

Ceramics in Jalisco

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Dante Barrera

José Tomás Esperanza León, *Allegory*, 1994 (burnished clay). (Pantaleón Panduro Museum, Tlaquepaque.)

Usually seen as beautiful, utilitarian objects, and in some cases luxury products, crafts can be so attractive that the buyer seldom asks what goes into them: the long days of hard work, collective experiences and creative needs of the people who conceived of them.

Crafts were born as an answer to Man's need to change his environment and make it more accessible. The struggle for survival is implicit in some of these products, for example, the ones made of unraveled vegetable fibers which were the first crafts of early men.¹

This first change of Man's surroundings allowed him to develop other abilities and craft forms; he began to cover

baskets with mud, which was hardened in the Sun: these were the first predecessors of ceramics. Undoubtedly, in this same period the most important step forward in mastering the environment was the invention of the bow and arrow.

Weaves diversified and people began to work with fibers that were "friendlier" than vegetable fibers. Women concentrated on two kinds of production: cera-

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Bandera earthenware took its name from Mexico's national colors.

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A plaque to Tlaquepaque's artisans.

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mics and textiles. Two other activities that began at this time were also basic for the development of humanity: agriculture and the discovery of metals in the Neolithic Period. Precisely in this period, the conditions for the development of crafts and trade —beginning with barter— were consolidated.

Once basic needs were satisfied, people concentrated on symbolism: art, religion, myths and a joint form of cosmogony, the way they conceived of and explained life.

TRADITIONAL CERAMICS

Some say that pottery was discovered accidentally when some mud-covered baskets were left hardening in the Sun. Others give it divine connotations, saying the first

potter was the Creator, who made the first man out of clay. The fact is that ceramics in all its different forms has accompanied Man throughout his development.

A great many forms, colors and finishes have been used in Mexican clay work, from simple terra cotta used to make rudimentary baskets and containers to satisfy the most elemental needs of men, to ritual ceramics made and decorated to please the gods.

Today, some pre-Hispanic techniques continue to be used, as in the case of the *bruñido* (burnished) clay made in Tonalá and Tlaquepaque,² also called “aroma” clay because of the smell it gives off when wet. The containers are covered with a bath of *matiz*,³ over which many floral or animal motifs are painted. This work is signed by the artisans who then patiently polish each piece with pyrite.

Tasks are divided up in the family: some family members wet the piece and begin the polishing; others make large holes in the patio to put the objects in so they remain damp and are thus easier to polish.

Derivative of *bruñido* crockery are the *encebadas* (tallowed) pieces, for which the sheen is obtained not by rubbing, but with a bath of fat which adheres to the clay when its surface shrinks during firing.

One of the varieties of this is the *canelo* (cinnamon) earthenware, which comes from the town of El Rosario. Typically, it has other tones and a floral decoration and is made in the shape of containers for liquids. At the beginning of the century it was known as *loza amarilla* (yellow crockery).

Bandera (flag) earthenware takes its name from Mexico's national colors:



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Traditional Mexican kitchens are full of pottery. (Regional Ceramics Museum, Tlaquepaque.)

pieces bathed in red clay beaten until it “flowers” are decorated with a bath of color and large white and green flowers.

Another type of *encebada* ceramics is a shining, black crockery, as dark as the night, known as “graffito black,” which only emphasizes its brilliance, decorated with an awl when the clay is still wet.

Beautiful in all its forms—capricious like Man’s creativity itself, allegorical as a recreation of life—still useful for utilitarian objects, as active as Man himself, traditional ceramics will continue to exist as long as people have anything to say about it.

COLONIAL CERAMICS

In pre-Hispanic Mexico, the *toltecas*, or artisans, were recognized for their great

ability and enjoyed special privileges. When the Spanish arrived they found that although Mexican potters were only familiar with polishing as a technique for waterproofing their receptacles, they already displayed great sophistication in ornamentation based on frets and lines which never crossed and the use of wax molds.

The Spaniards made their own contribution by teaching them the uses of the *greta*, a technique they had learned from the Arabs for giving a sheen to crockery. This was the origin of what is called *loza de lumbre* (open-fire crockery),⁴ which continues to be made in every town in Mexico and is sold at local markets, just as it is in Jalisco. The Spaniards also brought with them the use of the modern potter’s wheel and the kiln.



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Petatillo pieces can be recognized by their thin diagonal lines surrounding images of plants and animals.

Mexican potters contributed to ceramics the highly baroque decoration such as in the *petatillo*⁵ pieces made in Tonalá and Tlaquepaque.

Loza de lumbre is for everyday use in cooking food; it is decorated with large white flowers and has small holes in the lids to let the steam escape until the last bubble of boiling beans.

Betus or *betún*⁶ clay, decorated in bright colors and a shining finish recalls the legends recounted in the town of Santa Cruz about supposed “spirits” that wander through the San Gaspar Forest. It is also used for children’s toys and, in its past glory, was used to make recipients for berry milk and gold dust to present as gifts to prominent and important persons.

