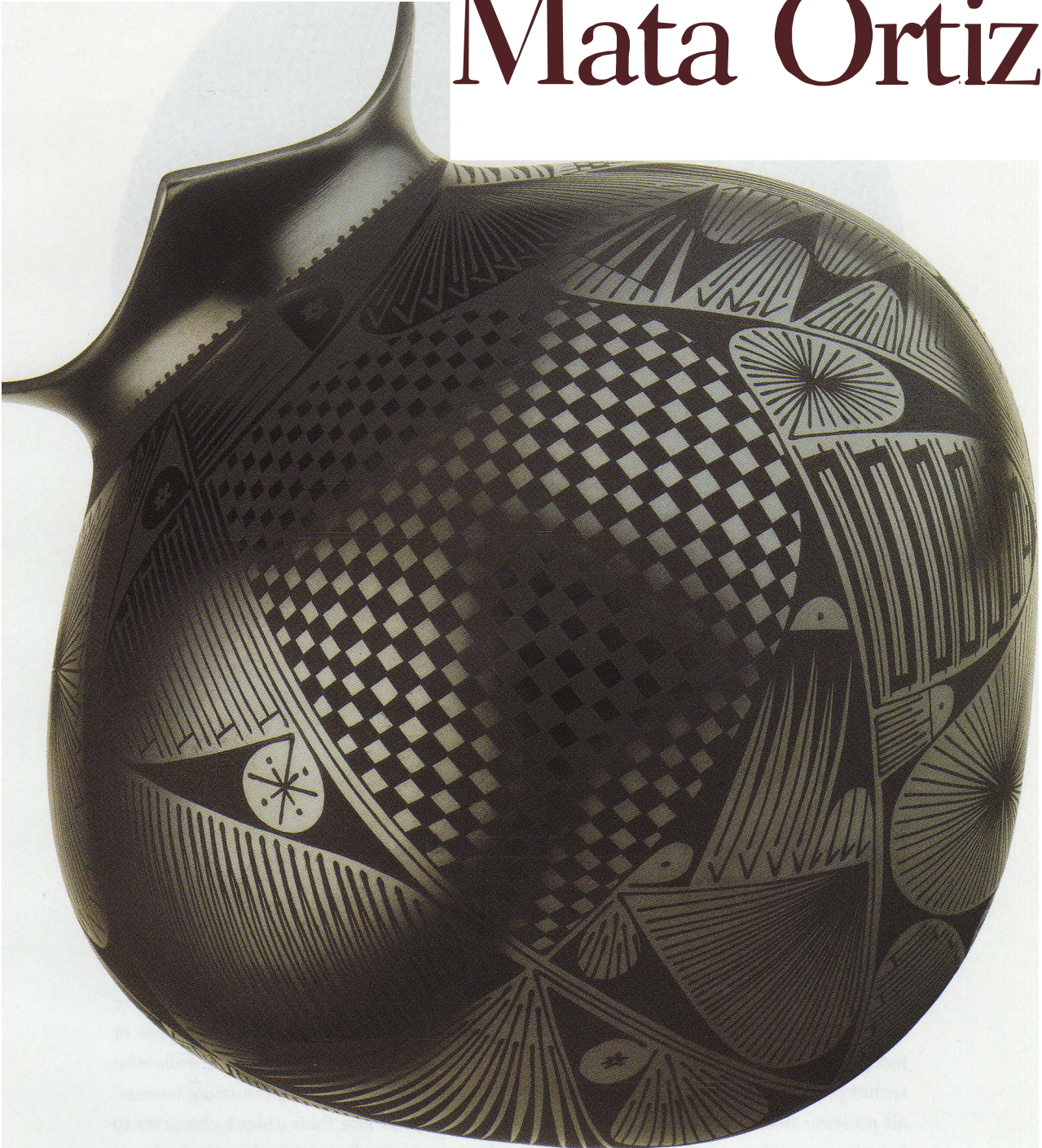


The Magic Of Mata Ortiz



▲ Jaime Quezada,
graphite-finished pot
with four-pointed mouth,
23.5 x 24 cm.
Native & Nature Collection.



