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# Indian Decorative Designs

PEDRO J. LEMOS

*Editor of The School Arts Magazine*



Pueblo Woman  
and Indian Pottery

**A**MERICAN designers, for many years have studied design sources of the Old World for inspiration and guidance in producing designs for American industrial art requirements. Egyptian Grecian, and Renaissance sources were rigorously studied and rigidly copied. The result was that American homes became decorated with forms and motifs, excellent in source and fitted to the land of their birth, but unrelated to a new period and in most instances unadaptable to a different background.

As archaeologists and anthropologists brought gradually to light, the architectural and utilitarian objects used by the earlier inhabitants of North and South America, a new source of American design became evident. It was found that beautiful enrichments of various materials had been made by the Incas of Peru, the Toltecs, the Mayans, and Aztecs of Mexico; that the Indian tribes of Central America had wrought wonderful gold ornaments; that the Indians of the time preceding Columbus' discovery of America had produced beautiful forms of pottery as well as weavings. They found that the Indians of present periods were using interesting and unique design symbols derived from nature and that these motifs were valuable for American designers.

Artists in America and Europe were quick to recognize the value of the material. Designers and artists of European countries have traveled, visiting and sketching many of the Aztec and Mayan ruins for their architectural motifs, and museums the world over have gathered the woven textile fragments and pottery, because of the value that they impart to the decorative arts. This contribution from the early art craftsmen of America gave to the world a decidedly new note in decorative enrichment.

Where the early arts of the Old World had, through years of refinement and elaboration, to-

gether with the ornate period of the Renaissance, become over-intricate, the arts of the early Americas come on the scene in contrast with a bold, almost crude, but refreshing simplicity.

As years have gone by and the art of the Indian has waned in output, because of lessening numbers, and their intermingling with white men, the appreciation of their handicrafts has increased. As a step toward preserving the decorative arts among the Indians several of the American museums, notably the one of Santa Fe, New Mexico, have encouraged the Indians to continue their arts. By creating markets and offering premiums and prizes at annual exhibitions, their fine arts are being fostered.

It has been found that among the aborigines and the primitive peoples most of their decorations come from natural forms. These forms may become so symbolic that their source in nature may hardly be traced but the abstract form has been found by them and more fittingly applied to their objects of use.

The primitive tools used by these primitive workers undoubtedly have guided them by necessity to use the fewest lines possible, and to decorate their utensils and weapons in the simplest ways. This has resulted in motifs that are well worth studying by the modern artists as examples of simplicity and restraint. The great fault of much of the modern design and the tendency of the design student is to think in terms of intricate subjects and elaborate surface decorations.

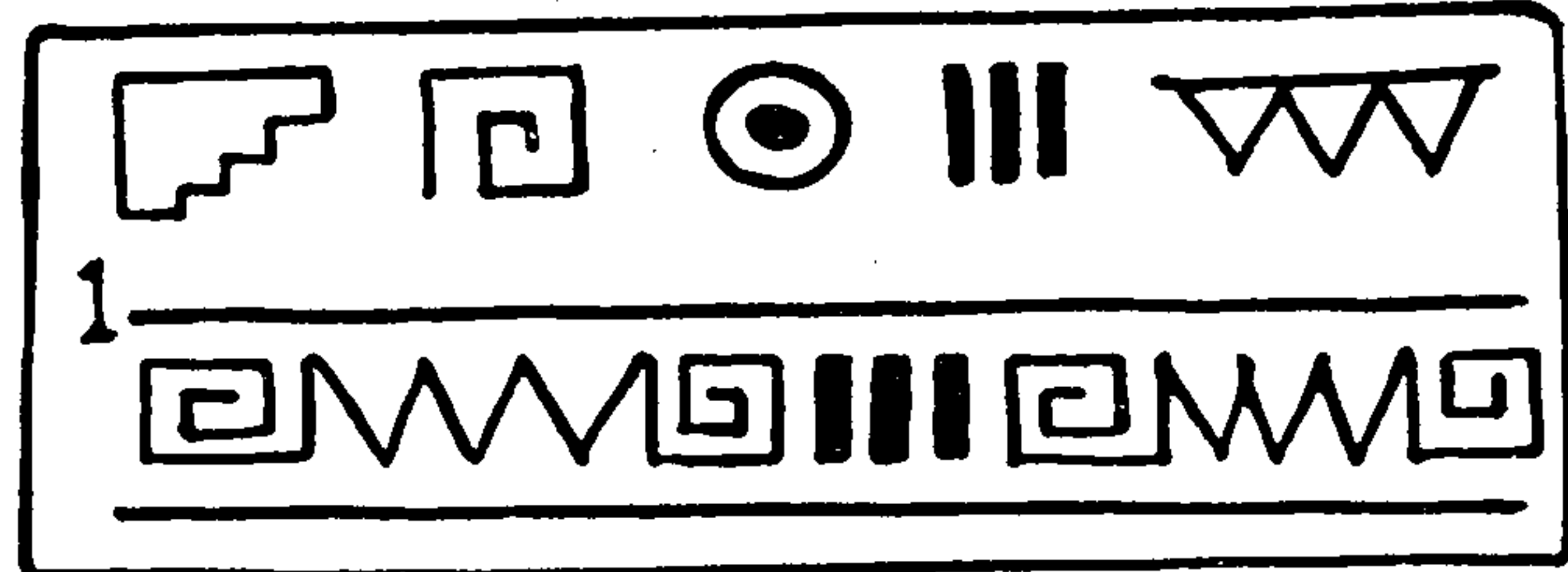
The good designer never defeats the surface of the object decorated with the decoration that is applied. He knows that the design which indicates not only width and height, but also thickness, cannot become a unified surface decoration. He knows that a subject that appears to have superimposed parts cannot but appear to be in perspective upon the surface and therefore is a separate idea from the surface upon which it rests.

The remarkable outstanding principle in reviewing the fine decorative designs that have been recorded from the work of the American Indian and other primitive workers, is that the flat relation of a design to its material is fully recognized. The design is refitted to the material needs. One feels, in seeing their handi-

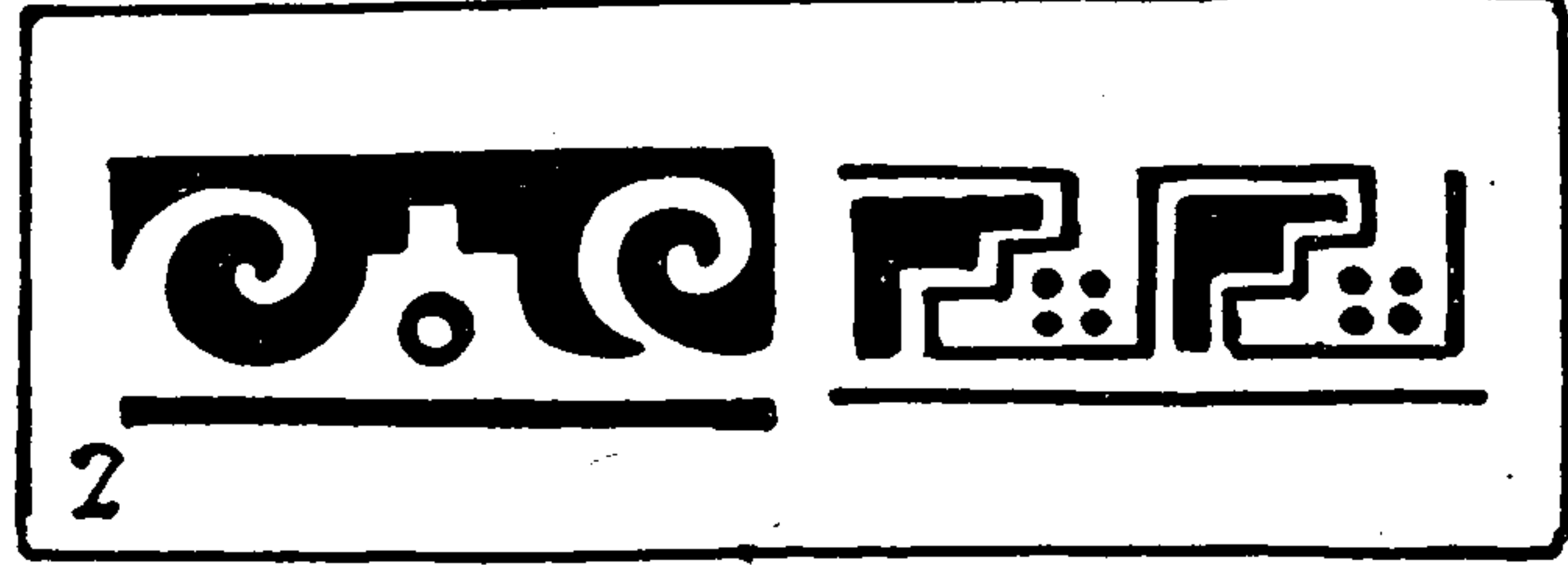


# OUTLINE FOR COURSE OF STUDY

1. Select three typical motifs from the Aztec designs. These motifs to be small units that occur throughout Aztec decorations. Trace these designs and memorize their forms. Produce a border 2 x 10 inches in black, using only a brush and ink. The border to be made by repetition of one of the Aztec motifs selected.



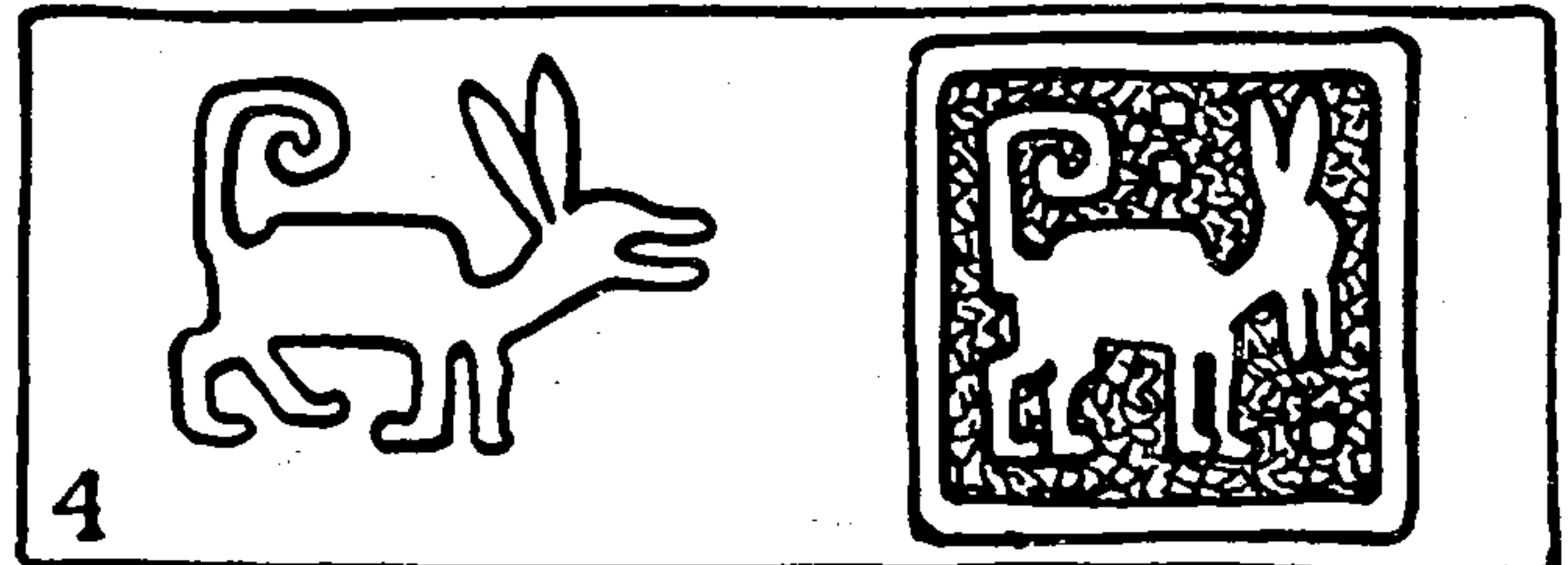
2. Make a border 2 x 10 inches using two different but harmonious forms of Aztec motifs. Use orange and green-blue for colors.



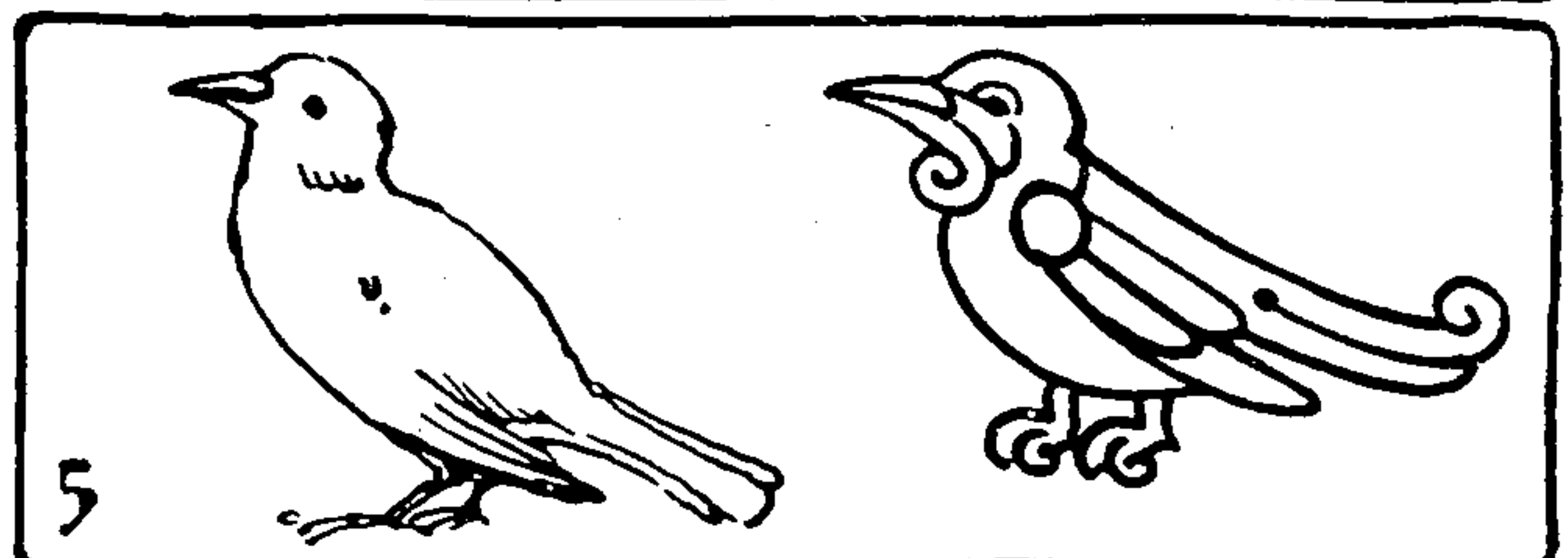
3. Draw an Aztec bird or animal to become familiar with the line arrangement of these Aztec decorations. Apply a bird design to a circular panel seven inches in width, adding a dark background.



