



Opulent: Mata Ortiz Pottery

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Mata Ortiz, Chihuahua, in northern Mexico, has been described as a “small village where magic happens every day.”¹ Approximately 450 potters live there, producing technically superb and visually compelling pottery that has gained both national and international attention. The originator of the Mata Ortiz movement, Juan Quezada, received Mexico’s Premio Nacional de Artes y Ciencias in 1999, the first northerner to be honored with this national prize. Pottery from Mata Ortiz is noted for its extremely thin walls, masterful proportions and meticulous decoration – aesthetics that account for its growing popularity.

This small town, however, has become a center of creative production only within the past three decades, owing to the curiosity, perseverance and art of Juan Quezada. In the late 1960s, Quezada began investigating the creation of an original ceramic process, experimenting with fire, clay deposits buried deep in the mountain, minerals ground into pigments, and paintbrushes made from the hair of his children. The creative journey of this one man profoundly affected a small town and the people in it.

The Quezada family migrated to Mata Ortiz in 1941 from Tutuaca, near the border of Chihuahua and Sonora. Juan, their youngest child, was then one year old. He entered school in Mata Ortiz at the age of 9 and left at the age of 12 to help support his family. Several years of his youth were spent gathering and selling firewood. During his treks into the mountains, the young Juan gathered shards of ancient pottery – shards later credited as having inspired a new ceramic process. As a boy, he might have sat “in the mountains, huddled before a fire on a yucca blanket [pulling] the shards from his pockets and [examining] the precise geometric patterns ... [wondering] about the ancient people and how they made such objects.”² Quezada also found work in local orchards and the railroad repair yard of his hometown.

During Quezada’s youth, Mata Ortiz remained a primitive locale. The railroad line running from Ciudad, Juarez on the Texas Border through Mata Ortiz provided the only contact with the outside world and, for most in Mata Ortiz, the only employment. In 1959, however, the repair yard was closed, leaving the town in dire economic

straits. This closure coincided with excavations being done at Paquime, an ancient archeological sight nearby. Run by the Di Peso and Amerind Foundation, the excavation continued from 1950 until 1961. Coinciding with the bleak and desperate economic period in Mata Ortiz, the digs at Paquime were, not surprisingly, looted, and a black market soon grew up around these stolen treasures.

Juan Quezada’s source of employment at this time is not clear. After marrying Gullermina Reyes in 1964, “Juan worked hard at whatever jobs he could find.”³ In his free time, Quezada, “inspired only by prehistoric shards,”⁴ undertook to create the ceramic technique he had long envisioned. It is believed that some time between 1966 and 1970, “Juan fired the first pot that he was satisfied with.”⁵

The current literature on Mata Ortiz suggests the ancient shards were his only inspiration. But I suggest that the active black-market trade which developed in Mata Ortiz during Quezada’s formative years led him to realize ancient pottery had monetary value and therefore further inspired his discovery of a new process.

Quezada’s contribution is often said to have been made without any knowledge of its potential worth. As one commentator put it, “in all the years of developing his art it never occurred to him that there might be a market for it.”⁶ The fact that ancient pottery has been sold in Mata Ortiz since at least 1959 negates this assertion. In addition, during his explorations, Quezada not only had a family to support but also lived in a town that understood the value of ancient artifacts. To suppose that he remained completely insulated and unaware of the possible value of his pottery is, therefore, unlikely.

Quezada could not have foreseen the extent to which his new craft would be marketed; he himself has stated that he never intended to make an entire career out of producing pottery, as he “just wanted to make a pot.”⁷ Dreams of the Premio Nacional and extensive touring exhibitions never figured in those early years. Yet one could surmise that the creative ingenuity necessary to develop pioneering ceramics inevitably included a glimmer of potential benefit.

These statements are largely speculative, the only facts being that a town lost its economic basis and a black market in antiquities developed while Quezada was



inventing a ceramic technique. The simple story of inspiration through creative motivation and youthful curiosity is enticing and has been extensively documented by two American participants in Mata Ortiz ceramics, Spencer MacCallum and Walter Parks, author of *The Miracle of Mata Ortiz*. However, economic motivations and the economic situation in Mata Ortiz in the late 1960s and early 1970s are rarely discussed in published histories of the town, even though they played a large part in the development of this ceramic movement. The complexities and intricacies of nearly every piece of work produced are inherent, but it is a disservice to simplify and romanticize the town's fascinating history.

In 1974, Juan Quezada was selling enough pottery to traders to devote his time exclusively to ceramics and to support his family. He was the first person in Mata Ortiz to do so – although hundreds would eventually follow. Quezada's innate ability to teach has been the true miracle of Mata Ortiz. Self-taught artists are relatively common; a self-taught artist with the capability to teach, however, is rare. Almost miraculously, his process and encouragement of fellow villagers resulted in the emergence of hundreds of extraordinarily gifted artists in Mata Ortiz.

In the past decade, the Mata Ortiz pottery movement has burst onto the national and international art scenes. The town now boasts second- and third-generation potters who are shaping the Mata Ortiz movement in their own creative and diverse



Juan Quezada, *Olla*, 2001, clay, 13" x 10", Courtesy Owings – Dewey Fine Art, Santa Fe, NM

directions. This movement has enabled families to remain together in a region where many living in rural or urban areas are forced to cross the border illegally to look for work or spend long hours working in low-paying factory jobs. The movement is also responsible for the emergence of pride not only within what was once a desolate town with no economic basis but also within the state of Chihuahua, where newspaper

headlines now read "Juan Quezada: The Pride of Chihuahua." For northern Mexico, so long excluded from the canon of visual culture, the movement is a stunning example of artistic prowess. Mata Ortiz, located near the border region, an area usually racked with the harsh realities of drug trafficking and the challenges of constant cross-cultural contact, now offers the area a beautiful and stoic manifestation of human ability.

The artists in Mata Ortiz, some of the finest of whom are represented in this exhibition, have created countless unique styles through constant innovation and experimentation. The tale of this small town and the art it produces will continue. The complexities and the beauty of its pottery, and the fascinating stories that are yet to be written, will comprise one of the most remarkable ceramic art movements in history.

– Laura Widmar

Notes

1. Susan Lowell, *The Many Faces of Mata Ortiz*, (Tucson: Treasure Chest Books, 1999), 15.
2. Spencer MacCallum, "Ceramic Revival in the Casas Grandes Valley" in *The Masterkey* 52 (Spring 1978), 48.
3. Walter Parks, *The Miracle of Mata Ortiz* (Riverside, CA: The Coulter Press, 1993), 11.
4. Parks, Back Cover.
5. Parks, 11.
6. MacCallum, 45.
7. Juan Quezada, "The Soul of a Potter: Juan Quezada" interview by Marta Turok, in *Artes de Mexico*, no.45 (Summer 1999): 87.

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