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Jatun Molino: A Pottery Village in the Upper Amazon Basin

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JATUN MOLINO

A Pottery Village in the Ecuadorian Amazon Basin

Geographically, Ecuador is one of the most diverse countries in South America given its relative small size. It consists of three distinct regions; the first being the Andean range which runs north to south throughout the interior of the country. The steep, rugged mountains rise to over 20,000 feet at the snow covered peaks of Chimborazo. On the western side of these mountains lay the lowlands of the coastal region that border the Pacific Ocean. On the eastern side of the Andes lay the jungle area of the upper Amazon basin known locally as the Oriente. In the short distance of only 200 miles (as the crow flies) one can experience the landscape from sea level to snowcapped mountains followed by a descent into the steaming jungles of the Amazon. It is here in the rainforest of Ecuador one will find the tiny, remote village known in Quichua as Jatun Molino.

The 30 minute flight into the jungle begins from the small town of Shell (named after the Shell Oil Co. from the days of its use as an outpost for drilling sites in the jungle) located at the eastern base of the Andes at the entrance into the Amazon basin. Flying over the dense jungles of Ecuador, one cannot help but notice the small dirt runway that appears as a blemish on an otherwise lush landscape. This tiny airstrip is the link to civilization for the small village of Jatun Molino, which otherwise is at least a 4-5 day journey by dugout canoe to Shell.

The small village of Molino has approximately 100 inhabitants (60 children and 40 adults.) While the primary language in Molino is Quichua, several residents have been able to learn Spanish as a result of traveling to the small towns that border the jungle region. The houses are made in a traditional style with most having the living areas elevated and the cooking and storage areas beneath the main floor. Palm leaves are woven together to form the roofs and bamboo poles are split and laid for the second story flooring. There are approximately 15 houses that make up the village, with each site being strategically located along the Rio Bobanaza and separated by thick jungle.

Ecuador, which lies on the Equator, has a climate that is constant year round. Since the sun starts setting shortly after six and there is no electricity in Molino, darkness blankets the village each night by seven. By 8:00 p.m. the village is silent and nearly everyone is asleep. The sounds of chopping wood and people bathing in the river begin near dawn (6 a.m.) as the light of day brings human activity back to the village. The smells of burning wood and cooking are everywhere while both birds and monkeys are making their presence known.

The daily activities of the Quichua Indians living in Molino are primarily hunting, fishing and the making of traditional objects for daily use such as baskets, palm fiber bags, pottery, fishing nets, dugout canoes and other articles to be used or traded. Their diet consists mainly of boiled and fried yucca root and plantains, corn, fish and other game (mostly fowl), as well as a wide assortment of natural fruits that are indigineous to the area along the Rio Bobanaza. The main beverage of the Quichua is a fermented drink called Chicha made from the boiled Yucca root and water. This drink is made from the mashing, chewing and spitting of the root into a common container, and is prepared almost daily by the women of the village. This drink is served regularly in the homes throughout the village and it is considered impolite for visitors to refuse.

The organization of the village is communal with all members participating in areas that contribute to the good of each person. The men hunt, build and repair houses, as well as produce baskets while the women gather foods, cook and produce pottery. This division of labor has been consistent throughout time with the Quichua and the responsibilities of each person are readily accepted. Adults are the main providers for the group, yet their dedication and concerns for the young are ever present. Children are seldom seen as obstacles to work and are often included in jobs that might otherwise seem beyond their scope of experience. It is through this caring for the young and allowing them to be involved in the day-to-day activities that enables the Quichua to easily pass on information to the next generation. Since most of what is learned is taught through a handed down system, it is not surprising that both males and females readily accept their roles within the village as they grow into adults. As a group they are a people who enjoy each other and love to laugh. There is a true sense of sharing and each person in the village is valued. It is the delicate balance of

responsibilities coupled with their sharing nature that enable the Quichua of Molino to live a peaceful, happy life in the Ecuadorian rainforest.

While all adults share in the responsibilities of gathering food, hunting, cooking, farming, building, etc., tradition dictates that only the women in Molino produce the ceramics. Even though the older women are the main producers of the pottery in Molino, it is common to see young girls of 10 and 12 years old working alongside their mothers and/or sisters. The older women spend time with each young potter as she carefully studies and practices the traditional ways of producing ceramics. While they make pottery at home for personal use, some also work collectively in a separate space that they built for the sole purpose of producing ceramic objects for sale and/or trade. The pieces, which are made by six women living in Molino, are transported by plane to the small town of Shell where buyers take them to Quito to be sold. Selling this way is becoming more common for those inhabiting the rainforest as they seek new ways to obtain monies for medicine as well as tools needed for hunting and agriculture.

