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4-1-2003

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Recommended Citation
Molinaro, Joe, "Pottery of the Ecuadorian Amazon" (2003). *Art Faculty and Staff Scholarship*. Paper 4.
http://encompass.eku.edu/art_fsresearch/4

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Pottery of the Ecuadorian Amazon

by

Joe Molinaro

The great Amazon! Spanning the heart of South America by 2200 miles east to west and over 1400 miles north to south, is an endless carpet of green forests with veins of rivers and streams appearing copper-foiled in the midday sun. Sometimes referred to as the 'lungs of the planet' with a bio-diversity in its ecology second to none, serves as home to people who have lived and worked in the rainforests of South America for generations. Indigenous peoples have inhabited this part of the planet for hundreds of years, often carrying out daily chores that are at the same time similar and different to those living outside the rainforest. As writer Alain Gheerbrant once wrote, "Indian culture, unlike ours, is a process of accommodation to nature" [1]. Building homes, gathering food and the making of common objects for the house are all part of the activities that connect them to those living in other parts of the globe. Yet the process of creating these objects while living in harmony with a fragile ecosystem are the challenges the indigenous face each day.

Specifically, the lush jungles of the Amazon basin region of Ecuador, comprising nearly 50% of the country land mass and representing 5 of the nations 21 provinces, is home to eight indigenous groups. While only supporting 5% of the total Ecuadorian population of more than 12 million, these groups are vital components to a country of people that is as diverse as the land itself. The eight groups inhabiting the jungle region of the Ecuadorian Amazon; the Quichua, Shuar, Achuar, Zapara, Shiwiar, Cofan, Siona/Secoya and Huaorani, all share a similar past and present which can be seen through the objects made and used in daily life. Typical housing made of palm leaves, dug out canoes used to navigate the water routes of the jungle, hand-crafted blowguns used regularly for hunting, and feathered headdresses for ceremony are examples of how life is similar among the peoples and locations of the upper Amazon basin. Yet other examples such as basket weaving, body decoration, and the making of pottery, serve as gentle reminders of the uniqueness within the various peoples of the Ecuadorian Amazon region.

It is the making of pottery that helps define and unite groups both in production techniques and designs. While most today still produce pottery, some have declined to a point where it is rare to see items produced at all. The Cofan for example (estimated at under 1,000 [2]), claim to no longer make pottery while the Shuar (over 60,000), are at the precipice of extinction in pottery production. Most

often there are only older women in Shuar villages who possess both the materials (brushes, stains, forming tools, etc.) and skills of pottery making. Convincing a younger generation of potters to emerge from these communities as artisans is difficult since the role of pottery objects in daily life has been

greatly affected through the introduction of metals and plastics. In many villages utility is no longer the issue, and the sales of pottery in these communities has never been established as a market commodity, thus having little appeal to younger girls who otherwise might become potters themselves. There is a myriad of reasons how and why pottery declines within any given culture, much of which has been the study of anthropologists and historians for generations. However, it is in the study of those places in the rainforest where ceramic wares continue to be produced that often helps illuminate the uniqueness of a people and the richness of a land. Materials, processes, and the objects of production all contribute to the tapestry of tradition that helps identify those who still produce pottery today in the upper Amazon basin.

In places where ceramic production still thrives in the Ecuadorian Amazon landscape, known locally as the 'Oriente', appears a hierarchy of ceramic production both in quality and quantity. For example, the Quichua, the largest of all indigenous groups in the region, estimated at over 100,000, are known to be the finest potters in the jungle and continue to support this claim by consistently producing new wares throughout villages in the northern reaches of the Oriente. Their fine line drawings with brushes made of human hair allow for delicate abstractions to be painted onto the surface of the forms using red, black and white clay slips. A final coating with a tree sap allows for the sealing of the surface and therefore easy to use and clean. Storage vessels called tinajas and drinking bowls known as mucauas are frequently produced for daily use. Typical beverages such as chicha, a fermented drink produced through the chewing and spitting of the cooked yucca pulp, are common in many pottery producing communities, therefore sustaining a need for pottery. Other animal and figure forms are also made for both special occasion and ceremony within the community, often times representing various aspects of the Quichua cosmology. In these villages tradition is easily passed on from generation to generation and young girls are encouraged to participate in training at an early age in order to help provide pottery for daily use as well as income for the family. Pottery remains a everyday staple for the Quichua and more recently as items for sale in an art and tourist market. The delicate balance and influence of utility and sales, in particular the ways that they preserve tradition while pursuing new avenues of growth, helps sustain a heritage that is otherwise easily left behind.

