Earthly Delights
Transforming clay traditions

Japanese Kimonos
A study of art and culture

Easterly, Hockney, Lange and Steichen
Art in Portrait Photography
The village of Juan Mata Ortiz is situated along the banks of the Palangana River in the high northern plains of Chihuahua, Mexico. Home to approximately 2,000 people, this farming and ranching community was named in honor of a 19th-century local hero in the war with the Apache.

During the past 25 years, some extraordinary things have occurred in this modest town. Over 300 people—that's 15 percent of its population—have become potters and Mata Ortiz has become the center of a revival of a centuries-old ceramic tradition.

Pottery revivals, of course, have taken place in other communities, most notably at Hopi and San Ildefonso, Mexico, or in Arizona and New Mexico. However, in such cases the artists were aided by the discoveries of archaeologists and the interpretation of museums. In Mata Ortiz, however, the current revival is the result of the efforts and experimentations of a single individual, Juan Quezada.

Working from pot shards and pottery he found in the caves around his village, Juan Quezada single-handedly rediscovered the materials and techniques necessary to reproduce Casas Grandes style polychrome pottery. The pottery work of the Casas Grandes


LEARNING from EXHIBITIONS

THE POTTERS OF MATA ORTIZ

TRANSFORMING A TRADITION

by Mark M. Johnson

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and designs through his own insight and imagination.

According to authority and exhibition curator Bill Gilbert, the forms and designs of pottery created during the early part of the revival naturally were more closely aligned with the prehistoric Casas Grandes tradition. Recent work, on the other hand, has evolved and reflects a more contemporary and personal response to the same ancient source. Thus, the products of the revival movement fall somewhere between traditional craft and contemporary art. Some potters maintain a strong stylistic link to the prehistoric conventions, while others lean toward stylized realism, and others prefer purely geometric motifs.

“The range of Quezada’s innovations is staggering,” says Gilbert, the single most important innovation being the break with horizontal banding in the design system. Quezada attempts to acknowledge the three-dimensional essence of the object by overlapping designs, often on a diagonal axis, thus energizing the design and suggesting movement.

Quezada forms his pottery by hand through the use of a rounded plaster mold as a base. While the clay of the pots is still green, the forms are scraped with a piece of hacksaw blade until the desired shape is achieved. When the pots are “bone dry,” the artist sands and polishes them to


Eduardo Ortiz. Jar, 1993. Ceramic; 9" x 8". Private Collection. Photograph by Damain Andrus. (Also seen on cover.)

a high finish with a stone or a deer bone, with a little vegetable oil acting as a lubricant.

The pots are then painted with clay slips and mineral pigments using brushes made of as few as four or five strands of human hair. After being preheated in the kitchen oven, the pots are fired, one at a time, in an inverted flower pot saggar covered with manure or cottonwood bark.

Interestingly, the potters of Mata Ortiz do not consider themselves to be the direct descendants of the Casas Grandes culture. They have no ongoing traditions to connect them, and no memory or recent history of relatives being involved in pottery making. Pottery, its process or the product, has never been an important aspect of the lives of this community’s inhabitants. Even today the potters of Mata Ortiz rarely keep examples of their own work for use or display in their own homes. Clearly, the driving force behind this clay renaissance is economic.

Quezada’s departure from original ancient styles has inspired his followers to be equally experimental. Younger potters learn by emulating the master but then,
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Gerardo Luna
Ceramic; 8” x 7”
Private Collection.
Photograph by
Damain Andrus.

Hector Gallegos
Jar, 1993.
Ceramic; 10” x 10”
Private Collection.
Photograph by
Damain Andrus.
farming and ranching. Women had little to no opportunity for gainful employment.

Quezada’s initial success and financial reward inspired and excited others to follow his lead. Quezada shared his discoveries with family and friends, and, in so doing, fostered the beginnings of a local “school” of pottery. Aspiring potters, some with little or no experience, would learn from Quezada until they also emerged as mature, independent artists to guide and nurture others.

What has not been fully studied or explained is how such a modest community could produce such a large and disproportionate number of skilled and productive artisans in such a short period of time. The Potters of Mata Ortiz: Transforming a Tradition includes approximately 50 ceramic works and is accompanied by a color-illustrated catalogue. The exhibit is curated by Bill Gilbert, Assistant Professor, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, and is organized by the University of New Mexico. This exhibition is a program of ExhibitsUSA, a national division of Mid-America Arts Alliance, is generously supported by the National Endowment for the Arts Challenge Grant Program and the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation. Additional support has been provided by the H&R Block Foundation, Cooper Foundation, Richard Florsheim Art Fund, Samuel H. Kress Foundation, and the state arts agencies of Arkansas, Kansas, Illinois, Missouri, Nebraska, Oklahoma and Texas.

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with experience and a degree of self-confidence, develop a new direction, their own style that distinguishes themselves from the master and each other. It is the marketplace that serves as the primary impetus to develop a new style and it is the same economics that will determine its success.

Economic considerations certainly have encouraged many residents of Mata Ortiz to turn to pottery as a craft and as a livelihood. The town was very poor for a long period of time and conditions offered little opportunity for any kind of improvement. Indeed, the primary options for men included working for the railroad or for fruit growers, or subsistence
A n art instructor once told me that the sculpture I wanted to render was already in the clay. I had to do was to liberate it. As I looked at that humble lump of clay, I found the idea both intriguing and frustrating.

He was right. Whatever I chose to make was already there. Getting it all the way out was an intimidating proposition. I have, however, discovered a solid solution for students who aren’t quite ready for such a grand liberation. The answer? Don’t liberate it...entirely.

Relief sculpture is the perfect solution for novice sculptors and a great bridge between two-dimensional and three-dimensional art. Instead of embarking on a three-dimensional design, students can render a two-dimensional design and transfer that design onto a slab of clay. Then they can begin the process of exploring the ins and outs of sculpture.

As my high school students began this unit, they struggled with the question of how to render an image with depth on a quarter-inch slab of clay. Dealing with this prompted them to revisit perspective concepts the class had covered earlier in the year. It also fostered a desire to explore actual three-dimensional possibilities.

Students were allowed to add clay where desired to build up areas and to overlap the outer frame. The more they desired depth, the more they hungered for three-dimensional sculpture.

I talked about relief sculpture and showed examples of Greek relief work as we went along. Some students left their images firmly planted in their clay backgrounds. Others all but totally freed theirs!

With so many varied examples of sculptural transition available, it was easy to explain the method of extracting a three-dimensional form from clay. The activity provided excellent latitude for varied interest areas, while supplying an opportunity for short-term success. We were done with the sculptures in 10 days, which left us time to glaze them as carefully as we wished.

As we moved on to three-dimensional forms, I was pleased with the knowledge that this unit filled in some of the blanks between two-dimensional and three-dimensional artwork.

When I told my students that we would use this unit as preparation for three-dimensional sculpture, they all breathed a collective sigh of relief!

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