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POTTERY IN SAN LUIS JILOTEPEQUE

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Within Guatemalan folklore, talking about the pottery of San Luis Jilotepeque is always a relevant topic. In the struggle for survival, people have sharpened their intelligence and poured their souls into their work. This is certainly true of the pottery of San Luis, for in the tinajas (clay jars), its most important product, the potters have invested all their artistry and skill.

We will present this brief study following the traditional structure: Introduction, Development, Conclusions, and Bibliography.

1. Introduction

San Luis Jilotepeque (Xilotepeque, land of corn) is a poetic and marvelous town. It is located 41 kilometers from the city of Jalapa. Along the way, one passes through the towns of San Pedro Pinula, El Aguacate, and La Montaña. Upon arriving in San Luis Jilotepeque, one forgets the discomforts, the inconveniences, and the bumps of the road, because it feels like reaching paradise. It is a journey worth experiencing!

The day we visited this town; it was raining heavily. It was November 3, 1975. We left the capital at 5 a.m. and arrived at 9 a.m. We

visited the municipal council, the local church, the town itself, its market, and so on.

We were saddened when we were told that, due to the rain and because it was the beginning of the month dedicated to remembering the dead, they were not working with clay.

Nevertheless, we found three pottery-making families from whom we were able to gather some information about the tinajas we intended to study. As soon as we saw the finished *tinajas*, several questions arose: How do they achieve such a perfect spherical shape? Why do they have three handles? How do they get that vivid red color? That is the secret of the potters, who are praised by everyone for their work, dedication, and artistry. They are proud of their artistic creations, and that brings them great joy. Who cares about the low price paid for their work!

To us, the pottery of San Luis Jilotepeque seemed to be the most beautiful handmade pottery known in Guatemala.

2. Development

2.1 Historical Overview of San Luis Jilotepeque

In the eastern part of the Republic of Guatemala, in the department of Jalapa, lies the municipality of San Luis Jilotepeque, one of the oldest known towns. Fuentes y Guzmán, in his *Recordación Florida*, refers to it as "a large and populous town."

"During the colony it was an important town, appearing in the alphabetical index of cities, towns and villages" (as the head of the parish in the district of Chiquimula and whose vicariate it depended on with two churches, eight confraternities and 3,544 parishioners. Juarros, volume I, pages 71 and 75).

It was added to Jalapa when the towns of the State of Guatemala were redistributed for the administration of justice under the jury system adopted from the Livingston Code, decreed on August 27, 1836 (Pineda Mont, Book 10, page 464).

It previously belonged to the jurisdiction of the department of Chiquimula. It was conquered by Captain Pedro Núñez de Mendoza. The first colonial settlers moved the town further east, into the small valley where it now sits, near El Durazno, an archaeological site with Toltec-style pyramids.

The etymological interpretations of the word *Jilotepeque* are as follows:

- = Jilotepeque: Land of corn;
- = Xilotepec: Dwelling of *Xilomén*, the goddess of the harvest among the Otomí;
- = Xilotl: tender corn cob; and the Hispanicized form *Xilote*, meaning the heart of the cob, which has many uses; and
- = Tepetl: hill or place of corn cobs.

