

# HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE OF MIXQUEÑA POTTERY

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photography: Manuel Guerra C.

## 0. Introduction

This article is an effort to recover information about the pottery of the Pocomames, from the town of Mixco (Guatemala), and their descendants, which was gathered during research conducted in the first half of 1989. The data comes from the last potters originally from that town, and although some of them no longer live there, they continue to feel Mixqueño or identify deeply with Mixco. <sup>(1)</sup>

The aim is therefore to gather various pieces of information: the names of the potters of Mixco, many of whom were born at the end of the last century and lived well into the 20th century; their pottery trades or specialties (comales, pots, whistles, incense burners, various toys, and others); the neighborhood or district where they lived; the origin of the clay used; some of the techniques employed; the figures they produced, where the finished product was distributed, the people who bought it, and finally, the reasons for the decline and resurgence of such an important artistic and economic endeavor.

To achieve the objectives of this research, I initially based myself on the data provided by chroniclers and travelers who wrote in the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries. To obtain information about the pottery of the present century, I turned to the writings of some ethnographers, but mainly, I took the data from the oral tradition of the few potters who work with the Mixqueña pottery technique.

I hope that this will contribute to the historical and cultural knowledge of an important craft and craft object in Guatemala, as well as clarify some doubts about the process of change in a traditional popular culture phenomenon inherent to the central Pocomam ethnic group.

## 1. Mixco pottery during the 17th and 18th centuries: the heyday

Probably one of the first references we have about Mixco pottery is that of the Irish friar Tomás Gage, who lived in Guatemala between 1625 and 1627, spending much of that time in Mixco. According to Father Gage, the town was renowned for its pottery, supplying jugs, jars, pots, plates, and platters to numerous homes in the city of Santiago. Gage notes that the Pocomame indigenous people of Mixco were “very talented, as they know how to paint and glaze pottery in red, white, and various other colors, which they send to Guatemala and neighboring towns to sell.” <sup>(2)</sup>

(1) Ctr. Claudia Dary. “Artes y artesanías tradicionales de Mixco” En: *La tradición popular* No. 63 (Guatemala: Centro de Estudios Folklóricos, 1987) 12 pp.

Francisco Antonio de Fuentes y Guzmán also left written testimony of the important activity that pottery was in Mixco, writing in his work *Recordación Florida*, which dates from the last decade of the 17th century, that pottery was a manual task widely practiced among young, adult, and elderly women in Mixco, to such an extent that, every day, the markets of the city of Santiago de Guatemala could be supplied with a wide variety of clay pieces. (3)

According to Fuentes y Guzmán, Mixco pottery was so important in terms of production volume that the chronicler reported that he asked the indigenous Marcos Tahuit about the meaning of the word Mixco, who replied that the term came from *mixco cucul*, which meant “town of painted pottery.” (4)

Almost a century after Fuentes y Guzmán's notes between 1768 and 1770, Archbishop Pedro Cortés y Larraz, who arrived at the parish of Mixco on a pastoral visit, indicated that in addition to the eight cattle and wheat ranches, the two iron mills, and the corn and bean crops, the town stood out for its “*locería*” (pottery). The archbishop indicated that pottery was strictly a female task and that the men were responsible for distributing it to other towns. Cortés y Larraz adds another important detail, which is that each family was dedicated to making a certain type of clay object. In addition, each female member of the family monopolized a particular figure, and this specialization was due to the fact that the artisans did not want to compete with each other so as not to interfere with their earnings:

“... in each one (hut), different work is done and no one can understand what the other is doing, so that one daughter works on plates, another on bowls, another on jars, etc. When I asked why this was, I was told that it was so that they would not interfere with each other's sales. (5)

It is very important to note that this specialization or exclusivity in certain types of objects continued until the present century. We will see later that in each neighborhood or canton of Mixco, the production of some objects predominated over

