



Majolica ware by Gorky González.

Guanajuato's Ceramics¹



Majolica ware by Capelo.

Earth, water, air and fire. These are the elements with which the potter, the porcelain maker, the ceramicist, the master craftsman (or woman) —artists all— give inert materials the permanent form of vessels and all kinds of objects, from the most humble pot, jar or griddle, to the most elaborate, majestic urns, large china jars, platters or intricate sculptures. They are all part of folk or fine art, pieces respected for their technical and aesthetic attributes as well as their sociocultural significance.

Guanajuato's pottery emerged in the Chupícuaro culture and developed for more than 25

centuries in unparalleled beauty and perfection. Shortly before the arrival of the Spaniards to the Americas, under Purépecha influence, it began taking on amusing shapes and multi-colored hues. With the conquest, the indigenous and Hispanic elements melded in the austere or richly decorated vitreous clay, while the smooth or burnished china maintained its pre-Hispanic characteristics. Fine majolica ware, a legacy from the Arabs and the Spaniards, was the crowning glory; according to popular tradition, it was introduced by Don Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla, the father of Mexico's independence, in the town of Dolores.

Photos by:
 1 Daniel Munguía
 2, 3 Guanajuato State Cultural Institute



Chupicuaro ceramics in the Alhóndiga de Granaditas Museum.



Vessel in the shape of a duck.
 Mestizo pottery.



Pulque barril. Mestizo pottery.

PRODUCTION TECHNIQUES

To produce anything made of ceramics, inorganic raw materials are used, basically clays (made up in turn of silica and aluminum, the most common elements in the earth's crust) of different kinds, textures and colors. It is common to combine different clays to make a ceramic object. When mixed with water, the clay becomes so malleable that other non-clay materials must be added. The skeleton of anything ceramic is made up of minuscule fragments of rocks and minerals, sand or tiny mollusks.

The way ceramics are made differs according to the organization of the makers. Sometimes men are in charge of the entire process; sometimes women take on a large part of the work; and it is common for children and old people to help at different stages when production is done by families. Today there are still family workshops as well as factories with highly skilled workers. In either case, the craftsman/woman must have a great deal of experience based on trial and error, as well as great dexterity and a perfect knowledge of the materials' properties.

The oldest techniques are based on molding with the hands or creating strips or rolls of paste that are superimposed on top of each other, or a single strip that is worked as a spiral, pinching the places where it is joined. Stone, wooden, ceramic or plaster molds are also used, producing objects of a relatively homogeneous size. The

conquest brought to Mexico an instrument unknown to indigenous cultures: the potter's wheel. Built with wheels or spinning plates and a system of pulleys and gears powered by the foot or a motor, the wheel moves while the artisan molds the piece with his/her hands. The next step is decoration and firing.

VARIETIES OF MESTIZO CERAMICS IN GUANAJUATO

Vitreous Pottery. Vitreous pottery, seldom fired at over 900 degrees Celsius, is made with red or brown porous clay and has a smooth, shiny, waterproof surface. This kind of pottery is used to make everything from pots, water jugs, other kinds of jugs, plates, platters and flat bowls for serving and reheating all kinds of food on an open flame, to ornamental pieces like flower pots and items like glazed tubs and chamber pots. Vitreous pottery is appropriate for making miniatures and was even sometimes used for construction materials like flagstones, gargoyles and drainage pipes common until the early twentieth century in many Mexican cities.

It is produced in many parts of the state of Guanajuato, such as San Felipe Torres Mochas, Dolores Hidalgo, Coroneo, Acámbaro and the hamlet of Las Flores, near San Miguel de Allende.

Majolica. From the technical, ornamental and aesthetic point of view, majolica ware was the



Tiles by Alfredo Carrillo. Dolores Hidalgo.

best porcelain produced in New Spain and newly independent Mexico. In Guanajuato, many specific refinements were added, and a regional tradition arose that is still carried on by some ceramicists today. Majolica ware uses enamel that may have been created in pre-Islamic Egypt and was used extensively in ninth-century Baghdad. It was an attempt to achieve a white porcelain similar to the kind made in China, covering the paste—a reddish or yellowish white clay mixture—with a white color made from the tin.

Because of its quality, this kind of ceramic was used especially to make sets of dishes, large jars and flower pots. During the viceregal period, many kinds of containers were made for preserves, vinegars, brine and cacao beans. It was also common to see majolica ware jars in drug stores holding all kinds of medicines, resins and aromatic oils. It was also used to make candle holders and candelabra, boxes, chests, water basins and jugs and elegant chamber pots called *condes* (counts).

The particular Spanish style called Talavera is a variety of majolica ware painted blue on a white background with designs that include animals, human figures and floral patterns, all motifs still used in contemporary majolica ware from Puebla and Guanajuato. Today, however, the colors are not limited to blue but also include green and orange.

Today, imitation majolica ware is made with a white glaze made with china clay or kaolin applied

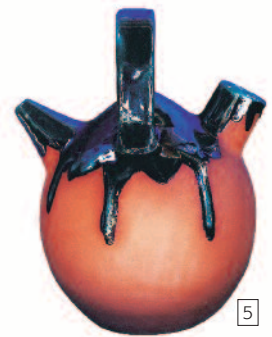
to the still wet piece, decorated with incisions. In Guanajuato, this is often painted green and brown, sobering somewhat the profusion of its graffito designs.

Industrial pottery. Dolores Hidalgo's pottery and ceramic production occupies one of the foremost places in Mexico. It is said that Don Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla fostered many industries and trades among both the indigenous and mestizo people. In the 1930s, the manufacture of tiles began or reappeared; the demand was such that eventually the old family workshops could not satisfy it without modernizing and adapting to new forms of production. Today, there are almost 10 factories and many workshops that produce tiles in considerable quantities at reasonable prices.

