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THE POTTERS OF GUATAJIAGUA, SALVADOR

THE picturesque town of Guatajiagua, situated half a day's ride from San Miguel in eastern Salvador, is noted for the excellence of its pottery. The Indian inhabitants for the greater part are of pure blood, but they have abandoned their native tongue and speak the Spanish language. There is reason to believe that formerly they used the Matagalpan dialect still spoken in Cacaopera and Lislique, although they may have employed the Lenca language like the majority of the inhabitants of eastern Salvador.

Clay for pottery-making is found in three localities near the town. It is mined by women with the aid of an iron-shod stick, broken into small lumps, and carried to the town in broad baskets balanced on the head. There it is dumped into

large vessels outside the house, water is added and it is left to soak. Meanwhile the jar is carefully covered to keep the pigs from drinking the water.

When the clay is soft, sand and more water are added, and the mixture is kneaded until it is of exactly the right consistency. This is a simple but most important step, and is done with the most scrupulous care, for the soundness of the finished product depends on the proportions of the mixture. During the process and while the vessels are in course of manufacture any chance visitor samples a pinch of clay between the thumb and fingers with all the savoir faire and aplomb of a connoisseur sipping vintage wine. To the writer the clay seemed more sticky than is usual in pottery-making, for it adhered firmly to the fingers unless they were dripping with water. When the clay has reached this desired state it is rolled into cylinders about eight inches high and six inches in diameter. These, covered with wet cloths, are kept in the house until needed.

Although the older women may collect the clay, may criticize the making, and aid in the polishing, most of the actual fabrication is done by unmarried girls. The reason for this is that the work is performed on the ground and the potter must stand with her heels together and her knees straight most of the time (fig. 37, *b*). It is not

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an easy position to assume, let alone maintain for long; and the older members of the household are not supple enough for the task.

Before commencing pottery-making a small area outside the house is swept clean and several leaves are placed on the ground to serve as a base for the clay. The potter plunges her fist into a



FIG. 35.—Pottery-making, Guatajiagua, Salvador

clay cylinder, sets it on the leaves, and rapidly works it into a rough ring (fig. 35, *a*). This ring is soon squeezed up to form a crude vessel with a flat base and vertical sides about an inch in thickness (fig. 35, *b*).

The potter then starts to shuffle at an even gait around the vessel. The toes are almost in contact with the clay, but never actually touch it,

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except in the case of the most skilful girls who can walk around the soft clay walls with their toes touching so lightly as not to mar the vessel (fig. 37, *b*). Meanwhile the hands, one inside and the

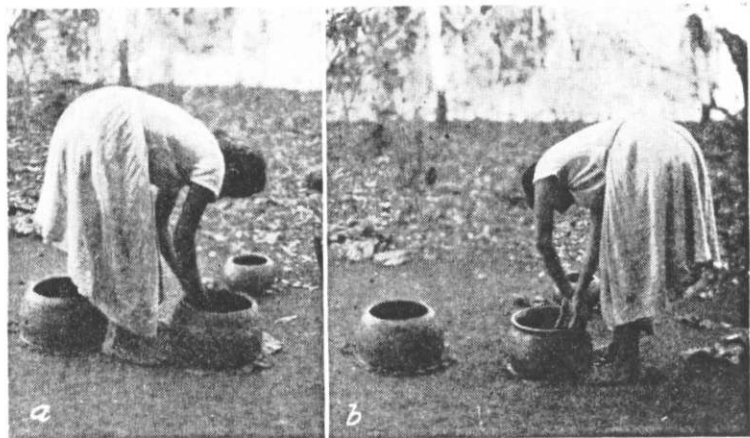


FIG. 36.—Pottery-making, Guatajiagua, Salvador

other outside, are worked diagonally upward to curve and thin the walls (fig. 36, *a*). In an incredibly short space of time a symmetrical dome of clay with an open top is formed, which is to become the upper half of the completed vessel. This done, the clay is drenched with water, the operator resumes her circular march, and the dome is smoothed by passing a piece of corncob over the surface. The resultant form appears in fig. 36, *a*.

Next the rim is fashioned. This sometimes is

done by making a crease in the walls, but more often it is built up by adding coils. The difficulty of this stage in the manufacture depends on the size of the opening to be rimmed, as may be seen in fig. 37, *a, b*. Again the vessel is drenched with water and carefully smoothed.

When the working-place was selected, it was located in the shade but near the edge of the shadow of the house. So artfully was it chosen that a few minutes after the vessel was half completed, as we



FIG. 37.—Pottery-making, Guatajiagua, Salvador

have described, it was covered by the direct and powerful rays of the tropical sun. The clay dries rapidly. Soon the half-completed vessel is solid enough to lift, and it is picked up, carried again

into the shade (fig. 38, *a*), inverted, and set down with the rim on the ground.

This operation brings the base uppermost, and the leaves on which the original clay cylinder was set are stripped away. The clay thus revealed is



FIG. 38.—Pottery-making, Guatajiagua, Salvador

still soft and plastic, for the half-walls of the pot have sheltered it from the sun.

The soft clay of the base is now pressed out to form a rough cornice on the walls of the inverted vessel (fig. 38, *b*), the potter resumes her walk around the vessel, and the rounded bottom is

created by diagonal stroking with the hands. Soon a stage is reached when the opening is so reduced that it is scarcely possible to insert the hand. This is the last chance to support the interior of the vessel, so it is carefully smoothed with much water and a corncob. Then the hole is reduced in size until only a single finger can be inserted.

