

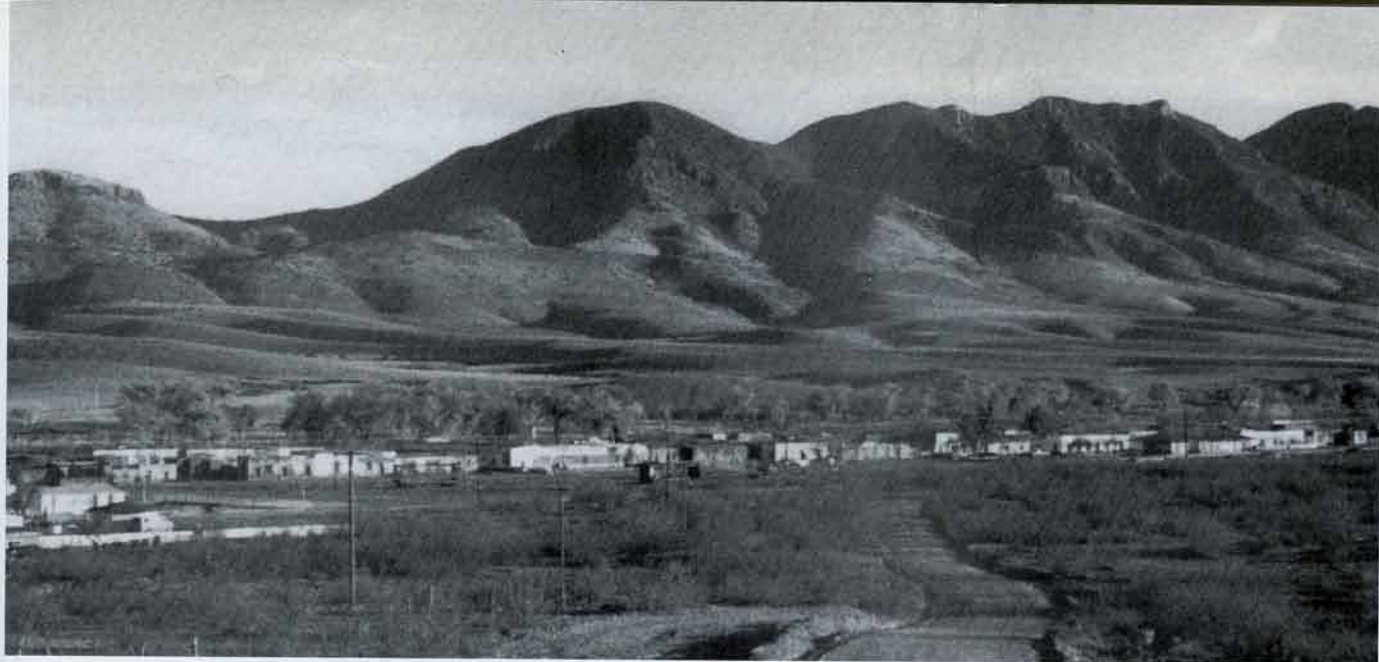
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## Juan Quezada: Mexican Potter

*Juan Mata Ortiz, Chihuahua, Mexico.*

The village of Juan Mata Ortiz is situated along the banks of the Palanganas River, about twenty miles south of Casas Grandes in the high plains country of Chihuahua, Mexico. Over the past 28 years a revival of the Casas Grandes pottery tradition has developed in the village. The work of the Casas Grandes culture belongs to the larger family of prehistoric Pueblo pottery and is known primarily through the excavations of the Paquime ruins by Dr. Charles Di Peso. To date, the Casas Grandes culture has not received as much attention as that afforded to prehistoric cultures in what is now the U.S. What seems clear is that the ceramics of Casas Grandes can be best understood as part of the larger tradition of prehistoric Pueblo pottery.

