

THE FOLLOWING MATERIAL IS  
**COPYRIGHTED**  
AND IT IS SUGGESTED THAT  
IT MAY NOT BE REPRODUCED  
OR USED FOR PROFIT.  
FOR EDUCATIONAL AND  
RESEARCH PURPOSES ONLY.

70.36  
7675  
#5/1976

**SAN CARLOS DE GUATEMALA UNIVERSITY**  
**CENTRO DE ESTUDIOS FOLKLORICOS**

**GUATEMALAN TRADITIONS**

**5**

Jun. 2005 #D524

**Editorial Universitaria**  
Guatemala, Central America

1976

**RESEARCH  
REPORTS**

## POTTERY IN SANTA APOLONIA, CHIMALTENANGO

*Félix Castillo*

*Enrique Martínez*

*Miguel Alvarez*

*Fustino Collado*

*Photographs: Félix Castillo*

### Introduction

This research work was carried out in two phases:

1. Bibliographic analysis of the few sources related to Santa Apolonia and its ceramics; and
2. Fieldwork. We visited the town of Santa Apolonia, in the department of Chimaltenango, on two occasions and closely observed the ceramic production process in several homes. We had the opportunity to talk with the potters and local residents, which gave us insight into the socialization of the folkloric practice. We are aware of the limitations of this work, but we do believe we have provided a clear idea of the ceramic production process in Santa Apolonia.

## 1. Geographic Location and Sociocultural Aspects of Santa Apolonia

Santa Apolonia was established during the colonial period; it has a territorial extension of 96 square kilometers, distributed among 14 villages and 21 hamlets. Its elevation above sea level is 2,650 meters.

**Population.** According to data from the 1973 population census, the population reaches nearly 4,500 inhabitants.

**Boundaries.** Santa Apolonia borders Joyabaj to the north; San José Poaquil and Comalapa to the east; and San José Poaquil and Tecpán Guatemala to the south and west.

**Communication Means.** It has communication services such as telephone service and daily mail. There are several local and regional roads connecting it to neighboring municipalities and villages within its jurisdiction. At kilometer 90 of the Inter-American Highway, there is an intersection that leads to the town center, which is 2 kilometers away.

**Category.** The municipality is of 4th category and is located 36 kilometers from the departmental capital, Chimaltenango, to which it also belongs, and 92 kilometers from the capital city.

**Commerce and Industry.** Its commercial and industrial system is based on the production of pottery, lime, charcoal, and construction timber.

**Patron Saint.** Its patron image is the Virgin of Saint Apollonia, advocate and patroness of all dentists and dental professionals.

**Main Festival.** It is celebrated annually from February 6th to 10th.

**Religion.** Catholic and Evangelical. The Catholic religion is overseen and organized by Father David Vavasseur, while the Evangelical faith is led by pastors, workers, and evangelical leaders.

**Education and other public services.** The municipality has an important school that provides primary-level education; it employs 7 teachers and has several annexes for agricultural practices, small industries, family and home guidance. This school is part of the pilot program system. There is also a regional office of the Ministry of Education for Spanish language instruction in the town, which is responsible for guiding, supervising, and coordinating activities related to teaching Spanish, literacy, and social promotion carried out by bilingual promoters and teachers in the department of Chimaltenango and part of Sacatepéquez. This office is headed by a Spanish language instruction technical advisor. Throughout the jurisdiction, schools operate in the following villages: Choantonio, Chipatá, Chiquex, Chuacacay, Parajbey, and Panatzán. There is a health clinic that is staffed by an auxiliary nurse, as well as a social services office managed by social workers who carry out their corresponding professional practice every six months. Currently, there is a nursery in the town run by the *Instituto Nacional Forestal* managed by a Peace Corps member and a forestry promoter. The municipality has a new and beautiful municipal building equipped with an auditorium.

**Crops.** The most common crops in the municipality are corn, wheat, beans, fava beans, and potatoes. Recently, several merchants have been focusing particularly on the field of fruit growing.

