



# Michoacán

## Discovering the Familiar

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Pottery is one of Michoacán state's outstanding craft traditions. Rooted hundreds of years in the past, it has managed to retain its essence down through the centuries. Certainly it has diversified, but techniques as old as burnished<sup>1</sup> and smoothed pottery continue to endure. From them have flowed new designs and styles that are the predecessors of contemporary pottery.

We would need a whole book to explain the wealth of Michoacán ceramics. The infinite number of techniques, processes, designs and finishes make an

excursion into this world of clay a journey without end.

In Michoacán today, a great variety of items are made at high, low and medium temperatures, from the household *comal* used for grilling tortillas to totally decorated pots or strange, shapeless ornaments. They all have the seal and creativity of hands from Michoacán.



Photos by Dante Barrera

Above: Green pineapple from San José de Gracia.  
Below: A pot from Capula, detail.

Working in clay seems simple, but it requires great ability and knowledge. It comes in infinite variety; colors and textures vary by region, and each item is shaped with varying techniques and processes. The same clay processed in different ways yields very different results. Firing time, temperature, drying time and even climatic conditions all have an influence on this ancient, malleable material.

Among the oldest techniques is the one used to make *cocuchas*—very large, elongated pots stained with soot from being placed directly on a wood fire—named for the community where they are produced, Cocucho. Other techniques give us the burnished squashes from Zinapécuaro and the

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*chorreadas* from Patamban. Huáncito and Ichán also produce jugs of burnished and smoothed clay, with a different finish.

On the coast of Michoacán, almost unknown to outsiders, the beautiful local pottery has simple forms and a pure design. In some cases it is decorated with the unique natural dye exuded by the purple-bellied snail. Creativity comes to the fore in making ceramic replicas of flora and fauna using only natural materials native to the region.

Tzintzuntzan, one of Michoacán's oldest religious centers located on the edge of Lake Pátzcuaro, produces pottery in the classical pre-Hispanic style, with geometric designs and frets. Today, some craftsmen produce designs fired at high temperatures in a style rooted in their traditions.

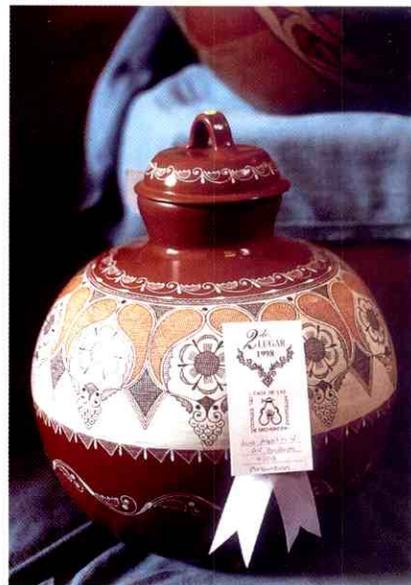
San José de Gracia is a community known for its green or yellow *vidriada* pineapples.<sup>2</sup> Decorated in innumerable ways, surrounded by flowers typical of Mexico such as the calla lily or the sunflower, particularly noteworthy in these pieces is the use of the technique called *pastillaje*, or decorating the piece with

small daubs of clay. In this process, the material's humidity is a basic factor: if it is very dry, the daubs crumble and if very humid, they change shape.

Santa Fé de la Laguna also produces *vidriada* pottery, but in black, and mainly punch bowls and incense burners, used frequently in ceremonies and festivities like the Day of the Dead. Candelabras for 7, 12 and up to 24 candles are a marvel to behold, covered with thousands of tiny flowers, frets and animals in relief.

Capula, only a few kilometers from Morelia, the state capital, produces sets of dishes and pots of different kinds. They are decorated with tiny dots of paint, thousands and thousands of dots that together take the form of brightly colored fish, flowers, animals and frets. At a distance the designs are perfect, but they are even more impressive when examined close up and in detail.

High temperature pottery is made in many communities today, such as Talpujahuá, Patamban, Morelia and Tzintzuntzan. What is incredible is that each place produces items that clearly identify the



Working in clay requires great ability and knowledge.



Cocuchas are made using one of the oldest techniques known.



Michoacan's world of clay is infinite in variety and techniques.



Polychromatic pottery from Ocumicho, a display of creativity and bright colors.

artist, the community and the region, and the design of which denotes the cultural heritage and experience spanning centuries. *Engobes*,<sup>3</sup> wax molds and other techniques make this pottery very special.

The polychromatic pottery of Ocumicho, a picturesque town far from the noise and concrete of the cities, stands out among relatively new designs and techniques. There, craftsmen make clay demons, religious figures and scenes of daily life. Their bright colors, creativity and innocence have been very well received by contemporary collectors. Particularly noteworthy are the “little hens of Ocumicho,” which at first glance seem to be simple figures of little animals or demons dressed in costumes, but you lift up the clothing, you are surprised with erotic art!

All these objects are excellent examples of how innocence and a fertile imagination can combine to interpret the relationship between good and evil.

One of the communities that seems to have suspended the passage of time is Zipiajo, a small town which produces deep, round pots, sold individually or in

stacks. They can be used for storing rice or beans and are placed one on top of another. I call this a clay cupboard, because in addition to being attractive, they take up very little space. Here, we also find sets of griddles, from very large to tiny. Each griddle can be used to toast a different food: chili peppers, tortillas, grains of corn, lima and garbanzo beans, or even mamee pits, used by many women as mascara.

In Michoacán, artisans have given clay a language of its own to tell stories that only pottery can convey. **MM**

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Burnishing consists of polishing by rolling the piece briskly while still fresh to close its pores and give it a natural sheen. See Gloria Cáceres, “Cerámica popular mexicana” in *Revista del CIDAP. Centro Interamericano de Artesanías y Artes Populares* 41-42 (November 1993).

<sup>2</sup> The *vidriado* technique consists of bathing an already fired piece with a lead-based enamel and firing it again to give it a shiny finish and make it more resistant and waterproof.

<sup>3</sup> The clay used to cover the unfired pot.



Capula produces sets of dishes and pots decorated with tiny dots of paint.