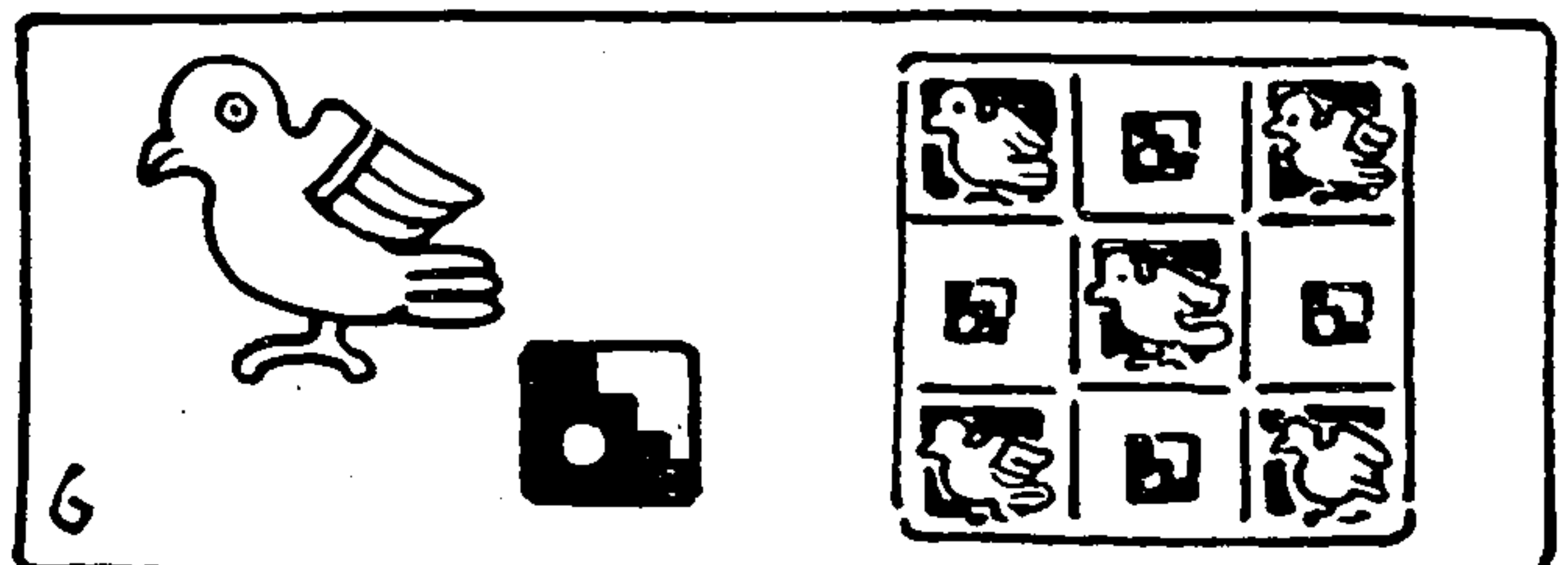
4. Arrange an animal design similar to the Aztec types within a square 6 x 6 inches. Add a narrow Aztec border around the space. Make in black and orange-red.



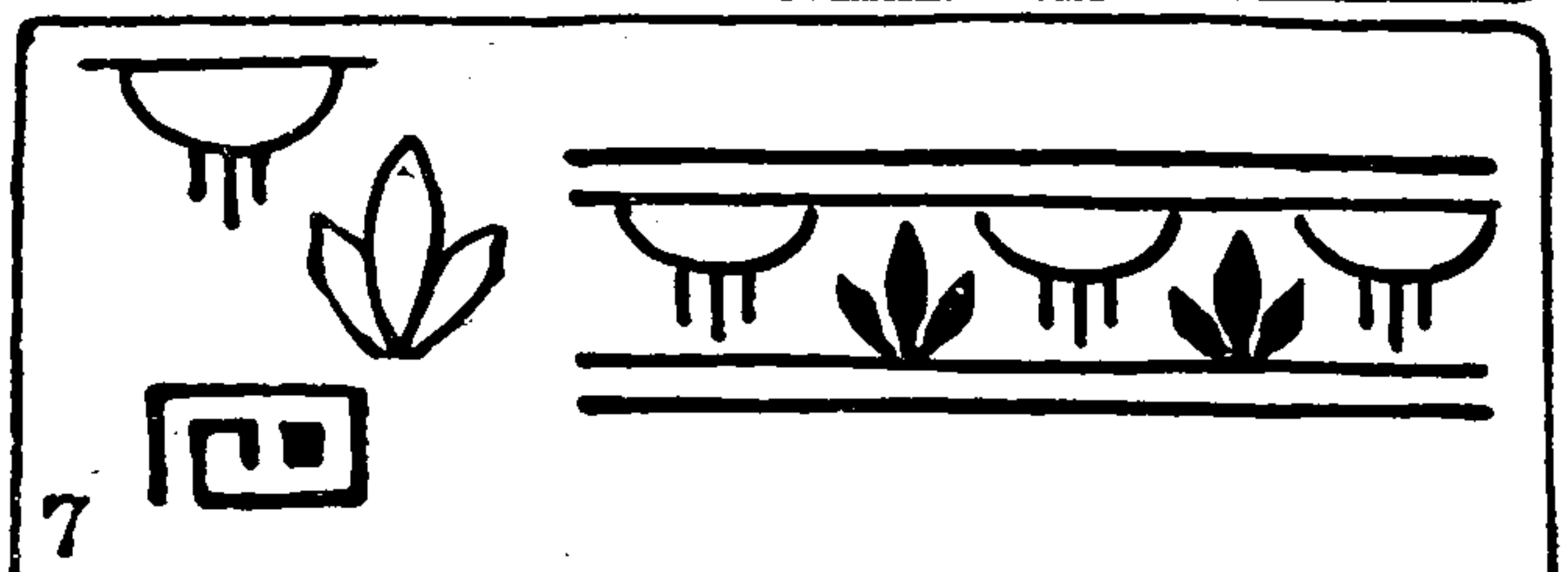
5. Selecting a picture of a bird native to the students' community, have the students design it after the manner of the Aztec, Mayan, or Toltec designs.



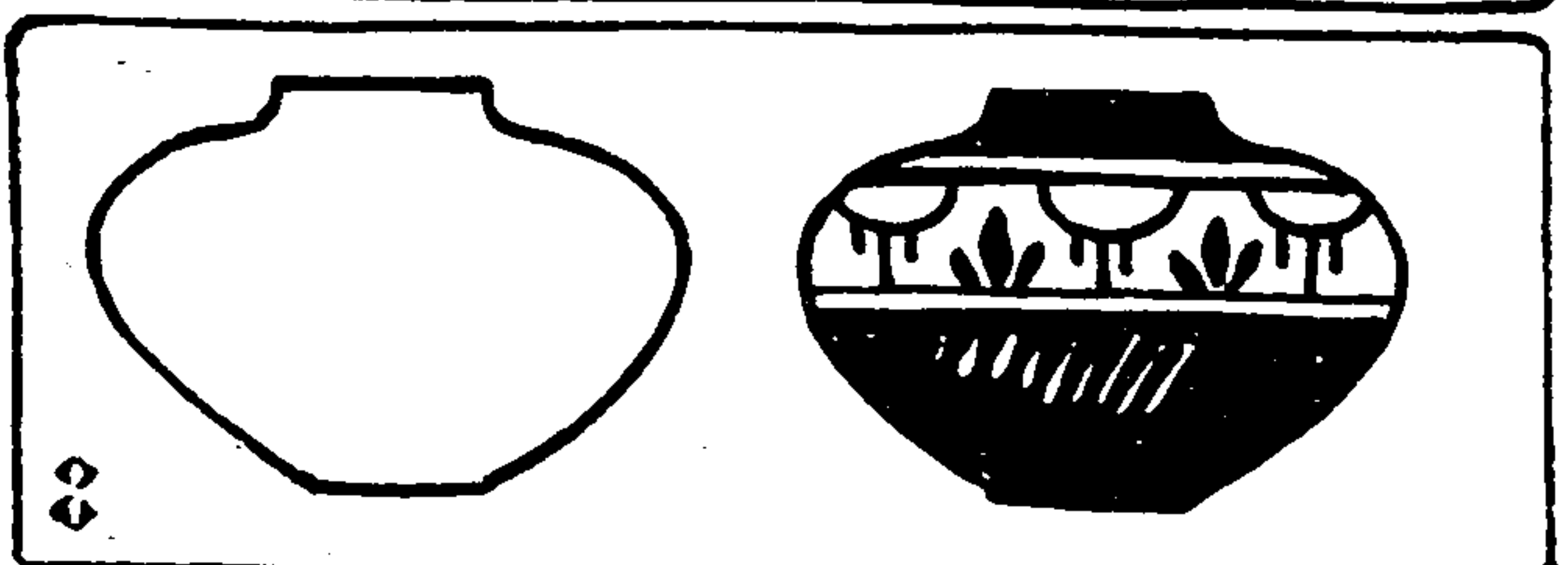
6. Plan an all-over pattern for a block printed textile, the design to be a checker arrangement of squares 4 x 4 inches. Alternating squares to be birds or animals and a geometric motif.



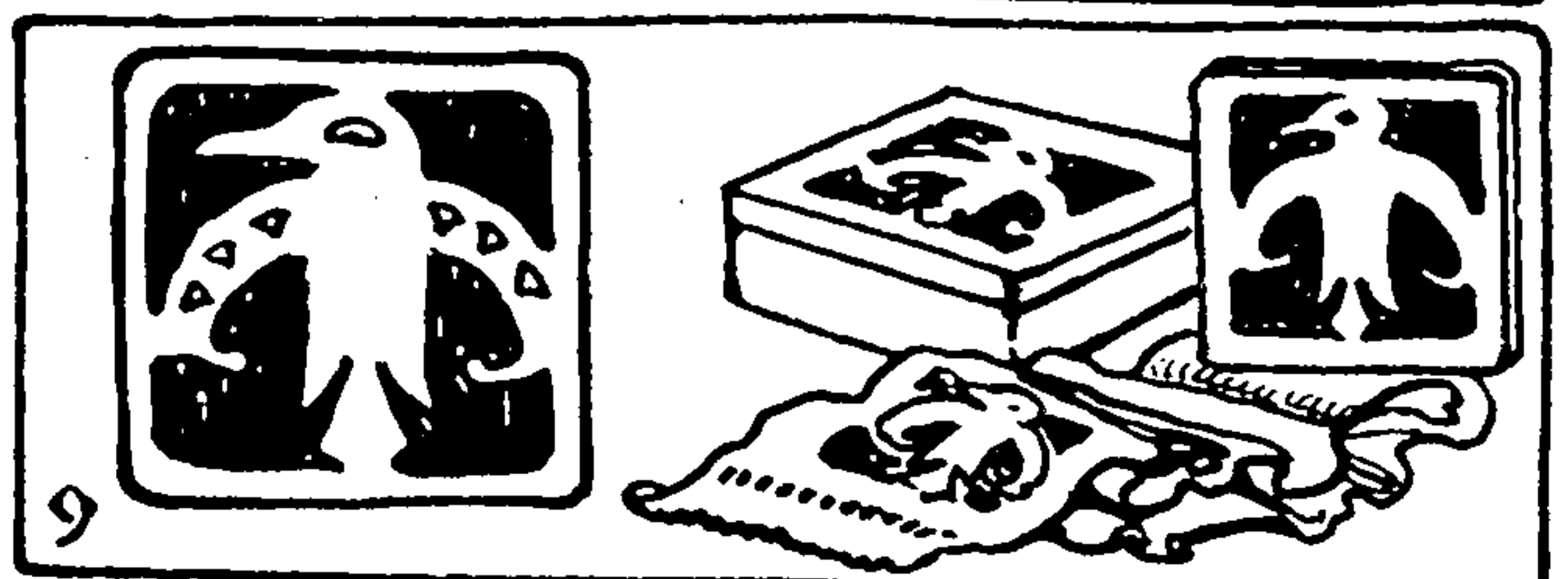
7. After reading about the life and customs of the Pueblo Indians of New Mexico and Arizona select six different motifs or units from the Pueblo Indian plates and draw them on a sheet of paper. Combine two or more motifs into a border design.



8. From black or tan colored paper cut a bowl design, Indian in shape, and paint a border on it using black, white, and deep red colors. Place the border in a well balanced location.



9. Plan Pueblo Indian bird design for a six-inch square. This may be used for a box cover design, a tile, or for block-printing a scarf.