- (2) Tomás Gage. *Nueva Relación que contiene los viajes de Tomás Gage en la Nueva España*. (Guatemala Tipografía Nacional, 1946), p. 191.
- (3) Francisco Antonio de Fuentes y Guzmán. *Recordación Florida* Tomo II. (Guatemala: Tipografía Nacional, 1932), p. 287.
- (4) Existen otros significados para la palabra Mixco:
  - (a) Del nahuatl *Mixconco*, lugar cubierto de nubes. La geonimia concuerda con las condiciones atmosféricas del pintoresco pueblo, cubierto frecuentemente de nubes, que se levantan en la serranía del Manzanillo.
- (5) Origen de leones, de león, y la final locativa *co* (según Peñafiel). Según Arriola la primera etimología es la más aceptable. c.l.r. Jorge Luis Arriola. *El libro de Geonimias de Guatemala. Diccionario Etimológico*. (Guatemala: Editorial\* José de Pineda (1973). p.345.
- (c) Pedro Cortés y Larraz. *Descripción Geográfico. Moral de la Diócesis de Goathemala*. Tomo II. (Guatemala Tipografía Nacional, 1058), pp.202-204.

others. Likewise, some families dedicated themselves to creating only a certain ceramic product, for example, comales.

## 2. Pottery in Mixco in the 19th and 20th centuries: the decline

Even at the beginning of the 19th century, pottery from Mixco continued to be abundant and of economic interest. Around 1800, Domingo Juarros wrote in his *Compendio de la historia del Reino de Guatemala* **Compendio de la historia del Reino de Guatemala** that the town of Mixco was renowned for the pottery made by its indigenous people.

“Its neighborhood (Mixco) is made up of Indians and Mulattos, the former trading corn, which they harvest in the surrounding area, and in jugs and other pottery they make, while the latter are mule drivers and farm workers.”<sup>(6)</sup>

In general, it can be said that almost all the pottery centers near Nueva Guatemala de la Asunción (Antigua Guatemala, Chinautla, and Mixco) were affected by the introduction of English and Chinese ceramics, both kaolin-based, which were widely imported during the 19th century.

On the other hand, certain Mixco ceramics, such as the comal, were replaced by those from San Juan Sacatepéquez and San Raimundo (Guatemala). According to Charles R. Arrot, this replacement can be explained by the fact that the clay from these communities was of better quality, which produced more resistant and durable objects than those from Mixco. <sup>(7)</sup> On the other hand, I believe that the decline of Mixco pottery from the 1950s onwards was due to the privatization of the land in the town of Mixco—as a result of its merger with the capital—where the potters obtained their clay. This left a huge gap in the supply of the basic material for pottery manufacturing, to such an extent that it disappeared.

Likewise, when the old master potters died, their descendants forgot the ancient techniques and changed occupations.

I explained elsewhere that Mixco's proximity to the capital city is undoubtedly the most important reason for the sharp decline in Mixco pottery, as tin and plastic pots and containers, as well as celluloid toys, flooded the shops and markets of Mixco. <sup>(8)</sup> As a result, the clay pieces from this town have been reduced to little more than a memory. On the other hand, the proximity to the capital demanded labor,

(6) Domingo Juarros, *Compendio de la Historia del Reino de la ciudad de Guatemala* (1500-1800). (Guatemala: Editorial Piedra Santa, 1981), p. 49

(7) Charles R. Arrot. “Cerámica actual de Guatemala (Mixco Nuevo)” En: *Tradiciones de Guatemala* (8): 1977, p. 365

(8) Dary, Claudia, op. cit. p. 4

which is why many potters abandoned their artistic craft, which had become unprofitable, and became nannies, cooks, and maids in the “big houses” of Guatemala City.

### **3. The potters of Mixco**

According to information obtained through oral tradition, until the 1940s, more than 20 people could still be found in Mixco making clay objects.

The Toc family lived in the Cenicero district and was entirely dedicated to making clay toys. In the same neighborhood lived a woman known only as “Mariana,” who also specialized in making anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figures and kitchen utensils for children. Liandra Coy, from the Chipatal neighborhood (also known as Chipatalito), was another professional clay toy maker: she made chompipes (turkeys), small horses, tinajas, small jugs, dolls, and chickens.