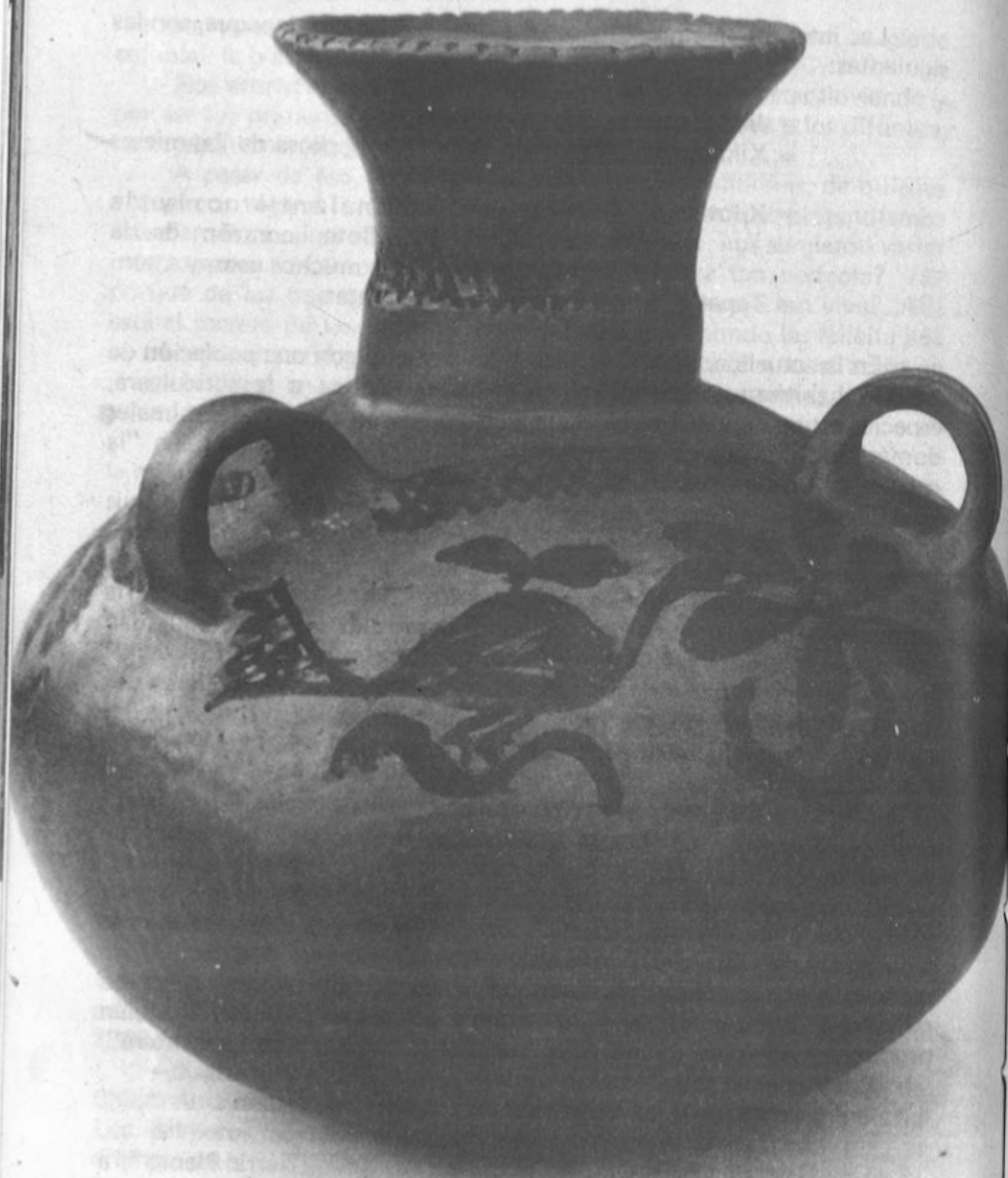
Currently, San Luis Jilotepeque has a population of 12,398 inhabitants; most of them are engaged in agriculture, especially the cultivation of corn and beans, as well as raising domestic animals. They speak the Pocomam language, but also "Castilian" (Spanish).

It has fifteen villages and eight hamlets. In the town of San Luis Jilotepeque, there is a district called Los Olivos, formerly known as El Barrial. It has an airstrip, a parish church, a Calvary shrine, two schools, a beautiful building where basic education is taught, and the municipal council. The community development program offers courses in crafts and tailoring. One of the main sources of income for the population is pottery made by women, who from a young age learn the craft from their mothers—who not only pass on the technique but also the skill and patience needed to make the vessels.

The vessel most commonly produced is the tinaja or water jar. Additionally, they make *pichingas* or *porrones* (pitchers), *jarros-patos* (duck-shaped jugs), and *cotetas* (used like the others to store or carry water but shaped like a lizard—an animal common to the area and locally called *cotete*). This vessel is an innovation in San Luis Jilotepeque pottery). In addition to the aforementioned vessels, they also make pots, cups, *cajetas* (used as plates for eating), and miniature pots. They also produce grinding stones, made from materials sourced from the quarry.

2.2 Technique for Making a Tinaja or Water Jar

Near the town, there is a place called "Tierra Blanca," where women go to collect white or black clay, which is the raw material, freely available, used to make their vessels.



