



CROSSING | BORDERS

TRANSCENDING | CATEGORIES

CONTEMPORARY  
ART FROM  
MATA ORTÍZ,  
MEXICO

## WILLIAM GILBERT ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This exhibition has been over four years in the making and during that time I have relied on the support of many individuals. First, I would like to thank Stuart Ashman and Joseph Traugott for their vision in agreeing to take on this complex project. I would also like to acknowledge Bonnie Anderson for her professionalism in bringing the concept to fruition.

I deeply appreciate the commitment the collectors have demonstrated to helping the artists of Mata Ortíz by making their best work available for this exhibition. I understand how difficult it is to trust these precious and fragile objects to strangers. I am particularly grateful to Dr. Barry and Maria King for their generous gift of 43 pots from their collection to the Museum of Fine Arts. From this impressive beginning we hope that the museum can build the finest public collection of contemporary Mata Ortíz pottery.

Thanks are also due to Dr. Richard O'Connor and the San Diego Museum of Man for providing access to Walter Parks' photographs of Juan Quezada's early work, and to Geoffrey Batchen for his expert assistance in editing this essay.

As always, I am grateful to Spencer MacCallum and Walter Parks who preceded me in Mata Ortíz and have been so generous with their help and advice. My gratitude, as well, to Steve Rose for his years of assistance in communicating with the artists and transporting the pottery. Without his help we would never have secured the new pieces Juan Quezada created for this exhibition. I appreciate how hard you all have worked on the potters behalf.

Finally, I would like to thank Juan Quezada and the potters of Mata Ortíz. It has been wonderful to feel a small part of an art movement that is changing the lives of so many people. In the course of eight years worth of visits to Mata Ortíz, I have developed the greatest respect for your integrity as artists. I have also thoroughly enjoyed the time I have spent in your community. I hope this exhibition does justice to the incredible energy in your work. Adelante

## AGRADECIMIENTOS DE WILLIAM GILBERT

*Esta exposición lleva mas de cuatro años en preparación y durante este tiempo yo he dependido del apoyo de muchos individuos. Primeramente quiero darle las gracias a Stuart Ashman y Joseph Traugott por su facultad y por haberse comprometido a presentar este complicado proyecto. También quiero pasarle mi agradecimiento a Bonnie Anderson por su profesionalismo y su ayuda en traer el proyecto a su meta.*

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*Para el ensayo de este catálogo le debo las gracias a el Dr. Richard O'Connor y el San Diego Museum of Man por ayudarme en obtener acceso a las fotografías de las primeras obras de Juan Quezada tomadas por Walter Parks. También a mi colega Geoffrey Batchen por su experta asistencia editorial.*

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*Finalmente, quiero darle las gracias a Juan Quezada y a los alfareros de Mata Ortíz. Ha sido maravilloso tener la oportunidad de participar, en pequeña parte, en un movimiento artístico que les ha cambiado la vida a tantas personas. En mas de ocho años de visitar a los alfareros de Mata Ortíz desarrollé un gran respeto por su integridad artística. También he disfrutado mucho los días que he pasado en su comunidad. Espero que esta exposición les de a ustedes el mérito y el reconocimiento que merece la increíble vitalidad que se encuentra en sus obras. ¡Adelante!*



## THE VILLAGE OF MATA ORTÍZ

by William Gilbert, Guest Curator

On first impression, the village of Mata Ortíz looks like many other small towns in northern Mexico. The dirt streets radiating out from a central plaza, the unplastered adobe houses, the tin roofs, the roaming chickens and dogs, all seem very familiar. It doesn't take long, however, to realize that this town is, in fact, very different. In this little village of 2,000 people, a ceramic movement has sprung up and the more than 400 artists involved have transformed their community in profound ways.

A little over 30 years ago one man, Juan Quezada, became inspired by the remnants of the ancient Mimbres and Casas Grandes civilizations that he found in his local environment and set out to reinvent a process for making hand-formed pottery. Working without the help of any local artists or outside experts he single-handedly developed a complete process for forming, painting, and firing his pottery.

From a very early date Juan Quezada moved beyond copying the designs he found in the ancient pots to create his own images. In time, the work he produced made its way to the United States, where three pieces were discovered in a secondhand shop in Deming, New Mexico, by Spencer MacCallum. Intrigued with the work he encountered in that shop, MacCallum began a journey through northern Chihuahua that eventually led to Juan Quezada's door in the remote village of Mata Ortíz.