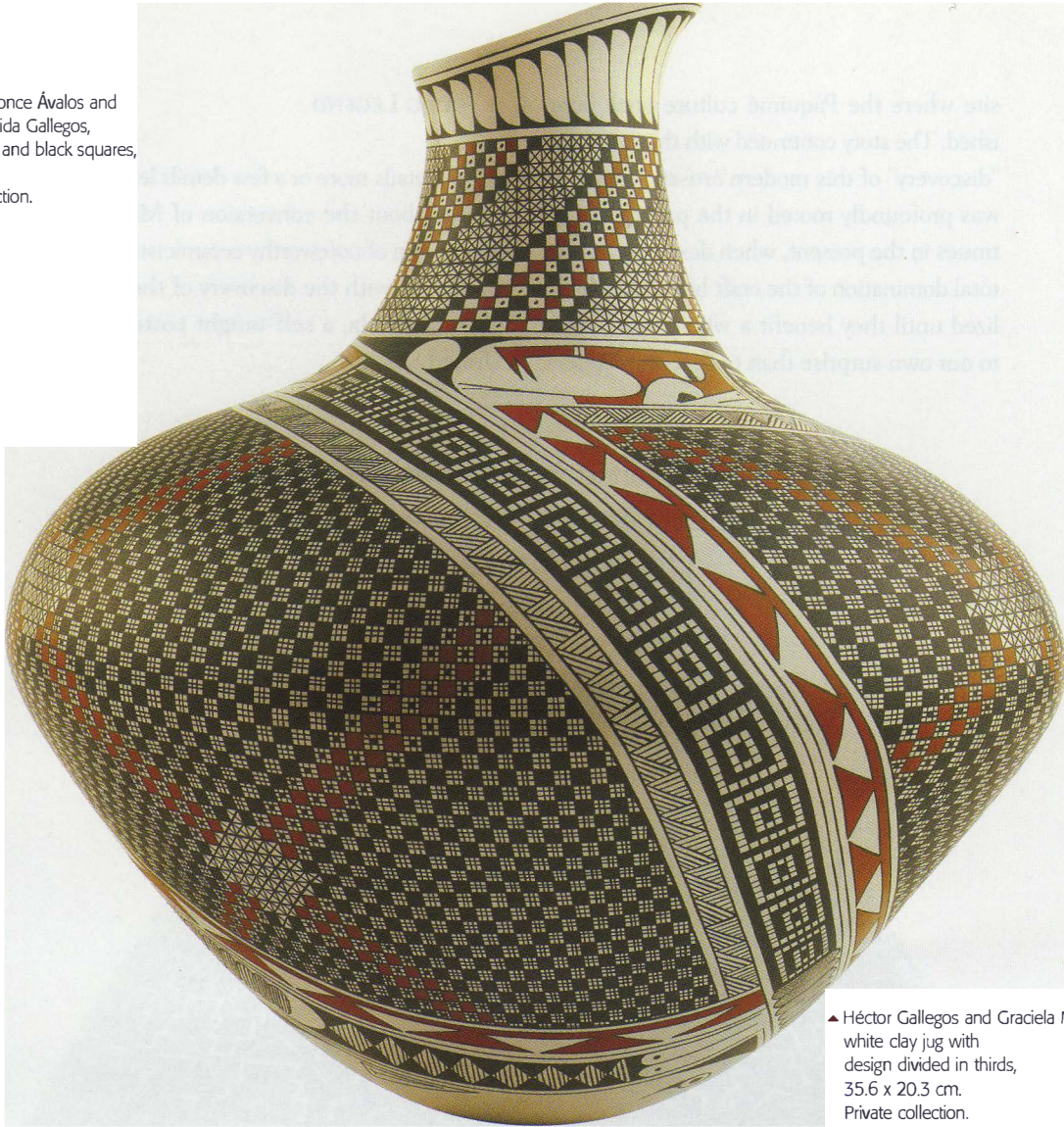
Almost by definition, our towns' craft tradition has been handed down from generation to generation for centuries from pre-Hispanic to colonial and independence times. In each place or region, techniques and objects, colors and materials preserve stories that explain their inhabitants' mastery of one craft or another. States like Michoacán, Oaxaca and Puebla, for

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example, are lost in time when you look for the origin of many of their craft traditions.