In the canton of Progreso, the entire Acú Gómez family worked with clay. They were maternal relatives of the only Mixqueña pottery teacher living in Guatemala City, Eusebia Pixtún Acú (1938). Eusebia said that her grandmother, Juana Gómez (+), was a true specialist in making everyday and ceremonial incense burners and traditional toys. Her mother, Victoria Acú (1902-1985), and all her aunts and uncles learned the pottery trade from her. Aunt Candelaria (+), who has since passed away, made toys, as did Sofía Acú Gómez, who no longer works due to her advanced age. Although pottery made using pre-Hispanic techniques has historically and culturally been a female craft, in Mixco we see that some men learn the trade and practice it, but only during their childhood. Miguel Angel Acú Gómez (+) made Three Kings for traditional Guatemalan nativity scenes. Carmelo Acú Gómez (1910) also worked with ceramics during his childhood. Carmelo made toys, Three Wise Men, whistles, and incense burners, which featured two little angels on the handles, a personal touch of his. Carmelo worked with clay for only five years, then turned to other trades that were more profitable for him, such as plumbing, tinsmithing, blacksmithing, carpentry, and others. Rosalía Guzmán C. de Acú, Carmelo's wife, was renowned among the people of Mixco for making beautiful Three Wise Men figurines. Although Rosalía is not indigenous and does not belong to a family of potters, she mastered the craft to perfection. She no longer works with clay due to her advanced age.

Except for the cases mentioned above, we do not know the dates of birth and death of most of the artisans listed above. I suppose that some of them, such as Juana Gómez, were born at the end of the last century. Others were born at the beginning of this century, such as Eusebia's mother and uncles.

The women who made the comales for cooking tortillas were María Luisa Zamora, Florencia de Pernilla—known as “Señora Lencha” from the El Calvario

district or Las Cruces neighborhood, now Zone 1 of Mixco—Felisa Pernilla, Tomasa de Velásquez, and “Señora Rosario” from the Cerrito district.

In the Panzalic district, the comales were made by the Toc family, specifically by the wife of Don Pedro Toc and Buenaventura Beato. María Yantuche also made comales. She is still alive and occasionally makes one or two comales for her own use.

Now, the larger pots used for traditional Mixco atoles came from Sacoj, a village in Mixco, but whose inhabitants belong to the Kaqchikel ethnic group.

#### **4. Origin of the clay and procedures**

Mixco ceramics were made with red clay and coated with white clay slip, then decorated with colored aniline.

The red clay was obtained from land within the jurisdiction of the town of Mixco. In many cases, potters had clay deposits located on land they owned and very close to their homes.

The clay used to apply the slip or final coating to the pieces was white and came from the Guacamayas ravine (zone 19).

The potters went in small groups to fetch the white clay from the Buenos Aires estate, owned by Vicente Sandoval. They had to pay ten pesos for the right to enter or a license. A man named Sebán was the estate manager and he was the one who allowed the artisans access to the land.

Juana Gómez, Eusebia Pixtún's grandmother, said that the white clay has its own spirit and that in order to find it of excellent quality, one must take milk, white tortillas, cheese, and hard-boiled eggs to the place where it is extracted. In other words, the color of the food eaten as a snack must be similar to the color of the clay; dark foods should not be eaten so as not to offend it. All of these foods were consumed by the pottery families at the same place on the farm where they extracted the clay.

Today, the farm no longer exists, and housing developments have been built in its place. This is another factor that has contributed to the disappearance of Mixco pottery, as the potters no longer have a source of clay relatively close to the town of Mixco and are forced to seek other livelihoods.

However, Eusebia Pixtún does not want Mixco pottery to die out. That is why she uses red clay from Nueva Chinautla to make her art objects.

In order to mold the clay, a series of steps had to be carried out. Initially, the portion of clay to be used was divided into two parts. One of them was placed on an **apaxte**, which was then inserted into a hole in the ground. Water was added to the clay and left to “rot” or “soak” for a period of two days. The other portion of the clay

was ground on a stone and then strained through a sieve, after which it was ready to be mixed with the rotted clay. This mixture was then kneaded into a uniform paste, and the potters proceeded to model different pieces. As we can see, no sand, ash, or any other material that could serve as a degreaser was added to the clay.