With MacCallum's sponsorship, Juan Quezada was free to concentrate totally on his work, and he quickly developed a strong personal style in his pottery. As MacCallum located markets for the work in the United States, the pottery practice spread, first to other members of the Quezada family, and then to other families in Mata Ortíz.



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The current exhibition at the Museum of Man in San Diego, *The Magic of Mata Ortíz*,<sup>(1)</sup> demonstrates how quickly Juan moved beyond copying ancient designs. The years 1976-1979 evidence a rapid growth as Juan began to stretch the formal qualities of Casas Grandes and Mimbres designs to fit his own aesthetic.

Above JUAN QUEZADA Polychrome ceramic, early 1970s Collection of Spencer MacCallum

Left: JUAN QUEZADA Polychrome ceramic, 1977

Perhaps the major breakthrough came in 1977 when Juan Quezada decided to eliminate the horizontal banding that is the canon in Pueblo pottery and instead paint the pot's entire three-dimensional field. The horizontal banding in Pueblo pottery serves to isolate the design field from the lip and base of the pot. It is an ordering device that contributes to the quiet, static presence of Pueblo pottery. With the breaking of this barrier, Quezada's designs were free to roam the three-dimensional space of the pot, and the full force of his artistic energy became apparent. Juan Quezada had moved beyond the confines of a traditional practice. His subsequent work combines the intense energy of his painting style with the solid, grounded forms of his pottery to create some of the most successful weddings of two- and three-dimensional design in American ceramics.

The work he produced in the late 1980s and early 1990s shows an artist at the peak of his artistic powers. The pots of this period are painted in complex spatial arrangements and infilled with intricate designs covering nearly the entire surface of the pot.

In recent years, Quezada has moved to a new style that represents a significant change from a powerful, aggressive energy to a confident, secure restraint. In 1995, the University Art Museum at the University of New Mexico presented an exhibition of Mata Ortiz pottery. For that show the Museum borrowed an early Juan Quezada piece from the MacCallum collection, known as the "levitation pot" <sup>2</sup>

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Collectors from El Paso, Texas, were so enthralled by this piece that they commissioned Quezada to make a new work inspired by the "levitation" piece. This commission has led to a new "sencillo" period in Quezada's work marked by a much more open design field, with increased emphasis on the negative spaces of the exposed clay body. In making this change, Juan Quezada moved from his roots in Casas Grandes to the aesthetics of the Mimbres culture. Negative spaces, which previously had been reserved for small areas on the sides and bottoms of his pots, became the focus of the work. With the shift in focus to the clay body itself, Juan Quezada has concentrated his time and energy in recent years on developing a variety of clay colors to offset his designs.

Juan Quezada's emphasis on personal expression has set the standard for younger potters, many of whom are less tied to the Casas Grandes and Mimbres roots. These artists live in a larger world than the one in which Juan Quezada grew up and are exposed to a host of influences through various media. The best of this new generation of artists have invented their own distinctive palettes, forms and designs, independent of Juan Quezada and Casas Grandes.

They are working, to a greater extent, from their own imaginations to create purely aesthetic expressions. With the Casas Grandes and Mimbres cultures as a base, and Juan Quezada's innovations as an inspiration, these artists have gone on to create works of great spatial complexity and intense detail. Their imagery evokes Op Art, M.C. Escher and computer chips in combination with plumed serpents and macaws. The exhibition at the



Museum of Fine Arts, in Santa Fe, presents examples that document the aesthetic range of the artists throughout the village. The pots created by these artists have no utilitarian or ritual function. There is absolutely no history of the people of Mata Ortiz using these pots in their homes. The works are made exclusively for sale as aesthetic objects. They are made and purchased as fine art.

#### **WHERE IS MATA ORTÍZ' PLACE IN THE U S MARKET ?**

Until quite recently, the only market for the work from Mata Ortiz has been in the United States. The question of where Mata Ortiz pottery really belongs in our art system is a complicated issue. One of the difficulties in deciding on the appropriate category stems directly from the movement's being so new, both as a practice and as a commodity in the American market.

