



Gerardo Cota tending a dung firing in Mata Ortiz, Mexico.

Mata Ortiz

Traditions and Innovations

by Bill Gilbert

The village of Juan Mata Ortiz, Mexico, lies about 20 miles south of Nuevo Casas Grandes in the high northern plains of the state of Chihuahua. Home to approximately 2000, this farming and ranching community was named in honor of a local hero in the 19th-century war with the Apache. Over the past 25 years, it has been the center of a revival of the Casas Grandes ceramics tradition. During this time the number of practicing potters in Mata Ortiz has steadily grown to the present count of over 300.

Knowledge of the Casas Grandes systems is based primarily on the Charles Di Peso archaeological excavations of the ancient center of Paquimé, just south of Nuevo Casas Grandes. Paquimé was

inhabited between A.D. 1275 and 1400 and was then abandoned. The larger Casas Grandes system flourished between 1175 and 1400, concurrent with the habitations of Chaco Canyon and Mesa Verde to the north. The artifacts excavated at Paquimé provide ample evidence of trade with the prehistoric pueblos of the southwestern United States. There is also a close association between the materials, processes and design motifs used in their ceramics. In short, the ceramics of Casas Grandes can best be understood as a part of the pueblo ceramics tradition.

It is somewhat more difficult to determine the proper artistic context in which to examine the contemporary work from Mata Ortiz. There is no

question but that the initial source for the current production was the Casas Grandes ceramics tradition. The forms and designs utilized in the early part of this revival were derived directly from the prehistoric Casas Grandes style. At the same time, aspects of what is taking place in this village appear more closely related to highly energized studios or movements in contemporary art. The difficulty in categorizing this work stems from the large distance Euro-American culture imposes between traditional craft and contemporary art. Lacking is a model for understanding the work of Mata Ortiz as a contemporary art form that has roots in the traditional crafts of Native American culture.

There are parallels between the re-

vivals of puebloan ceramics in New Mexico and Arizona and what has taken place in Mata Ortiz. In the revivals at Hopi and San Ildefonso, one person was initially responsible for revitalizing a style that had been lost to the culture. In Mata Ortiz, Juan Quezada is the equivalent of Nampeyo at Hopi or Maria Martinez at San Ildefonso Pueblo. He accomplished this without the influence or direction of outside scholars or experts, basing his work on the shards and pots he discovered in wandering through the local environment. From the very beginning, the lack of access to collections of whole pots, photographs or books meant that Quezada frequently had to employ his imagination in extrapolating entire forms and designs from small fragments.

He also needed to reinvent the process of fabricating pottery step by step through trial and error. A process similar to that used some 600 years earlier at Paquimé (based on the materials available in the local environment) evolved slowly. This faculty for creative experimentation is perhaps Quezada's most important trait. The fact that he has been able to accomplish all of this by himself is of great importance to all that has since taken place in Mata Ortiz. Compared to the revivals at Hopi and San Ildefonso, the balance in Mata Ortiz is tilted toward individual experimentation and innovations, and away from rigid adherence to tradition.

In Mata Ortiz, the potters do not consider themselves to be direct descendants of the Casas Grandes culture. They have no ongoing tradition to connect them to Casas Grandes, no memory of relatives making pots in this style or anyone using their pots for household or ritual purposes. Even today you rarely see these potters using their own works in their households or saving favorite

pieces for their aesthetic appeal. The driving force is economic, and for most of the potters in Mata Ortiz, Juan Quezada is the tradition.

The range of Quezada's innovations is staggering. He has influenced every aspect of the production of ceramics in Mata Ortiz from clay bodies, to forming techniques, to designs. Yet, his single most important innovation is the break he made with the design system of horizontal banding that is the dominant



Juan Quezada has influenced every aspect of Mata Ortiz pottery; his use of a diagonal design axis and overlapping patterns gives the illusion of depth and movement.

motif in the tradition of Casas Grandes and much pueblo pottery. The system of horizontal banding allows a two-dimensional design to be laid across the surface of a pot. Quezada decided to treat the entire pot as a design field to create designs that acknowledge the full three-dimensionality of the pot. This innovation, in addition to his use of a diagonal rather than vertical design axis and his tendency to overlap designs, creating an illusion of depth, gives his

work a powerful sense of movement that separates it from the mainstream of pueblo pottery and ranks it as one of the more successful weddings of two-dimensional and three-dimensional design in contemporary ceramics.

The influence of this breakthrough can be witnessed throughout the works of other Mata Ortiz potters. It is the precedent for the insects and lizards of Manuel Rodriguez crawling over each other, and for the intricate designs of Gerardo Cota spinning off into the open space of the lower half of his vessels.