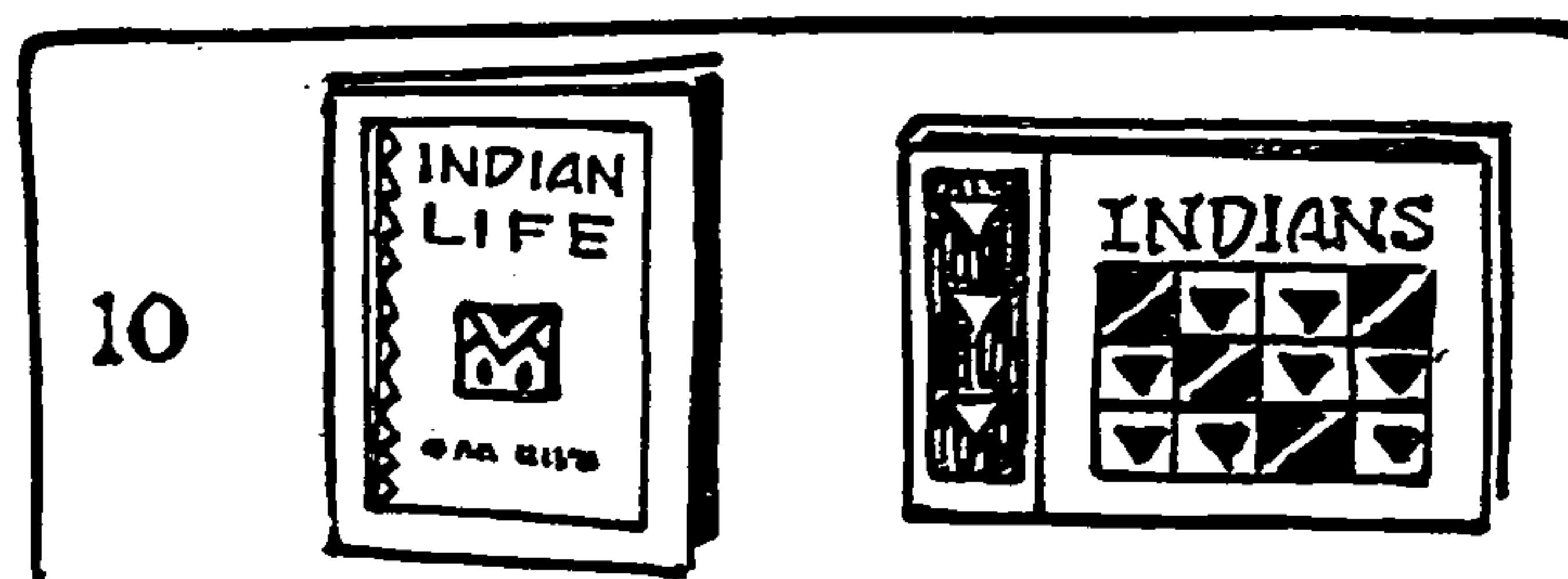


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# INDIAN DECORATIVE DESIGNS

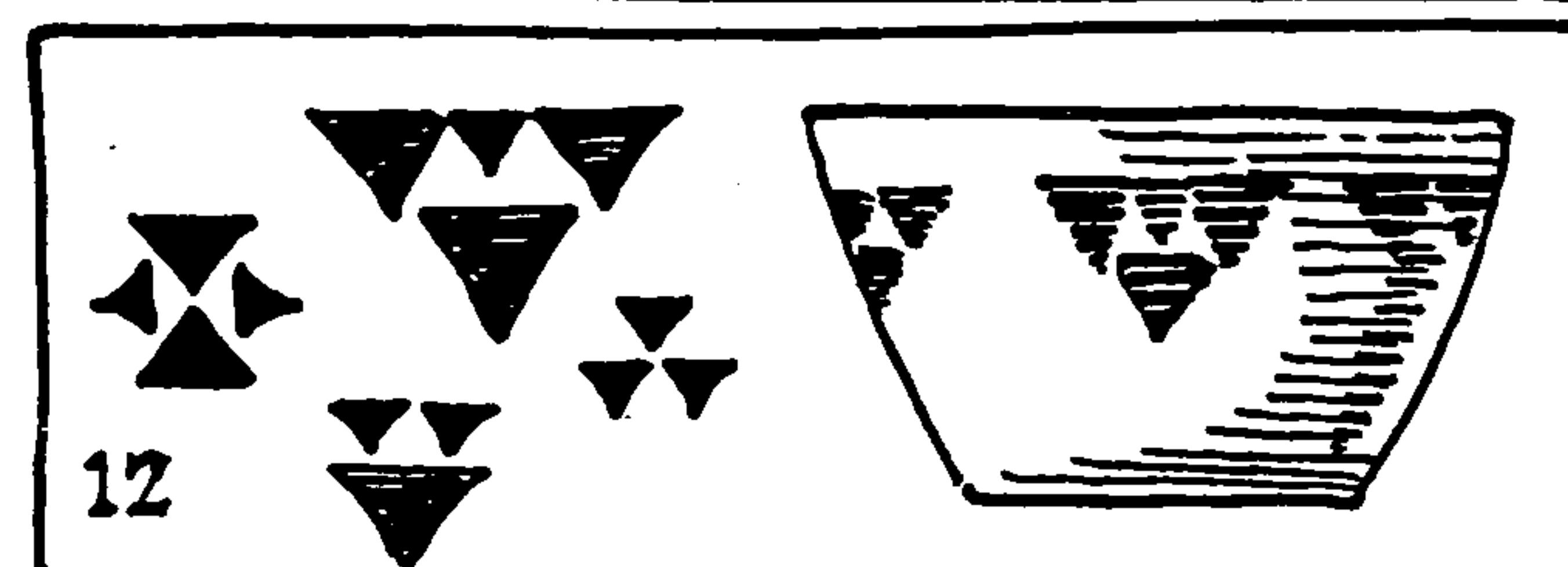
10. Plan a booklet cover with a short title such as Indian Life, or Indian Stories, and plan an Indian decoration for the cover. This may be an all over pattern or a border top and bottom. The design may be stencilled on, or stick printed with water color or tempera paint.



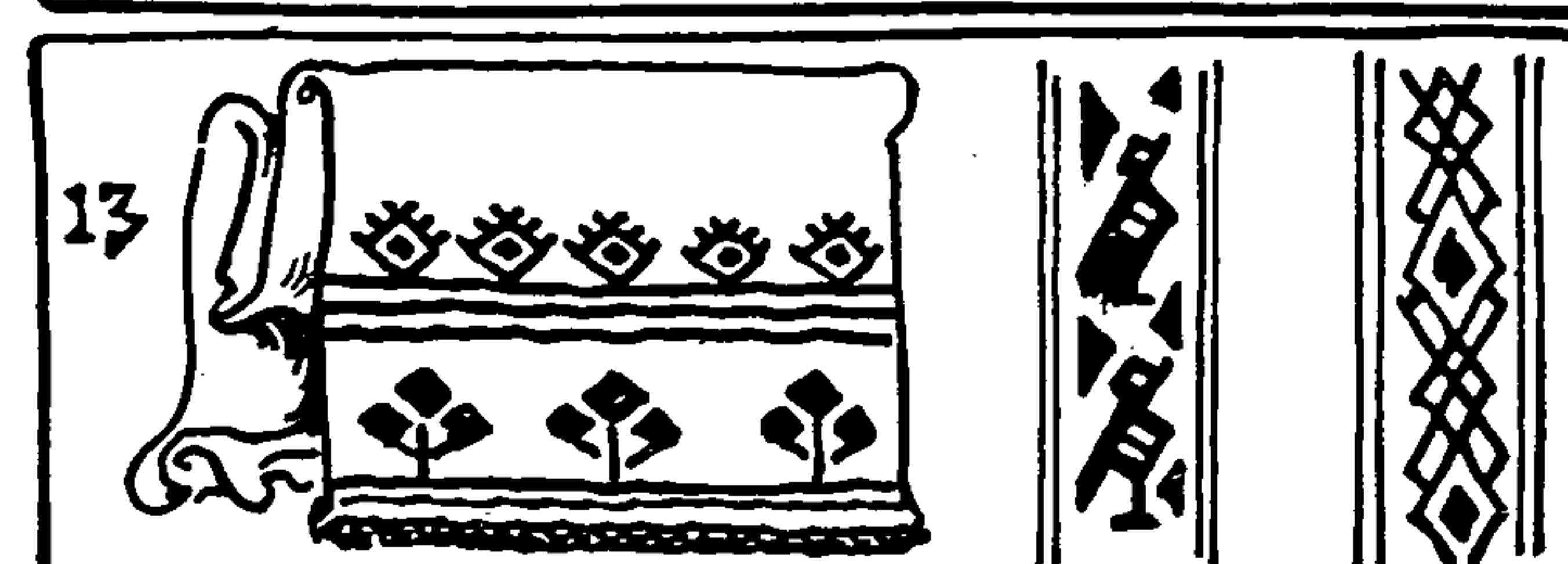
11. Design a circle space 10 inches wide within which a plant form and birds will be placed, all to be done in the Indian manner.



12. Plan a shape for a basket, using a design developed by repeating triangle shapes. These shapes may vary in size and be combined to make other forms.



13. Design a border for a drapery, using the Guatemala Indian forms for a border. Design an upright border with Guatemala Indian birds. Design a border for four sides of a square scarf with geometric design similar to the Mexican Indian types shown in Plate 23.



14. Design three jewelry designs, pendants, or pins, following the characteristics of the Colombian Indian jewelry shown on Plate 6.



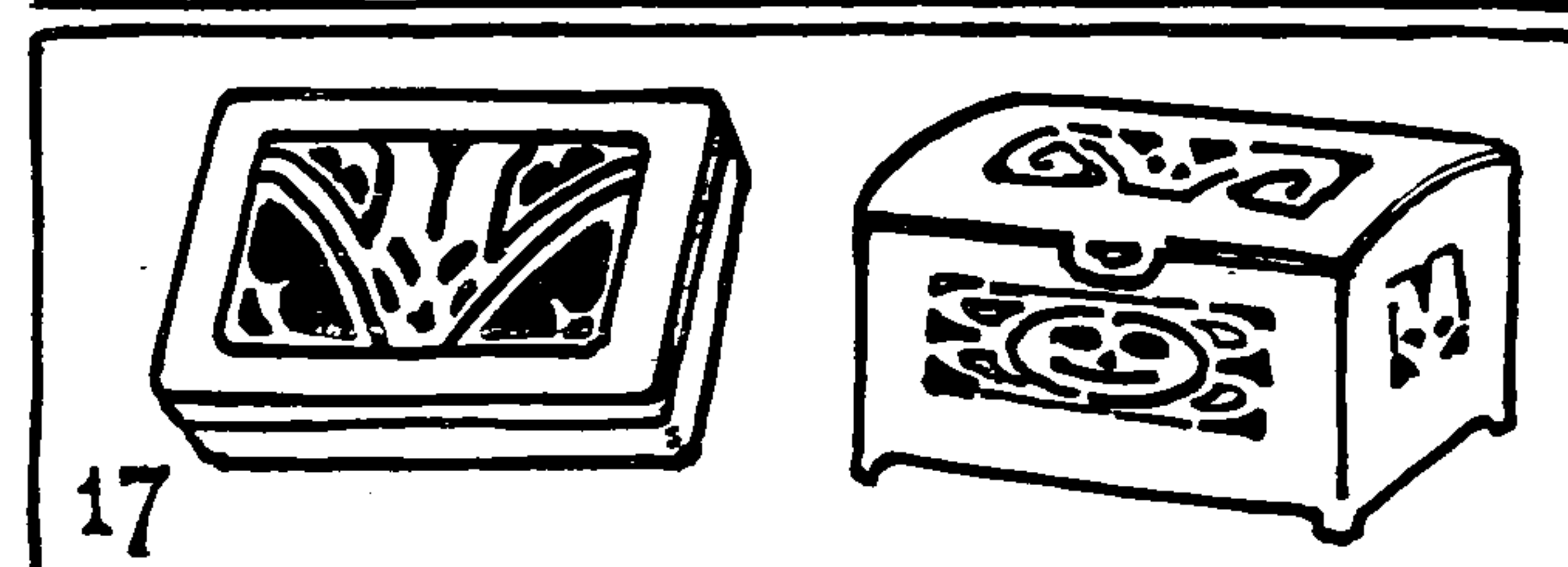
15. Design a brooch or buckle after the jewelry forms made by the Navajo Indians. These may be made on gray paper which is then pasted onto black, or black and white tempera may be used on gray paper. Turquoise color may be added for stones.



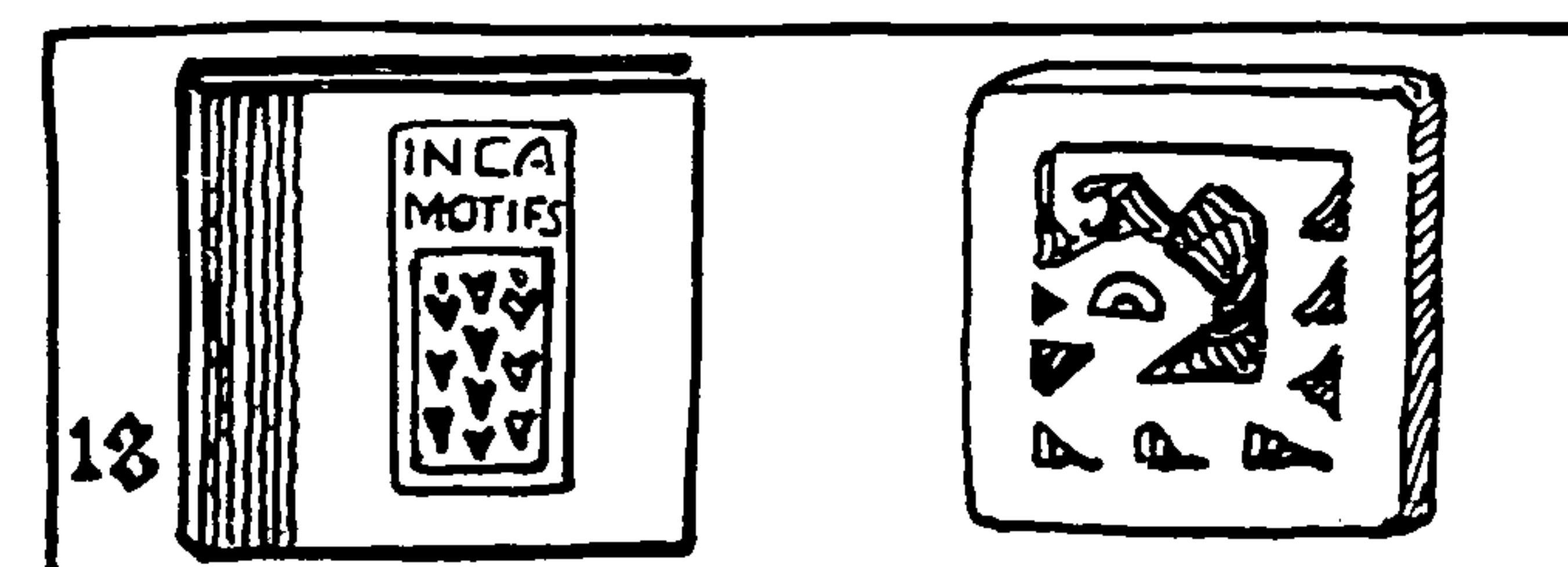
16. Design shield motifs for an Indian pageant. Study the Cheyenne Indian crests shown on Plate 22. Design decorations for a leather magazine cover or hand bag, following the design forms shown on Plates 21 and 22.



17. Plan a design for a box cover or small chest to be carved or decorated in Relievo or Gesso following the decorative manner of the Haida Indian. See Plate 24.



18. Read about the Incas and their ancient cities. Plan a booklet that will have a designed cover and inside titles. Plan a Peruvian tile design to be made in color cement for a fireplace.





crafts, that weaving, or pottery material, or wooden surface always set the limitation to what the craftsmen should attempt. If the American student can secure this desirable quality of design restraint, he has achieved a great step in progress. And the student can secure this by a careful study of the works of the American Indian, many of which are shown on the plates of this portfolio. A review of those plates will show different types of work, all, however, unified by the same simplicity and fitness to their purpose.

In Plates 1 and 2, and 9, 10, 11 and 12, are shown motifs from Toltec, Mayan and Aztec Indian sources. The Aztec derived many design motifs from the Mayan Indian and in turn the Mayan Indian secured ideas from his predecessor, the Toltec.

The border designs are bold and massive in quality. The strong quality of their forms reminds one of their great pyramids, still standing in Mexico, and the great stone buildings that have been recently excavated in Yucatan.

One finds interesting light patterns against their dark portions and on second glance it is realized that the dark portions are equally interesting against the light form. It will be found repeatedly that equal consideration has been given by these early artists to both the forms that were used in the design and that the parts of the background left remaining were thoughtfully studied and formed.

In Plates 3 and 4, 5, 16, 17 and 18, we find motifs by the modern American Pueblo Indians. These motifs in many ways have the same characteristics as those of the Aztecs. In fact, it is due to these characteristics that many archaeologists lay claim to their statement that the Pueblo Indian of the United States is but the descendant of Aztecs who long ago crossed the Rio Grande and built new homes in the north.

