

## TYPES OF CERAMIC ART IN THE VALLEY OF MEXICO<sup>1</sup>

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**I**N the following remarks I intend to give a brief résumé of my work on the types of pottery found in the Valley of Mexico.

This work consists on the one hand of a typological description of the different forms, and on the other hand of a study of certain artistic problems presented by one of these types; namely, the so-called "Culhuacan" pottery. The archaeological material on which these studies are based was collected by Professor Franz Boas in the years 1911-12, while he was in charge of the International School of American Archaeology in Mexico City.

One of the most interesting features of the excavations of this school consists in the fact that sites were unearthed which showed a succession of different cultural layers. In European archaeology it is a very common occurrence to find one cultural layer lying over one or more layers of other, different cultures. Knossos on Crete, and Troy, are classical examples of sites in the Old World, where as many as six or seven cultural strata are found superimposed; but in American archaeology we have seldom been so fortunate as to find any clear cases of superposition, and we are thus deprived of the safest and most convenient method of establishing the data of relative chronology. Under these conditions, the stratified sites excavated in the Valley of Mexico are of especial importance. In a site a few miles northwest of the City of Mexico, at San Miguel Amantla, three distinct cultural strata were found. The types of these can be identified with types of specimens found in other parts of the Valley of Mexico: consequently we now have a fairly well-defined picture before our minds of the sequence of three culture periods in this area.

The latest period, which is represented by the topmost stratum, is that of the Aztec culture. This was the one that the Spaniards

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met at the time of the Conquista, and which they destroyed. The Aztecs were a Nahuatl-speaking people, who came from the north and overran a people with a much higher culture; namely, the one-time mythical, but now historically rehabilitated Toltecs.

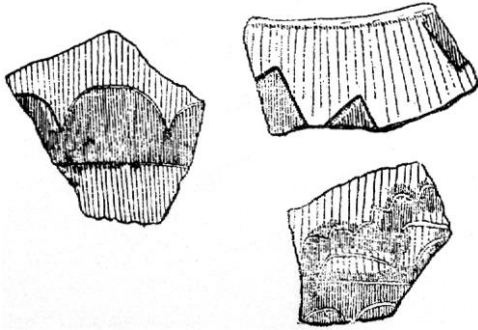


FIG. 1.—Archaic pottery with incised lines and painted surface designs.

The culture of these people is represented by the second cultural stratum of San Miguel Amantla, and we therefore speak of the archaeological specimens of this group as belonging to the Toltec type or the type of Teotihuacan. The latter term refers to another site which belongs to the Toltec culture. The duration of this cultural period must have been very great. This is shown by the great depth of the stratum at San Miguel. The third and deepest stratum of this site leads us back still farther into antiquity. The remains found in this layer consist chiefly of potsherds. For want of a better name, we refer to this culture simply as the "archaic type" or as the "*tipo de los cerros*" (*cerro*, "hill"), since the same type of pottery is also found on the hills of the Valley of Mexico. The stratum of this archaic type seems to merge gradually into that of the Toltec stratum, specimens of either type being in some cases intermixed in the intermediary layers. From this we conclude that the advance of the Toltec culture over the archaic one was presumably not cataclysmic, but took place gradually, by means of a process of absorption. The relation between the Toltec and the Aztec cultures must have been quite different, since between the layers of these two cultures there is a sharp break in the site at San Miguel. There is no transitional zone, as in the former case.

My work consisted in a typological study of the different kinds of pottery found at San Miguel and at other sites in the Valley of Mexico, and in determining to which one of the three the various types belong.

I shall not enter into a detailed description of the various types,

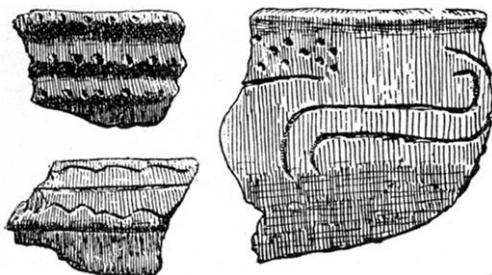


FIG. 2.—Archaic pottery with incised designs.

but shall simply mention a few of the more salient features, and illustrate them by means of a number of drawings.

There are a number of distinct types of pottery that must all be relegated to the archaic culture. Four of them seem to be the most characteristic.

First, we have very numerous—represented a type of brown pottery which is ornamented by thin incised lines and broad red lines, the latter following very unevenly the incised outlines (fig. 1).

Second, there is a type of heavy pottery which is decorated outside with series of indentations made with a dull instrument, probably the end of a stick (fig. 2).

The third type is represented by pottery covered with a white slip, and decorated with incised designs (fig. 3).

