

Eastern Kentucky University

From the Selected Works of Joe Molinaro

2001

The Pots of Jatumpamba

Joe Molinaro, *Eastern Kentucky University*



Available at: https://works.bepress.com/joe_molinaro/3/

The Pots of Jatumpamba

By Joe Molinaro and Nancy V. Bronner

During the summer of 2000, a small group of ceramists, filmmakers, writers and student interns from both the United States and Ecuador, spent several weeks capturing one of South America's rich pottery traditions on film. The crew, headed by Joe Molinaro, Professor of Art at Eastern Kentucky University, worked long hours recording the traditional processes of the potters of Jatumpamba, a village located high in the Andes of southern Ecuador near the city of Azogues and the province of Canar. With an altitude close to 10,000 feet and a general population of approximately 2500 inhabitants, life in Jatumpamba (a Quichua term meaning large plateau) appears to be a step back in time where cars are few and daily life slow and often arduous.

Molinaro has been traveling to Ecuador for over a decade as part of an ongoing investigation into the pottery traditions of indigenous groups from the Andean highlands to the Amazon basin. His 1996 video documentary, Jatun Molino: A Pottery Village in the Ecuadorian Amazon Basin, documented one such ceramic-centered communities (see *Ceramics Monthly*, May 1995). As in Molino, making pottery in Jatumpamba is a female-dominated tradition; mothers have been passing down the skills for producing traditional functional pottery to their daughters for generations. This type of family pottery production, however, is facing a crossroad of time and progress that challenges its future as a viable occupation for the next generation.

Younger potters seeking alternative lifestyles, changing market values, and the introduction of plastic and metal containers for household use, are forcing the community to re-evaluate the need for and the importance of making clay objects for daily use. What was once an everyday staple, as both commodity and occupation, the work of the Jatumpamba women potters is on the decline and in danger of extinction. In recent years, women carried their products to market themselves. With the decline in sales they now rely heavily on others to take the pots to the market. These middlemen and/or women purchase the wares at wholesale prices, paying only half the value of each piece. The combination of reduced sales and decreased revenue has forced the younger generation of women to more critically evaluate making pottery as a life's work, despite long standing customs.

The sturdy, hand-built pots of Jatumpamba exhibit their graceful lines and granulated textures in shades of russett, terra cotta, carnelian and dark copper. Unadorned but for a deeper-hued slip applied before firing, the pieces all carry the inky scars of the direct flames and speak of the ancient mountains from which they are created. Located in the thin air of the Andes, Jatumpamba's milieu clearly reflects its time-honored clay traditions. Adobe brick houses, stone and wooden fences capped with rows of burnt-orange clay pots, and thousands of pottery shards are scattered throughout the landscape. Each grave in the local cemetery is adorned with a round-bottomed clay cooking vessel that holds a candle that is lit in memory of the deceased during religious ceremonies, evidence of the integral part that clay plays in the villagers' daily lives. Historically, a

wide range of wares were produced, from storage vessels for grains such as mote (corn) and quinoa (a nutritionally complete grain grown at high altitudes) to large platters or griddles used for making tortillas and serving the Ecuadorian delicacy, cuy (roasted guinea pig). Pots of various shapes and sizes had any number of uses in the home.

Mothers carefully guide their young apprentices through the entire pottery process; the gathering of materials, the actual production of the wares, the firing and, finally, the trip to the market place for sales. Each pottery family has a traditional clay source that has been in use for generations, although at the higher elevations outside the village clay is available in a more public domain. Clay is dug by hand and with pick-axes from local fields and carried on the potters' back to the pottery making site in large hourglass-shaped woven baskets.

The moist, baseball-sized chunks of clay are spread out on mats for several days to dry in the intense Andean sun and parched air. When needed, the pieces are re-hydrated in containers of water and then deposited onto a dirt or cement floor to be wedged by foot. With colorful, dusty skirts held up, the pile of clay is mixed and stomped to an internal rhythm. A mixture of fine sand and clay dust is added to the wet clay by sifting it into the mix while the footwork continues. Impurities such as small pebbles and sticks are meticulously removed by hand as they are encountered. After hours of preparation, the potter is ready to begin creating ceramic forms.

The initial stage of vessel-formation takes place on a large, waist-high, overturned vessel that serves as the construction platform. Potters use the walk around method to slowly and methodically pull up the clay into thick walls. When the desired vessel height is attained, the rim is pulled out and carefully shaped and smoothed with a piece of cloth. Only a slight manipulation of the rim is added for decoration. The partially formed pot is put aside to harden somewhat before moving on to the next stage of forming.