Nevertheless, in recent decades, we have seen that these skills tend to disappear or be corrupted, overwhelmed by the avalanche of plastic and industrial production. Increasingly, objects lose their unique character to become practically mass produced items found everywhere. These goods have an advantage when they compete with traditionally made objects, whose master craftsmen have preserved or recovered original techniques and

◀ Humberto Ponce Ávalos and Blanca Almeida Gallegos, pot with red and black squares, 30 x 31 cm. Private collection.



▶ Héctor Gallegos and Graciela Martínez, white clay jug with design divided in thirds, 35.6 x 20.3 cm. Private collection.

the cultural value of their craft and are willing to invest the time needed to create unique, beautiful pieces whose survival will depend on demand, an “outrageous” sale price and an exclusive market, since only in that way can the value of the labor put into them be recovered.

No one can deny this bleak fate of Mexican artisan life, unless they look at the example of Mata Ortiz, a town of ex-railroad workers and loggers converted into artisans just over the last three decades. Their mastery as ceram-

icists seems to counter a non-written law in Mexico’s craft tradition that says that a craft well plied is inherited, and, if it goes back more than 100 years, all the better.

Here in the town and environs of Mata Ortiz, there are no centuries to be dredged up, nor interminable family trees of craftsmen. Here, it all started as the adventure of an adolescent boy with a bent for sketching and the arts: Juan Quezada, whose passionate curiosity led him to reproduce pieces similar to those left behind hundreds of years ago in the imposing

site where the Paquimé culture once flourished. The story continued with the fortuitous “discovery” of this modern artisan, whose art was profoundly rooted in the past, and continues in the present, when dexterity and the total domination of the craft have been socialized until they benefit a whole town, more to our own surprise than to that of outsiders.

A YOUNG LEGEND

A few details more or a few details less, all the stories about the conversion of Mata Ortiz into a town of noteworthy ceramicists begin in the 1970s with the discovery of the work of Juan Quezada, a self-taught potter, in the United States.

It all started as the adventure of
and adolescent boy with a bent for sketching and
the arts: Juan Quezada.



◀ Manuel Rodríguez Guillén,
pot with M.C. Escher like perspective,
24.1 x 17.8 cm.
Private collection.



Juan was a young man whose fascination for clay and its secrets awakened during his teens when he found shards of Paquimé ceramics along the way on his long walks to gather firewood. The geometry of the design and the predominant red and black on the pieces of clay spoke of the splendor of this pre-Hispanic culture, a powerful trade and religious center that developed in Mexico's North. Determined to reproduce the beauty and discover the techniques used to make it, Juan began to experiment with clays, paints and firing, dyes and decorations, making pieces that he sold sporadically.

Three of these pieces were purchased in 1976 in New Mexico by Spencer MacCallum, an anthropologist and art historian, who never rested until he found their maker. California resident Spencer traveled to New Mexico, crossed the border and began his investigation in northern Chihuahua. It is said that, with a photo of the vessels in hand, he went through the isolated little towns on his way asking if people knew the person who had made them. He continued until he came to Nuevo Casas Grandes and from there, to Mata Ortiz, a town connected to the rest of the state by the railroad. From the end of the nine-

teenth century until the late 1950s, the town had survived mainly thanks to the railroad and logging, but in 1963, with the closing of the railroad repair shop, the main source of jobs, it had gone steadily downhill.