**Orographic and Hydrographic System.** The municipality features a high hill called **Xesajcab**, a beautiful spot from which several towns in the department of Chimaltenango can be seen. Its most important rivers are: Chuaparal, Choantonio, Crucincey, Chipatá, Chuachún, Cujil, Papixic, and Xesajcab.

**Other important aspects of Santa Apolonia are the following:** the majority of the population is Indigenous and speaks the Cakchiquel language. There is difficulty in communication with Ladinos who come from other places, due to the limited knowledge of Spanish among the local population, as previously mentioned, with only a few exceptions.



The clay is ground with a grinding stone...

Regarding the regular activities carried out by the inhabitants of Santa Apolonia, particularly the Indigenous population, it can be noted that men are exclusively dedicated to agriculture. Women, on the other hand, devote their time to domestic tasks and, in the specific case at hand, are the ones who work with ceramics. Men occasionally handle clay as a pastime and produce some ceramic pieces.

During our visits to Santa Apolonia, we noticed that the type of housing where most of the Indigenous people live are thatched huts with cane walls, as well as adobe houses with tile roofs. Some of the families own domestic animals and poultry. Of course, the ever-present best friend of man, the well-known *chuco* (dog in English), is also part of the scene.

## 2. The ceramics of Santa Apolonia.

Of pre-Hispanic origin, the pottery of Santa Apolonia still preserves the same characteristics noted by Charles Arrot in 1949 (Arrot, 1949), particularly in terms of its production processes.

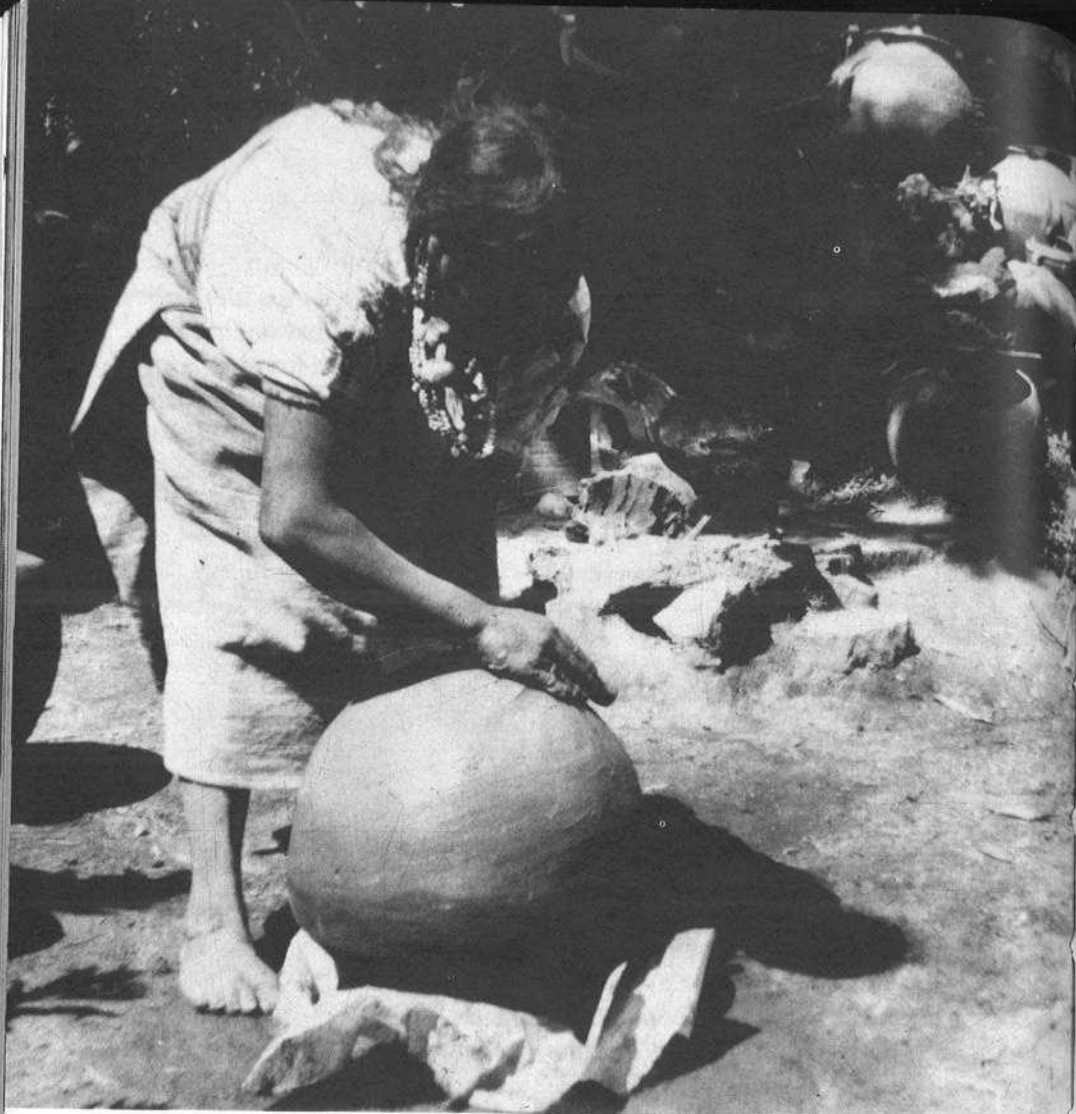
The most notable features of this pottery are that it is handmade (without a potter's wheel) and fired outdoors (without a kiln). The shapes of the pottery clearly reflect its ancient origins.