Repeatedly, the younger potters first emulate Quezada's forms and designs, and then develop entirely new styles to identify their work as separate. Their initial inspiration was the example of his economic success, not an interest in the ancient Casas Grandes culture. As a result, they are less bound by the prehistoric tradition and have a strong impetus to develop a distinctive style that identifies them as artists in their own right. This has contributed to the almost constant innovation that makes the revival in Mata Ortiz so unique. This faculty for innovation establishes comparisons with movements in contemporary art and distances the work of Mata Ortiz from revivals within the field of pueblo pottery.

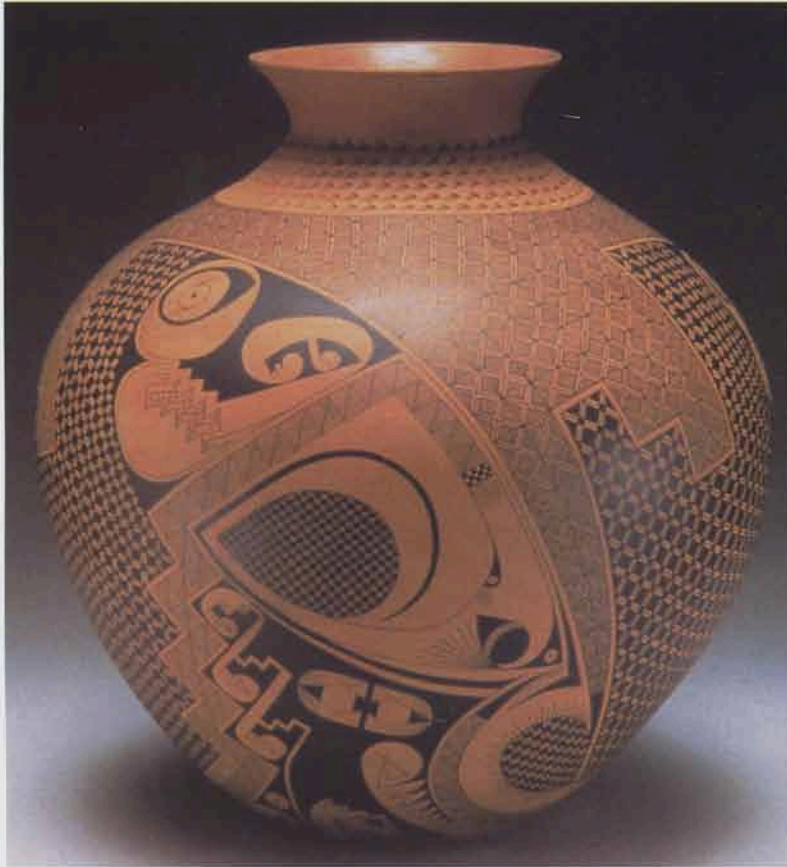
In the development of their personal style, some have turned to the Mimbres culture, with the help of books brought by traders and collectors, as a source within the field of pueblo pottery but outside of Quezada's recent investigations. The Mimbres culture produced painted pottery between A.D. 800 and 1150 in what is now western New Mexico, eastern Arizona and northern Chihuahua. It is among the most highly regarded ceramic work in the pueblo tradition and has great appeal as a source of inspiration to the young artists. How-



Handbuilt and burnished marbled-clay jar with brushed decoration, 10½ inches in height, by Cesar Dominguez and Maria Gabriela Almeida.



Right: Pantyhose-burnished jar, 9 inches in height, with polychrome brushwork, by Gerardo Cota; unlike most Mata Ortiz potters, he begins with a design in mind and shapes the pot accordingly.

