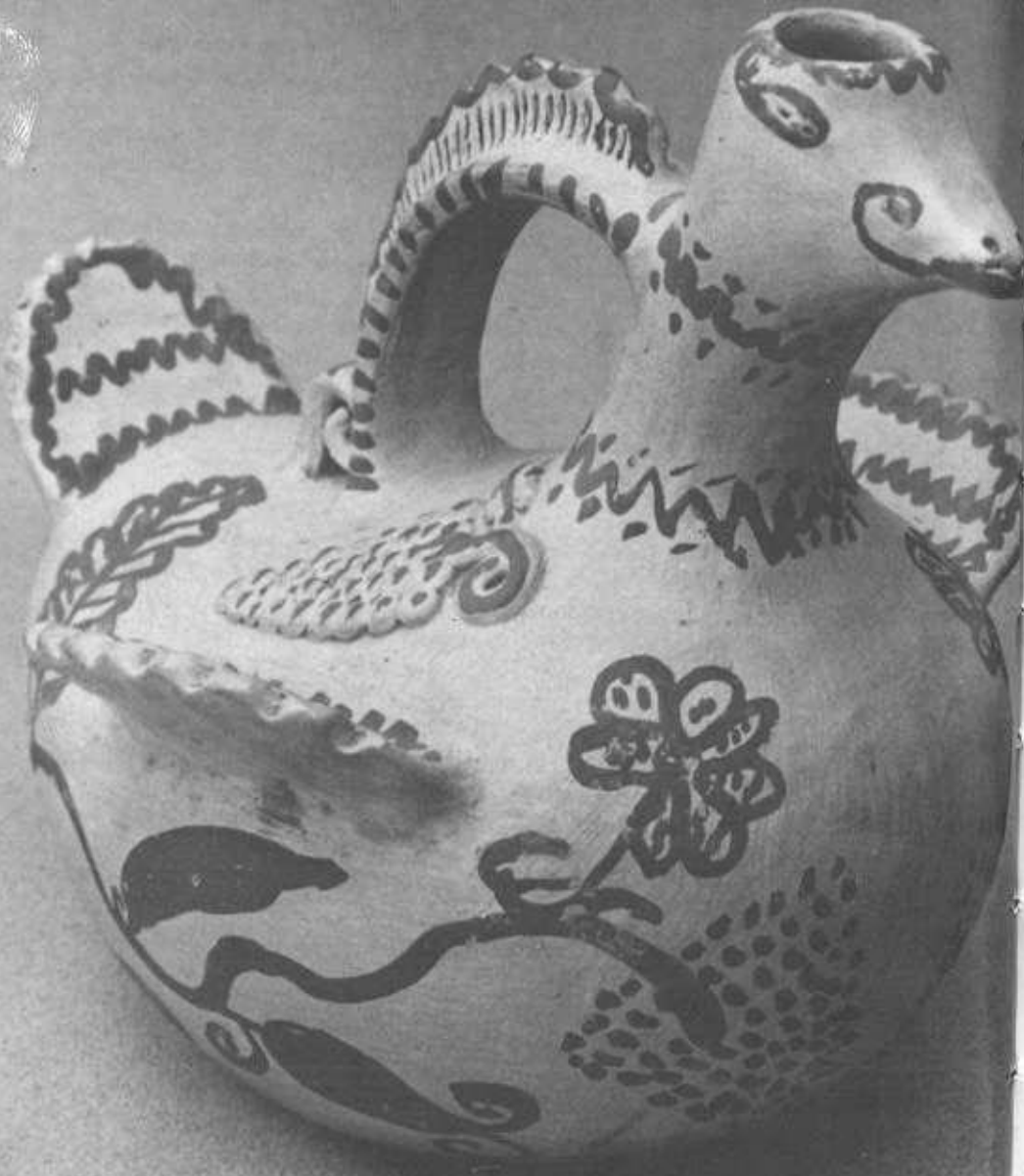
3.1.1 Firing process

This process takes place between two and three in the afternoon and consists of piling pieces of firewood (during the rainy season or cow manure in the dry season) into a perfect circle. The pots are then arranged upside down within the circle. Using an old pottery shard, the potter distributes embers among the pots until a slow-burning fire is established, which is then stoked with Montezuma pine. Once the fire burns evenly, grass is added to maintain the flame.