In Santa Apolonia, as in Chinautla, women are dedicated to pottery work. We were unable to determine the exact number of potters, but according to data obtained from the municipality, there are more than 150. Men are exclusively devoted to agricultural activities (to "agriculture," as Juan Chonay puts it), although this does not mean that they don't occasionally create clay figures "for fun and relaxation."

### 2.1 Materials and Tools Used for Work

- The materials used in this type of pottery are the following:

Black clay (*poc*); red paint, which is extracted from a stone "found in the hills" called *cocó*; white paint for decoration, which is a type of sand mixed with lime, also found in the hills; river sand; a piece of corn cob (*xilote*); a piece of leather or cloth; pine firewood that "burns with an even flame"; dry pine needles



...they apply their artistic skills, passed down from generation to generation, and begin to model.

(*pajón*), and kindling (*xicaít*).

## 2.2 Production Process

After going to the hills to collect the black clay (***poc***) carrying it back on their heads or after purchasing a basket of it for Q.2.00, the potters proceed as follows:

1. The clay is ground using a grinding stone and mixed with river sand, which is the equivalent of *tizate* used in places like Totonicapán;
2. The clay, or *poc*, is moistened until it becomes mud;
3. Once the clay is ready to be shaped, the potters apply their artistic skills, passed down from generation to generation, and begin modeling the pottery pieces. A potter's wheel is not used here; instead, the women themselves act as the wheel, turning their bodies backward, counterclockwise, so that the piece they are working on remains stationary;
4. The technique varies depending on the pieces. When the "pots" are large (such as cooking pots, tamale steamers, etc.), the lower parts are shaped first, and little by little, pieces of clay are added to cover the remaining parts;
5. At the same time, the potter shapes the piece using the *xilote*. The final touch is given with a piece of leather or cloth, which is rubbed over the surface of the piece. The interiors are smoothed using a small piece of tin;
6. Once the pieces are shaped, they are left to dry in the sun for four to five hours, and then placed in the shade to prevent over-drying;





...themselves act as the wheel...

7. Once dry, they are coated with *cocó* or red paint, and in some cases, white paint is also applied at this stage of the process;
8. The next stage is the "*calentada*" (pre-firing), which takes place inside the house, not in the everyday kitchen, but in a separate area. Pine firewood is used for this, while the other women involved in the process begin to prepare the *chicaib*, or outdoor kiln. The purpose of the *calentada* is to remove moisture from the pieces before they are subjected to the heat of the *chicaib*, because if the moisture is not removed, the pieces risk cracking;
9. **The firing.** The *chicaib* or outdoor kiln, where the firing will take place, is prepared as follows: stones are placed, and on top of them, kindling (*xicaib*) are laid, which are then packed with broken pieces from previous firings. Then the pieces, ready for firing, are placed one on top of another. Next, they are covered with **kindlings** and dry pine needles (*pajón*), and the embers (ashes) from the *calentada* are added. Gradually, the fire begins to burn, consuming the pine and twigs in an even flame. The women constantly tend the fire.  
-Once some pieces are fully fired, the ones that have not been properly fired are placed into the areas where there is still fire, using a pine stick for this task. Once the pieces are completely fired, they are removed from the *chicaib* with long pine sticks and, with great skill, placed near the firing site. Then they are cleaned of ashes and are ready to be taken to the market.