In a class by itself among the techniques brought from Spain is the doubly fired majolica ware⁷ or Queen’s Talavera ware; its

tin oxide bath gives the clay a whitish finish which is then decorated with different colored floral motifs or very intricate frets reminiscent of its Arab origins. It was born in the town of Sayula, Jalisco, in the factory owned by Epigmenio Vargas, where friezes, sets of dishes and utensils were made with the famous “bat wing” design in cobalt blue. This style disappeared because no *güerito* (person with light skin) wanted to learn the trade, and it was generally considered that *morenitos* (persons with dark skin) were not good enough to continue the tradition of making this kind of crockery, the preference of kings and princes.

CONTEMPORARY CERAMICS

Centuries before the birth of Christ, ceramics were already being fired at high temperatures thanks to a kiln made with several chambers. This technique came to Mexico in the middle of this century and established itself firmly in the 1960s when everything Latin American became popular, not only folk art but also the visual arts and literature in general.

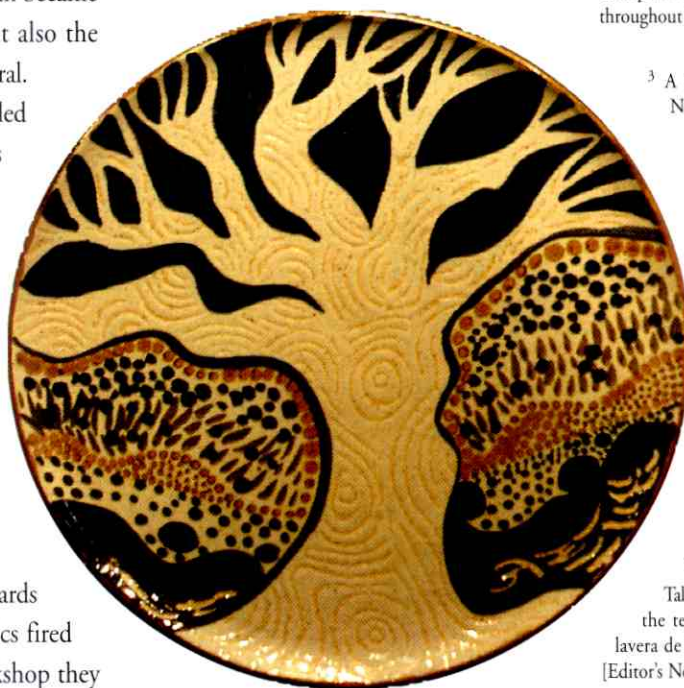
The need for new products led to the manufacture of ceramics made of kaolin or china clay, the raw material that when mixed with quartz and other chemicals is used to make porcelain. Fired at a medium temperature, with a brilliant finish decorated with flowers and geometric figures, it is sold mainly on the decorator market.

Jorge Wilmot and Ken Edwards are the first to produce ceramics fired at high temperatures in a workshop they



Above: *Canelo* earthenware has ochre tones and a floral decoration. (Reprinted courtesy of the mayor's office of Tonalá.)

Below: Blanca Goens, *Tree of Life* (contemporary ceramics). (Pantaleón Panduro Museum, Tlaquepaque.)



set up in a town in Tonalá. They are experimenting with designs and local decorative motifs as a way to preserve the local forms of expression, using materials which need to be doubly fired at temperatures of up to 1,400 degrees centigrade.

This is the beginning of a creative and social reform in Jalisco's craft corridor—Tlaquepaque and Tonalá—since they have managed to make both glazed and non-glazed crockery called Stoneware that is more resistant and free from the danger of lead contamination. ■■

NOTES

¹ These first crafts still survive in Mexico's indigenous communities. For example, the Seris still weave with the fiber called *torete*, so strong and dense that baskets made of it can be used to carry water.

² The municipalities of San Pedro Tlaquepaque and Tonalá, together with Zapopan, are part of the Guadalajara metropolitan area. The first two are Jalisco's most important craft corridors. Many of their artisans have specialized and their mastery in ceramics, chicle, corn-stalk paste, blown glass and iron working are recognized throughout Mexico and the world. [Editor's Note.]

³ A bath of clay dissolved in water. [Editor's Note.]

⁴ A form of inexpensive, flame-resistant glazed pottery that can be placed on an open fire. [Editor's Note.]

⁵ *Petavillo*, considered luxury crockery is decorated with thin diagonal lines that look like a mat weave that surrounds images of animals, flowers and plants. [Editor's Note.]

⁶ *Betus* crockery is made in bright colors with a finish that looks like cake frosting.

⁷ *Majolica* ware is made in the Spanish town of Talavera de la Reyna. When the Spaniards brought the technique to the Americas it was called Talavera de Puebla, to distinguish it from the original. [Editor's Note.]