This is where MacCallum finally found who he was looking for. By then, Juan had perfected his technique and materials and only financial concerns kept him from spending all his time making ceramics. Convinced that Juan Quezada was the maker of the receptacles he had bought, Spencer decided to encourage the potter to continue his exper-

iments and promised to buy the best pieces he made. This was the beginning of an almost decade-long relationship that benefitted first Quezada and then other potters of the town.

But Quezada did not make his technique a mysterious, inexplicable act of magic; he did not say that his art was the result of an innate ability. With time, and after seeing proof of his followers' seriousness, he shared some of his discoveries and improvements with other potters. This socialization of knowledge turned pottery into the main economic activity for more than 300 families. More than two de-



▲ Porfirio "Pilo" Mora V., mixed clay pot with black geometric decoration, 22 x 19.5 cm. Native & Nature Collection.

cedes later, one can speak of different styles in Mata Ortiz ceramics; the different colored clays and techniques have diversified, and many of the craftsmen have become internationally famous, although the brightest star in the firmament undoubtedly continues to be Don Juan Quezada.

ORIGINAL ARTISTIC EXPRESSION

Of elegant, sinuous forms, walls fine and light to the touch, and interconnected geo-

metrical designs made up of multiple thin lines, in which black dominates, Mata Ortiz ceramics are, from their very inception, ornamental. Though they are inspired in the beauty and perfection of their pre-Hispanic forebears, the pieces produced in this singular northern Mexican town are characters in their own story.

The technique seems simple, which makes the results all the more surprising. After working with different soils from the region, Quezada achieved a mixture of clay with the perfect balance of humidity and plasticity that allows



▲ Lydia Quezada Celado, pink clay pot with jagged mouth and polychromatic decoration, 28 x 23 cm. Native & Nature Collection.

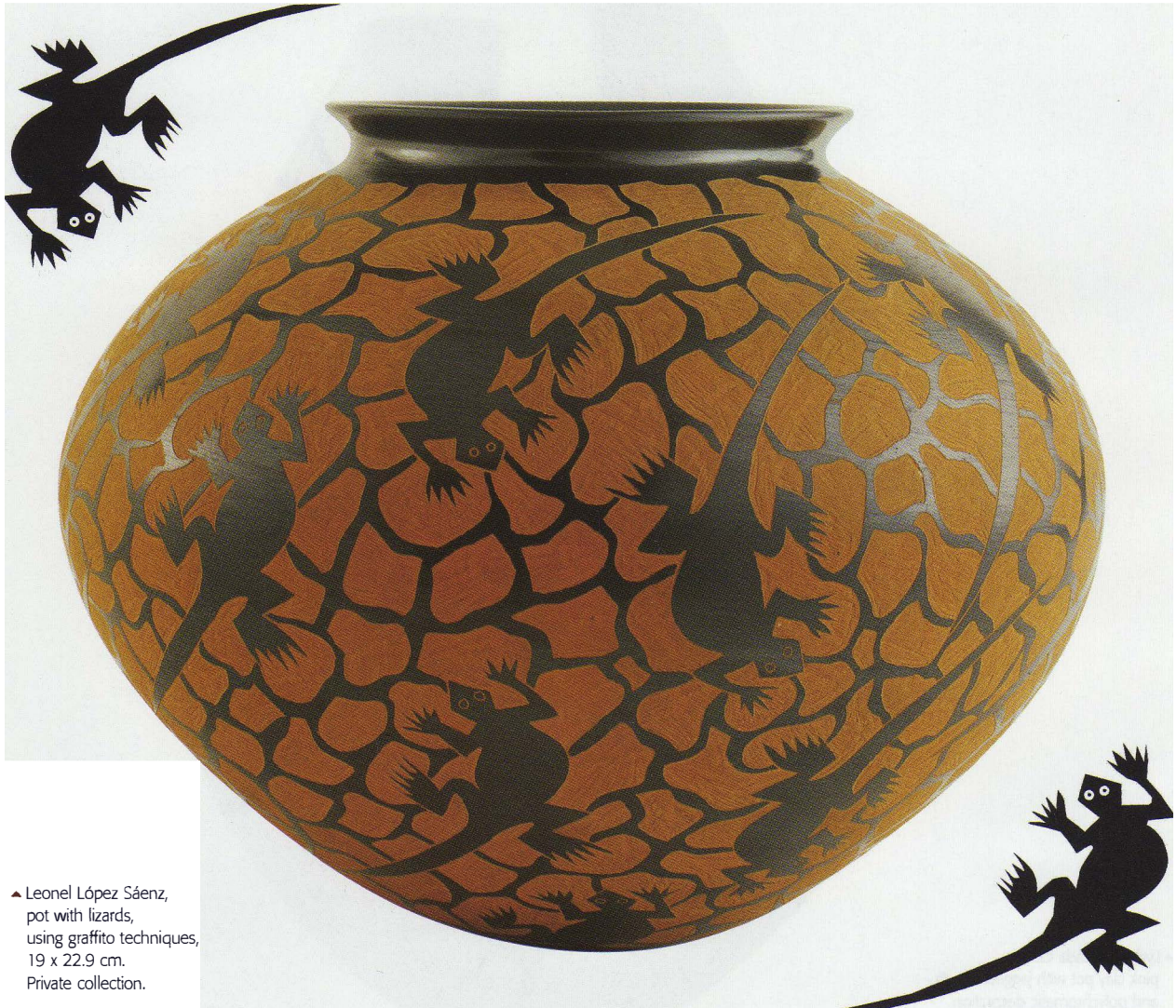
him to mold and design a piece without its breaking or sagging during the process.