The birds and animals of the Aztec and the birds and animals of the Pueblo Indian have a quality of life and alertness, conveying a "play element" trend on the part of the artist. One feels that the artist enjoyed including these nature creatures in his design.

Plate 3 illustrates the weaving of some of the Indian motifs, and Plates 4 and 17 show excellent applications of the Indian motifs to pottery. While Plate 4 is modern pottery, Plate 17 is a pre-istoric collection.

Plates 27 and 28, in color, show more of the designs as applied to ceremonial figures and applied art forms, illustrating a good sense of space relation.

In Plate 6 are shown typical jewelry forms found in the old burial places of the Indians of

Colombia. The abstract human figure decorations are well balanced and show good distribution of small and large parts. The use of gold wire as a filigree decoration is shown. The filigree, however, unlike the modern Mexican gold filigree, has not been over-used, or used in too small details. The scale of each whorl or spiral is in good proportion to the object.

Plate 7 designs are those by modern Guatemalan Indians, as applied to weavings and embroideries. These designs are similar to those used by their ancestors and are woven in brilliant threads against black or dark-colored backgrounds.

Plates 13, 14, 15 and Color Plates 25 and 26 show designs from the work of the remarkable Inca Indians of Peru. The Inca designs have interested artists and designers immensely, and influenced many craftsmen toward a simpler, but more thoughtfully arranged form of design. Plate 15 shows the use of their design to pottery and weaving. The student will learn much of good design by careful observation and analysis of the art of the Peruvian Indian.

Plates 8 and 19 illustrate some of the Indian basketry designs and woven motifs. Simple arrangements of triangle or square forms, are the basis for many of their most pleasing designs. Reverse positions or alternating arrangements produce interesting arrangements.

Plate 20 illustrates good examples of Navajo silver work. In combination with the silver the Navajo uses the turquoise stone. This stone has a religious significance symbolizing the sky and is much cherished by the Indians.

Plate 21 shows good designs by the Winnebago Indian, while the lower section shows quaint copper ornaments found in the Ohio Indian mounds.

The crests and rawhide bag designs have excellent suggestions for school pageantry motifs and for decorations of leather or textile material.

Plate 23 shows strong textile and pottery motifs by modern Mexican Indians. Plate 24 presents animal totem pole motifs from the Haida Indian of the North Pacific sections of North America. These plates show strong positive design arrangements, a good influence for the hesitant over-detail-inclined student.

American sources present a wealth of material for the American student. It is hoped that with all the study of the world's rich gathering of design forms that the student will include those forms so excellently achieved by the early designers and craftsmen of the American continents and thereby more truly achieve an American expression in the design created for use in America today.













A group of Aztec bird  
designs from old Aztec  
manuscripts















PLATE 2



Aztec borders and  
motifs found in  
Mexico





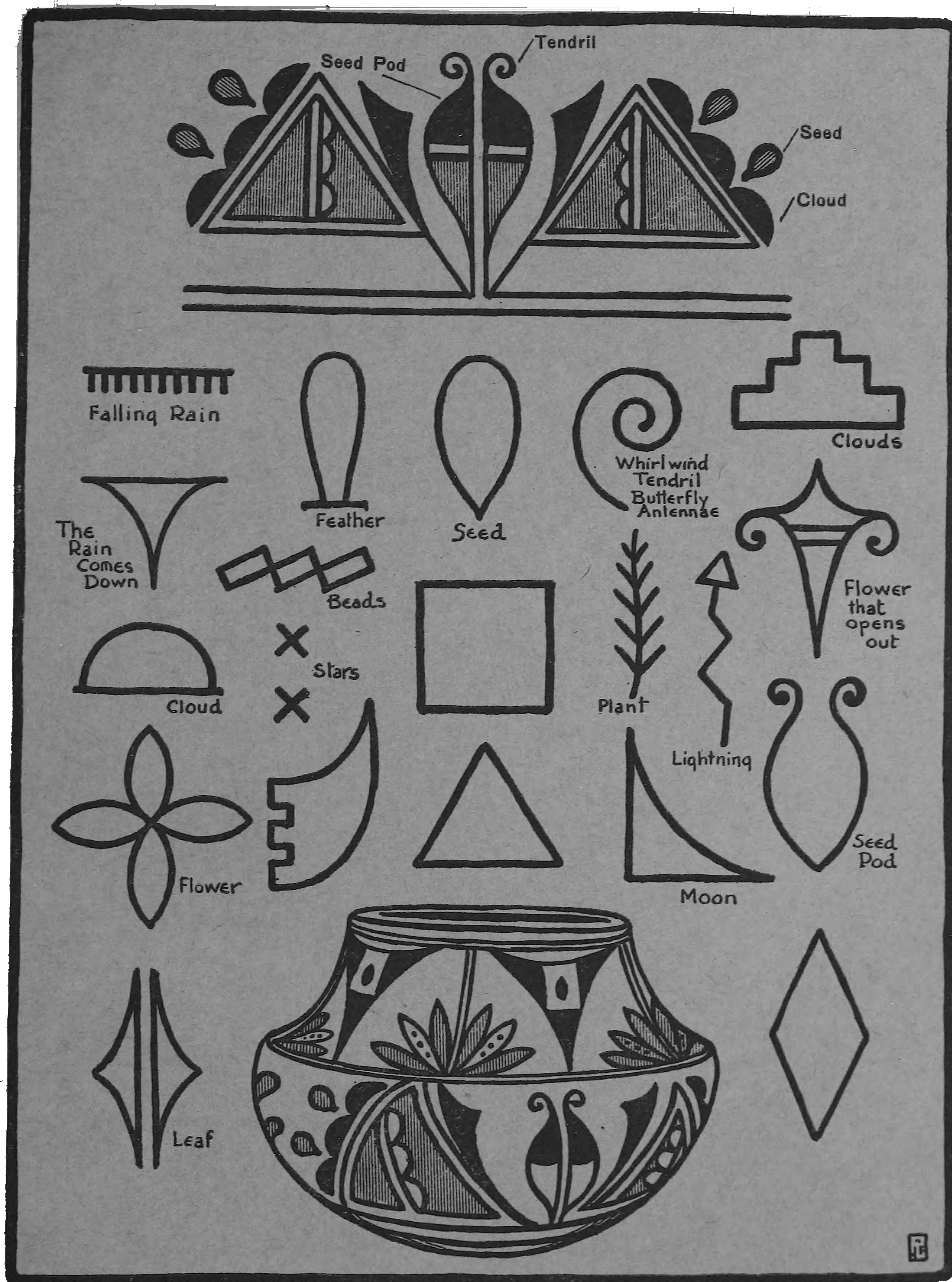








PLATE 3



American Pueblo Indian  
design motifs and their  
meaning







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PLATE 4



Indian Pueblo pottery  
designs from  
New Mexico





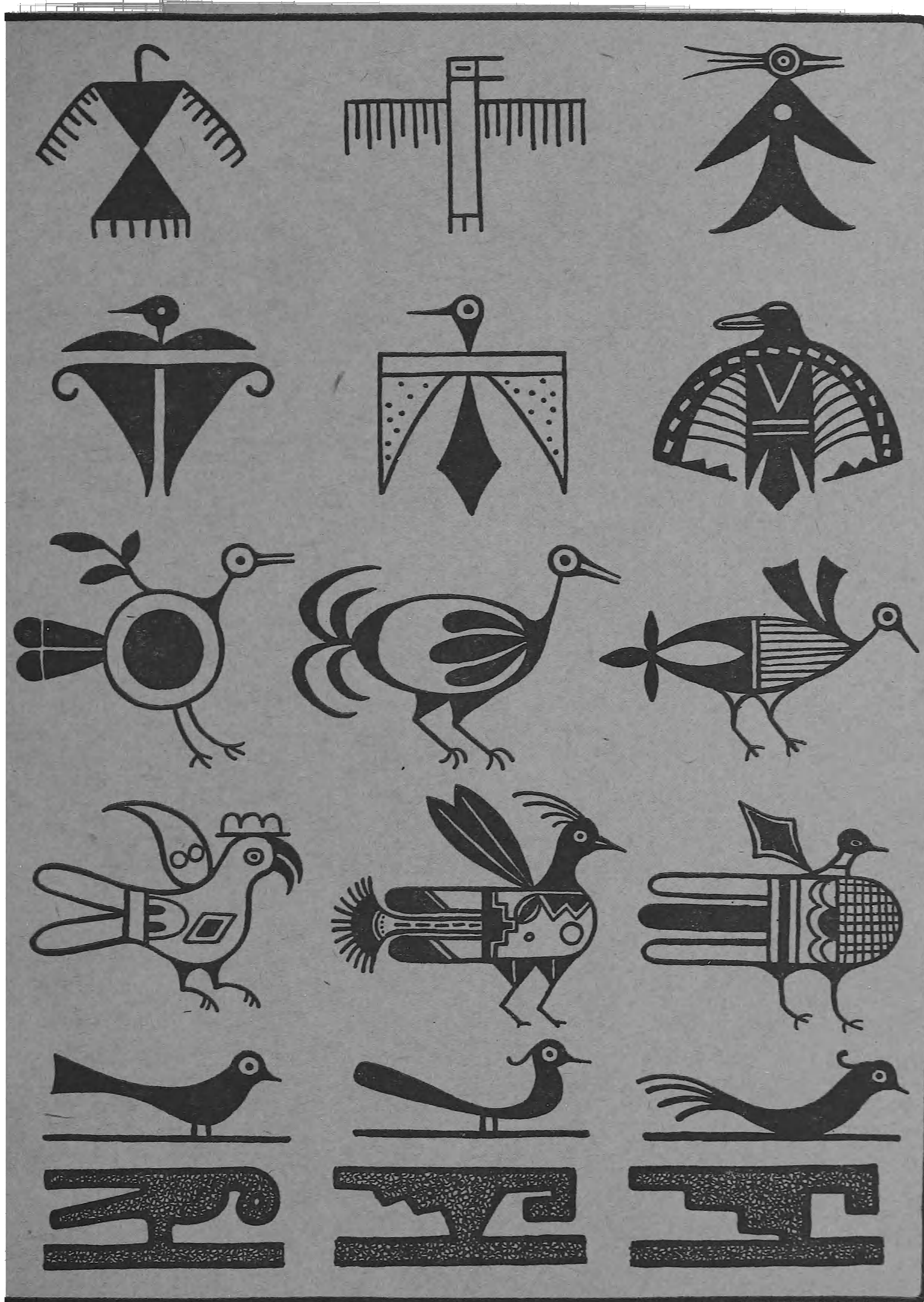












Bird designs used by the Pueblo Indians on their pottery. Bottom row shows abstract bird motifs







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COLOMBIAN INDIAN JEWELRY DESIGNS