To create details on the pieces, such as eyes, ears, mouths, or decorations on the huipiles (blouses) of the shepherdesses, wooden sticks were used in a technique called “incisa.” It was also customary to add portions of clay to the figures to form headdresses (tocoyales) on the dolls' heads, hats for the shepherds, and pieces of clay simulating firewood on the back of a mule. This technique is known as “pastillaje.”

To smooth the mouths of candlesticks, jugs, and pots, very smooth leaves were used, particularly the pottery makers, who preferred the tender leaves of coffee or pomegranate trees. This is no longer done today because the leaves are no longer available.

The pieces were then left to dry in the sun, the smaller ones in the shade and the larger ones in the sun. They were then fired in large open-air kilns.

While the pieces were still hot, white slip was applied. This technique differs from that used by the potters of Chinautla, who apply the slip before firing the figures.

Finally, the pieces were decorated with aniline dyes in a wide variety of colors. In the past, egg white and glue were added to the aniline dye to make it stick to the pieces and prevent the color from fading so quickly over time.

## **5. Mixco potters at the Santa Catarina Pinula and Ciudad Vieja fairs**

The different families of potters took their pottery to Santa Catarina Pinula and Villa de Guadalupe (Guatemala) on the eve of Santa Catarina Day, November 25. They did not sell their pieces there, but traded them for locally grown fruits such as lemons, oranges, tangerines, limes, and jocotes, among others. The people of the town and the village would lean out of their doors and balconies carrying baskets of fruit and ask the Mixqueños, “María, what are you carrying?” “Small clay toys,” they would reply. “Let's see, I'll give you five oranges for that,” would say the buyers. According to Carmelo Acú, the Mixqueños received five to six pieces of fruit for each piece of pottery. And just as the potters had walked to Pinula with their **cacaxtes** loaded with pottery, they returned to Mixco carrying baskets of fruit.

A week later, on the eve of the Feast of the Immaculate Conception (December 8), the potters would prepare their cargo again, arranging the clay objects in maguey pita nets, placing **pashte** between each object, and heading for Ciudad Vieja (Sacatepéquez).

The journey to Ciudad Vieja was also made on foot, “at a trot,” as it is popularly known. The artisans left Mixco at 5 in the morning and arrived in Ciudad Vieja at 10. In five hours, they managed to cover 28 kilometers, trying to reduce the distance by going into ravines and looking for trails. They only stopped for a few minutes to eat a frugal breakfast in Santa Lucía Milpas Altas Sacatepéquia Ciudad Vieja was also done on foot, “at a trot,” as it is popularly known. The artisans left Mixco at 5 in the morning and arrived in Ciudad Vieja at 10. In five hours, they managed to cover 28 kilometers, trying to shorten the distance by going into ravines and looking for paths. They only stopped for a few minutes to eat a frugal breakfast in Santa Lucía Milpas Altas (Sacatepéquez).

These trips on foot to both Santa Catarina Pinula and Ciudad Vieja continued until the early 1940s. The artisans enjoyed visiting Ciudad Vieja because the patron saint festival was very lively, with many **chicherías** (chicha bars). Eusebia Pixtún has fond memories of those days when she and her family would go to offer their handicrafts to the devotees of the Virgin of the Immaculate Conception. Eusebia says that very close to the church courtyard, people would line up pots containing tamales made with chompipe (turkey), beef, pork, chicken, and duck. “This was the people's favorite thing to do, go **tamalear**,” says Carmelo Acú, Eusebia's uncle. Every house made tamales, and when you passed by some houses, you were invited in to try one. On that day, December 8, the piggy bank was broken, and the money was spent on **drinks** and food, Carmelo said. “There was also music played on double and single marimbas.”

In this pleasant festive atmosphere, the people of Mixco would sell their handicrafts next to the church. Eusebia remembers that the potters stayed in Ciudad Vieja for eight days, from the 6th to the 12th. Eusebia would leave for Ciudad Vieja with her mother and maternal grandparents. Her grandfather, José Reyes Acú, had friends in Ciudad Vieja. In particular, the family would stay overnight at the home of a man named Paredes. Eusebia recalls that her grandfather would bring his guitar and play serenades. They would also serve chompipe tamales, chicken, and pork, as well as sweet manzanilla and ichintal en pulique (a Guatemalan dish).