When a *tinaja* (clay water jar) is purchased, it must first be "cured." The surface of the vessel is soaped several times, then placed in the sun to dry. Afterward, it is rubbed with a banana peel until it becomes waterproof.

The finished pottery pieces are sold by the potters to intermediaries who work with market vendors, primarily those at the central market. They also sell through owners of tourist shops.

They receive orders from various individuals who commission to produce specific pieces by the dozen or certain models



Duck jar. Traditional figure. Chinautla. (Photograph: Mauro Calanchina).



Duck jar. Side view. Traditional figure. *Chinautla*. (Photograph: Mauro Calanchina).

individually. Likewise, some families sell their items within the community. During the rainy season, when it rains too much, they do not carry out the firing process, as it takes place in the patio of the house. Instead, they only model the vessels and wait for good weather to proceed with the firing.

Nowadays, they have started making pieces such as hens with little beaks, and according to a local vendor, this design was inspired by a Japanese hen.

4. Analysis of the social conditions in which the pottery of *Chinautla* develops

Due to the lack of bibliography on this subject, we undertook the task of conducting direct research in the municipality of *Chinautla*, interviewing several potters, including Mrs. María Antonio Chacón and her daughters María Albertina and Marfa Tomasa, aged 12 and 9 respectively, both with the surnames Alastro Chacón.

The aforementioned lady told us that the only source of income for her and her daughters is the making of pots, *tinajas*, flowerpots, nativity scenes, and similar items, which they sell retail. On rare occasions, buyers from the capital come to their home, often guided by her young daughters, interested in other items (such as doves, horses, frogs, etc.) that she does not make.

The prices of large pots, *tinajas*, and flowerpots range between Q0.20 and Q0.30, while the smaller ones range from Q0.10 to Q0.15. Mrs. Chacón told us that she learned the craft of pottery from her mother, who in turn inherited it from her grandmother. Currently, she is teaching the trade to her daughters, so they have a way to earn a living in their homeland and won't have to go serve in the capital.

Our informant tells us that in the town, they are now making "a lot of things that weren't made before," which she does not make herself, but the need is very great these days, and sooner or later, she will have to make "those things" in order to earn a living.

Later, we interviewed the owner of a large pottery store (the biggest in the town). This gentleman refused to give his name, and we were only able to ask him a few questions, which he initially answered evasively. However, his attitude gradually changed, and he later told us that he comes from a family of potters, including his wife and two daughters, one of whom is already married and has her own workshop at the entrance of the town.



Censer. Traditional figure. *Chinautla*. (Photograph: Mauro Calanchina).

Our informant gained some notoriety in 1973 when he attended the national fair with a sample of ceramics from *Chinautla*. The success he achieved on that occasion was due to the high demand for the ceramics produced in his home, a circumstance that led him to consider the need to expand production. As a result, he currently not only produces a series of items in his own home but also buys products from small-scale potters or provides them with the clay and model, later paying them for their labor. The fine pieces are crafted by his wife, but only upon request.

All of the above constitutes an artisanal industry.

Regarding the work systems, based on the gathered data, we can affirm that there is clearly a transformation occurring in *Chinautla*. The shift is from small family or home workshops to larger-scale production, which is shaping an artisanal industry where potters sell their labor by producing pieces that do not follow their traditional cultural patterns. This leads to the loss of the popular artist's identity, uprooting them from their immediate past and gradually driving them toward a process of proletarianization.

5. Commercialization of the product

Regarding the commercialization of the product, we distinguish four forms:

1. The itinerant merchant (generally indigenous), who takes the product to fairs and villages;
2. The intermediary of the large markets (Central Market and Terminal Market in Guatemala City), who distributes it to neighborhood markets;
3. The intermediary for large stores or boutiques (?), who distributes the product to exclusive "IN" stores in zones 9 and 10, as well as the airport in the capital city; and
4. The major intermediary, who exports large quantities of ceramics to markets in Miami, where there is great demand.