Other groups who remain engaged in the production of pottery in the Amazon basin, although to a lesser extent than that of the Quichua, are the Shiwiar,

Achuar, Secoya, Zapara and Huaorani. The nearly 700 Shiwiar, for instance, are a small group of indigenous who inhabit a portion of the eastern Amazon region bordering Peru and continue to produce lively ceramic wares which remain in use today. Like many groups, marketing has not played a strong role with the Shiwiar because of their remote location and the difficulty of getting items out of the jungle. While the process of creating and decorating pottery for all groups is similar to that of the Quichua, the Shiwiar are more likely to show a more playful side to their surface painting with figure images and/or words painted onto the forms. This type of visual communication among members of the village shows

a more personal, intimate and non-commercial side to their work. And the Shiwiar, like many groups producing pottery today who wish to find venues for the sale of their products, have the dense jungle and remote locations of their villages that make it difficult to market the wares. Transportation within the rainforest is costly, time consuming and sometimes dangerous, making the transport of delicate pottery an obstacle.

The Achuar (approximately 5,000), Zapara (200) and Siona-Secoya (1,500) are other indigenous groups who continue a potterymaking tradition with varying levels of development. Like many who produce wares in the jungle regions of Ecuador, these groups continue passing along information to younger girls to provide pottery both for daily use as well as for sale or trade outside the community. Where pottery once had a sole purpose of utility, an increased awareness of the rainforest, together with efforts into various aspects of eco-tourism, has provided opportunity for a resurgence of tradition in the face of an otherwise decline. Similar in both process and materials, these groups produce wares that at first glance appear to be extensions to that of the Quichua and even Shiwiar. Yet subtle nuances of form, sap coating materials and techniques, along with painted imagery all help define a uniqueness found only within each groups' production. The simple, child-like line drawings on the ceramic forms of the Zapara to the varying foot bases on bowls that are found within Achuar villages provide examples of how cultural expression is explored differently within otherwise similar forms.

Lastly, there are the Huaorani, a small group of under 1,000 inhabitants, who, within the past 50 years have transitioned from a violent, semi-nomadic group to now living peacefully in permanent settlements. In an earlier time, the lifestyle of the Huaorani made pottery production difficult, if not impossible, due to the fragile nature of the work and the difficulty of transporting it when on the move. Now, however, the Huaorani remain settled in areas and therefore produce ceramics. Because of the shortened time of development, this pottery is often crude by comparison to other indigenous groups who have worked in clay for many generations. Forms are delicate, often having a tall, narrow bowl shape with little or no surface decoration. Pieces are smoke fired leaving dark surface

coloration on an otherwise brown-gray clay. A tradition of utensils made of gourds remain in use today with pottery often being used only for ceremonial and/or funerary purposes. In addition, making pottery for sale or trade has not impacted the Huaorani greatly because of the limited production of wares and the remoteness of their communities. While the Huaorani have adopted potterymaking into their lives, their lifestyles continue to reflect their past in the ways they carry out daily chores. Hunting with blowguns and spears, the wearing of little clothing, and the various forms of body decoration provide evidence of their past.

The pottery of the upper Amazon basin of Ecuador continues to serve as a cultural tool for identification of those who inhabit this region. Potters seek new avenues for sale while continuing to make wares that still serve the needs of the communities. With an increased awareness by those outside the rainforest for the differing of pottery styles, as well as the forces that challenge its' production, it is hopeful that tradition will not fade and new potters and styles will continue to emerge.

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[1] The Amazon: Past, Present and Future
pg. 98
Alain Gheerbrant
Thames and Hudson, London
1992

2 all population figures taken from the newspaper 'La Hora'
May 16, 2002
Quito, Ecuador