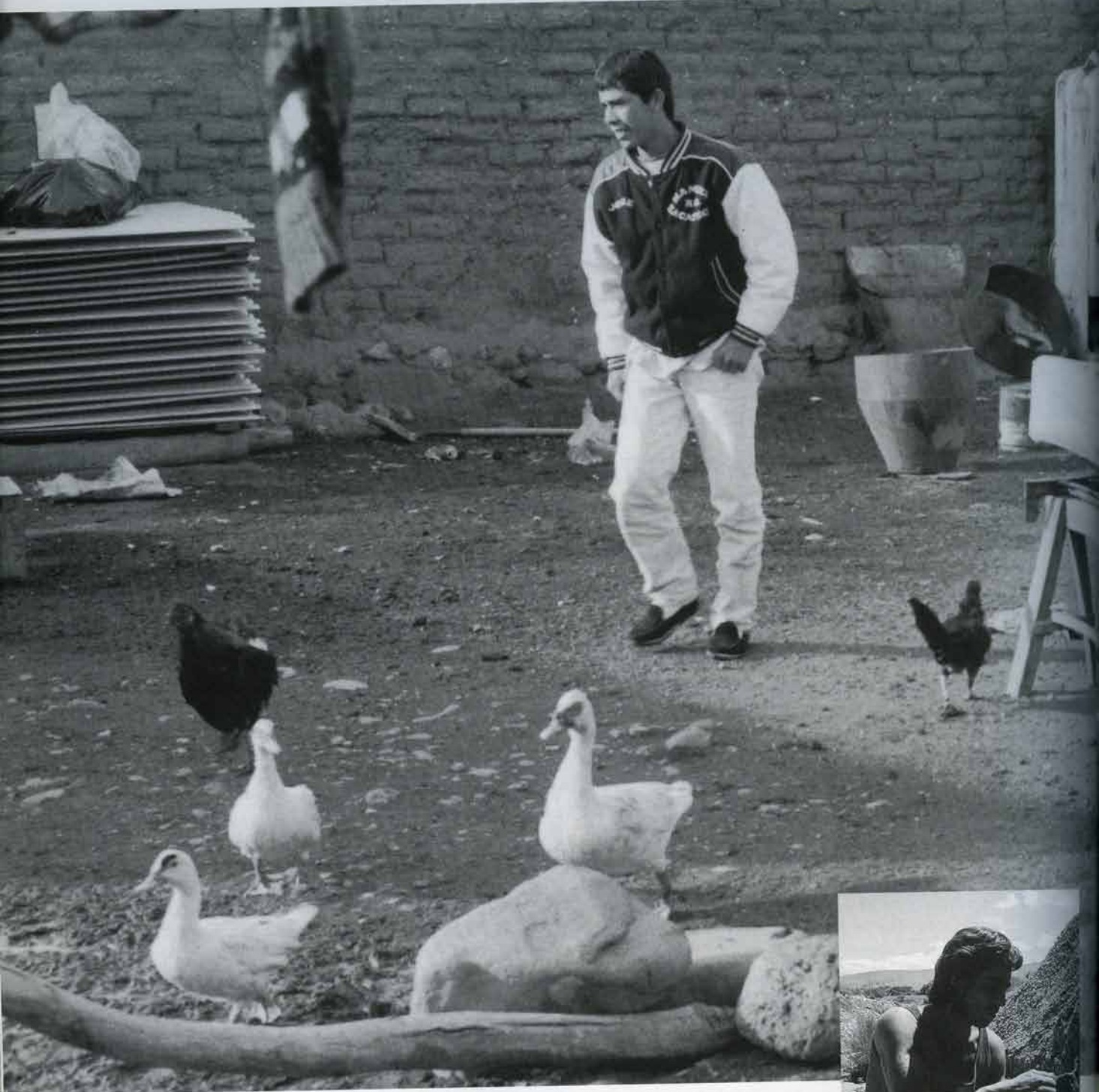
In some ways the present revival in Mata Ortiz compares with those that have taken place earlier on the Pueblos of New Mexico and Arizona. In other ways, however, this revival is unique. Unlike the Pueblo examples, where Native American artists such as Maria Martinez or Nampeyo were aided by archaeologists and museum collections, this revival is the result of the efforts and experiments of one man, Juan Quezada. Inspired by the pot shards and pottery he found in the caves above his village, Juan single-handedly rediscovered the materials and techniques necessary to produce Casas Grandes style polychrome pottery.

The magnitude of this accomplishment should not be underestimated. Over a long period of time, through endless experimentation, Juan has managed to discover usable clay sources, determine the proper minerals and slips for painting his pots and work out a successful way to fire outdoors with no kiln. Since his initial investigations 28 years ago, more than 300 people in Mata Ortiz have taken up pottery making, and the revival is in full bloom.