Jewelry designs from gold  
ornaments made by Indians  
of Colombia, So. America







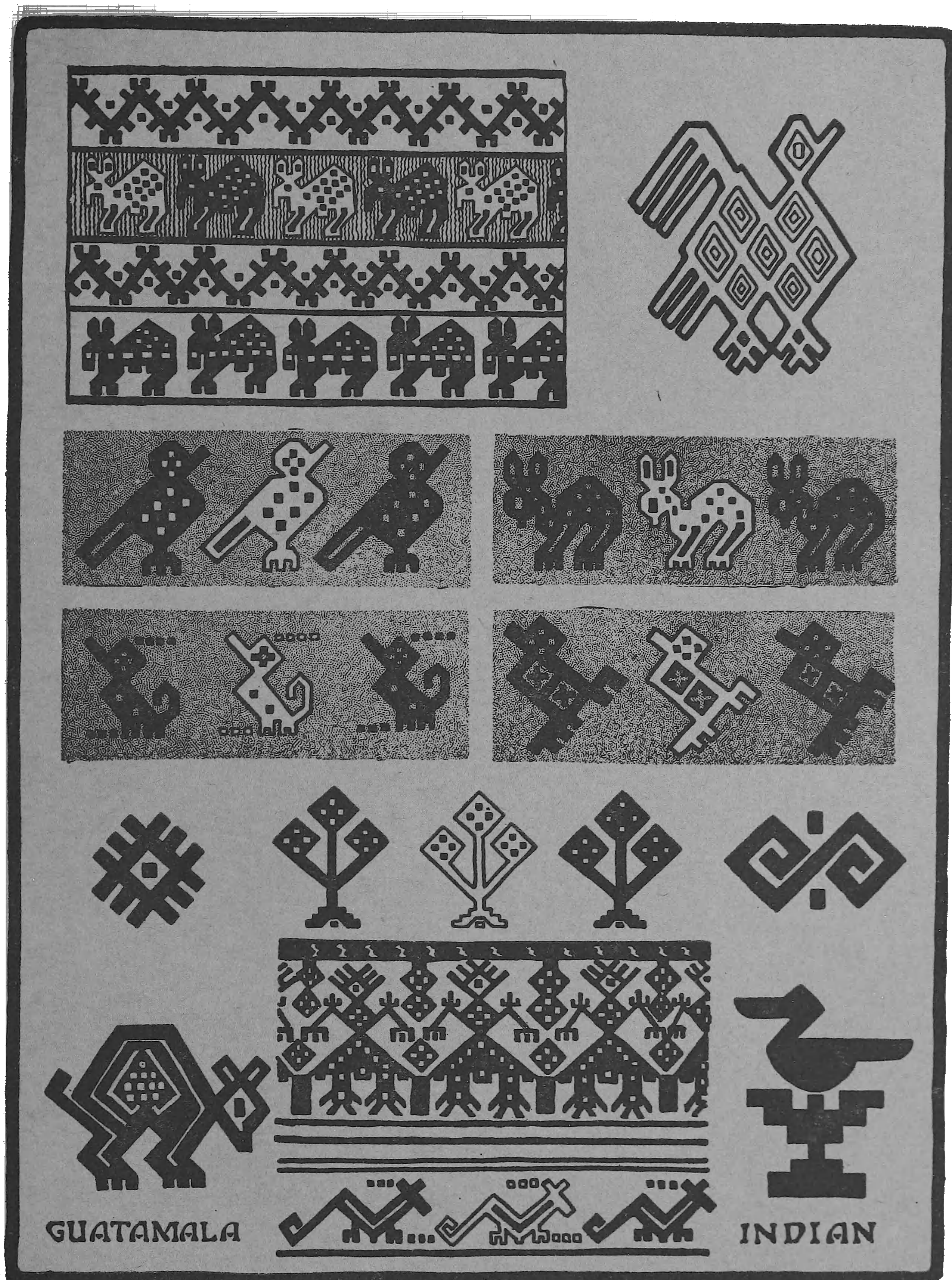








PLATE 7



Bird, animal and figure  
designs from Guatamala  
Indian weavings







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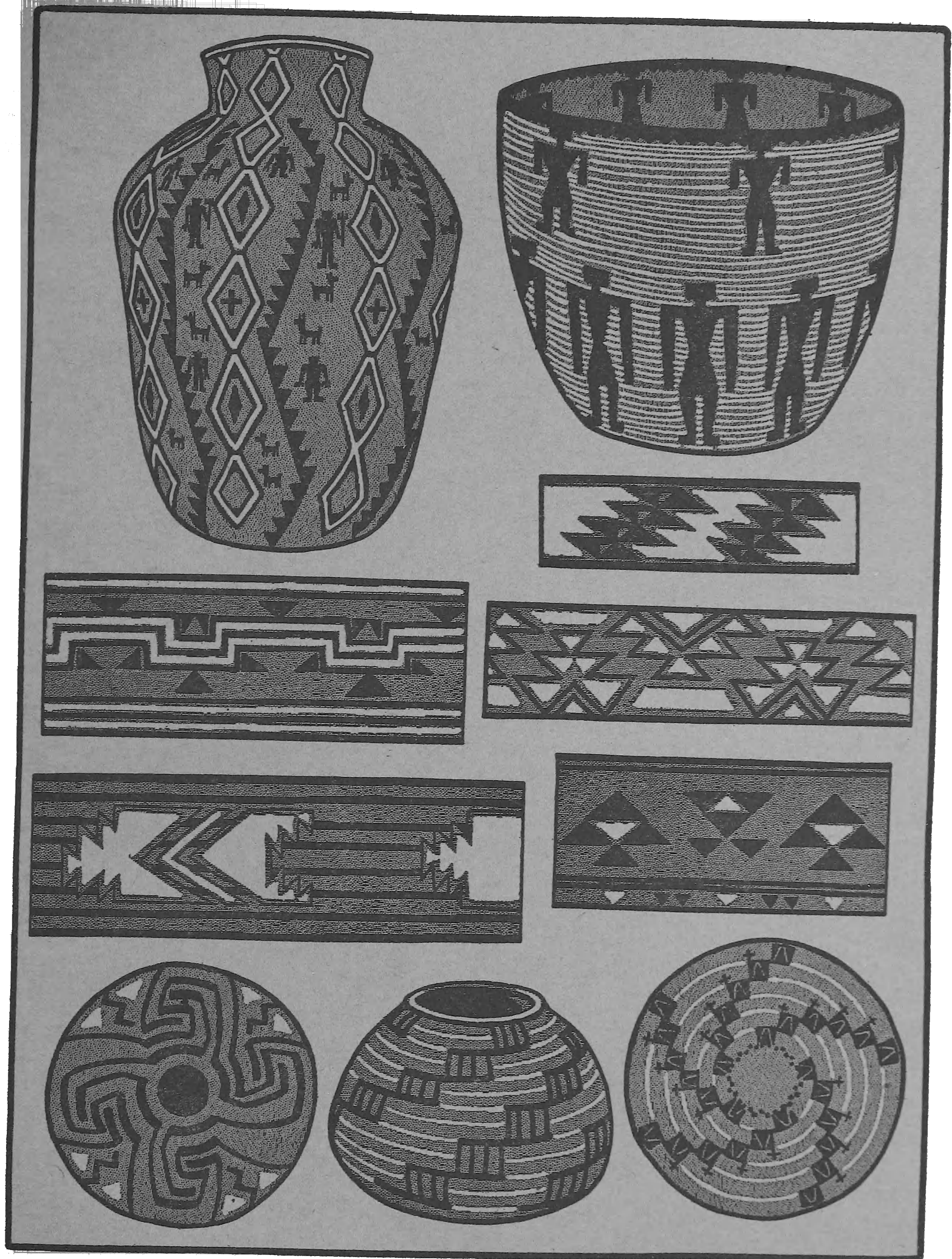
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PLATE 8



Basketry designs from  
different Indian tribes  
of North America







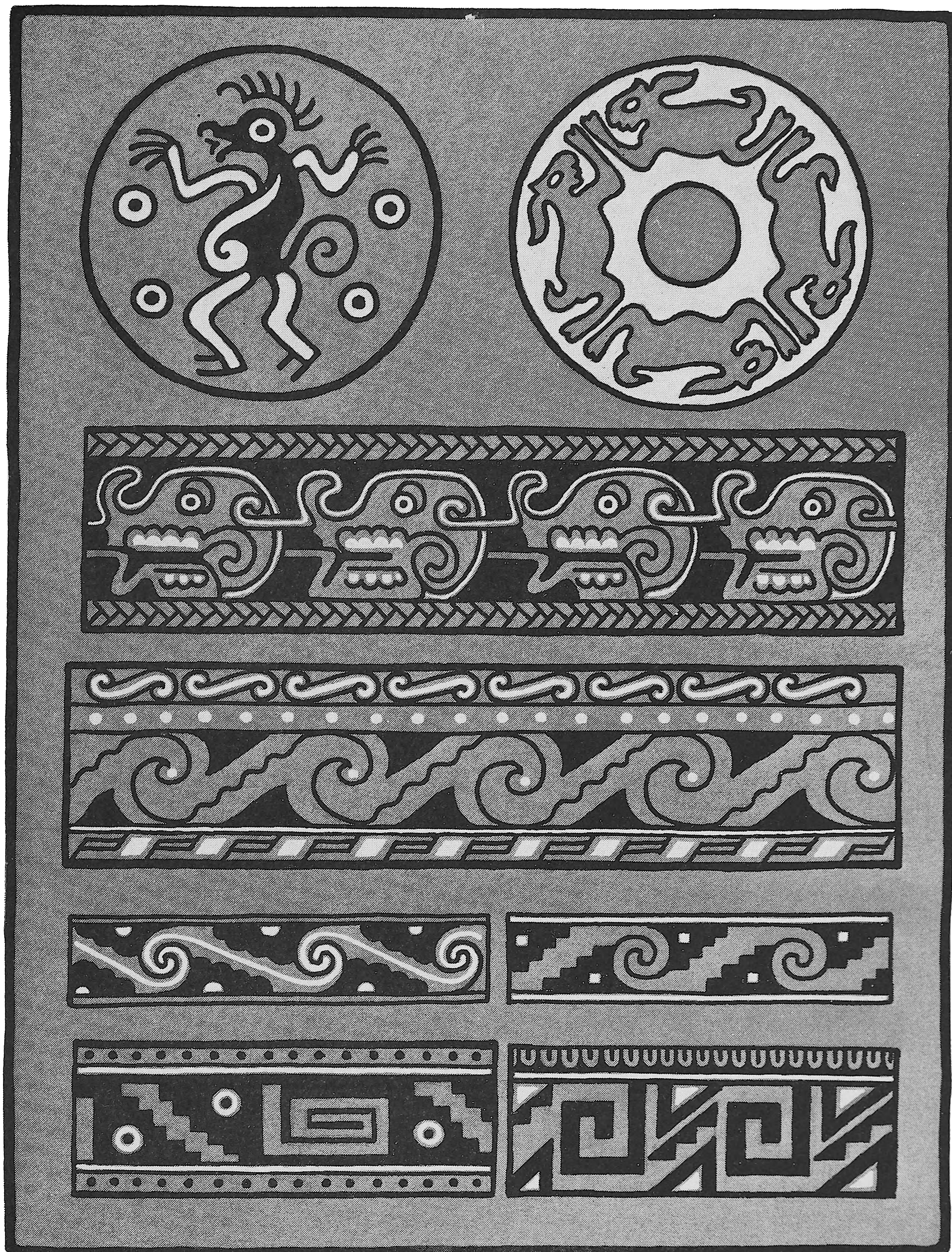








PLATE 9



Maya Indian designs from Mexico. The Maya Indian preceded the Aztec Indian







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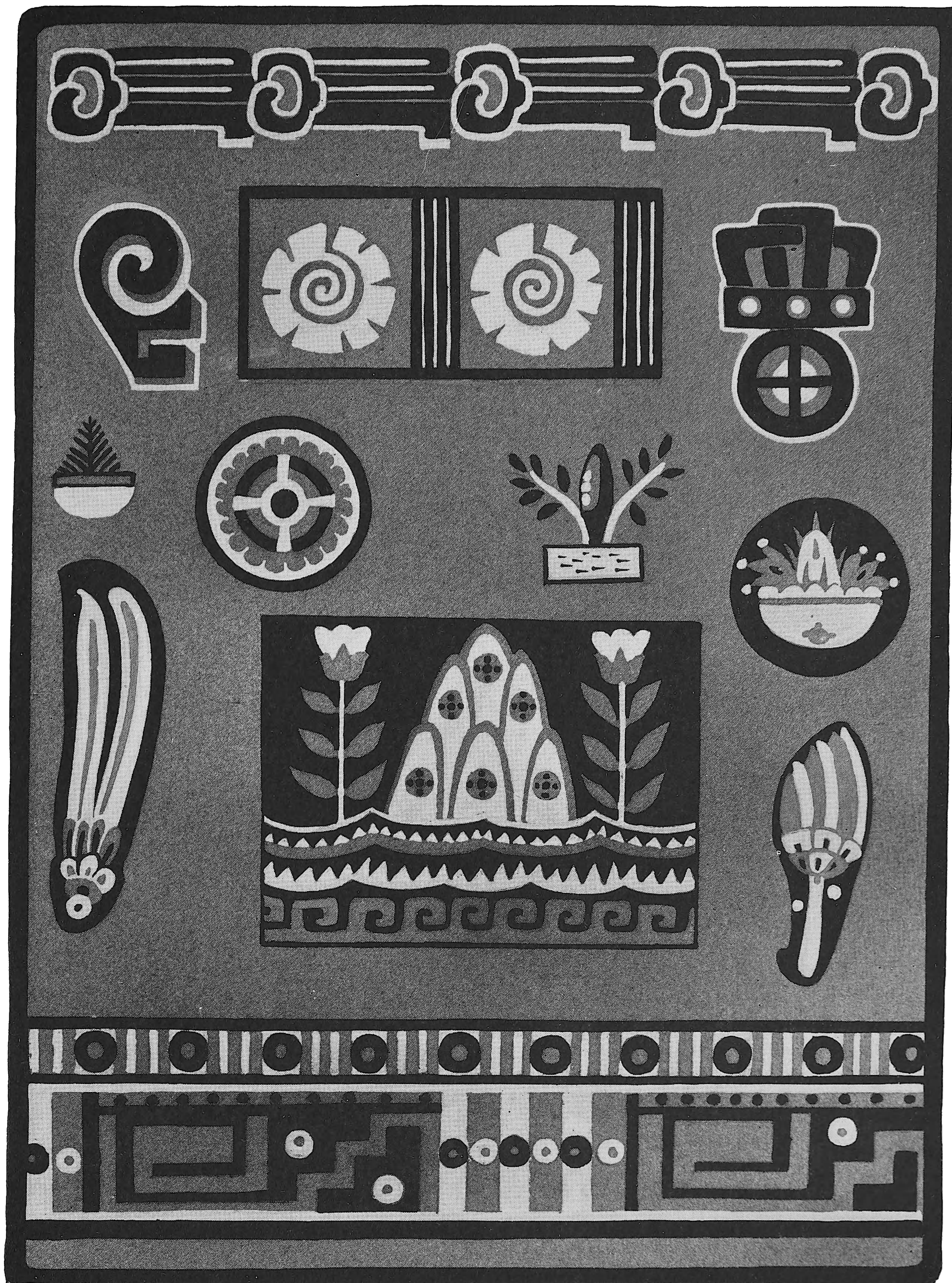
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A group of designs from old pottery  
and stone carvings made by the early  
Maya Indians in Mexico

















Aztec Indian  
designs found  
in Mexico







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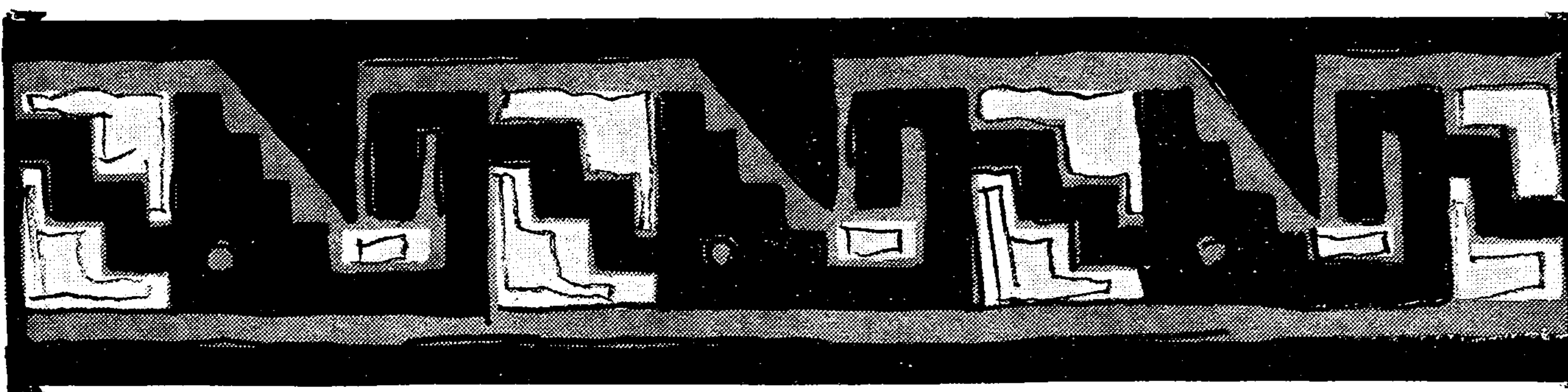
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Aztec borders and a  
Toltec panel from a  
ceremonial bowl







