

## Daughters of Clay, Chile.

In the village of Quinchamalí in central Chile, women carry on an age-old tradition that continues to model daily life.

In early April, autumn takes hold of this region and transforms it with cooler temperatures and the yellow ochre colors that dominate the landscape. Thousands of leaves drift from the poplars and cover Loceras de Quinchamalí the roads, giving a decidedly pastoral feel to the scenery. This is the time when the people of Quinchamalí stream into the vineyards for the harvest.

This area of Chile is known for its fine stock of wines produced from the rulo, or dry farmed, vineyards. It is also famous for its cherries and for a host of other fruit like watermelon and tomatoes, known internationally for their aroma and flavor. But inside the houses, another activity is going on. Like a jealously guarded secret, it leaves its particular seal on the people of this village. It is the work of the loceras of Quinchamalí. Loceras are potters, women who extract red mud from the nearby hillsides and dedicate themselves to the feverish creation of thousands of clay pots and figurines.

I arrive over muddy roads at the home of one of the loceras. Anjibda Smith Vielma. She is one of the oldest potters and one of the most respected among the small group of women who perpetuate this Loceras de Quinchamalí, Chile rustic art. Her modest but welcoming home is on the outskirts of the village. Though she could use her land to plant wheat or other crops, she says proudly that she prefers to “live from the earth, from the clay”. Accompanied by her husband, Don Floriano, she passes on to others what is today the noblest tradition of the region.

“I have a clay mine in my own backyard. You just have to know how to find the right kind, the clay you can really use”, she says as she throws her braid over her shoulders and digs out shovelfuls of dirt with a spade.

The aroma of fresh herbs –rosemary, mint, fennel- spread like a giant veil over the hills. Vielma carefully accommodates the reddish-black mud in the sacks that she has ready in her little horse-drawn cart. As she stops to catch her breath, she explains. “I’ve worked with clay since I was a little girl. It’s like I’ve always known how to give shape to the plates and platters I make. Before, in the olden days, my mother and I would go and sell our crockery in the nearby villages like Bulnes and Chillán. We traveled by horse and cart through the hills over the muddy roads and around the bushes to get to the place where we traded our wares”.

She moves forward several feet and unloads her precious, heavy cargo. This is women’s work by tradition, but Don Floriano labors alongside his wife, removing impurities from the clay and leaving it creamy and malleable so that she can work with it more easily.

My first visit is a short one. Most potters consider their work to be personal, almost private, and I want to be respectful. Perhaps their feeling is a vestige of the past when being a potter was considered less than dignified work, when the making of clay “trinkets” was associated with the lowest castes of the colonial world. The mestizos of the new world once said that it wasn’t seemly “to work with mud.” Today this has changed for many loceras, and visitors can even find workshops where they’re invited to observe pots being created. It’s value added for the tourist. But whether it is for reasons of professional secrecy or because of the stigmas from the past, the first approach with an artist should be made carefully.

I return a few days later and find Vielma sitting in a chair at the doorway of her house with a fistful of clay in her hands. This amazing woman is skillfully giving shape to a small object, casually pushing Loceras de Quinchamali her long gray braid of hair out of the way from time to time as she works. The clay she is kneading has recently been removed from a plastic bag that has conserved its moisture. She is molding what looks like a little jug that will soon take the form of a mate cup. Sitting next to her, I can see how the fine clay begins to be transformed into a figure of ornamental value. Better yet, it’s useful, even as it maintains a profound aesthetic sense. It looks so easy, but an amateur would take hours to do this, and with far less desirable results.

“The first thing you have to do,” she explains, “is to clean the clay by stepping on it with your feet. After you make a piece like the one you’re holding in your hands right now, you let it rest for a few days. Then you polish it and scrape it with these tools.” She shows me a washbowl full of little stones of various sizes, knives without handles, seashells, and all kinds of metal instruments and wooden sticks. “A few days later, when the piece is set, you have to scrape it again. Then you make the decorative drawings and you put on the handles. You let it rest again, and then you get to the fun part. You have to put horse dung on the fire, and you have to cook the pot until it gets a good reddish hue”.

This part of the work turns out to be complicated, since we have to go into a small room where the smoke is so dense we can hardly see the pots that are just inches from the bonfire. “Now take the Loceras de Quinchamali pitchfork and bring out one of the bowls. Be careful and don’t touch it, because we don’t have a hospital nearby. “My eyes are stinging from the smoke, but I manage to move the bowl away from the burning fire and leave it on the floor. Soon it will be covered in straw, which will give the pot a black color as it burns. “If you just let it cool in the air, it will stay red, like the color of the clay,” she says.

This instructive class, though my eyes are still watering and irritated, Vielma takes me into the heart of Quinchamalí to visit Buenaventura Ulloa, who seems to have been designated to tell others about the town’s culture. (She unfortunately died last November 2005). As we walk through her garden, shaded by a large wisteria vine, Ulloa tells me that this tradition of pottery making originated in the region’s Mapuche settlements. The tradition continued under Spanish colonial rule, when inhabitants began to make large clay pots for storing grain at harvest time. Some of these enormous crocks can still be found in the old storehouses scattered throughout the area. Initially, the loceras made kitchenware: bowls, pitchers, and plates. But as the years passed, the women became aware of a demand for decorative pieces. Today, the workshops in

women's homes in the hills of Quinchamalí are full of ornamental pieces in the shape of chickens, pigs, and turkeys.

In the memory of each artisan is a grandmother, a mother, or an aunt who labored daily with clay. The home, the workshop, the domestic space where they grew up gave them an early awareness of Loceras de Quinchamalí the labor assigned to women. Little girls were to emulate the women they saw, dividing their time between making pots and fulfilling the reproductive duties of the household, raising and feeding children. It's easy to see how the grandmother and the mother created and modeled not only clay figurines and pieces, but also the idea of what it meant "to be a woman" in Quinchamalí. As in other societies, the functions inherent in a role are not learned by listening to "rational" explanations. People learn by imitating others. The work is done according to tradition, because the mother, the grandmother, and all of the women in the past have always done it. Nobody teaches anyone to form a pitcher, to polish, or to paint. They learn it by copying body language, emulating gestures. "I learned to work by watching", say Práxedes Caro. "Your hands learn, really. It's like learning to Loceras de Quinchamalí read; if you have a good memory, you learn fast. I used to help my mother polish the post when I was ten or twelve years old. Then I told myself I was going to help her to paint, and I painted one. But I erased it quickly because I was afraid she would punish me. Later, she let me paint, and then I started to make the pots, too. I took the clay in my hands and I learned fast".

Olga Vielma is another "daughter of clay", as she calls herself. Her house is very simple, but her earthenware art may be the best of all. She is ancient. Her disfigured hands bear the mark of her labor; her fingers are cracked from the years of work with the biting dirt. With affection, she begins to show me some of her masterpieces. She disappears into her house, emerging each time with another pot to display in the light of the porch. She only makes crockery, since custom has it that others produce the ornamental pieces....

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