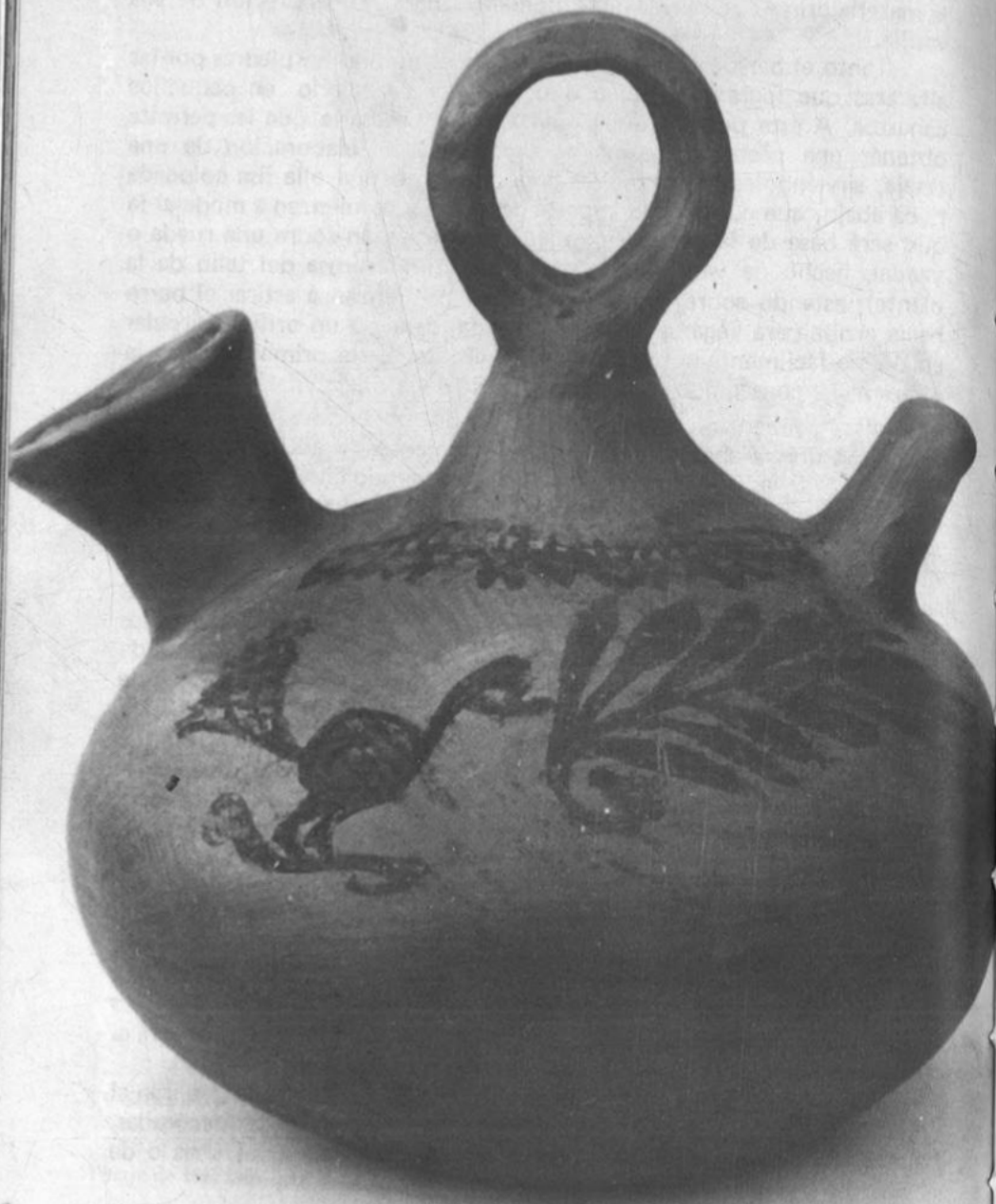
Tinaja of three handles. San Luis Jilotepeque.

Both the white and black clay are ground on stones by the potters until a fine powder is achieved, which is then sifted through small baskets. They add just enough water to the powder to make a moldable paste and begin shaping the *tinaja*, using an inverted smooth pot as a base mold, which they cover with the clay paste to start forming the base of the new jar. They then place it on a wheel or *yagual*, made from banana plant fibers (the fibrous covering of the plant's stalk). While on the *yagual*, they begin stretching the clay upward to reach the desired height, leaving a circular opening wide enough for a hand to fit through. With these initial steps, the potter has molded the body of the *tinaja*, which now resembles a pot. She then begins the first smoothing process using a corn cob, moving it from bottom to top along the vessel's surface. Next comes the second smoothing, using a strip of leather—often from an old shoe. After this is done, the pot is placed in the sun, where it remains as long as the potter deems necessary. She then performs the *buculeada*, which involves smoothing the inner walls by inserting a *tol* (a rounded tool) into the opening of what is still just a pot, to help eliminate roughness. After the *buculeada* is completed, the neck and the handles are added—traditionally three in the *tinajas* of San Luis Jilotepeque. With these elements in place, the potter considers the first stage of her masterpiece complete. When asked why these *tinajas* have three handles, the potters reply that they serve as decoration.