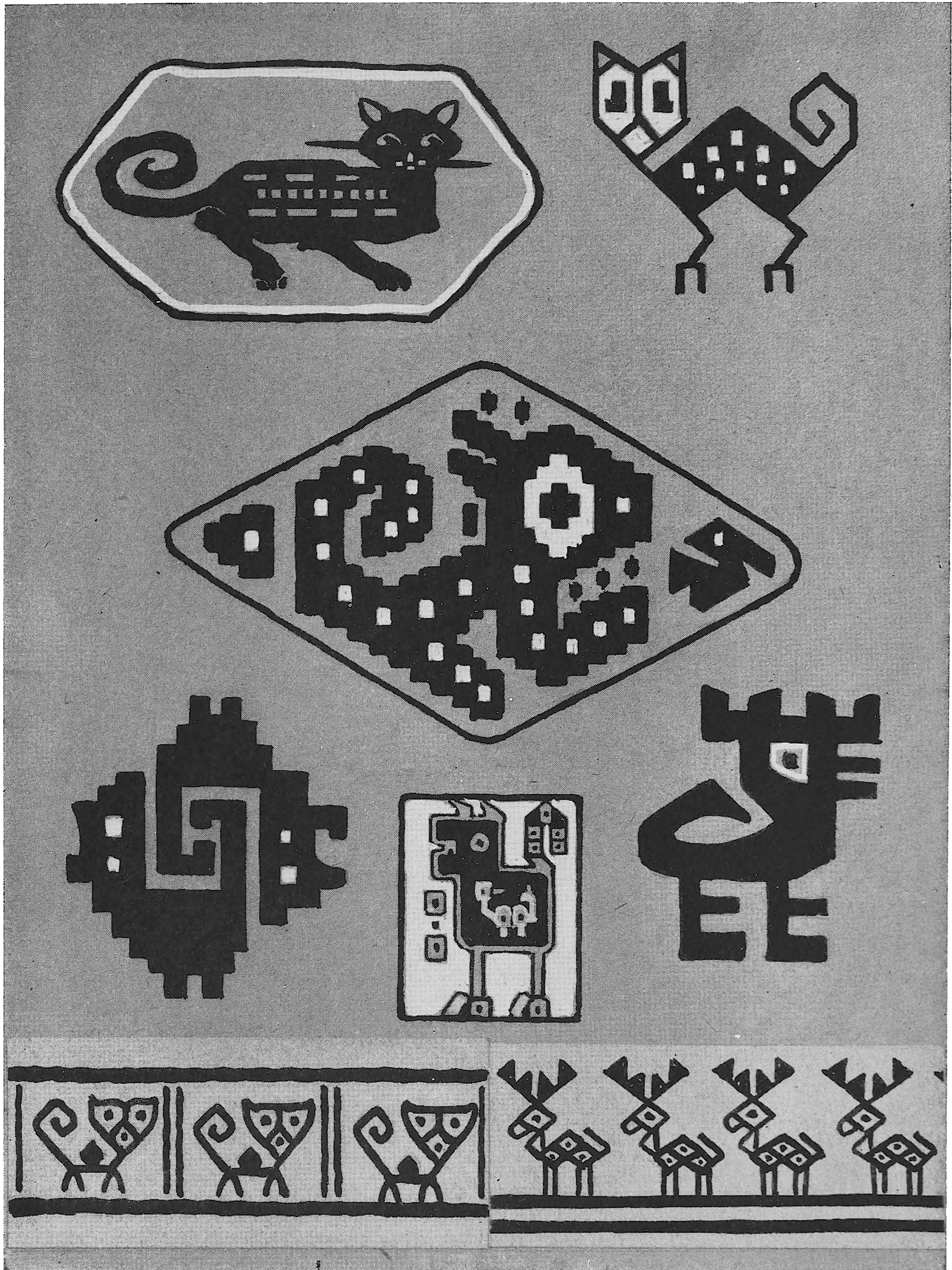








PLATE 13



Designs from old Inca  
Indian weavings found  
in Peru, South America







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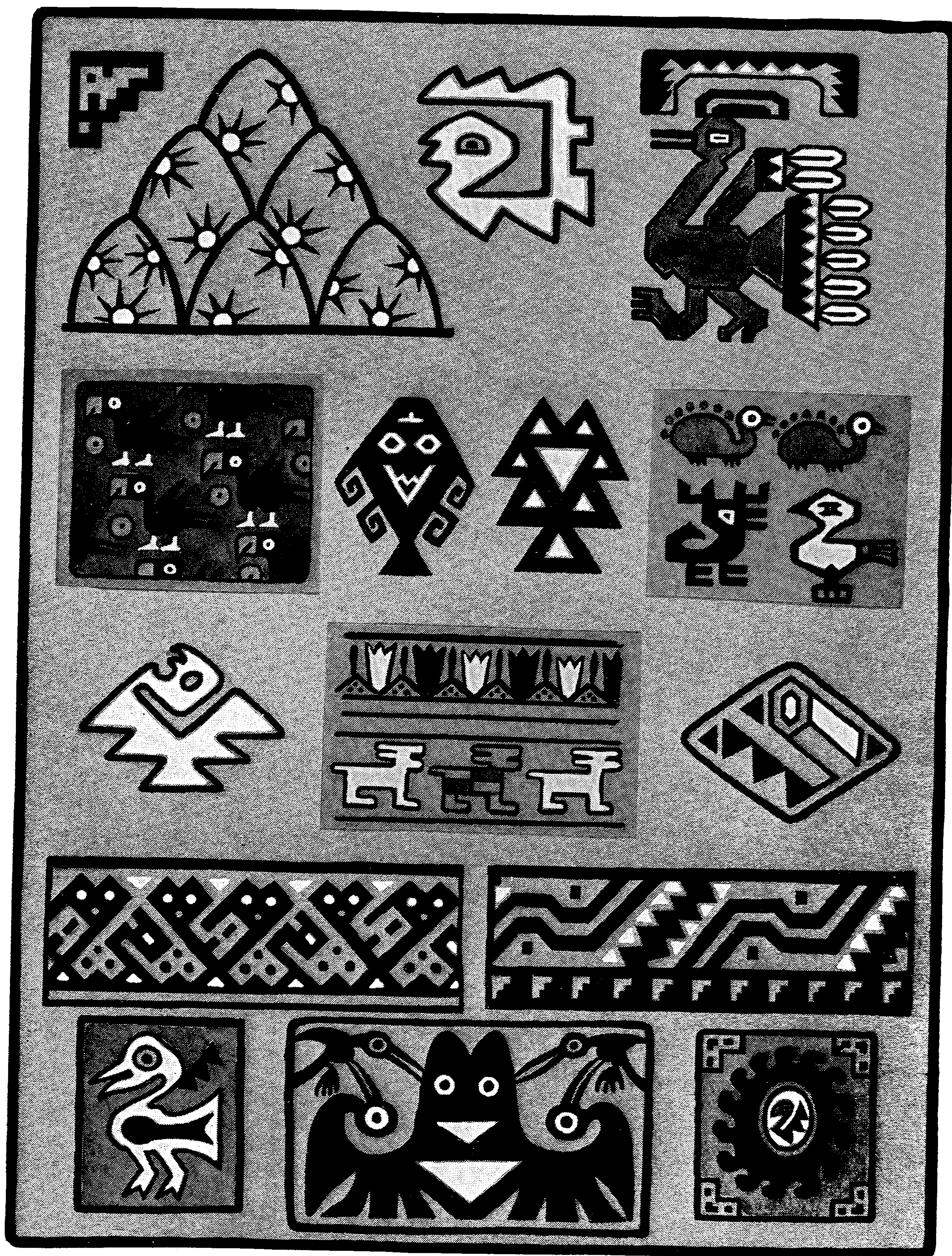
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Bird, animal, fish and plant designs  
made by the Inca Indians of Peru,  
South America





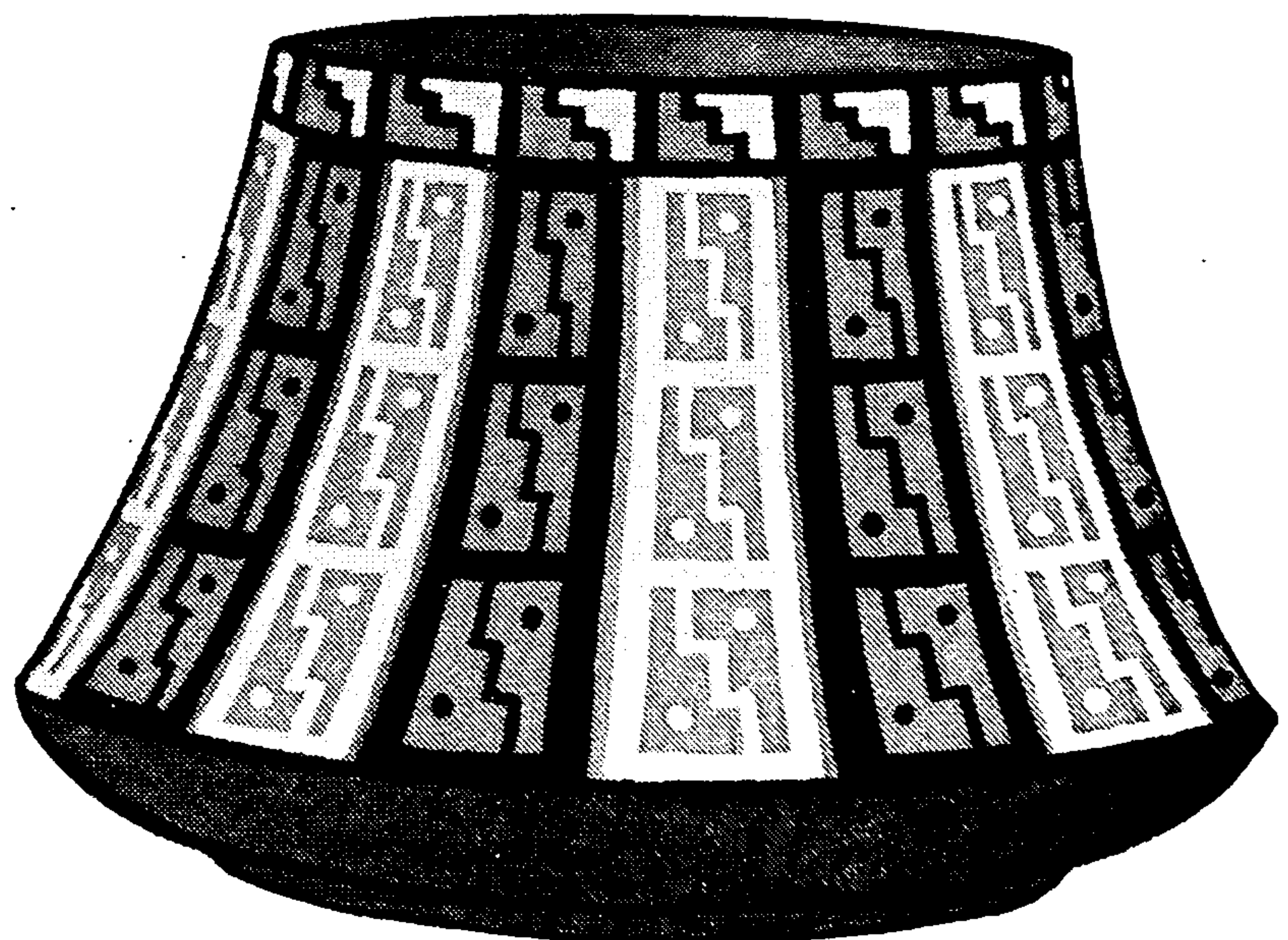












A Peruvian Indian weaving and  
two bowls showing their applica-  
tion of design to objects of utility







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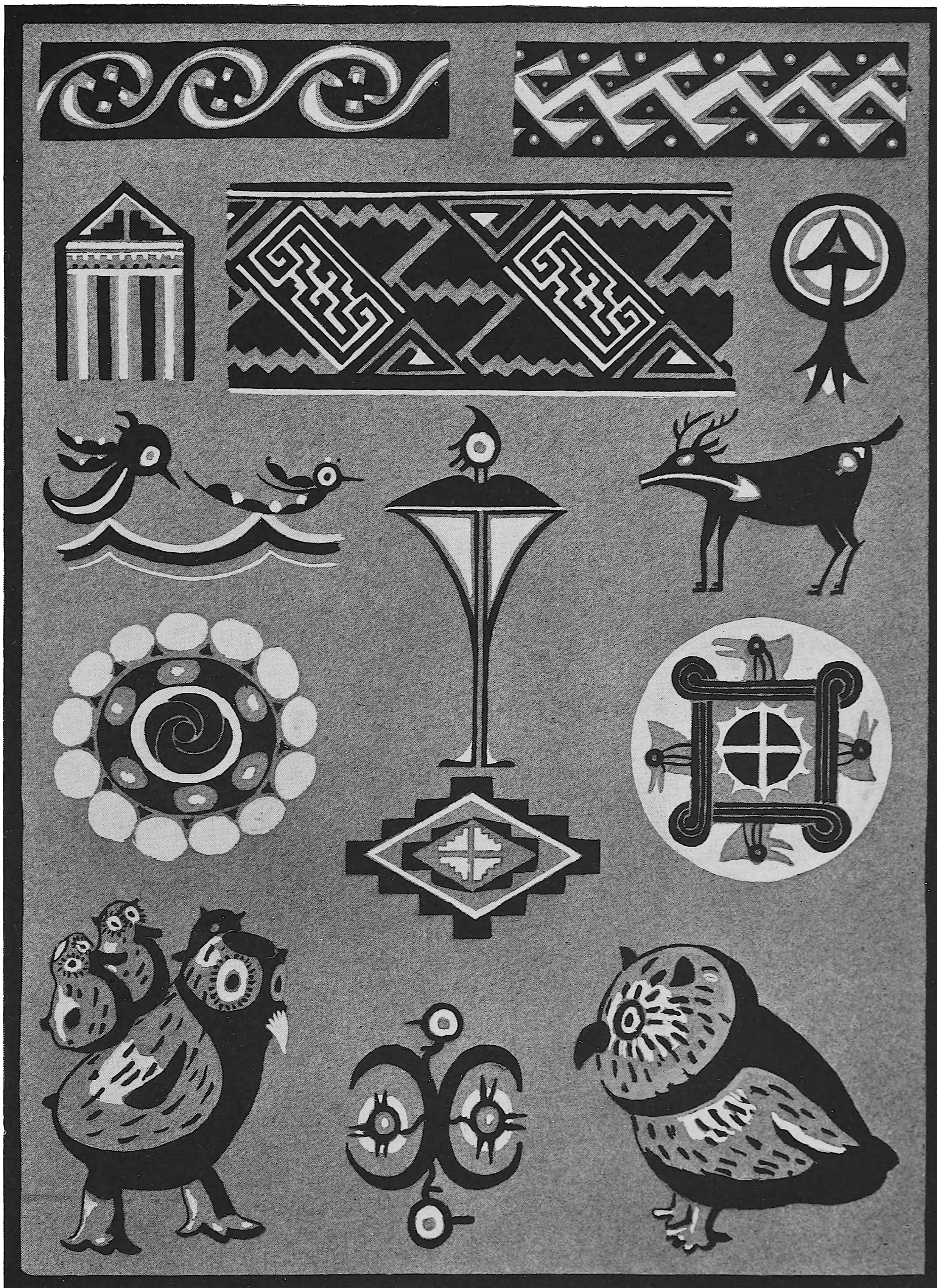
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Designs by the Zuni Indians  
of North America. Used on  
their pottery