The work from Mata Ortiz is also new in the sense that it is foreign. It is made by people from another country—namely, Mexico—who belong to a different culture and speak a different language. The natural tendency in our art world when confronted with a new or foreign art movement is to try to place it within the boundaries of existing models. There are important structural divisions in our art world between fine art and fine craft, between mainstream art and ethnic art, between contemporary forms and traditional art forms. The resulting placement of a new movement within an existing category can have profound effects on its success in finding an audience and a market. Each category has a set of rules, and those rules create the standards that define quality and maintain the hierarchies of price.

Acceptance in our system becomes problematic when the new movement does not fit easily into an existing category, or combines aspects of a variety of existing categories. In this case, the new movement challenges the assumptions we maintain and, as a result, is viewed as a threat or is simply ignored.

The art of Mata Ortiz is just such a movement. It refuses to conform readily to any of our existing categories. The pottery of Mata Ortiz is based on a Native American tradition, it has been revived by a Mestizo culture from Mexico and has developed a strong bias towards the innovation and personal expression characteristic of contemporary art. It must fight through our existing image of Mexican crafts as tacky and imitative, our lack of knowledge regarding its historical roots in the Native American culture of Casas Grandes, and our bias against recognizing pottery as fine art, especially if it is produced by minority cultures.

#### **MEXICAN CRAFTS**

It is to the credit of those responsible for introducing this work to the United States that it was not placed within the category of Mexican crafts. The work presented in this exhibition is not stereotypical Mexican tourist-

trade merchandise. The aesthetic expressed in this pottery is far too sophisticated and refined to fit the notions of the casual, naive expressions of peasant culture that we ascribe to this genre. The art from Mata Ortíz is made by highly skilled artists who are deeply involved in a personal investigation of their medium. Categorizing this work as Mexican crafts would have condemned it to a low-priced market, which would have reinforced standardization and mass production, and stifled personal creativity and aesthetic ambitions.

### PUEBLO POTTERY

Fortunately for the potters of Mata Ortíz, their first representative, Spencer MacCallum, was committed to encouraging the most creative work possible. He aimed, from the very beginning, to secure an audience that would support excellence. Starting with MacCallum's initial introduction of Juan Quezada's pottery to an American audience, the work of Mata Ortíz has been presented in the United States as the southern-most expression of Pueblo pottery. This approach has helped enormously

The artists of Mata Ortíz have benefited greatly from this association, not only because the audience and market for Pueblo pottery was well established, but also because the value placed on Pueblo Pottery was quite high. Indeed, the price ceiling defined by Pueblo pottery has made it possible for the price of Mata Ortíz pottery to climb steadily during the past decade, as Mata Ortíz artists are increasingly rewarded for their most ambitious work.

The fact that Maria Martinez and Lucy Lewis both met and accepted Juan Quezada provided a sanction of authenticity that also has helped the work from Mata Ortíz to succeed in the U.S. Both treated Juan Quezada not as an imitator or Mexican usurper, but as a fellow artist with a shared commitment to an earth-based art form.<sup>3</sup> Over time, however, tensions have developed between the Pueblo potters and their Mexican counterparts over the authenticity of the Mexican work. This is a complicated subject. Tied up in this one dispute are many issues—ethnicity, cultural property, market definitions—that drive the current discourse in the arts.

To discuss the characterization of the work from Mata Ortíz as Pueblo pottery, we need to look at various aspects of that definition. In terms of process, the Mata Ortíz pottery is, if anything, more purely “traditional” than pottery currently produced on many pueblos. Even the lower priced, quickly produced work is made by hand from native clays. There are no electric kilns in Mata Ortíz, no premixed clay bodies, no slip casting. Clays are still dug from the surrounding environment. Pigments are ground from local mineral deposits and pots are fired outdoors with cow manure or cottonwood bark. This is not to say that the artists of Mata Ortíz will not



LYDIA QUEZADA CELADO *Bichrome ceramic, 1999 16" x 10.75" diameter Collection of Mr. & Mrs. James H. Gilbert*



use commercial processes in the future, as they become more readily available. Nor is it to say that they have a greater commitment to natural processes than their Pueblo counterparts. It is merely to say that the work from Mata Ortiz can not be dismissed from the field of Pueblo pottery on the basis of process.

With regards to ethnicity, the potters themselves have never claimed to be Pueblo artists. Even artists in the village who are totally committed to continuing the Casas Grandes tradition freely acknowledge that they are genetically a mix of Spanish and indigenous peoples from farther south in Mexico. They take great pride in their "Norteño" identity. The initial association with Pueblo pottery was the result of Spencer MacCallum's effort to find the appropriate context for this work in the United States, not an attempt to misrepresent the ethnicity of the people.