Once dry, they are coated with cocó or red paint, and in some cases, white paint.

### 2.3 Work System

As previously mentioned, only women participate in the making of this pottery. All women, from the youngest to the elderly, take part in this task. There is no division of labor or specialization, as all of them are capable of performing any stage of the production process.

It is a family workshop, as only the women of the family participate, and there is no wage labor involved anywhere. The tools and materials used are simple (though not lacking in complexity), and each potter takes pleasure in her work.

### 2.4 Transformation of the Folkloric Tradition

The pottery of Santa Apolonia is among the most authentic in Guatemala. Its traditional forms include tamale steamers, water jugs, *chirmoleras*<sup>1</sup>, pitchers, flowerpots, incense burners, and smaller ovoid-shaped pots. However, in recent times, new models such as braziers and others have been introduced, transforming the traditional patterns.

It is important to note that in the house of *Don* Juan Chonay, flower vases are being made with a clear influence from the glazed pottery vases of Totonicapán. According to the informant, the reason for making them is that "people like to buy highly decorated items."

Despite these transformations, for the most part, the traditional patterns with clear pre-Hispanic roots are still preserved.

### 2.4 Market and Function of the Pottery of Santa Apolonia

When discussing the impact of ceramics in the municipality of Santa Apolonia, in the department of Chimaltenango, we must refer, even briefly, to its use and market, as well as the importance it holds as a source of income for household economies.

<sup>1</sup> *Chirmoleras*: small containers traditionally used for serving *chirmol*, a type of salsa



Next, they are covered with kindlings and dry pine needles (*pajón*)...

The utilitarian nature of the ceramics from Santa Apolonia is expressed through their ornamental, recreational, and domestic functions. The inhabitants of this municipality rely on ceramic objects for daily use, just as they do with other plastic utensils. This latter phenomenon can even be observed in the very households that produce ceramics that is, the use of plastic materials.

In terms of ornamentation, it can be said that many homes in Santa Apolonia display vases and flowerpots. A variety of these folk-art objects can also be seen in the church and parish house. However, this use is not limited to the local context. One only needs to look at the decoration in many homes in Guatemala City or in households located in departmental capitals, such as Chimaltenango, where this type of ceramic is used not only as decoration but also in everyday domestic life.

It should be noted that the ceramics of Santa Apolonia also offer a wide variety of toys, which are made by the Indigenous children themselves as they begin learning this craft. Among these, we find little dogs, doves, and more.

The potters of Santa Apolonia sell their products to visitors to the town, to tourists, researchers, and collectors, as well as to intermediaries who transport these items to major population centers and sometimes even to other countries. They also distribute their products in the municipality of Tecpán and, as previously mentioned, in the departmental capital of Chimaltenango.

As in other pottery centers in the country, the ceramic objects in Santa Apolonia are priced extremely low. This is because the population, that is, both producers and consumers, often have little to no understanding of the value of these products. This is a problem that must be addressed if we want to preserve the people's art. However, this issue, naturally, is or should be the subject of a separate chapter. The larger pieces, such as tamale steamers, barely exceed the value of one quetzal, and the same can be said

said for jars, large jars, pots, clay jug, candlesticks, griddles, braziers, etc.

### 3. Transformation of the Folkloric Tradition

Once again, the importance of handmade ceramics in Santa Apolonia and its continuity across generations can be confirmed. This is where it is worth emphasizing the way in which many families express themselves through their art, yet are mercilessly exploited through the purchase of their artistic production. As we were able to observe, and as previously described, this process involves a series of laborious and demanding stages.