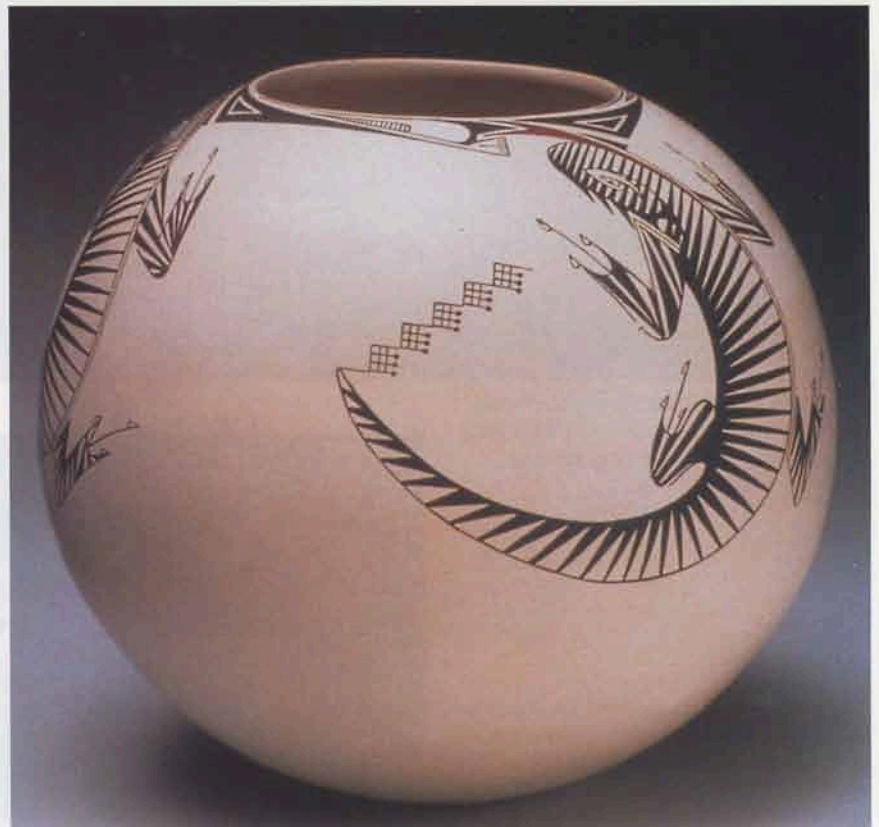


Left: Intricately patterned jar, 18 inches in height, by Oscar Rodriguez; his designs frequently include animals "captured" in the act of transformation, such as a fish becoming a bird.

Jar with lizard imagery, 7 inches in height, by Manuel Rodriguez; he uses a broader palette of pigments (including rose, orange, yellow and brown) than most of the other Mata Ortiz potters.

ever, questions remain as to the appropriateness of their use of Mimbres designs. Some people view this as plagiarism of the styles and heritage of the pueblo cultures in the United States. On the other hand, Quezada is very clear in his belief that the Mimbres culture is a shared antecedent of Casas Grandes and the northern pueblos. He has personally discovered Mimbres pots buried within the physical boundaries of contemporary Mata Ortiz.

Perhaps most compelling about Mata Ortiz are the questions it raises. It is fairly easy to make the argument that economic considerations have driven the explosion of artistic production in Mata Ortiz. The town was very poor for a long period of time, and the advent of any new possible means for earning a decent living was bound to draw the attention of the townspeople. Before pottery, the main economic options for the men were working for the railroad or for the Mormon fruit growers, or subsistence farming and ranching on



Right: Highly reflective blackware jar, 8½ inches in height, by Eduardo Ortiz; to prevent smearing while decorating, he usually wears hand coverings made from stockings.



Geometrically patterned jar, 6 inches in height, by Olga Quezada and Humberto Ledezma; their work often incorporates squared or fluted rims.

Deer-bone-burnished jar, 8 inches high, by Juan Quezada; though they use the same raw materials, he prepares a black pigment much darker than the brownish black utilized by the others.



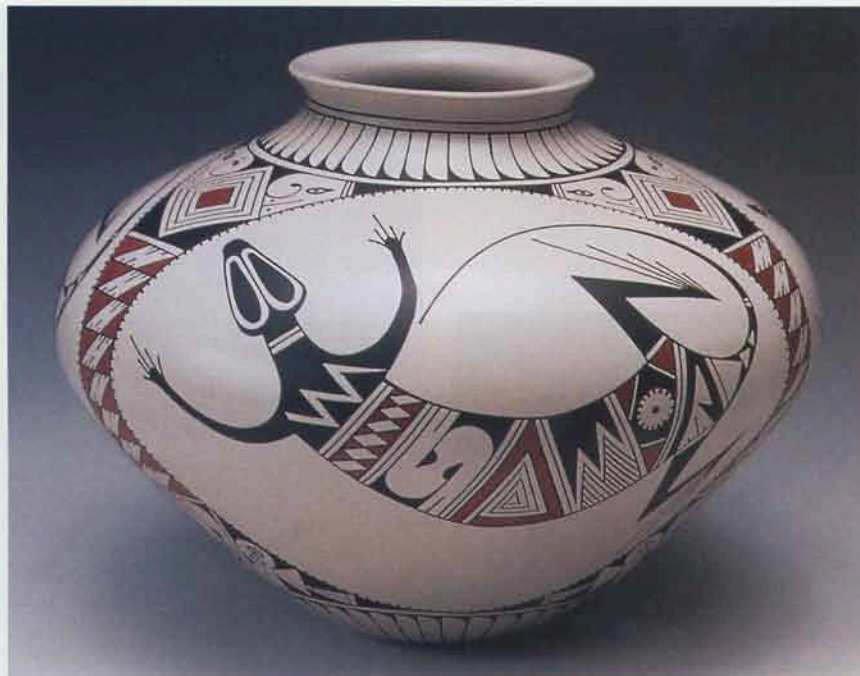
the *ejido* (collective land). For the women, meaningful access to the cash economy did not exist.