The purpose of the pottery produced in Molino is consistent with the traditional reasons motivating the Quichua potters throughout the years. Whether they make pieces at home or at the workshop, the pots conform to traditional shapes while each maintains personal characteristics that make each object unique. For the Quichua, the pieces are useful objects that are a necessary part of daily life. Making the pots technically efficient and aesthetically pleasing are results of how these indigenous people approach their lives and work. The pieces they create exhibit an elegance of form and a sophistication of surface. Their work is a reflection of them as a people, which is why it is common to see the potters share in the making of each piece whenever necessary. There is no 'ego' behind what they make and most forms and images are understood by all members of the village. This pottery making tradition has been alive in the rainforest for generations with various indigenous groups, and still continues today with the Quichua.

The process of making the pottery begins with the gathering of clay. The women hike to a site in the jungle near the village (about a 20 minute walk) where they dig clay from a shallow creek bed. They fill palm-leafed woven baskets that are first lined with fresh banana leaves. Each basket holds approximately 75 pounds

of wet clay which they carry on their backs using a rope made of vines to wrap around their heads. Clay is gathered as needed and several women work together to obtain the materials for all. After this is complete, they spend long hours sitting and cleaning the clay by carefully squeezing it through their hands and picking out foreign particles such as stones and twigs. It is not necessary to keep the clay wet since the humid air of the jungle enables the material to remain moist throughout the day and night. Covering the baskets with a banana leaf is all that is required to ensure the clay will be ready for use. After the clay has been cleaned, the process of forming the pot begins.

Coiling is the main technique used by the potters, and they achieve a thin-walled form by pinching the coils upward as they apply them to each piece. The clay, which is wet, requires the potter to have control lest the objects collapse during the forming process. The tools utilized for the making of each piece are a variety of scrapers cut from the outer shell of dried gourds, strips of wood used for paddling, small pieces of corn husks that serve as a type of chamois for the rims, and smooth stones that are collected from the rivers edge to use for burnishing. They make several pieces at the same time which allows the potter to move from one pot to another while each form begins to stiffen.

Once the piece is complete and the drying has begun, it is then stiff enough to have a red clay slip applied to the surface. The painting of this slip is done with a piece of cloth that is dragged across the form. After allowing the red slip to dry on the surface, the potter uses brushes to paint the intricate network of lines that visually describe forms and symbols in a purely abstract fashion. This work is extremely tedious and takes long hours to accomplish. Patterns painted onto the finished forms often reflect those things that are part of daily life. Animals (i.e., snakes, spiders, frogs, turtles, birds, etc.), plants and other communal imagery are common to this type of work. The women spend long hours painting the surface of the ware with fine brushes made of human hair. These brushes, made of only one and two strands each with an overall brush length of approximately two inches, enables them to paint the delicate lines on the surface that are traditional with the ceramic pieces produced in the jungle. The pigments come from the earth (white, black, red and ochre) and are each ground by hand using a large and small rock which serve as a type of mortar and pestle. After the pieces are coated with slip and the fine line painting is complete, they are allowed to

dry until ready for the fire. Forms dry slowly in the damp air of the jungle, so potters often pre-heat pieces by placing them near burning logs which further prepare them for the firing process.

The work is fired in an open pit with three large logs coming together from a circle. A large bowl-shaped container, which has a hole approximately 6 inches across cut out of the bottom, holds the form to be fired as it is placed upside down in the larger firing container. The piece to be fired is then covered with wood ash which serves as an insulator for the heat. The firing chamber is placed onto the three logs that now have their ends, as well as other smaller bits of kindling, burning. This chamber is set on the fire for approximately 30-45 minutes while the potter continues to stoke the fire. Once the flames are ablaze and the desired time has expired, the chamber is removed from the firing site followed by the piece and ash from the container. They immediately dust off the form with leaves and set it in the firing chamber that is now placed upside down on its rim. The hole in the bottom of the firing chamber again serves a purpose as it becomes an area where the finished pottery can rest. While the piece is still hot, the potter takes a chunk of hardened tree sap and rubs it on the form. The sap melts onto the hot piece and creates a protective, gloss-like coating on the ware. This surface enhances the painting and helps make the form impervious to water. The sap, which comes from the Chillquillo tree, is gathered by cutting the trunk of the tree with a machete. When the men in the village are out hunting and notice these trees, they will cut them and, when returning to the same location 2-3 months later, gather the hardened chunks of sap which have collected on the surface of the tree, and bring to the women in the village.

The type of objects produced by the Quichua range from small bowls called *mucauas*, which are used mostly for either the drinking of *chicha* or the serving of food; *tinajas*, a small, medium or large size storage jars, and other large bowl forms that all have a visual patterning through the use of the intricate line painting described earlier. The potters of Molino also create a variety of animal and human forms in vessel-like configurations, all with complex surface treatment.

The pottery of the Quichua Indians is unique. The forming, decorating and firing of the ware is a tedious process, yet this does not discourage the potters as

they continue to produce highly decorated pottery for daily use. The fragile nature of these objects is testimony to the great skill of these potters. Their daily lives are an integral part of the work and are reflected in both the design and process of each piece. Pots made by the Quichua are still used daily. While others from outside the rainforest may not need these pieces for utilitarian purposes, many still attach great aesthetic value to the pottery that is produced in the upper Amazon basin region of Ecuador.

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