It is evident that the work carried out by these potters has characteristics that set it apart from similar practices, namely: 1) it is a type of pottery made without a wheel, shaped entirely by hand with the aid of rudimentary tools which, though not ideal, are handled with great skill such as (a corncob), a curved piece of wood, and a similar piece made of tin or metal sheeting; 2) for modeling, the upper part is first made on the flattest surface of the ground, and once that part is dry, the lower part is constructed. While shaping the piece being worked on, it remains stationary, and it is the person who moves around it; 3) it is an art produced by women, while the men dedicate themselves to agriculture, and it serves a role not only within the Santa Apolonia community but also in neighboring communities; and 4) the firing is done outdoors, and it is not considered a problem for outsiders to observe the production process. In fact, it can be said that the potters feel pleased when someone from outside takes an interest in how they carry out their work. The most common pieces include pots, braziers, tamale steamers, large jars, *batidores*<sup>2</sup>, hotplates, vases, piggy banks, and *chirmoleras*.

This work holds deep significance for the potters both socially and economically. Socially, because over the years the potters have formed families that continue to cultivate this art, of which they are proud; and economically, despite the poor compensation they receive, their ceramics provide important support for the family's livelihood,

<sup>2</sup> *Batidores*: a type of small pots.



...gradually, the fire begins to burn...



The women constantly tend the fire.

however, as mentioned earlier, the payment they get for their products does not reflect the true value of their work. This can be confirmed by speaking with the potters themselves, who shared the prices with us: a small incense burner costs fifteen *centavos*<sup>3</sup>; small piggy banks, five *centavos*; vases, fifty *centavos*, and so on. That is why we believe there is a clear need for appropriate legislation that would allow for the dignification of the Guatemalan artisan, this would give ceramics greater visibility and demand, similar to that of Chinautla, Jalapa, etc. and so that their traditional figures are not transformed.

#### 4. Informants

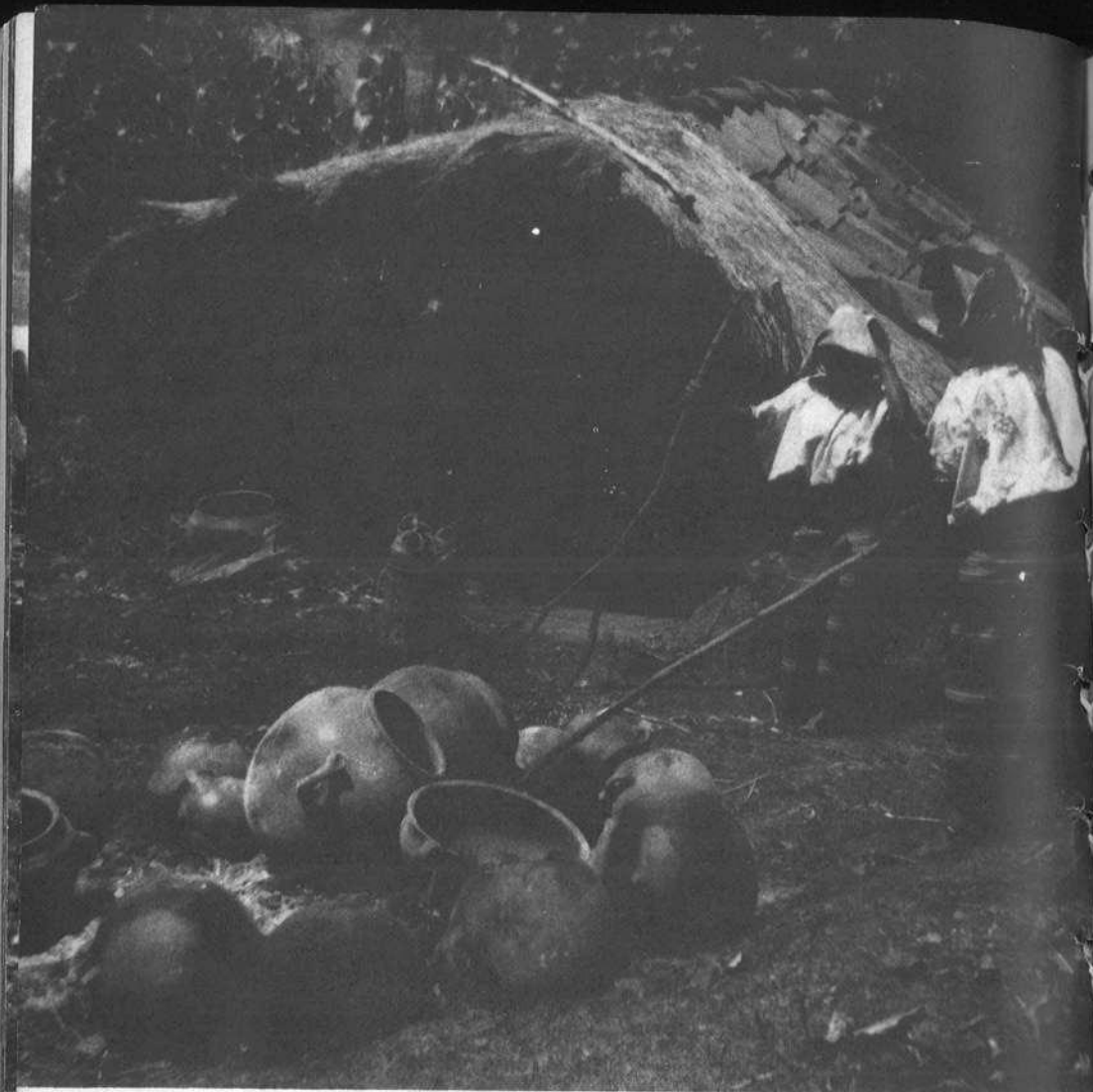
##### 1. House of Francisco Tamatz:

