

Guided by Ceramics, an insight of its past and present

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The cultural and symbolic capital of a nation is made of Symbolic? Authentic? Representations that allow us to know appreciate and share it.

The world of ceramics is part of that capital that in our country had various expressions since a long time and before records was taken.

We shall see the ceramic production of the indigenous Argentinean region known as “Delta del Paraná”, which is the area where San Nicolás City is placed, city where I was born, still live and develop my activity on ceramics.

The first thing we need to do is to elaborate on the meaning of ceramics, following OSVALDO MENGHIN’s expression, “ceramics is like a guiding fossil to appraise archeological clusters, so it is destined to be used for the final ethnogonic inferences as it appears everywhere and in large quantities in the Neolithic. Ceramic was usually a local production item so constitutes a historical and cultural content of great value.

Ceramic work has technical, economical, social, artistic and religious values, think about the processes of preparing the clay (mineral extraction and washing), manufacturing (hand made, with a lathe, coil pots), polishing, painting, enameling, cooking (wide variety of furnaces), in the different purposes it is applied such as house use, ornament, for burial uses, think about the forms and figures of vases, religious vases, and still we did not mention votive objects, figures, writing pads, construction materials.

No product done by men’s hands reflects the essence and spirit of a rich and varied culture as ceramics do in archeological excavation work”

We know that some ceramic pieces with high artistic and technical development are authentic documents that are used to learn about the social and economical aspects of the ethnical group that produced them.

The pre Incaic pottery show their transport means, architecture, dressing, domestic animals and scenes of their daily life.

But, which was the place and time where ceramic was born? It characterized the Neolithic that in Europe was started around 3500 to 3000 BC. It was much older in Middle East and China, may be two millenniums older.

Neolithic European ceramic has its root probably in Middle East. But Kiokenmoeding pointed shaped ceramic (5.000 to 3.000 B.C.) does not seem to be rooted there, it seems to be an independent center or it has derived from the Chinese ceramic of the semi buried mound houses in China (5.000 to 4.000 B.C.).

Mc. Kerns defines the existence of two centers in America, one of them, probably autochthonous placed between Peru and México and the second with Asian origin in North America.

In Argentina, the first signs of ceramics are from the Tafi culture in the first century B.C. in the valley that gave it its name, studied by Rex Gonzales. Starting there but not necessarily following its tradition, many ceramic styles developed in the Norwest of the country.

Other important region is the delta, area formed by the Paraná, Uruguay and Rio de la Plata, this delta has many islands,. The islands aspect is quite striking; going through its rivers and rooks we can see a wide variety of trees, and vigorous vegetation with reeds, aquatic plants, cockspur

coral tree (ceibos), teasels and other plants typical of floodable grounds. These plants, starting as bushes form the island forest.

This is the habitat where an original tribe worked in ceramics leaving his signature as Dr. Luis María Torres and J.B. Ambrosetti demonstrate in their research.

I shall try to detail the particular characteristics of this ethnical group so that we may understand its ceramic construction.

Domestic Characteristics

These Indians selected remote places to live, difficult for foreigners to access as they enjoy a peaceful life. They performed the required jobs for living as prepare furs and leather to manufacture clothes, ceramic vessels and vases to prepare and contain food and water, and bone instruments for daily life and weapons.

Women were in charge of all house works, from the construction of the sun shade to the installation of the dwellings. Women were the only ones that controlled the domestic life. Men were devoted to gathering, fishing and hunting.

Burial sites were placed near their sites.

Bone instruments manufacturing such as spear points, scrapers, graters and the selection of tools for different uses, particularly in engraving and modeling, show that the inhabitants of the middle and upper delta were skillful, hard and patient workers, with enough skill and will to use adequately the various materials that the environment offered them. They were also mild.

Men gathered mainly coconuts and maize, hunted deer, otter and capybara and fished various fishes and shellfishes.

Tattoos were used to distinguish women apt to be married and men that reached puberty.

There are no signs of marriage, couples formed naturally and were not permanent, because of this, the societies were matriarchies. Names, language, home authority and uses were taught by women.

We believe that there was a form of government because there are signs that the oldest, richest and braver man was the chief, but we ignore any detail of such government.

Art and Industry

Work on bones was the main craft and it was excellent, this technique became the main industry in prehistoric America.