The next day, the family was ready to return to the plaza in Ciudad Vieja to sell their pottery. The prices were very low: shepherds for Christmas nativity scenes sold for 5 cents, small pots for 2 cents, and small goats for 3 cents. The people of Antigua, according to what they say, fought over the pottery from Mixco. They explained that they bought the figures because they were “relics of the Virgin of Conception.”

The potters almost always returned happy because all the pieces they took to Ciudad Vieja were sold. They returned to Mixco on foot, but this time without their load and carrying sweets from the fair.

As the Mixqueño potters died, this custom was lost. In the last decade (1979-1989), Eusebia Pixtún and her family have gone to Ciudad Vieja only a few times to sell their wares, and fortunately, their handicrafts continue to be very popular.

## **6. The new generation of artists working with the technique and form of Mixco ceramics**

Eusebia Pixtún has succeeded in raising awareness among her descendants of the cultural and economic importance of ceramics. As a result, five of her eight children have learned the craft she inherited from her grandmother and mother. Some of them are mastering the technique so brilliantly that it is impossible to distinguish their pieces from those of their mother. This is the case of Reginaldo (21), who makes churches of all sizes, which show great refinement in their forms: good use of proportions, domes, columns, walls, and fine, solid crosses with great aesthetic value. Although Reginaldo spends much of his time working in electricity, he devotes his free time to helping his mother with pottery.

Rosa (28) is specializing in making all kinds of small objects, particularly small churches, chickens, pigs, goats, and horses. Magdalena has a particular fondness for medium-sized churches and fish, although she knows how to model other objects. Silvia (24) is in charge of making chickens with chicks. Eugenia (23) spends a lot of time making cherubs, angels, and large millers that are very similar to the shepherdesses made by her great-grandmother and grandmother. All of these young people live with their mother in the San Jorge neighborhood of Amatitlán.

We believe that if the Sian Pixtún siblings continue to work with clay in the way they have done until now, pottery made using Mixqueña techniques and forms will have ensured its survival for many years, thus avoiding its almost total extinction, as has happened in the town of Mixco, where only one elderly woman remains who makes small comalitos for her own use, and two women and a child who occasionally make rough figures for Christmas nativity scenes.

## **7. Traditional and recent ceramic objects from Mixco**

The following is a list of the different clay objects that are made in Mixco, and those that the family of Eusebia Pixtún is still making today:

### **Extinct traditional figures and objects**

Comales of different sizes (replaced by comales from San Raimundo, Guatemala).

Medium-sized pots and bowls (replaced by glazed pottery from Jalapa and by pewter, "china," and plastic kitchen utensils).



Common and ceremonial incense burners, bird-shaped whistles (doves or chickens).

**Traditional Mixqueña toys and figures made by the Sian Pixtún family.**

Horses with riders and loads (firewood, saddlebags, or arganillas, nets with fruits and/or vegetables)

Goats

Sheep

Chickens, ducks, roosters, and chompipes. (All of these have three “canillas” or supports).

Marranitos (little pigs)

Shepherds: tortilla makers, musicians, men on horseback, vendors (with baskets of fruits and/or vegetables, some of them carrying a child on their backs); buyers, men, women, children, dogs.

Jars

Clay jar

Apaxtes

Small pots (with two handles)

Alcarrazas (small pots with a flat base)

Figures for nativity scenes: the Three Wise Men on camels, mysteries (Joseph, Mary, and the Baby Jesus).

**Recent figures**

Churches

Angels and cherubs

Lions

Fish

Facades of houses and churches.



