

- **Where are they made?:** Ráquira, Boyacá.
- **Region:** Andean Region.
- **Material:** clay.



Ceramic bells from Ráquira /Photograph: Mario Carvajal/

One of the most representative activities of pre-Columbian peoples was the making of pottery. Water, corn, and salt were kept in pots, pitchers, or vessels of several kinds. A variety of pots was used for cooking and fermenting chicha, their corn drink.

From ancient times, clay vessels have been used in the everyday chores of society. However, a certain magical and religious value was conferred to these utensils, since ceramics has been considered the union of the four elements of the universe: water, air, earth, and fire.

The Colombian town that specializes in artisan ceramics is Ráquira, in the Department of Boyacá

Raquirá, a town in the Department of Boyacá, is the Colombian municipality that specializes in artisan pottery. Ráquira means “City of Pots” in the Chibcha language. When the Spanish conquerors arrived there and saw the diversity of ceramic utensils and the great skill of the Indians, they gave it the name of “Village of Pot Makers”.

Nowadays, every square meter in Ráquira is covered by pottery made in the traditional way by the hands of experts who take clumps of clay and turn them into pitchers, piggy banks, and all kinds of utensils.

Materials

The following types of clay are used in Ráquira: black clay, which contains a considerable percentage of coal; yellow clay; and red clay, which contains iron oxide.



Ceramic piggy banks from Ráquira /Photograph Mario Carvajal/

The mining of clay is carried out periodically by men, normally twice a year during the dry seasons; that is, from June to August and from December to February. At other times, the mines are flooded.

Other materials used in pottery making are the following: sand from the region's rivers and streams and mineral coal that comes from the Guachetá mines in the Department of Cundinamarca.

Three Traditional Kinds of Ráquira Pottery

Utilitarian sand crockery: This is a highly resistant type of crockery on account of its high sand content. It is used for pots, bowls, casseroles, and round, shallow pans called pailas. **Maíz tostao (roast corn) crockery:** This is about making toys and miniature crockery as small as a grain of corn. It used to be a ceremonial kind of crockery used as an offering for obtaining good luck and success in jobs. Plates, cups, and whistles in the shape of a hen are good examples. **Finger crockery:** It is used mainly to serve food to children, but it has other utilitarian functions: ashtrays, piggy banks, candlesticks, liquor flasks, little jugs, and containers for candy. Examples of its esthetic function are little horses, crêche figurines, human figures, and small religious relief panels.

More than 500 families from Ráquira are dedicated to pottery and working with clay and mud.

Today, thanks to the enormous diversity of ceramic handicrafts and a renowned school for artisans, over five hundred families are devoted to working with clay; Ráquira has become the ceramics capital of Colombia.

Besides the traditional folk ceramics, such as human and animal figures, the traditional Ráquira horses, crêches, dolls, and kitchen utensils, the pottery makers design new products that reflect

the needs and desires of buyers: flower pots, tea and coffee sets, decorative utensils, for example. Their imagination seems to have no limits.

If you like the pottery made in Ráquira, perhaps you would like:

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