Stone and wooden burins and drills were replaced with bone needles that they use in the preparation and mending of furs and leathers used as clothing. Bone utensils were used for navigation. They also replaced stone scraper used to engrave ceramics with bones cut and worn to form chisels.

Ambrosetti describes this ceramics as having homogenous engraving stylish, in few cases the piece border and the upper part of the belied shape were decorated with paint.

We may highlight that red, white and black ornaments were usually applied to earthenware.

Clay was correctly prepared, and it was cooked in open air or covering the objects with branches and wastes to get slow cooks avoiding cracks due to direct exposure to flame.

Analysis of found fragments shows geometric, spherical, open, symmetrical and simple forms. Necks, handles and spouts are uncommon.

According to Ambrosetti, this people also constructed the pieces overlapping and pressing fine clay strips, that were hand modeled later, either inside and outside in big vessels. Found fragments were normally engraved, with thin borders and medium cook. They use to break the pottery each time they change living habitat, this shows how easy to renew the utensils was for them once they were installed in the new dwelling.

Investigations carried on by Dr. Luis María Torres since 1896, produced a systematic study of the aboriginal ceramics in the Paraná Delta that allows us to deepen the ideas detailed above. This brings us a question: What was the contribution of those findings to our knowledge about them?

In the archeological sites in middle Paraná area, three mounds were found; several reasons show that they were totally constructed by men:

- In the base there are layers of earth sand and loess.
- Cooking wastes and bones were found.
- Compared with what was found in other archeological sites these remnants were not abundant.
- Some few objects done by men were also found.
- The characteristics and state of conservation of the various bone instruments indicate there are not too old, also the sharp defined cuts seem to be done by metal tools.
- The lack of human skeletons proves that the population had to emigrate short after been installed, remaining there for a short period.

In general, bones remnants, stone tools and weapons, bone weapons, pottery and metal plates were found in each mound. The following lines detail what was found in each site.

Rio Carabelas, mound 1

The pottery collection is represented by painted platters, furnace cooked, painted zoomorphic handles cooked in open air and engraved and painted fragments.

What are the characteristics of that pottery?

They were hand modeled. Platters have open forms, strong convex walls, with straight borders and rounded on a solid base.

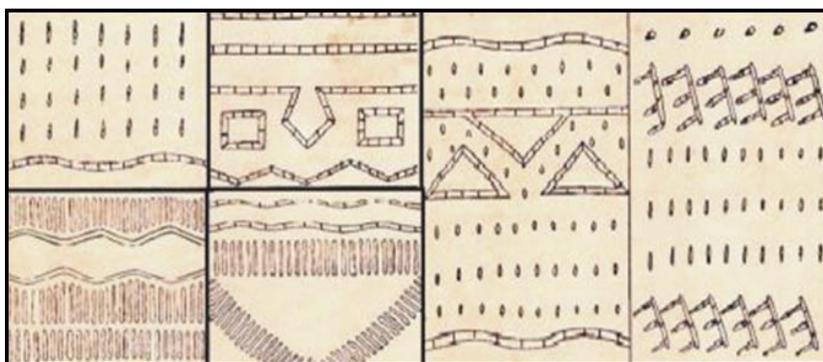
Small vessels or liquid containers that were continually handled had curved or rectangular handles, they were not carefully shaped, they seem out of proportion and with a rough finish.

Remains with images of different animal species were found in the mound. They represent tiger skins with rings or dots printed in the whole figure, Birds feathers were drawn as long and short lines.

Found ceramic pieces show that they decorated on cooked clay. They first worked on a white base, on top of that they distributed two zones of red clay, one on the edge and the second on the belly area, to fix color they most probably used heat.

Engraved fragments show a geometrical drawing with carefully calculated spaces y rectilinear layout, in rhythmic bands with inserted meanders and a correctly and firm stroke.

Geometric and rhythmic motifs in engraved ceramics

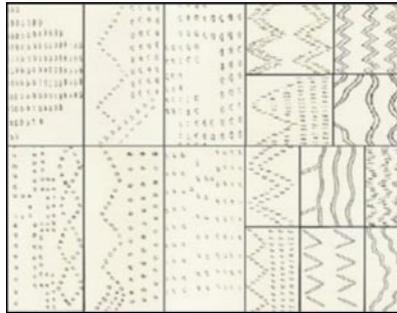


Mound 1 at Paraná Guazú, Middle Delta

Ceramics found in this place was mostly plain, engravings are very rare. Five big fragments were un-earthed; the reconstruction showed that they fit as belonging to one vessel, allowing us to appreciate shape and dimensions.