Ceramicists do not use potter's wheels in Mata Ortiz. They start with a clay "tortilla" on a base. Around that, a roll of clay is placed and molded upward with the hands until the desired form is achieved. The piece is dried naturally, then sanded with commercial sandpaper and polished, usually with an agate stone. Then the receptacle is given a light bath of oil and water.

Then comes the design, using natural, locally-produced pigments and extra-fine brushes

made of children's hair (first they experimented with animal hair and feathers); this makes decorating the receptacle an art in itself. There are no pre-established designs or sketches, although the complex geometry, the motifs and dominant colors give each of the pieces its own special identity. Today, the forms, clays and decorations diverge from the original tradition without losing their quality.

Perhaps the most interesting process of all is the firing of the pieces. Don Juan Quezada spent a long time experimenting to achieve a firing that would respect the tones of the clay



▲ Leonel López Sáenz,
pot with lizards,
using graffito techniques,
19 x 22.9 cm.
Private collection.



▲ Mauro "Chico" Corona Quezada, white clay pot with closed mouth and polychromatic decoration, 31 x 26.5 cm. Native & Nature Collection.

Of elegant, sinuous forms, walls fine and light to the touch, Mata Ortiz ceramics are, from their very inception, ornamental.

and the paint. After testing with wood and coal, the most perfect method was to put the pieces on the ground, protect them with an inverted clay pot, cover it with cow dung impregnated with kerosene, light it on fire and keep the fire going until the temperature got to 800 degrees Celsius. (The pot acts as refractory ware, preventing sudden, uneven heating that would change and stain the colors.) Forty minutes later, the process is finished, except for slowly cooling the pieces, for which a preheated stove oven is used. Today, cow dung is not easily acquired, so they have also used poplar bark. However,

since this is also scarce, the potters have been thinking that in the future, electric ovens may be an option, even though this goes against tradition.

Mata Ortiz ceramics seem to still have a long life ahead of them. Their fame, particularly abroad, where many pieces are shown in museums and galleries and admired by private collectors, is no obstacle to recognizing that the language of the clay in this case has achieved an undisputed artistic expression. **MM**

Elsie Montiel
Editor