Finally, there is a type ornamented with frets (fig. 4) which are

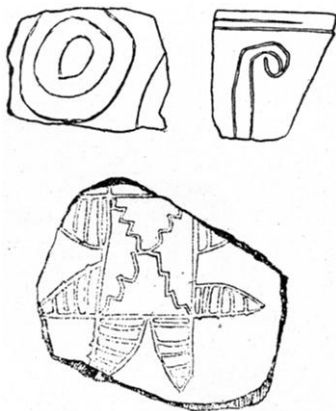


FIG. 3.—Archaic pottery with white slip.

typologically very similar to those of the prehistoric Pueblo type of pottery. This similarity is interesting from the point of view of the generally accepted theory that there was an old cultural substratum common to the cultures of Mexico and to the culture of our Southwest.

Judging from specimens found in other parts of Mexico, there can be little doubt that the archaic or pre-Toltec culture had a very

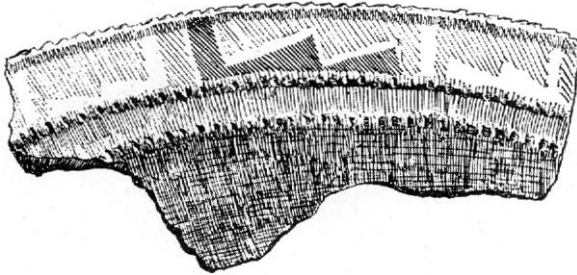


FIG. 4.—Archaic pottery with painted designs.

wide distribution. Professor Boas believes “that a technical culture fairly uniform in its fundamental forms extended in early times from the Pacific Ocean to the Valley of Mexico, and northward to the State of Zacatecas.”

The Toltec culture-period is represented by a number of distinct types of pottery, of which we may regard five as the most characteristic.

The first type consists of yellow pottery, painted red on the out-

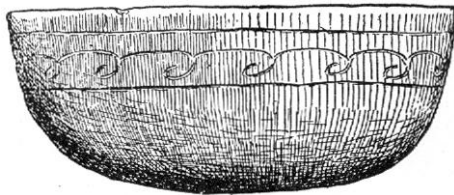


FIG. 5.—Toltec pottery with incised spiral designs.

side of the rim, and with a band of incised spirals in this red area (fig. 5).

The second kind of pottery is characterized by long vertical

grooves running down the sides of the vessels. This feature sometimes gives them a squash-shaped appearance (fig. 6).

The outside surface of the third type of pottery is covered with crude impressions, probably made with the end of a stick (fig. 7).

The fourth type is characterized by horizontal bands of elab-



FIG. 6.—Toltec gourd-shaped pottery. FIG. 7.—Toltec pottery with incised designs.

orate frets in relief, made by pressing a stamp with the negative design on it into the wet clay (fig. 8).

The fifth type shows straight sides, stands on three feet, and is decorated by a series of clay pellets attached to the lower rim of the sides of the vessel (fig. 9). Besides these, there are many elaborate types with attached moulded and painted ornaments.

The third and last culture-period in the Valley of Mexico—

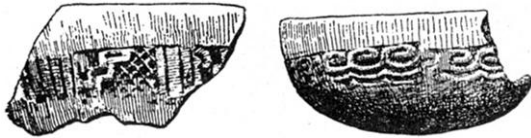


FIG. 8.—Toltec pottery with stamped designs.

namely, that of the Aztecs—is represented by various types of pottery. One of the most important types is a yellowish-red ware with designs painted on one side of the vessel with black paint. This pottery is either bowl-shaped or plate-shaped. The vessels very frequently stand on three conical feet. The bottom of the plates is decorated by intricate painted designs which are stylistically analogous to the Aztec hieroglyphs. This yellowish-red Aztec type of pottery may be easily subdivided into two sub-types. The one is light in color, and is decorated with fine lines (fig. 10);

the other is darker, and the lines of the designs are much heavier (fig. 11). The designs of the first type are comparatively simple, and consist of parallel lines, circles with a dot in the middle, simple spirals, and series of dots. The designs of the second sub-type are

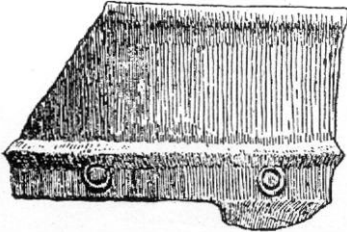


FIG. 9.—Toltec pottery with moulded ornamentation.



FIG. 10.—Aztec pottery with painted designs.

far more intricate, and show a much greater heterogeneity of form-compositions.