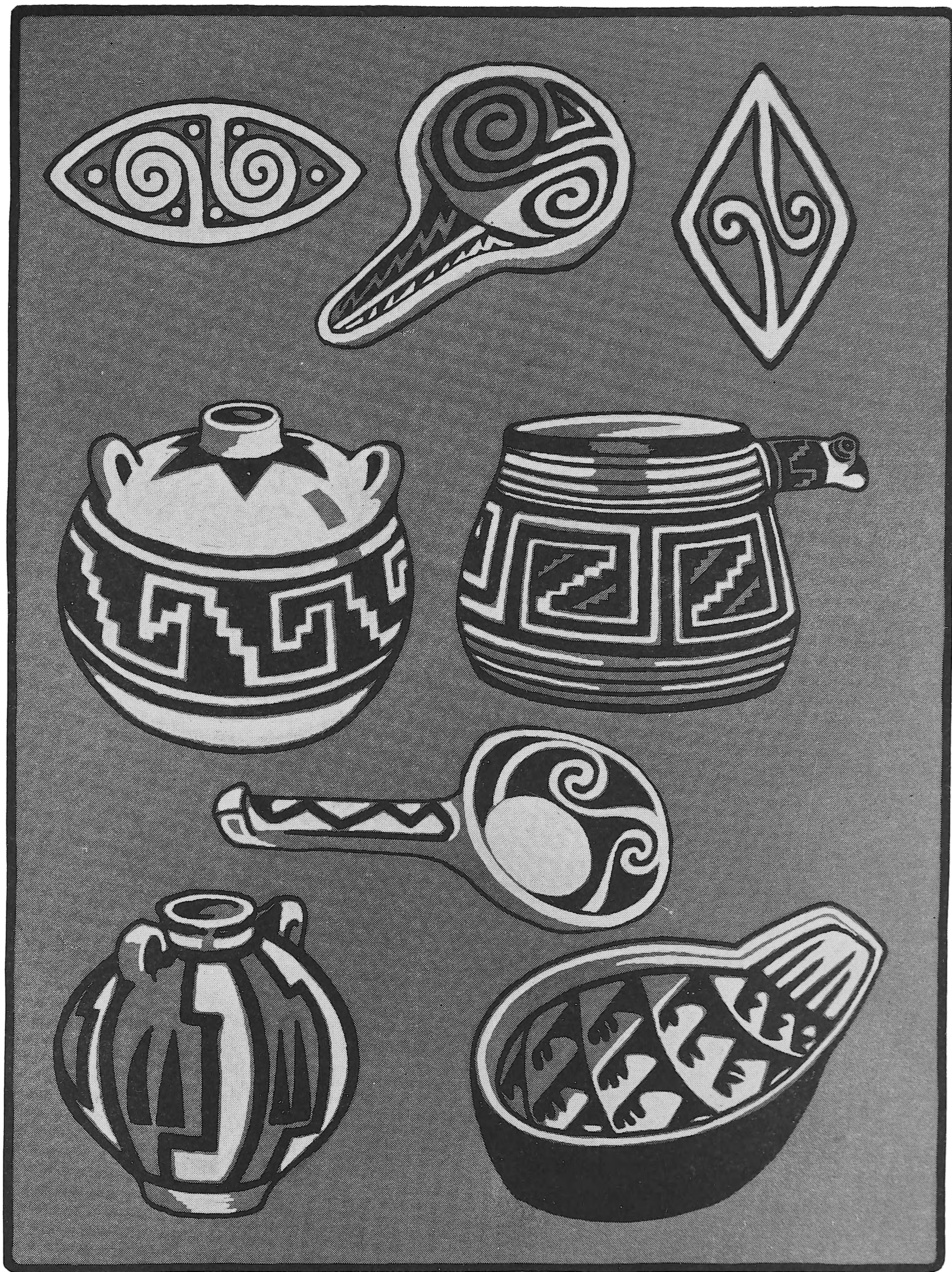


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Pre-Columbian Indian pottery  
taken from excavations in  
New Mexico







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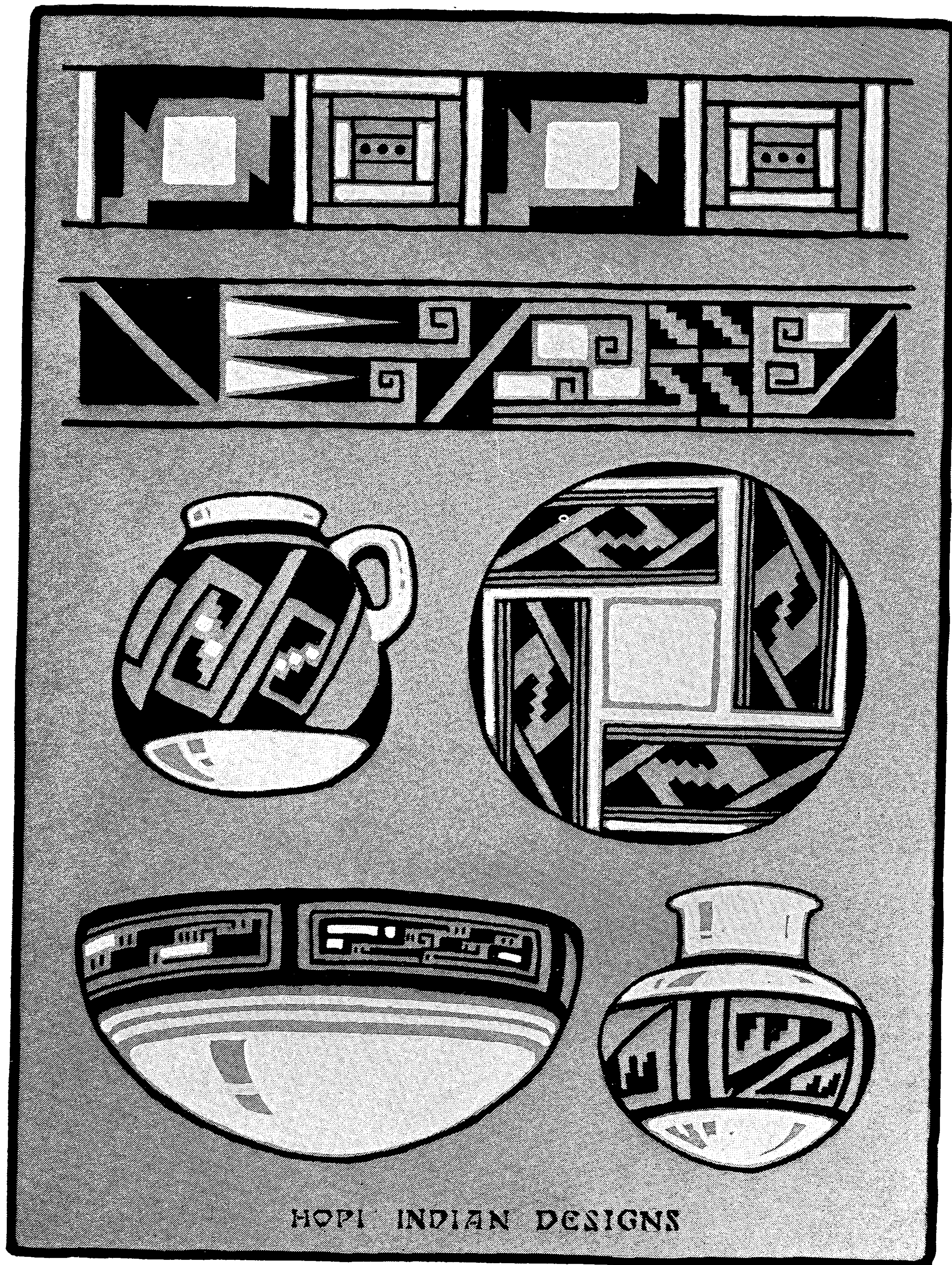
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HOPÍ INDIAN DESIGNS