Of all these, we consider the most harmful to be, without a doubt, the large stores and the major intermediary; because, in addition to imposing specific models -completely foreign to our culture- (e.g., hippie

feet, clogs, gourds, etc.) they exploit our artisans mercilessly by paying them starvation wages for pieces that are then sold in the large stores or abroad at exorbitant prices, thus reaping huge profits through excessive speculation.

Now then, we consider that all the ongoing processes of change are not isolated. They respond to the prevailing economic structure, to the historically determined mode of production established within our social formation, which is constantly upheld by the economically powerful classes thus reinforcing the impoverished condition of the popular classes, to which the inhabitants of *Chinautla* belong.

6. Process of transformation of the folkloric fact

From the perspective of ergological folklore, in *Chinautla* the traditional and popular folkloric fact is constituted by vessels *tinajas*, candleholders, nativity scenes, pots, etc.

Chinautla pottery includes both authentic traditional elements and non-traditional ones, resulting from the variation and change it is undergoing due to various causes.

We consider that the causes influencing the transformation of the folkloric fact are the following:

- a) Proximity to the capital city, which represents a market that imposes the tastes, quality, and quantity of the pieces;
- b) Growing and marked (though limited) proletarianization, as what the artist sells is not the product of their own creative effort, but rather their labor power, for which they receive a wage. The same exploitation (which even affects the owners, that is, small artisans) influences both the production of the pieces and their low quality; and
- c) Introduction of patterns or models foreign to their internal dynamics and popular tradition; imposition (through commercialization) of forms that have nothing to do with their customs, traditions, uses, or with the functionality criteria established over time.



Angel (candlestick). Non-traditional figure. *Chinautla*.
(Photograph: María Ramírez).



Angel (candlestick). Non-traditional figure. *Chinautla*.
(Photograph: María Ramírez).

7. Effects or results of this transformation

The phenomenon of mass production, driven by the conditions mentioned above, is leading *Chinautla's* pottery— a genuine expression of folk art— toward extinction (to this must be added the ecological aspect).

The quality of the pieces (painted and unpainted) has greatly declined due to variations and mass production: either they produce what is requested and accept the externally imposed price, or they starve. It's important to note that they could produce with the same quality as before, but there's no point, given the prices they are paid.

To this must be added the fact that the Guatemalan bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie, unfamiliar with traditional folk art, surround themselves with ceramic pieces without appreciating them for what they truly are, assigning them a decorative role of an exotic nature. Their utilitarian value is overlooked, and they are turned into mere ornamental or export items.

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Candlestick. Chinautla (1952.)



Tinaja. Chinautla (1972.)



Pichinga, Chinautla (1952.)



