

THE POTTER'S ART

Text and Illustration

by

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Some months after the final hectic days of salvage excavations at the Hull Bay site, St. Thomas, the heavy rains came. Since the land at Hull Bay was in the process of condemnation by the local government the extensive test pits were left open until the government took possession. But the rains caused havoc with the once straight walls and sandy bottom levels. This is the story of the discovery of a possibly unique piece of decorated Indian pottery, uncovered by rain in a temporarily abandoned pit, and recovered by a Virgin Island Archaeological Society member, Paul "Driftwood" Querrard.

I personally find Driftwood a wonderfully unique character, and a superb collector. A third or fourth generation Virgin Islander, Driftwood has, since childhood, picked up old bottles, shells, coins, swords, and bits of historical and Indian pottery. Everything seems to interest him. When the call came from Driftwood that he had a "nice" piece of pottery, it was out to his house above Magens Bay immediately.

"It's a blowfish bowl," said a proud Mr. Querrard.

Indeed it looked like a blowfish design, and he had a color postcard of a blowfish to back up his claim.

"Where did you find this?" I asked.

"Not telling now," said our man. Driftwood can be stubborn at times, but I knew that he could be generous with his finds as well, and meant to give this piece to the Virgin Islands Archaeological Society for display. He simply didn't want to tell me right away where he had found it. It was his surprise to tell me that it was found in our poor rain washed abandoned pit at Hull Bay. It was a pleasant surprise.

Zoomorphic representations on our local Taino ceramics are not rare, but they are not common either. Throughout the Greater and Lesser Antilles, the zoomorphic figures these Indians favored are similar and easily recognized by their finders. There are frogs, pelicans, the fruit-eating bat, the "catch-all" category of "dog", the turtle, lizard, fish, manatee, and shark; in fact, most species the Indians saw, or ate, are represented. All kinds of anthropomorphic representations of their Gods, or themselves, are found as well.

But, with only casual, and admittedly amateur research methods, I have yet to learn of another "blowfish" represented. I asked several noted archaeologists about this "blowfish" motif at the Sixth International Congress For The Study of Pre-Columbian Cultures of The Lesser Antilles held last July in Guadaloupe. Among others, Dr. Earle Kirby from St. Vincent, Henri Petitjean-Roget from Martinique, and Kurt Fischer from Haiti had never seen a "blowfish" that they could remember. So perhaps Driftwood did come up with a truly unique piece after all, if we were right in quickly assuming it was a blowfish!

What the general public knows as a blowfish, usually seen dried and inflated as a hanging decoration or made into a lamp, and found throughout the Caribbean and Central America native craft shops, is really a Porcupinefish, or perhaps the smaller Spiny Puffer, of the family 'DIODONTIDAE' or Diodon.

Normally the spines of *Diodon* lie nearly flat against the body, the sharp tips directed posteriorly. After inflation they are fully erect and present a formidable appearance to enemies. Found in mangrove channels and on reefs, the *Diodon* fishes feed on mollusks (especially gastropods), sea urchins, crabs and hermit crabs, all of which it crushes with its strong jaws. It has round puffy eyes, and soft looking puffy lips or snout. That this family of fish swam in our waters centuries ago for the Indian to see, can be inferred by the fact that they still swim here.

Our Indian potter, in depicting the "blowfish," chose not to give the viewer just a profile of the *Diodon*. He or she wished to display more, and on the side of a large open, yet very shallow bowl, the potter gave us the face frontally, and both left and right "puffed" sides. As an amateur potter, I find this technique fascinating and imaginative to extreme. The bowl fragment, of red unpainted clay, is relatively crude, as is some of the accompanying incised decoration. But the remaining fish is superb. The two "puffed" sides, opposite the face, are extended 1.6 centimeters from the sidewall of 8 millimeters thickness. From the accompanying illustration the reader can see the two large applied sides with concentric oval incisions around them and the central gash which outlines and defines these two puffed "sides." Between these are the doughnut-shaped eyes and a full lipped mouth, again with a gash depicting the openness of the mouth. It is simple, direct, and very imaginative, yet executed with a minimum of detailed sculpting.

In making this fish figure, the potter used only the fingers and possibly two small sticks. A stick, less than 3 mm. thick and cut square on the end, made all the decorative incisions, followed with a downward right-handed motion into the middle of the eye appliques to form the pupils. A new tool was then taken up, a flat stick with a "V" cut end, and forcibly punched into the "sides" to a depth of 6 mms. The mouth was formed with the same tool, but was pushed in on the left side, then scraped out to the right. The only remaining decorations visible are a series of zig-zag incisions lightly incised to the left of the bowl fragment, and are so crudely and lightly "drawn" that they appear to be an indecisive afterthought. One can assume that they appeared on both sides of the fish figure and went around the bowl to possibly a matching figure on the opposite side of the bowl.

Paul "Driftwood" Querrard continues to keep a sharp lookout for collectables. His reason for being a member of V.I.A.S. is that he is interested in the Virgin Islands' past. It is through his efforts and those of many other dedicated members that our Society works. Amateurs and professionals are continuing to work here, side by side, so that greater knowledge of the Indian and his life can be exposed to the public at large.