Next comes a drying phase, so they can apply red earth water, which gives the vessels from San Luis Jilotepeque their characteristic reddish color. The women achieve this by spreading the tinted water, made by mixing red earth with water, over the entire surface by hand. They buy the red earth from a place called El Pinal, at Q.0.06 per measure. Once this coat has dried, a third smoothing is done using a seed called *ojo de venado* (deer's eye), which they obtain from the village of El Camarón. This step is done with great care, as the final shine of the *tinajas* depends on it.

Finally, decoration is applied to some of the *tinajas* destined for market, and to all those for local use. The price of the decorated ones, which they call "special," is the same as that of the plain or "standard" ones.

The black pigment used for decoration is made by grinding small black stones found in the *guatales* (uncultivated plots of land), which are then mixed with water. This liquid is applied using bird feathers



Pichinga. San Luis Jilotepeque.

as brushes, to decorate the vessels with geometric designs, flowers, or animals. Once this process is finished, the potter waits until she has gathered 16 to 32 *tinajas* (8 to 16 pairs) to begin firing. This is done in the yard on dry ground where ash is spread, topped with cow manure to seat the pots, which are then completely covered with *jaraguá* grass.

At the end of the firing, it is likely that one or more *tinajas* will come out cracked or broken, reducing the number of items available for sale.

2.3 Product Distribution

In the town of San Luis Jilotepeque, there are individuals, most often women, who buy pottery from the local potters. These individuals are known as buyers, and they are the ones who sell to middlemen responsible for distributing the products to markets. Sometimes, the husbands of the potters handle direct sales themselves, selling in batches of eight pairs of *tinajas*, known as thirds.

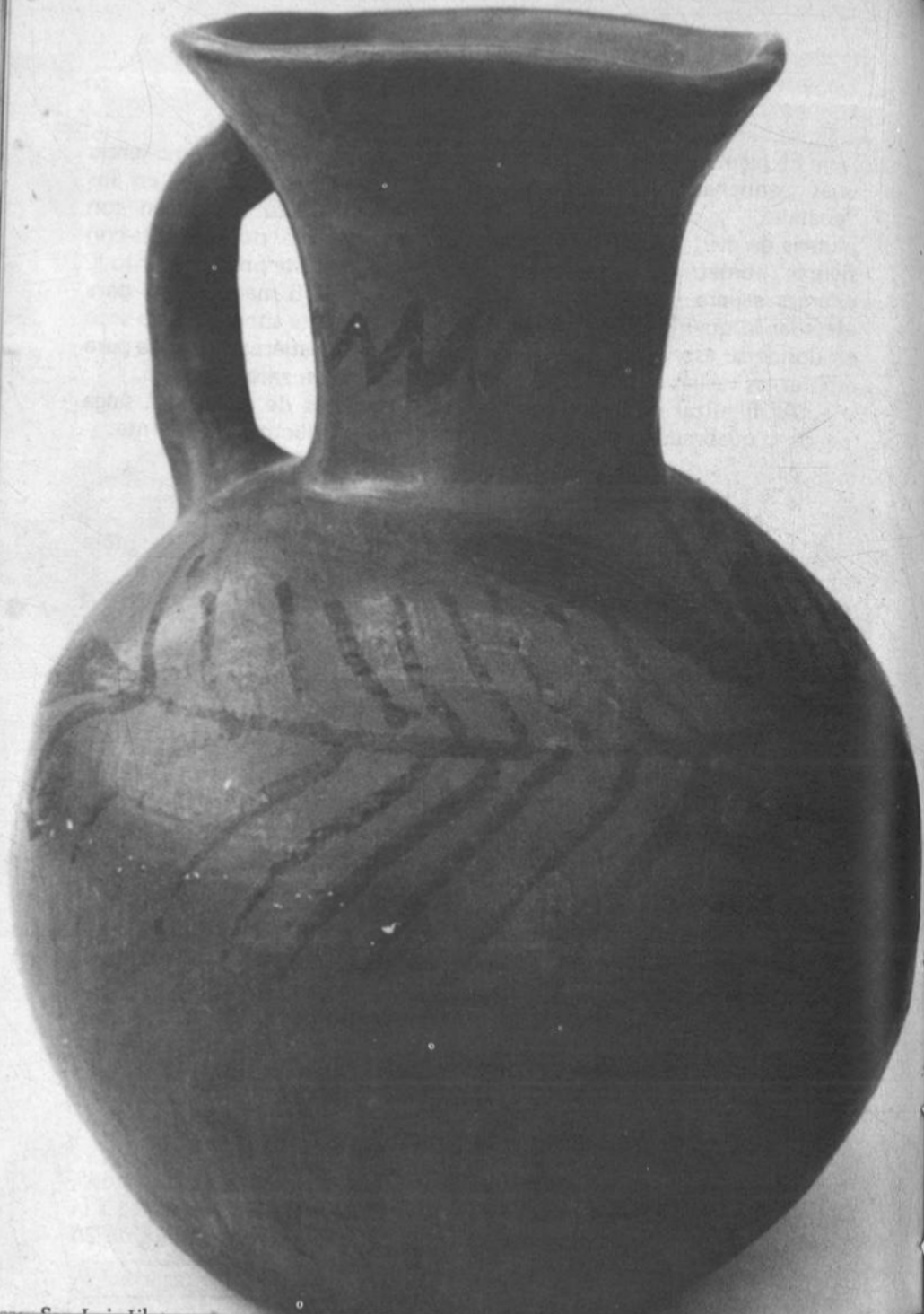
Currently, sales extend to several departments of the country: Jutiapa, Jalapa, Santa Rosa, Chiquimula, and Guatemala. And beyond our borders, to the Republic of El Salvador, where the largest sales occur in Santa Ana and Sonsonate.