The old procedures have been streamlined: the clays are ground in electric mills; industrially produced substances to cause opacity have been substituted for the tin. Sand from sand pits around Dolores, however, is still added to create the "Talavera" or creamy "Mexican" white. In any case, the traditional mix of black and red clays from the area around Dolores or the Santa Rosa Mountains is still combined with yellow clay from the mountains.

Stencils are used to produce panels with intricate decorations or series of tiles for covering walls with flower-covered branches and other designs influenced by Puebla, Spanish and Italian patterns. The enamel colors are applied with

Photos by:
 4. Guanajuato State Cultural Institute
 5. Daniel Munguía



Vitreous pottery. Guanajuato State Cultural Institute's Folk Art Collection.



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machinery and the traditional oak- or *pingüica*-wood-fueled kilns were replaced first by electric ovens and then by industrial gas kilns.

In addition to the tile factories, plates, platters, large jars and other pieces are made in Dolores Hidalgo, emulating majolica ware from Puebla or Guanajuato. The designs are extremely varied: sunflowers, calla lilies, fruit, fish, birds, the Sun with a friendly, human face, Guanajuato scenery, simple still lifes. That is, everything imaginable.



[1], [3] and [4] *Chupicuaro* ceramics at the Alhóndiga de Granaditas Museum. [2] Tar-covered piggy banks and [5] miniatures from San Luisito neighborhood.

High Temperature Ceramics. Stoneware is a ceramic made with very hard, completely vitrified paste that sometimes contains kaolin and other clays. It is very resistant and when struck, makes a metallic sound. It is also known as high-temperature ceramics since it is fired at a temperature of at least 1,200 degrees Celsius. The color of the paste varies from grays, yellowish white and brown to reds, depending on their components. In different parts of Mexico, indigenous and mestizo communities as well as some artisans and independent artists produce this kind of ceramics, making with it vases, boxes, decorative plates and ashtrays. This kind of ceramics is made in places like La Soledad neighborhood in Acámbaro.

Paste Ceramics. To make this kind of white porcelain, different industrially prepared pastes are mixed with other industrial components and water. The final mixture is poured into plaster molds where it is left to dry and then polished. Later the pieces are fired and covered with a vitreous glaze made of lead, borax or another transparent enamel that is sometimes colored with ceramic pigments. The designs vary; sometimes even decals are used. Gold and black are very common colors, as are typical

scenes of Guanajuato. These objects have flooded the market, creating jobs for many people in Dolores Hidalgo and Guanajuato, particularly in Mineral de Cata.

Tar-covered China and Miniatures. In the 1960s, very simple procedures were developed to make ceramic figurines: one example is the so-called tar-covered china mass produced in the San Luisito neighborhood of Guanajuato. This china is worked on a lathe, sanded, fired and finally covered with tar dissolved in diesel

fuel or gasoline. This technique is used to make perforated lamp bases incrustated with marbles, tea or coffee services, candle holders and ashtrays that were popular until a few years ago.

In the same neighborhood, other family-based workshops produce small pieces made on lathes to be used as toys or candy dishes. Since one of the kinds of candy they hold is tamarind-fruit candy, they are called *tamarinderas*.

The San Luisito potters use red and black clay from the Santa Rosa mountains and grind it manually or with machines, letting it settle in troughs. The pieces they make and fire may not be very artistic, but they can be very useful and curious to look at. They are made with techniques that used to be utilized to make vitreous porcelain.

Regardless of the name applied to the ceramics—a craft, minor art or even fine art—it will always be a product of human beings and society that we can see everywhere—despite the nefarious advent of the plastic age—and that continues to be useful and beautiful. ■■■

NOTES

¹ Summarized version of *La cerámica de Guanajuato* (Guanajuato, 1995), non-published research by Carlos Castañeda, Patricia Fournier and Lourdes Mondragón, Guanajuato State Cultural Institute.



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Gorky González' Workshop

More than 40 years ago, ceramicist Gorky González—whose workshop is in Guanajuato's Pastita neighborhood—decided to try to recover the tradition of majolica ware ceramics made with viceregal techniques. His love of clay and form has always been the *raison d'être* of the activity that has given him both satisfaction and local, national and worldwide recognition. Two years in Japan, where he studied with master ceramicists considered “national treasures,” added the courage and simplicity of the Asian spirit to his abilities.

Visiting Gorky's workshop is a revelation, uncovering the unexpected at the different moments of the process. The porcelain balls tumbling in the grinders where the craftsmen mix and prepare their own colors and enamels. The careful preparation of the clay—giving the word “plasticity” meaning— which requires care since greater plasticity makes for greater ease of handling but also for more shrinkage as the piece dries before firing. Pieces made in molds do not have this difficulty, but Gorky's workshop is known precisely for making all the round-



ed pieces by hand in the traditional manner.

A high point is seeing the pieces shaped by the potter, who uses the wheel as an extension of himself, watching him add handmade forms and figures to make, for example, a frog out of what had been a container. The darkroom is key since the gradual drying process, out of the way of drafts and direct sunlight, diminishes breakage and cracks. The pieces are fired for the first time; then the enamel is applied; and then the artist-craftsman paints colored figures onto the piece. Each artist has his own paintbrushes made of horsehair and squirrel tail because, with use, they are shaped to the intensity of his individual brush stroke. Then comes the second firing and the piece takes on a personality of its own. It is ready to take its place on shelves or in display cases, dining rooms or the corner of the house reserved for our most treasured objects.

Elsie Montiel
Editor



Photos by Daniel Munguía