Perhaps the most difficult question is cultural property. There can be little question but that the Mata Ortiz potters are working from a basis found in the ancient traditions of their region. Juan Quezada and the other potters have never doubted the appropriateness of basing their work on the Casas Grandes and Mimbres pottery that they found in their local environment. Their right to these traditions is less obvious to their Pueblo counterparts.

Although the work from Mata Ortiz clearly has its roots in the Aboriginal tradition of Casas Grandes, that may not be the most important point in deciding its appropriate category, at this point in time. Juan has developed an art form based on place. He found the inspiration for his work in the ruins surrounding Mata Ortiz and resurrected an 800-year-old tradition without the help of outside scholars. He found all the materials needed to create his work in the local environment. For the contemporary U.S. art world that may make him an artist of great ability and integrity; however, it does not make him a Pueblo artist.

Pueblo pottery is tied to a series of cultural practices, ranging from holding and serving food and water to ritual expressions of spiritual beliefs. This remains true even though the work currently being produced is solely for sale to the dominant culture market. That the works are being created as objects of art, to be looked at and not used, does not change the fact that Pueblo artists continue to feel the connection between the works they create and the pottery's history of use and religious importance. It makes no sense to the Native American artist to think of the artistic expression of a Hispanic, Catholic culture as Pueblo pottery.<sup>4</sup>

Given the current state of the politics of ethnicity, if Juan Quezada is not of Pueblo ethnicity, then his work can not be Pueblo pottery. In actuality, the work from Mata Ortiz is the product not of Native Americans but of Mestizos, who exist in a Hispanic cultural milieu, not a traditional Pueblo society. This is a point that Juan Quezada understands, and he has made it very clear in his leadership of the Mata Ortiz movement that the potters should respect the cultural property of their Pueblo counterparts.<sup>5</sup>

Given the growing awareness of cultural property, of the right of minority cultures to retain control of their own cultural expressions, I would argue that the period in which Mata Ortiz pottery could have been accepted as Pueblo pottery has passed. This is not to say that Spencer MacCallum was wrong to take this approach initially. It is merely to recognize that the time has come to find a new place for this incredible work within our system of art categorization.

## CONTEMPORARY ART

Of the various categories available, contemporary fine art seems the most appropriate to the spirit of the Mata Ortiz potters and should provide the greatest room for future growth. Taken literally, "contemporary art" should include the work of all living artists. In the U.S. we have a more restricted view of this category. In our country, contemporary art in the last century was driven by a particular artistic model. The artist hero—the creative individual who through his/her own personal struggle challenged our old assumptions and made the changing world we lived in intelligible to us—dominated this time period. The key aspect of this model is the concept of the artist as an individual who through his/her personal innovations is able to establish new truths. This stands in direct contradiction to our understanding of traditional practices, which are considered more communal and involved with the reiteration of known truths.

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Juan Quezada is without a doubt a contemporary artist. He is above all else the quintessential western individualist. He is entirely self-taught. He developed a complete artistic process on his own. His art is grounded in Casas Grandes and Mimbres ceramics, much as Duchamp was grounded in the traditions of European painting and Jasper Johns was grounded in Duchamp. From very early in his development as an artist, Juan Quezada moved beyond copying Paquimé and Mimbres designs to create his own expressions. He continues to this day to create new designs and forms, refusing collectors' requests to copy a previous piece.

There are, of course, problems with advocating that this work be treated as contemporary art. To be accepted in this world, the Mata Ortiz potters face an uphill climb. The fact that the work is pottery references function and use, and, therefore, craft. The roots of this work in Native American culture reference ethnicity and non-modernist cultural traditions. Its origin in a poor Mexican village references nostalgia and sentimentality, the past rather than the present or future.

Our notion of contemporary fine art is based on the modernist model of the avant-garde. Even in the post-modernist period, to be accepted as fine art, a work must speak in the accepted formal language. We are seeing increasing numbers of exhibitions in our museums of the contemporary art of other cultures. Invariably, these works are produced by young urban artists from these cultures, whether or not the culture is defined by an urban aesthetic.