Closing this opening is a critical and delicate task. The potter takes fresh clay, adds water, and kneads it to exactly the proper consistency. Then the finger is inserted in the hole and a coil of very soft clay is laid around it. The finger is gently withdrawn; the clay, being just wet enough to flow when unsupported, sinks, as it were, miraculously into place. If the amount and cohesive power of the clay have been correctly estimated, the bottom of the vessel is perfect and flawless.

Final smoothing and polishing with much water and a corncob are now given. This is delicate work, for the rounded bottom of the jar is so unstable as to quiver like jelly at the slightest touch. A hair's-weight too much pressure will cause complete collapse.

The next day handles are inserted. When everything is dry the whole vessel is polished with a stone, and if by chance a trace of the final opening

in the base remains it is carefully scraped smooth. Firing is accomplished in domed adobe ovens.

The resultant vessels are of three principal kinds. One is a deep, open-mouth bowl used primarily for cooking (fig. 38). A second is a globular jar of the kind used all over Latin America for storing water (fig. 37, *a*).¹ The third is a slightly curved griddle (fig. 39) which serves for cooking tortillas. An average worker completes four vessels daily; an exceptional potter turns out as many as eight. The local price of the bowls is six and a quarter cents, and of the jars twelve and a half cents in United States currency. The Indians of Guatajiagua are not rich.

The pottery-making process which we have described appears to be purely aboriginal, and so far as the writer knows, is practised only in Guatajiagua. In other parts of Salvador much pottery is manufactured both by hand and on a wheel. The hand process commonly employed is to model the base of the vessel over an inverted completed jar, partially dry it, and then to build up the walls by the widespread coiling technique.

The Guatajiagua method, however, is more rapid and results in stronger vessels, but it calls for unsurpassed mastery of materials and great

¹ See also *Indian Notes*, vol. II, no. 1, fig. 8, *a*.

manual dexterity. The skill of the potter also lies in the ability to bend so that the hands touch the ground and then to walk in a small perfect circle, for the shape of the vessel is contingent on

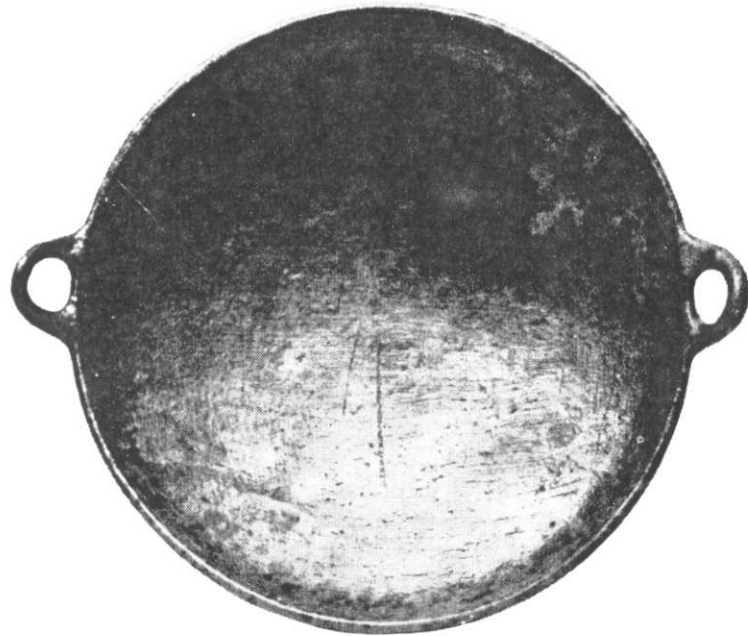


FIG. 39.—Pottery griddle, Guatajiagua, Salvador. Diameter 20 inches. (13/1165)

the course of the feet. Furthermore, the hands must work in perfect unison and with great delicacy of touch, though the body be held in an awkward position. Indeed, the hands move

with such rapidity that the eye can scarcely follow them, and with such grace as to transform a stolid chunky Indian girl into the very essence of rhythmic motion. Finally, the potter must be a keen judge of the viscosity of clay, for part of her technique is so delicate that not the human hand but gravity must complete the task.

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NOSE-ORNAMENTS OF GOLD

A WIDESPREAD custom of wearing an ornament of some particular form and material attached to the nose has been practised in many parts of the world. Certain Hindu ladies, for instance, wear a small stud or button piercing a lobe of the nose, and in various lands the common custom is followed of wearing a ring or a rod of metal or of other suitable material through the nasal septum. Included in the collection of gold objects in this Museum are a number which doubtless were designed for use as nose-ornaments. For convenience of description these may be classified as of three general forms—the bar, the ring, and the discoid.

The bar was worn horizontally through the septum and sometimes extended several inches on each side of the nose. Illustrations in Richard-

son's account of his journeys in the Far North¹ show both men and women wearing the bar type of nose-ornaments which probably were made of dentalia; that is, two of the shells were joined at their larger extremities with a piece of wood.

The use of nose-ornaments by the natives of North America is not believed to have been recorded east of the Rocky Mountain region, but the custom prevailed more or less extensively in the coastal area of southern Alaska, British Columbia, and southward to Mexico, in which last-named country it was widely distributed and has been illustrated profusely in picture-writings and stone-carvings. From Middle America the fashion continued into the South American continent, where it is still in vogue among many of the tribes which have resisted the influence of Caucasians. Such articles of adornment were made not only of gold and other precious metals, but of bone, ivory, wood, shell, stone, and feathers, as well. Indeed any suitable and accessible material was employed for the purpose as occasion demanded. Sometimes the ornaments were elaborately fashioned and gaily colored; at other times a mere piece of stick or a bird-quill seemed to suffice.

Two very ornate examples made of gold are il-

¹ Sir John Richardson, Arctic Searching Expedition, vol. 1, pls. III, IV, London, 1851.