A potter produces 3 to 4 vessels per day, spending an average of five hours to make each piece. Pottery work is alternated with other tasks such as carrying firewood, doing laundry, cooking, and other chores.

The price of a *tinaja* varies between the dry and rainy seasons. In winter, demand is low and a pair can be purchased for Q.0.35. In summer, the price rises to Q.0.50 due to increased demand, since the lack of rain forces women to collect water from public spouts using the *tinajas*, and later store it in them.

3. Informants

We visited a family of four members: the husband, Mr. Pedro Celestino López, 35 years old, who works in agriculture; and his wife, Mrs. María Asunción Gómez de López, 25 years old. They have a son named Pedro, seven years old. He and his father are originally from San Luis Jilotepeque, and the mother is from the village of Panpacaya. A sister of the husband lives with them.



Mrs. María Asunción, in addition to her domestic duties, makes *tinajas*. When asked why she didn't make other types of vessels, she replied: "because I only learned to make water jars. It is a trade I learned from my mother in the village where I was born, where women also do that work."

She gathers the raw materials herself and makes three to four *tinajas* per day. She sells her work to a local buyer at 35 cents per pair. The house they live in is quite spacious: made of adobe and wattle-and-daub.

In zone 3, we visited Mrs. Margarita López, sister of Mr. Pedro Celestino, who told us she wasn't working with clay due to bad weather and because her husband had gone to work in the fields, and she had to take him lunch.

She makes *pichingas* or *porrones*, and the so-called vessels *cotetas*, which she has begun modeling as an innovation. She also makes duck-shaped pots. She produces four *pichingas* a day and sells them for 35 cents per pair or Q.1.50 per dozen. This family has one child, currently one year and three months old.

The third visit was to the home of the Esteban family, who make small vessels: *cantaritos*, *jarritos*, *tinajitas*, etc. They produce three dozen of these pieces daily and sell each dozen for 60 cents. A dozen large *tinajas* sells for three quetzals. Some vessels are painted and others are not; it depends on the order. She sells them at the same place where she makes them.

Mr. Máximo Esteban and Mrs. María de Esteban have two children.

Mrs. María says she "rarely" works with clay in the winter. This family appears to be more well-off: their home is made entirely of adobe and tile roof.

4. Conclusions

- 4.1 There is no doubt that the pottery of San Luis Jilotepeque is among the most beautiful in Guatemala. Due to market demands, the product has evolved, for example, standard *tinajas* are not decorated because the market does not pay for their use value (aesthetic), but only for their exchange value.

- 4.2 The potters adjust their production to economic logic—seeking to obtain maximum profit—as the time they would spend decorating 36 or more vessels is instead used to produce additional ones; and
- 4.3 The vessels of San Luis Jilotepeque meet both the aesthetic needs of people in the local community (through decorated pottery) and the economic needs of the families who produce them.

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Duck-shaped pot. San Luis Jilotepeque.