The recent biennial syndrome has established the field of "world art," in which exhibitions are curated for diversity in terms of gender and ethnicity while being entirely uniform in formal terms. In this new system, an artist from a non-Western society can be considered a contemporary artist only if she/he works in the accepted mediums of photography, video, or installation. It certainly helps if he/she studied these fields at The Art Institute of Chicago, California Institute of the Arts, etc. What is difficult for our market to accept is the idea of contemporary artists who are from minority cultures and work in traditional media. 6)

In this sense, Pueblo artists suffer from the same discrimination as the artists of Mata Ortíz. Maria Martinez, Lucy Lewis and Nampeyo were not exhibited as contemporary artists, even though they were all true innovators who changed the definition of artist for their cultures. Maria Martinez came the closest. She became the undisputed giant of Pueblo pottery under the sponsorship of Edgar Hewett, the director of the Museum of New Mexico, who promoted her black-on black pottery as a Native American style that fit the modernist aesthetic.

The most appropriate category for the Mata Ortíz potters is none and all of the above. It will never fit cleanly into any one of our categories, because it is not a product of our culture or system. Perhaps the best fit is an emerging postmodern perspective that acknowledges cultural blending, not as a pejorative but as the reality of contemporary existence that recognizes the simultaneous coexistence of pre-modern, modern, and postmodern time frames.

In the story of this little village, we have many of the major themes facing all cultures and countries. The world is becoming smaller. Cultural, physical, and ethnic boundaries are not as absolute as they once were. The simplicity of a dominant world view is gone and with it one set of unquestioned standards. The roots of Mata Ortíz are in the Native American traditions of Casas Grandes and Mimbres. Throughout, Mata Ortíz has remained true to a close connection to the earth and to the interweaving of family, community, and art-making exemplified by these traditions. Added to this base are the energy and exuberance of Norteño culture and the emphasis on innovation and personal expression of contemporary art. The result is visually stunning work that demands our immediate attention, even as it enriches the discussion of these complicated and crucial questions.

## NOTES

1) *The Magic of Mata Ortíz*, San Diego Museum of Man, through January 14, 2001 Curator Grace Johnson.

(2) Spencer MacCallum. "This is the 'levitation pot,' so-called by my friends because of my unique experience on first seeing it. When I originally sought out Juan, I was looking for completion of the adventure of finding three of his pots in Deming, N.M. But when I found Juan, it was not a completion but a beginning. Three years later, on arriving in Mata Ortíz and seeing this pot among the group of pots he had ready for me, I had a psychological experience I've never had before or since. I felt my body lighten, and I had the sense of being perhaps 18 inches off the ground. This lasted for maybe half an hour, and over the next few days in the village, I could experience it again, at will, simply by consciously turning my mind to the pot; I experimented with this many times for the novelty of it. I feel this was the emotional completion that I had sought three years earlier. Whatever I might do now – leave the project or stay with it – I felt Juan was now on his own, this was his "commencement." My role in Mata Ortíz was essentially complete. In this pot I had accomplished what I had wanted."

(3) When asked if Juan was in fact a Pueblo potter, Lucy is reported to have said that Juan must be a descendant of the Acoma children traded into Mexico years ago in return for a bell for their church.

4 In discussing this issue with Pueblo potters, Cavan Gonzales explained that in his mind the work is not Pueblo pottery because it is purely an aesthetic expression with no ties to Pueblo spiritual practices. Diego Romero expressed the same concern based on the Mata Ortíz potters' purely formal use of Mimbres designs without any regard for the garbled visual messages they create.

(5) "Many here started to make pots with the *cuchillos* (knife designs based on the Mimbres feather designs). I didn't like it. Just too many traders, like in everything ... Some took out books of the Indios over there and said, 'Make a few like this.' I told them, 'No, no. That no. Copy a piece?' No. Bit by bit that disappeared ... For you to feel well, there is nothing like being in your own style and not be taking advantage of what another fought for and suffered." *Studio Potter* December 1995 Volume 24, Number 8, page 58.

(6) Contemporary Pueblo artists Diego Romero, Virgil Ortíz, Rina Swentzell and Jody Falwell share an interest in social commentary/criticism with Native American artists such as James Luna, Charlene Teters and Jimmy Durham. And yet, Luna, Teters and Durham are exhibited as contemporary artists, while Romero, and Swentzell are almost exclusively shown as ethnic artists. The reason is essentially formal. The former, as practitioners of installation, are viewed as participants in the avant-garde notion of a linear advance in the practice of art, whereas the others, as potters, are considered traditional, connected to a nostalgic practice.