Juan forms his pottery by hand using a rounded plaster mold as a base. The pots are scraped, while they are still green, with a piece of hack saw blade to perfect the shape. Once the pots are bone dry, he sands and polishes them to a high finish with a smooth stone or deer bone, using vegetable oil as a lubricant. Juan paints his pots with clay slips and mineral pigments using a brush made of four or five strands of human hair. Finally, the pots are preheated in the kitchen oven and fired outside, one at a time, in an inverted flower pot saggar covered with manure or cottonwood bark.

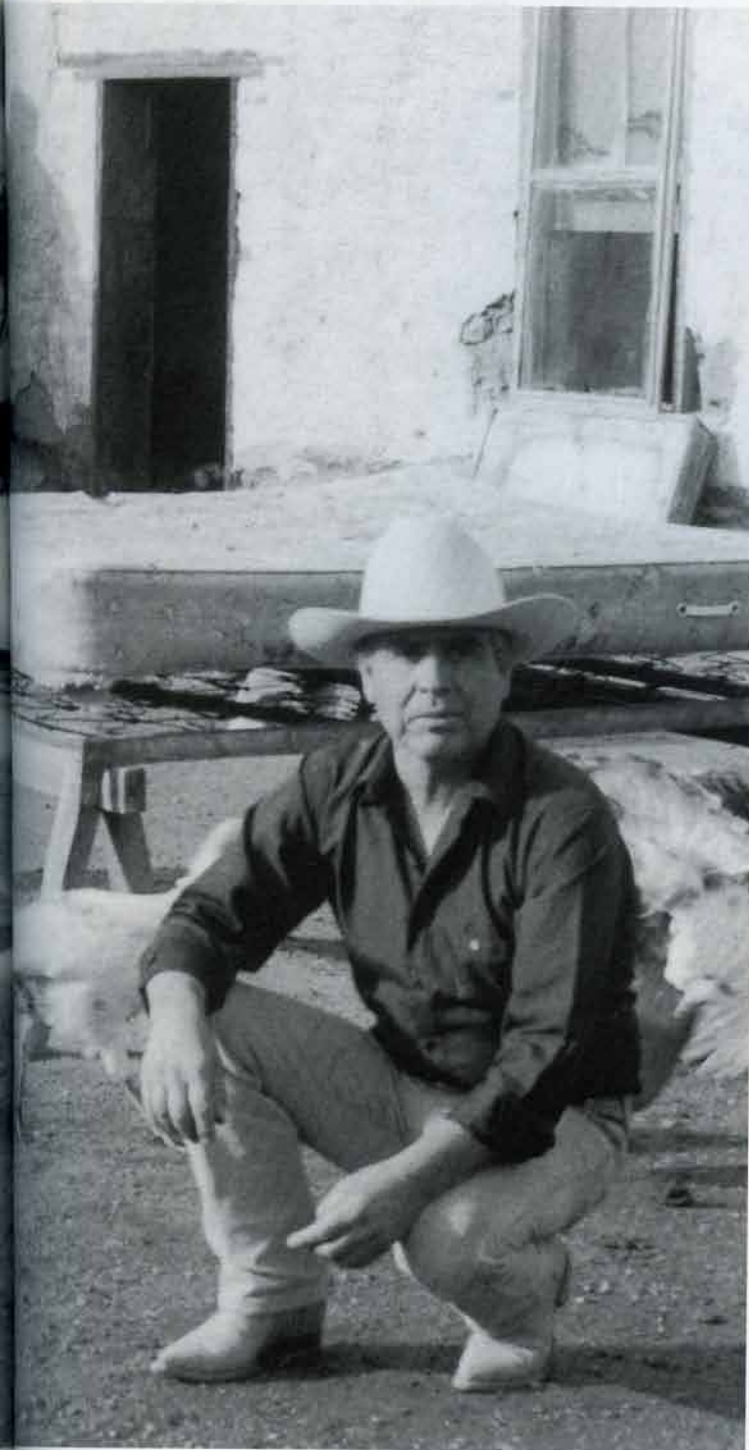
The market for the work currently being created in Mata Ortiz is almost entirely in the United States, where the work is sold alongside other examples of contemporary Pueblo pottery. This has created a certain amount of confusion as buyers who have never heard of the Casas Grandes culture struggle to understand this work as a Mexican version of a Native American tradition. The distance separating Mata Ortiz from the market, the lack of knowledge of Casas Grandes, the inherent American bias against Mexican crafts and the confusion over Mestizo artists creating 'Pueblo' pottery has slowed the acceptance of this extraordinary work in the U.S.