Professor Boas excavated a site at Culhuacan where the two sub-types of the Aztec yellowish-red occur, but with a great preponderance of the latter type; while at other sites (for instance, in the region northeast of Mexico City) the former type is by far the more common one. Culhuacan is a few miles south of the City of

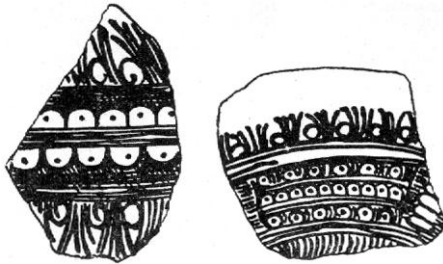


FIG. 11.—Aztec pottery with painted designs.

Mexico, and near the lakes. The excavations at this site brought to light great quantities of potsherds. This material has been divided among the National Museum of Mexico, the University Museum of Philadelphia, and the Peabody Museum of Harvard University.

The sherds of the dark, heavy-lined type found at Culhuacan

are exceedingly interesting, and, as I shall show presently, offer certain specific problems in primitive art. It is important to notice that this sub-type is doubtlessly a local variation of the yellowish-red Aztec type of pottery. While its general shapes and its texture prove it to be typical Aztec, it presents certain ornamental features characteristic of the site of Culhuacan, which distinguish it from the Aztec pottery found at other sites. Such local developments are familiar to the student of primitive art, and are interesting from the point of view of the dynamic evolution of art styles. In the present case we have agreed to call this Aztec sub-type the "Culhuacan" type. The predominating characteristic of this pottery is determined by the fact that its designs are executed with such great rapidity that, instead of presenting the regularity of execution which we usually associate with geometric designs, they show the same characteristics that handwriting ordinarily does. That is to say, the potter, instead of adhering to the ideal forms of his designs, executed them swiftly, in a style characteristic of his own individual motor-habits, just as in the case of our handwriting. When we write, we do not *draw* an *a*, *b*, or *c*, and so on, the way we learned to make them in school; but each individual writes them in a way characteristic of himself, and with more or less variation from the ideal form of the letters. Exactly the same thing happens in the design-elements of the Culhuacan pottery. These design-elements are not very numerous. Some of them occur over and over again on the different vessels. They are not only few in number, but also very simple in form. They are of such a nature, that a comparison of their forms on different pots readily reveals the ideal prototypes, just as the *a*'s and the *b*'s in the handwriting of different persons are not at all the same, but still all are derived from the *a*'s and the *b*'s of our schooldays as the standard prototypes. Several of the reconstructed ideal forms of the Culhuacan designs are shown in the following drawings (fig. 12). They are quite simple, and are geometrical. On the pots themselves, however, they never present the regularity of these ideal forms, but show many variations, and always in such a way that there can be no doubt as to the ideal forms which the potter had in mind while executing the designs.

One of the most frequent patterns is the following, of which I give here a number of variants (fig. 13). Similar variations may be traced for all of the other patterns.

Interesting from the same point of view is the execution of a fringe which is frequently painted on the rim of an ornamental band. The standard form of this fringe is V-shaped; but often this is simplified, as shown in fig. 14. And the whole range of forms intermediary between the full and the reduced form of this fringe may be found in the collection of Culhuacan pottery.

From the fact that we find the same designs executed differently on different potsherds, it is safe to conclude that the individual pot-

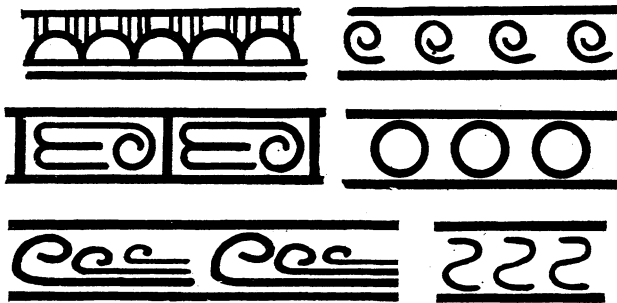


FIG. 12.—Reconstructed elements of decoration on Culhuacan pottery.

ters, in the process of painting with great rapidity, have developed motor-habits characteristic of themselves. We can even go so far as to attribute certain sherds to the workmanship of one and the same potter, just as we recognize the handwriting of a certain individual. On account of the immense amount of material found at Culhuacan, it is possible to conclude that a limited number of potters were at work in Culhuacan who all used the same set of designs and developed a local type of Aztec pottery common to all of them, but who at the same time impressed the individuality of their own motor-habits on their work. This individuality is conditioned by the hasty execution of the designs, the Culhuacan potters evidently producing large quantities of their vessels for the market. These circumstances have led to a sort of factory or mass production which makes the designs comparable to hastily-executed handwriting.