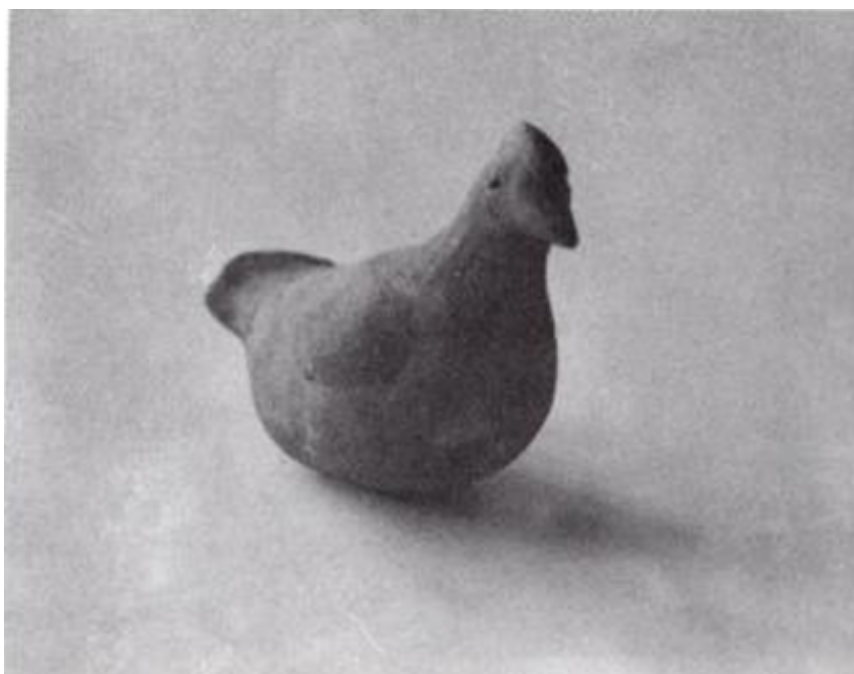
Mixqueña ceramic piece. Woman making tortillas.



Mixqueña ceramic piece. Woman “echando” (making) tortillas.



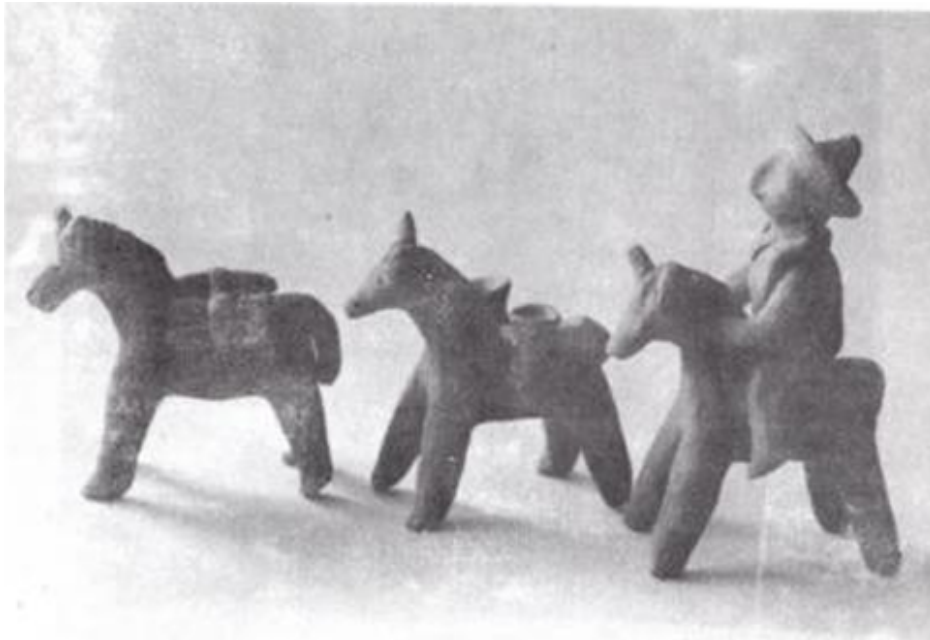
Mixqueña ceramic piece. Woman selling fruit.