These remnants belonged to an inferior cultural, almost primitive prehistorical level. They belong to a tribe of gatherer, hunters and fishermen. They are recognized by their homogeneous anthropological characters and their adaptability to benefit from the scarce elements that their environment provided

Display of the geometrical archaic design with rhythmical order, semi schematic and with basic Combinations



Mound 2 at Paraná Guazú, Middle Paraná

Destruction was such in this mound, that even if more than 500 pieces were excavated, we did not find even three pieces of the same pot so it was impossible to reconstruct a complete vessel. The pieces were homogenous as recognized in the way they were manufactured and adorned, our impression is that they were intentionally destroyed may be due to a migration to another habitat, habit that we mentioned be-fore.

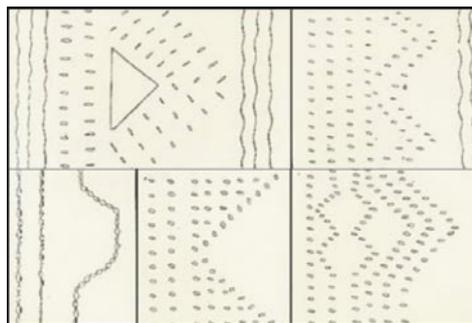
Ceramics were of small dimensions predominantly of open forms and some of sub globular shape.

Their decorating style was made of lines and dotted lines rarely curves.

Vases were decorated with a simple geometrical style, applied in not too wide bands, usually applied in the upper belly near the borders.

No zoomorphic figures were found

Display of the ornamental elements of the engraved ceramics with rhythmical order, geometrical Motifs



Ambrosetti and Dr. Luis María Torres provide us with the cultural capital we mentioned before and it is the starting point of our work in this, our contemporary period.

How to give new meaning to the aborigines and its culture in this land? Modern ceramic expressions, de-tracted sometimes in pursuit of modernity, carries us back to that “POTTER WORLD” that is part of our past but that is also “PRESENT”.

In San Nicolás, my home city, in the 250 anniversary of its foundation, the church authorities proposed to carry out an artistic project to celebrate it and called me to perform it. I called several architects and art-ists closely related to my work.

The work of art was an eighteen meters high and eight meters wide mural placed in an external lateral wall of San Nicolás Cathedral.

What did we want to emphasize in this project?

THE PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE OF OUR CITY INTEGRATED BY A NON ENDING PIL-GRIMAGE OF MEN HAVING THE CHURCH AS THEIR WITNESS.

How did we get it?

We worked on a ceramic coating of the dimensions already detailed, using over glaze enamels and gold and ceramic glazing

Past was represented with the designs found in the aboriginal ceramic fragments, following carefully its simple ornamental design, homogenous style, correctly done enhancing the motif repetition and geometry of the design.

Present was represented with a plan of the actual city grouping strategic elements in the design.

The future was symbolized by the only certainty towards the future in which we all agree: The presence of mankind.

In the center of the composition, metal pieces (the selection of this material is due to the known development of steel making industry in the area) represent the sacred fire or cultural melting pot where copper pieces represent temporary inflows that feed the crucible of past cultures to consolidate the present and rise to the future.

A ceramic sculpture representing San Nicolás, the patron saint of the city with the sun, generator of life, as his frame at the top of the composition, summits the artwork



Layout of the MURAL AT THE CATHEDRAL OF SAN NICOLAS

San Nicolás has no tradition in ceramics as it is an industrial city.

Ceramic interest begun in various workshops more that 30 years ago starting serial production of commercial elements, during this period some workshops turned to artistic production.

How did they do that?

Assembling studying and working teams, developing to the maximum their work, opening it to the world through expositions, contests and a variety on national and international events

The creation of the "Escuela Provincial de Cerámica" during the 80's was a breaking point in this activity as it allowed that artistic ceramic creation permeated the different levels of our society.

Many young people, through ceramics, walk through the art road, new languages, new experiences, multiple expressions....