Borders and Pottery designs  
by the Hopi Indian of  
North America





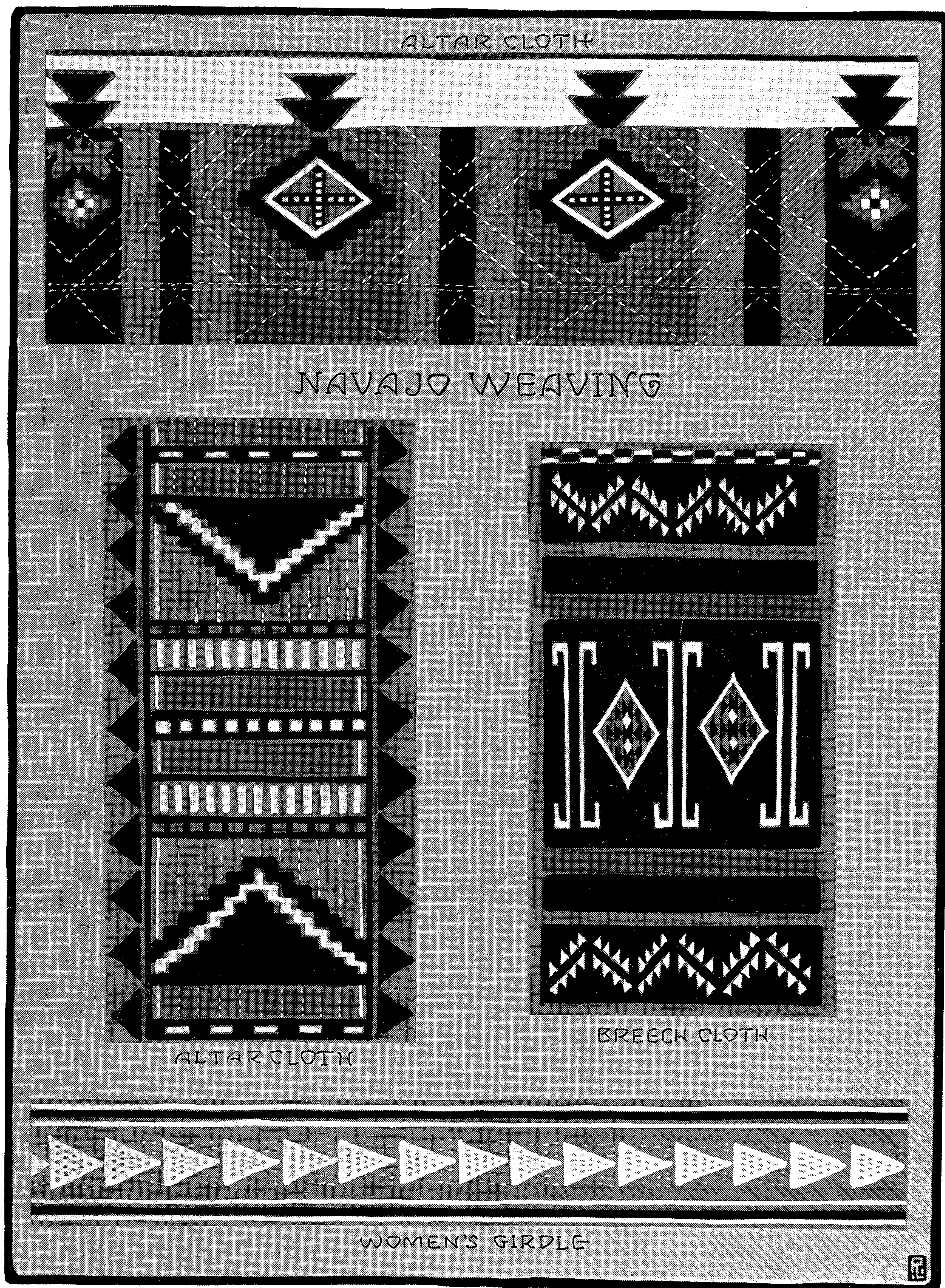












Navajo Indian weavings for  
wearing apparel and cere-  
monial purposes







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NAVAJO SILVER WORK

Hand wrought silver work  
designs by the Navajo  
Indian of North America





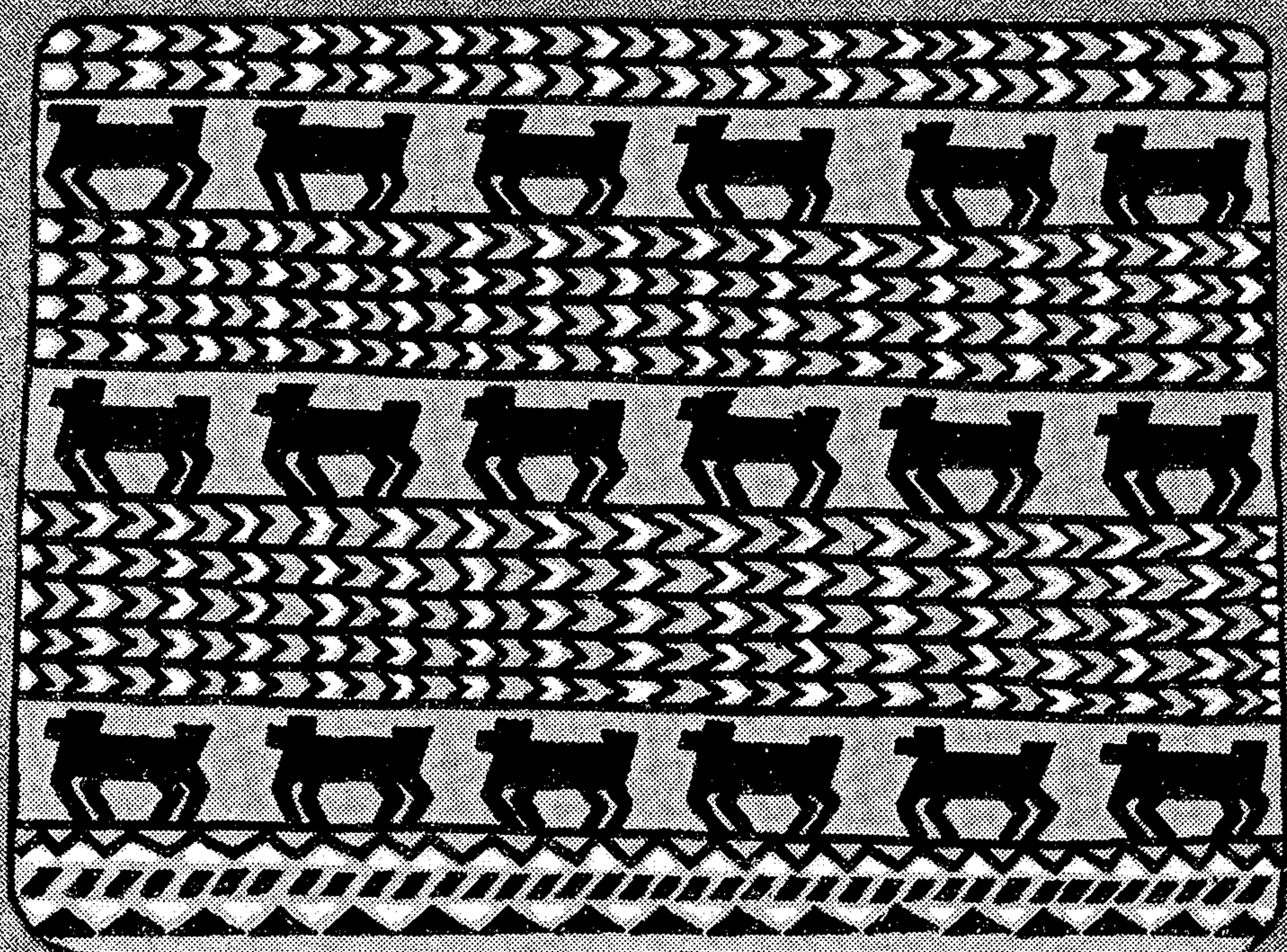




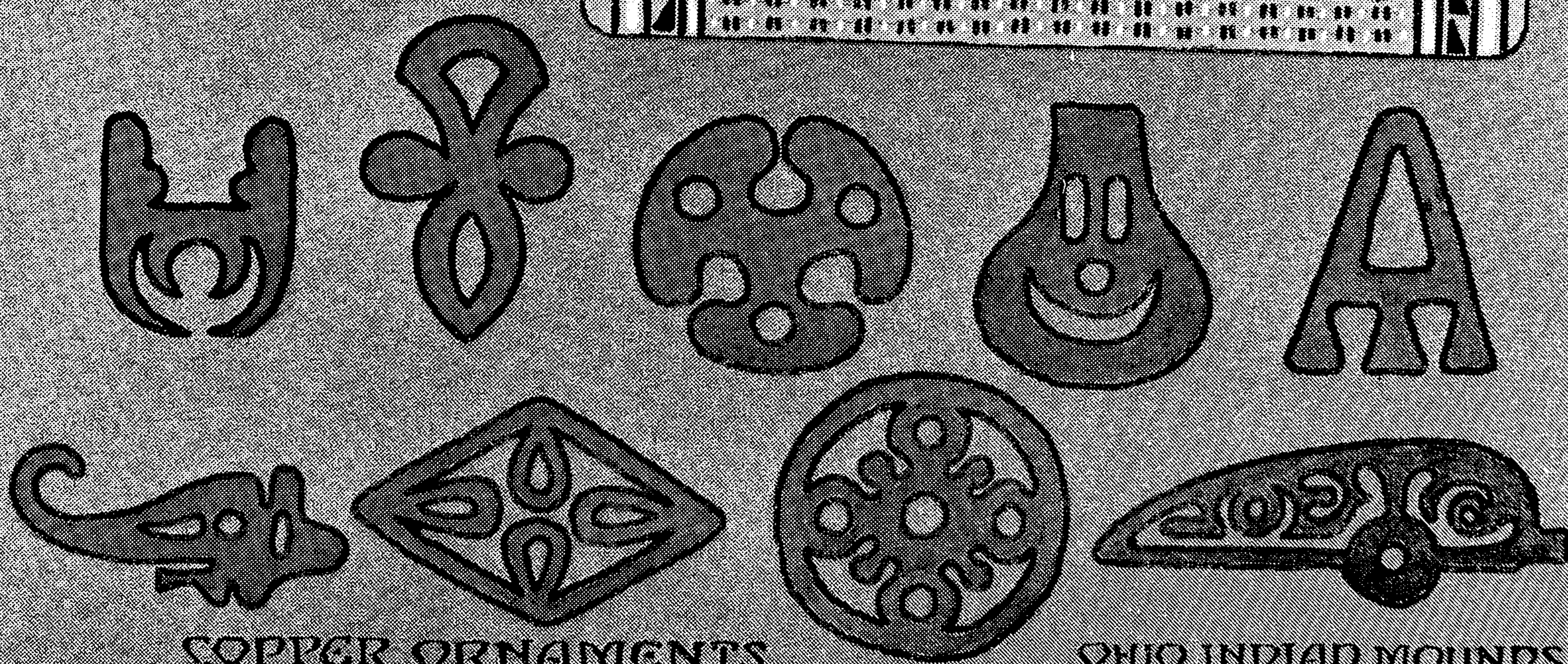
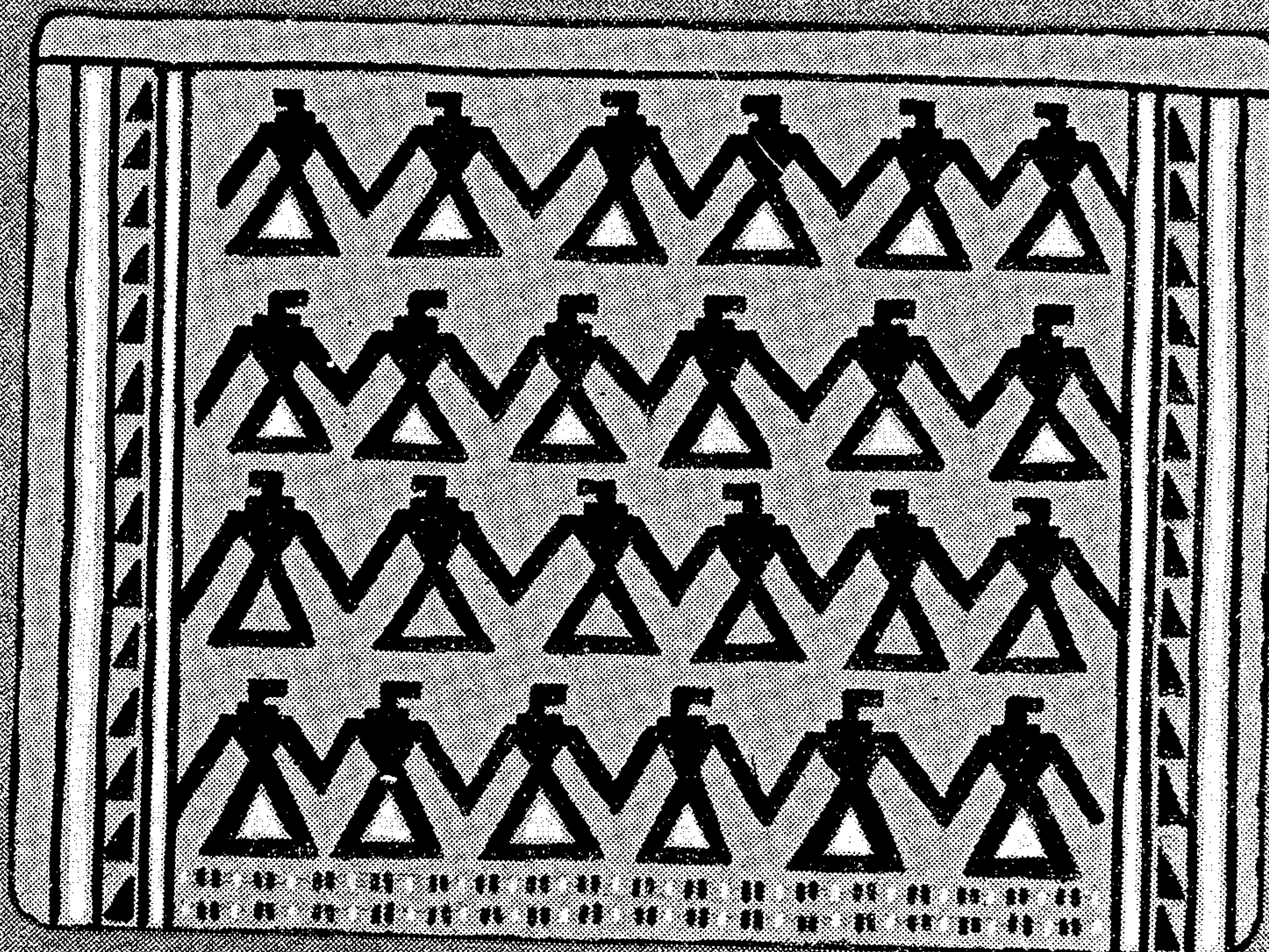
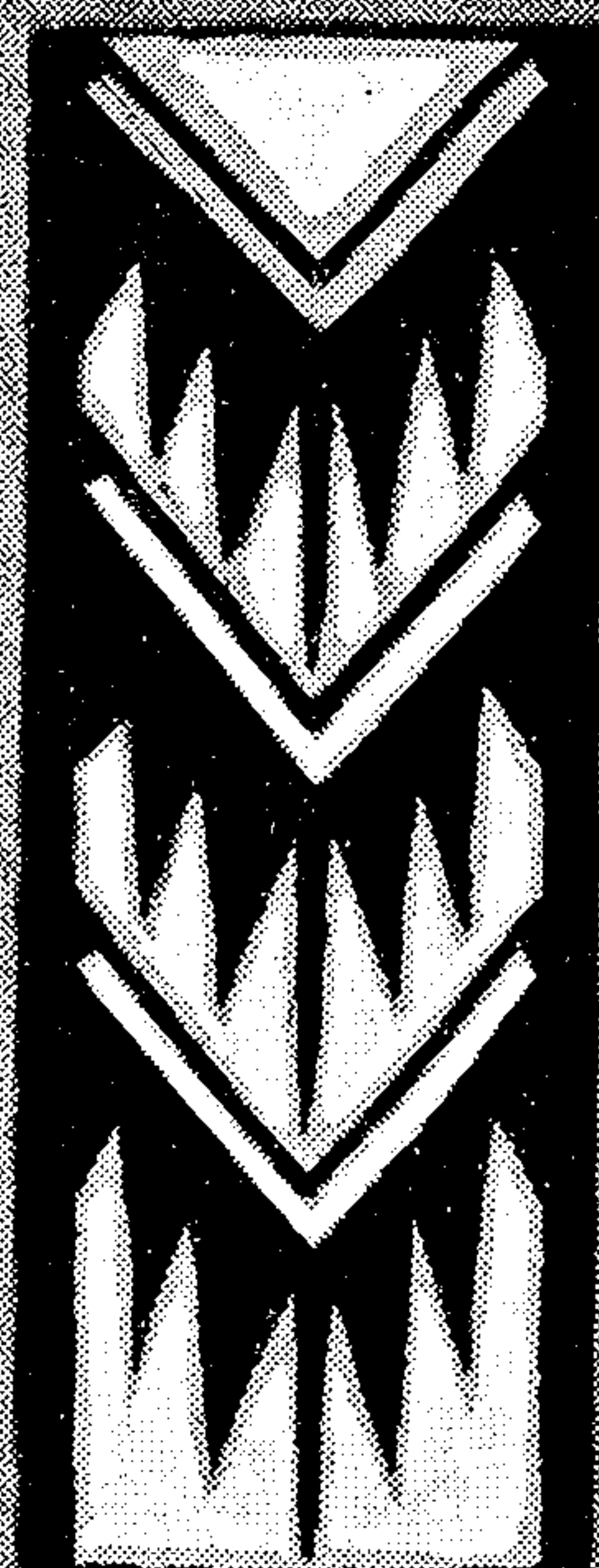








WISCONSIN WINNEBAGO INDIAN WEAVING DESIGNS



COPPER ORNAMENTS

OHIO INDIAN MOUNDS

Designs by the Winnebago Indians  
of Wisconsin and copper ornaments  
by early Indians of Ohio







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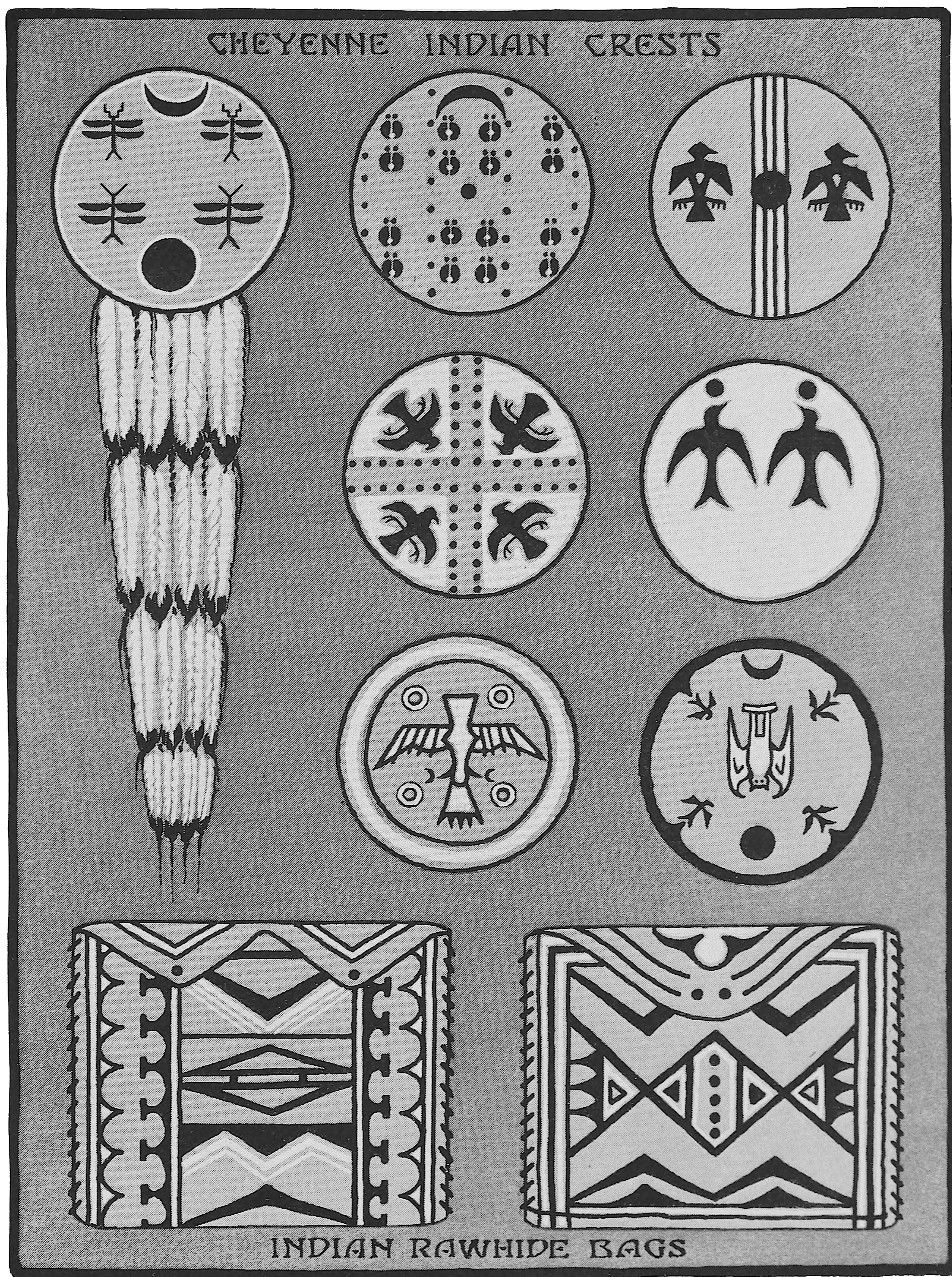
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Symbolic designs used as crests by  
the Cheyenne Indians. Decorated  
rawhide Indian food bags

















Mexican Indian designs  
from textile and pottery  
sources







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Haida Indian designs from the North-western section of North America.  
From carvings in slate and copper







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Animal designs by  
Peruvian Indians of  
South America





Bird borders from textiles and  
pottery designed by the Indians  
of Peru, South America



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Hopi Indian ceremonial dolls  
and woven crests from Arizona,  
North America





Animal and bird motifs  
from Indian Pueblos of  
North America