Given Quezada's initial success and subsequent rise in income, it is easy to understand why other families have tried their hands at pottery. What is not so easily understood is how so many people have been able to become proficient in such a short time. Part of the explanation is the open access to information. From the beginning, Quezada shared his discoveries with his family. This quickly expanded to include extended family, neighbors and friends of his children. Even today, one can trace the spread of design styles along kinship lines and *compadrazgo* relationships throughout the village. The absence of a guild system, such as the one operating in the North American pueblos with its defined boundaries between members and outsiders, has meant that those who were interested were able to learn at least the basics from others with more experience.

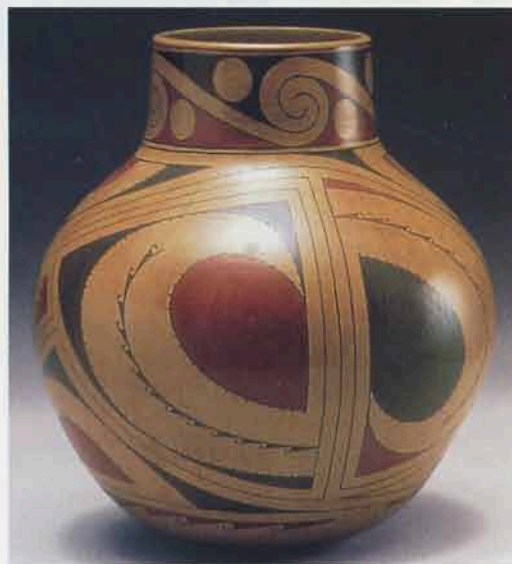
It is also true that the relative simplicity of life in the village provided nascent artists with sufficient time to practice their new art and, perhaps more importantly, the patience to undertake the laborious, time-consuming process required to produce this work. Many of the advanced potters making large works will spend over 20 hours decorating one pot. For a long period of time Gerardo Cota was losing over half of his pots in the firing. It takes incredible patience to continue working in these circumstances. Artists in Euro-American culture are, for the most part, quite simply not capable of this degree of patience. Time is too expensive in contemporary Euro-American life.

This may explain why people had the time and interest to experiment with this new art form. What has not been addressed is why so many are so good at it. Why can over 300 people in this village master the difficult task of forming pots by hand, without the help of a potter's wheel, and painting with a brush made of a piece of wood with three or four strands of human hair attached? And why have so many easily assimilated the extremely refined aesthetic of this work? Is it the result of an existence lived close to the means of production where eye-hand facility is exercised every day? If this is the case, why haven't the other nearby villages with the same way of life taken up and become proficient at this process? Is it the natural extension of an aesthetic ingrained in daily life? If so, why is this aesthetic not reflected in the furnishing of their houses, and why do these works have no place in the daily life of the community? Furthermore, why can so many of these artists not only replicate the aesthetic beauty of the Casas Grandes ceramics, but go on to create their own personal aesthetic vision? Certainly the proximity of a market knowledgeable in the aesthetic of pueblo pottery has been a major influence, and yet, pottery villages in other areas of Mexico with access to the U.S. market have not developed the elegant formal style of these potters or the complicated iconography of their design systems.

These questions are asked not out of



Jar with Mimbres-derived lizard motif, 8 inches in height, by Hector Gallegos and Graciela Martinez.



Left: Jar, 7 inches in height, by Andres Villalba Perez; he concentrates on creating designs that reflect the traditional Casa Grandes style.

any pretense of having the answers, but out of interest in the nature of human artistic creativity and in order to make clear the unique qualities of the artistic production in Mata Ortiz. There is something very interesting going on in this town. It hasn't become codified yet. It is new enough that it is difficult to predict what direction it will eventually take. What is clear is that it is being

driven by an intense creative urge and an extraordinary aesthetic ability.

The author *An associate professor of ceramics at the University of New Mexico, Bill Gilbert recently curated an exhibition of Mata Ortiz pots. Presented at the University Art Museum in Albuquerque, "The Potters of Mata Ortiz: Transforming a Tradition" included 56 works by 27 potters.*