- 1.1 Name: Juana Buc. Age: 60 years. Origin and residence: Santa Apolonia, Chimaltenango. Occupation: Potter.
- 1.2 Name: María Nicolasa de Tamatz. Age: 38 years. Origin and residence: Santa Apolonia, Chimaltenango. Occupation: Potter.
- 1.3 Name: Estela Tamatz. Age: 15 years. Origin and residence: Santa Apolonia, Chimaltenango. Occupation: Potter.
- 1.4 Name: Juliana Tamatz. Age: 18 years. **Same as above.**

- 2. Name: Narciso Chonay. Age: 46 years. Origin and residence: Santa Apolonia, Chimaltenango. Occupation: Agriculture.
- 3. Name: Basilia Buc. Age: Approximately 45 years. Origin and residence: Santa Apolonia, Chimaltenango. Occupation: Pottery.
- 4. Name: Catarina Chonay. Age: 35 years. Origin and residence: Santa Apolonia, Chimaltenango. Occupation: Agriculture.
- 5. Name: Rosario Tepax. Age: 27 years. Origin and residence: Santa Apolonia, Chimaltenango. Occupation: Pottery.
- 6. Name: Isabel Tepax. Age: 30 years. Origin and residence: Santa Apolonia, Chimaltenango. Occupation: Pottery.
- 7. Name: Marcela Saquil. Age: Approximately 25 years. Origin and residence: Santa Apolonia, Chimaltenango. Occupation:

<sup>3</sup> *Centavos*: cents.





...the ones that have not been properly fired are placed into the areas where there is still fire, using a pine stick for this task....

Pottery.

8. Name: Juan Chonay. Age: 58 years. Origin and residence: Santa Apolonia, Chimaltenango. Occupation: Agriculture.  
He works in pottery only when he is very tired and feels like doing it.

## 5. Bibliography

DEL VALLE, Jorge. Guía Sociogeográfica de Guatemala. Guatemala, Tipografía Nacional, 1956. 371 pp.

SAMAYOA CHINCHILLA, Carlos. Aproximación al arte maya. Guatemala, Centro Editorial "José de Pineda Ibarra", 1964. 281 pp.



... and are ready to be taken to the market.