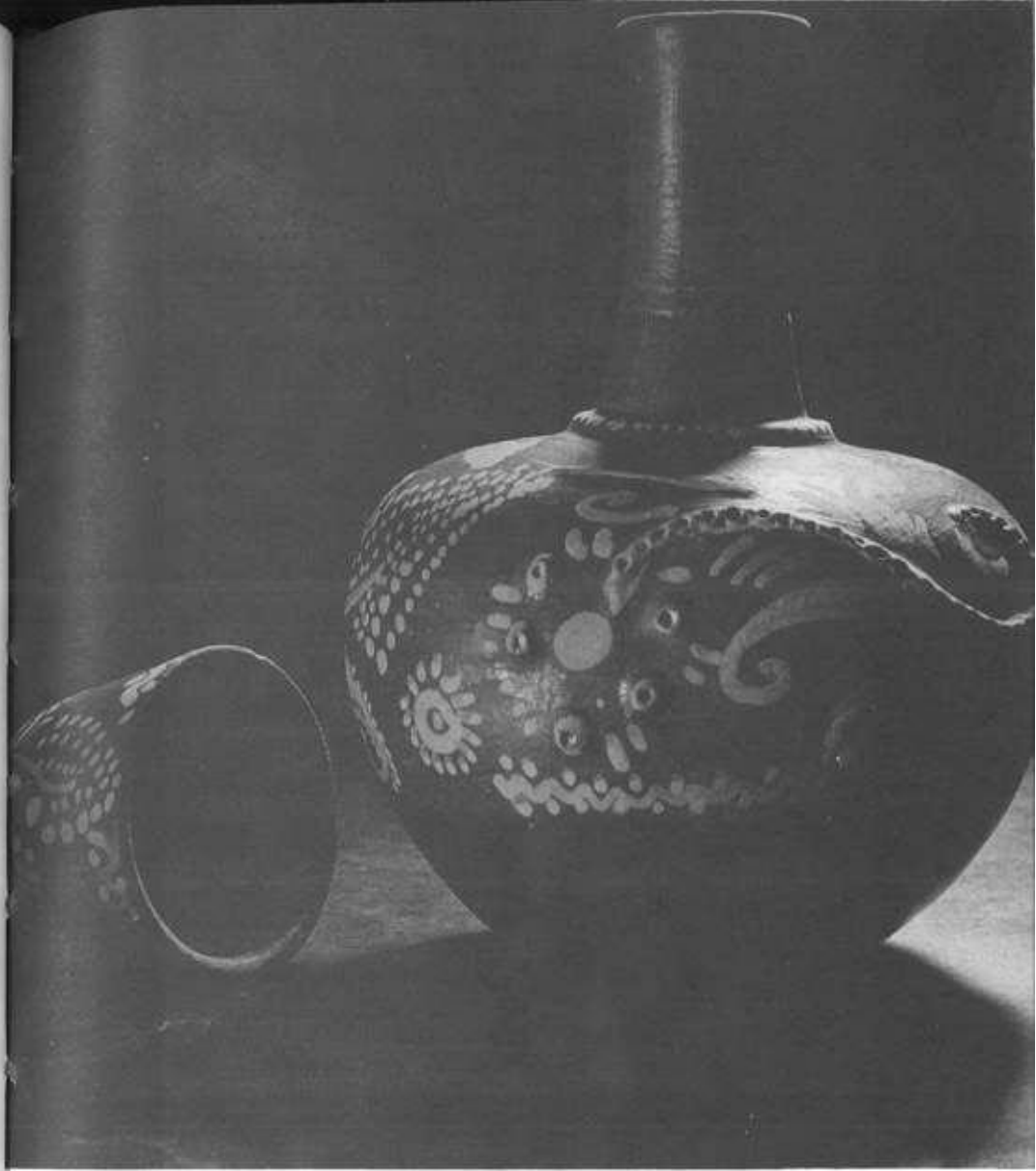
Brazier. Chinautla (1975.)



Duck jar. Chinautla (1952.)



Femala figure. Chinautla. 1952.

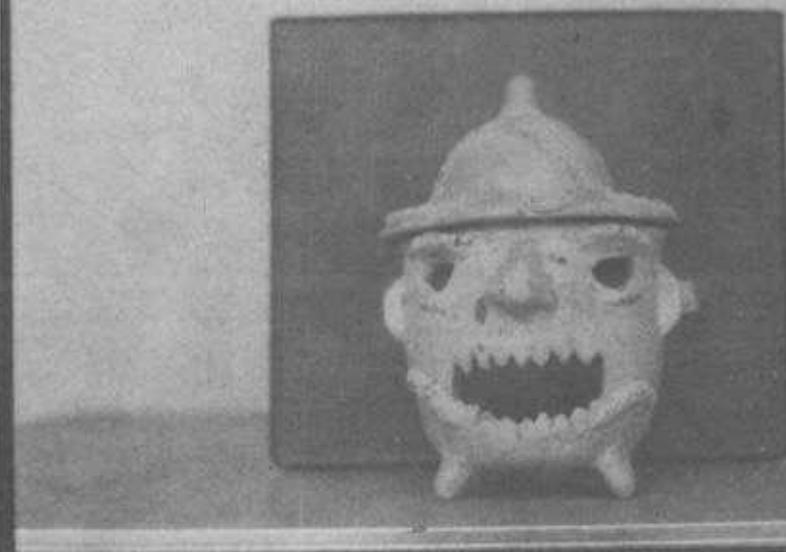


Pitcher. Chinautla (1952.)

Dancer. Chinautla (1972.)



Brazier. Chinautla (1975.)



Brazier. Chinautla (1975.)