The morning's production of several dozen of pots are set out to dry in the midday sun, where they soon stiffen to a leather-hard consistency. Later that afternoon, the potter begins the process of pounding the forms into the desired final shape. The sun is intense at the equator, but the altitude keeps the temperature below 70 degrees Fahrenheit and the wind brisk. Sitting against an adobe or concrete wall, legs covered with a rug or blanket to fend off the penetrating chill, the potter cradles the vessel in her lap as she takes up a pair of hardened clay mallets or paddles. The mallets have a reciprocal configuration that enhance the shaping process: the paddle held inside the bowl is slightly convex while the paddle held outside has a shallow concave curve.

With the convex tool held as a brace along the inside of the vessel, the potter applies the outside concave mallet to the vessel wall in a steady rhythmic pounding, beginning near the rim and moving slowly down to the base of the bowl. The paddles are in constant motion and no consecutive blows land in exactly the same spot. She turns the bowl frequently, every few strokes, as she persuades the clay walls to thin and curve. As shadows chase sunlight throughout the afternoon, the potter coaxes each piece into its final symmetrical formation and reaches for the next. At day's end, each potter has

created a number of forms that are already beginning to dry. The craftswomen work for several weeks to accumulate enough wares to warrant a firing. As the number of pots mounts, brush and firewood are collected from the mountainsides by various family members.

Once the pots are completely dry, the potter swishes on a red clay slip to the top portion of the vessel with a small cloth or brush. The bottom of each piece remains the original red-brown color. The firing is often done as soon as the last slip is applied. With the high winds of the Andes blowing freely across the plateau of the village, firing is timed carefully to take full advantage of the afternoon lull in wind velocity. The potters and all available family members, children included, work in a well-rehearsed fashion to quickly transport the wares to the firing site and begin the meticulous process of stacking pots for firing.

Arranged as a carefully layered raft that covers about twenty square feet, the base is formed by placing rows of pots, gently balanced on their sides against each other, on top of a bed of shards. Kindling and larger branches of leafy brush are placed on top, followed by another layer of pots until there are three full layers. A perimeter of old (previously-fired) pots is constructed around the square of greenware which is used to control airflow and temperature. Brush is packed around the spaces between the ware, thus adding fuel to the fire.

The fire is lit at the upwind corner of the raft and as the dry brush catches, the blaze quickly takes on a life of its own, producing copious amounts of thick fragrant smoke and crackling flames up to nine or ten feet high. The fire-tenders work ceaselessly to control the heat, carefully monitoring the wind direction. Sudden changes in temperature might crack the pots, so decisions about controlling the fire are made on a minute-to-minute basis. Broken pot shards are moved often to channel or deflect the breeze as the fire builds. The matriarch of the group knows her clay and fire well, and this is a time of serious instruction for daughter apprentices. Each girl watches her mother attentively, awaiting instructions based on temperature, wind, and fire condition.

Maintaining the blaze is hard, hot, work, and highly demanding. Family members pitch in by hauling wood while children run back and forth to the single outdoor faucet to retrieve water for their moms or aunts. Fire tenders add or adjust the brush judiciously to help the fire maintain a steady temperature as the blaze progresses. Once the heat has had time to spread evenly throughout the mound, the bonfire is stoked from all sides until the fire rages uniformly. The last combustible material added to the burning pile is chosen for its fineness which, after the conflagration slowly dies, leaves a fine insulating ash on the surface of the mound.

The bonfire lasts approximately three to four hours, depending on the size of the pile and the strength of the wind. After the fire runs its course and the mound is banked with the fine ash, it is left to cool slowly overnight. By the light of morning, the first pieces are carefully pulled to reveal the burnt orange coloration of the slip and the warm toast color of the clay. Each piece is carefully inspected as it is removed from the mound; piles of

similarly shaped forms grow adjacent to the bonfire site. Broken pots are discarded, and then used in future firings. Successful pieces are bound up with rope and made ready for market in the neighboring towns of Azogues and Cuenca.

Although the majority of Jatumpamba's residents still use these clay vessels, people from outside the village who purchase the pottery often want the pieces only for decoration around the house. As a result, the pieces are not used, broken and replaced. Weaving Panama hats and working in other tourist related craft markets is becoming more popular with the younger generation, making the production of pottery in this old Andean village a low priority despite its long tradition. With the changing times, one can only speculate as to the future of a craft heritage that once reigned supreme and brought dignity to all those who worked in it.

The simple, down-to-earth beauty of these ceramic pieces and the tradition that produces them will be showcased in an exhibit at Eastern Kentucky University this fall (22 Oct. to 16 Nov) Potters from Ecuador will be in attendance at the opening reception and the video documentary: Jatumpamba: An Ecuadorian Andean Pottery Village will be released at this time as well. For further information, please call (859) 622-1634 or visit ECU's Art Department Web site: www.art.eku.edu/