In this brief summary I have tried to give an exceedingly sketchy picture of the problems that archaeological specimens may offer to the anthropologist. The concrete material I have presented points towards scientific methods that are very diverse in their application, and lead to different types of culture-historical understanding. We have seen how, on the one hand, an *extensive* method works out

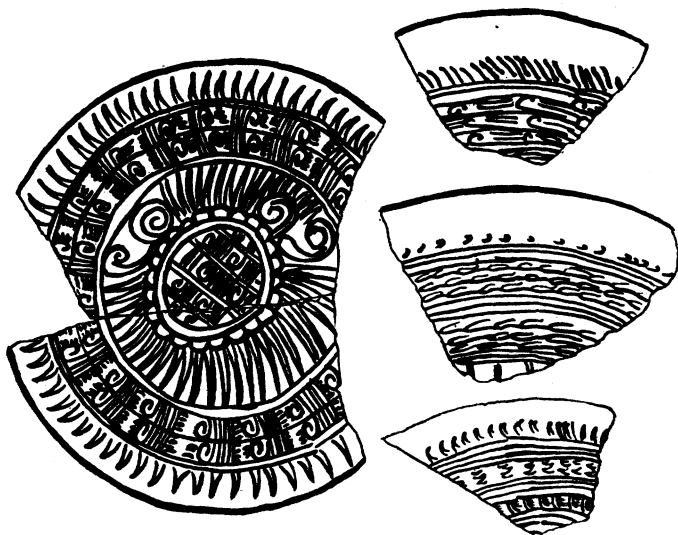


FIG. 13.—Painted Culhuacan pottery.

a typological classification of the pottery forms, and a general characterization of the different culture-periods, by their pertinent artistic styles; and then we have seen how, on the other hand, an *intensive* method leads to an understanding of the specific conditions under which a certain local type of art may develop. The inferences that may be drawn from the archaeological material of Culhuacan are really of a psychological nature, inasmuch as they give us an understanding of the concrete conditions that determine the forms of the designs, and reveal the similarity of the process to our own motor-habits. The psychological nature of this intensive method stands over against the formal character of the extensive method of typological classification. The two methods supplement each other. The method of studying the productions of primitive art intensively or psychologically, of studying the con-

crete conditions under which they have arisen, is very young in anthropology. It consists in an effort to go beyond the usual general statements about primitive art, to go deeper into the problems wherever the nature of the available material makes it possible. This tendency is developing very strongly in American anthro-

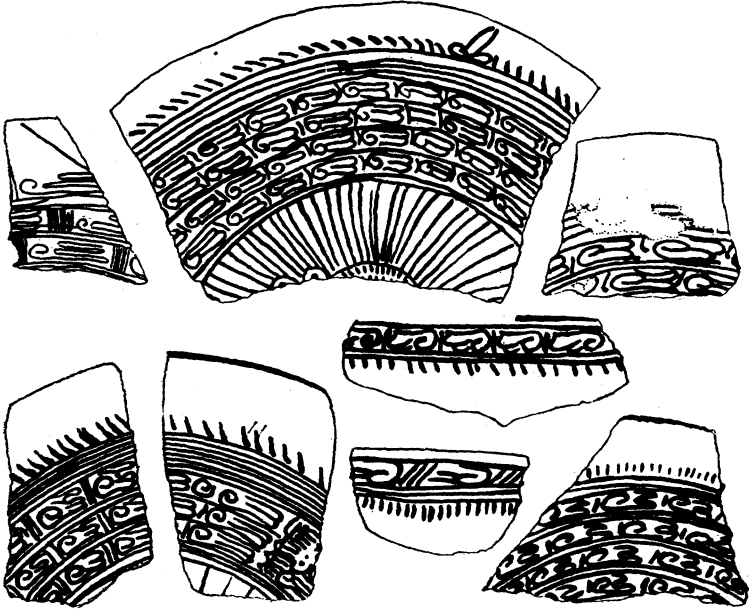


FIG. 14.—Painted Culhuacan pottery.

pology, and is inspired and insisted on by Franz Boas. We have heard much in late years about the relation of anthropology to psychology. Our discussion of this subject has, I fear, often been too abstract and general to make it fruitful either for the anthropologist or for the psychologist. A much better method for mutual understanding is, I think, to illustrate by concrete examples what we mean by the psychological point of view in anthropology. The material alluded to in the above report presents a clear example of this aspect. Within the extensive problem of artistic types in the Valley of Mexico we discover in the local type of Culhuacan a possibility of going deeper and studying intensively the specific conditions and the specific processes that led to the development of an individual art style.