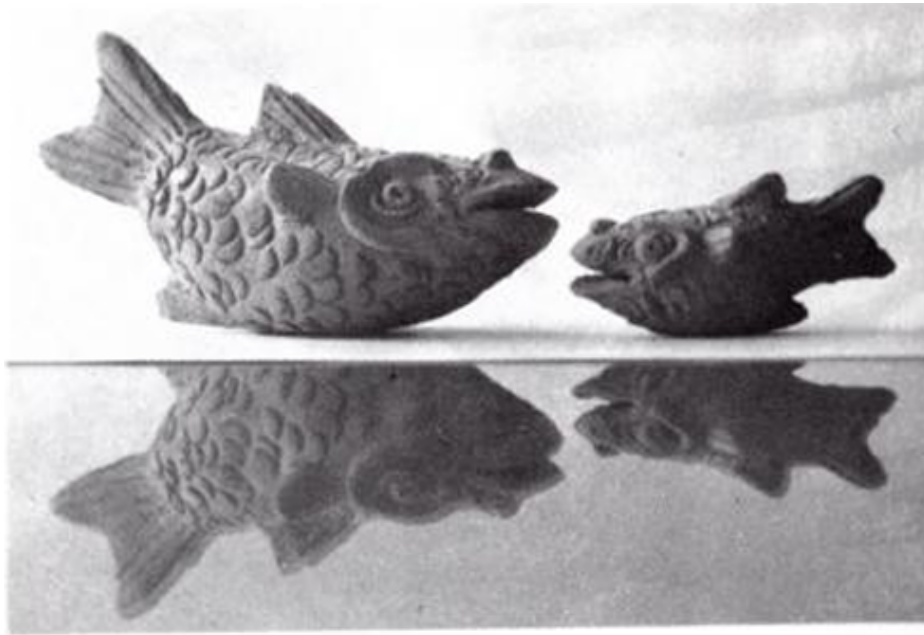
Hen-shaped whistle.



Goat-shaped candlestick.



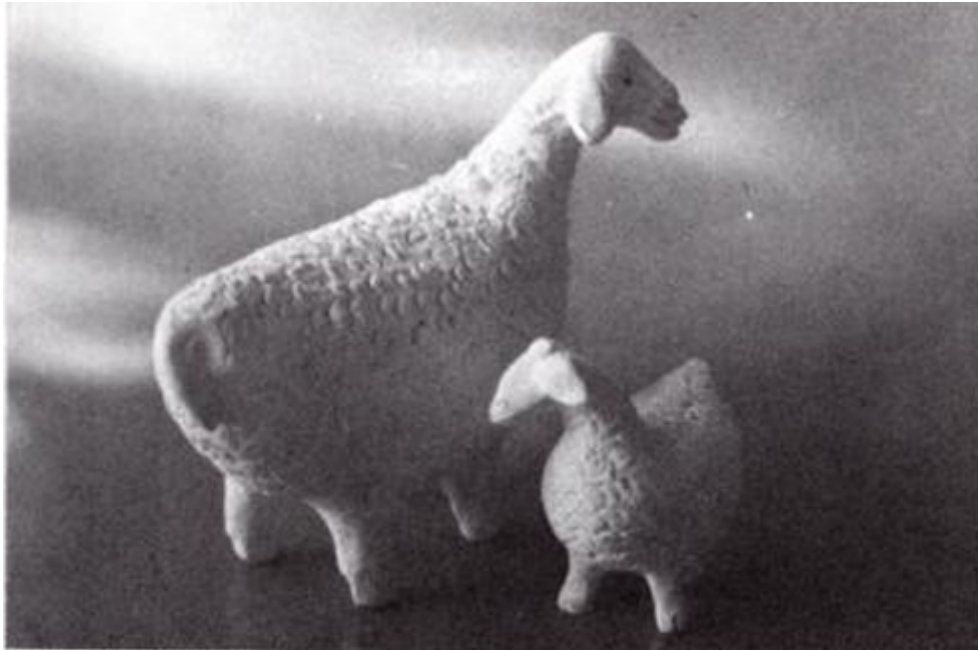
Mule driver with his mules.



Clay fish.



Chompipe (turkey) and duck. Traditional Mixqueña pottery.



Clay sheep painted with white lead, for the Guatemalan Nativity scene.

**FOLKLORIC PROJECTION**