At the University of New Mexico, we have changed our focus from a Euro-Asian axis to feature the indigenous traditions of the Americas. For the past six years I have taught a course with Lucy Lewis' daughter, Mary Lewis Garcia, at Acoma Pueblo. Two summers ago we decided to offer a course with Juan Quezada in the mountains of Mexico. While camping out, making pots and exploring caves, we had many discussions regarding his early attempts to make pottery, the evolution of his style, the relationship between his tradition and that of the U.S. Pueblos, and the direction the revival has taken in contemporary Mata Ortiz. In the following conversation, we briefly revisit these topics in the comfort of Juan's living room in Mata Ortiz.



*Juan Quezada (right) At Home In Mata Ortiz. Photo by Steve Rose.  
Inset: Juan Quezada During His Early Investigations. Photo by Bobby Furst.*





## POTTERY FEVER

[ED. NOTE: The following conversation between Juan Quezada, Bill Gilbert and John Davis was taped at Mata Ortiz, Chihuahua, Mexico, in September 1995. The original Spanish transcription was translated into English. This edited version attempts to preserve the mannerisms and style in which Juan Quezada speaks.]

**Bill Gilbert:** *How long have you been making pottery?*

**Juan Quezada:** For about 27 years. 27 or 28.

**Bill:** *How did you get started?*

**Juan:** That's when I was young...very young...before I could work. When I began to bring down firewood from the mountains, I began to find in the caves of the ruins of Paquime the shards of pots. Sometimes I found whole ones. When you washed [cleaned] them over and over, every now and then...at times you found uncovered ones. Then, in that time, I could not buy materials for sculptures or paintings...I didn't know anyone... there wasn't any money...so I experimented with pure natural colors—vegetables, minerals—for the colors. So when I found the pieces and the designs I liked and their shapes, I said to myself, "I like this." So I thought that since there weren't the means to buy paints, and the Ancients had to have found their materials here — the clay, the paints — well, I'll go find them, too. Well, with much difficulties, as I hadn't seen a potter or a painter — nothing.

**Bill:** *When you started was there no other person to show you?*

**Juan:** No one. No one — I didn't even know what a potter was. I was ignorant about it — definitely.

In my free time, I was bringing clay — when I was into pots — I wanted to discover "clay and paints" — to see if I could make the designs that I liked. I looked for the liquid clay. Since I didn't know, I thought that if it was runnier the clay would be finer and better. So I would bring it — fine, fine — and say, "That's good!" So I would make the piece but when I would get it ready I had to prepare the paint, at the same time I would start to get behind, you see? So I wouldn't paint it anymore. I would try with another and another. I had my mind set on the most beautiful pots — the ordinary ones — many I wouldn't even pick up — I preferred the white ones, the yellow ones, pretty ones.

So, failure after failure. So I brought all types of shards. I even began to break the ordinary-looking ones. All the ones that I saw that didn't have pretty designs...that weren't well-made, and then breaking up the ones that had good paint jobs, too. But with my eyes, I could not see the grains — it was a very fine paste.

**Bill:** *When did you start to mix sand with the clay?*

**Juan:** I started to see that they all had sand, so I brought sand. I sifted it, washed and ground it on a *metate* [grinding stone], and I added it to the earth. That was when I started to achieve results. Afterwards, when I was making pots, I looked for the finest sand only — small grains. I did this for a while. Later, when I found clay of a particular color, I looked for a rock of the same color. Then, I'd grind it and add it and get the result you see. You see?

**Bill:** *What color was your first clay?*

**Juan:** Yellow.

**Bill:** *And the white and rose were later?*

**Juan:** Yes, later. With the yellow I had problems back then. We

don't wash now like we washed the clay before, [when] I used a rag or cloth. When I started to travel around the U.S., I noticed that there were eruptions [on the surface of the clay] due to the humidity. So I didn't like it at all. So I saw that I had to remove the lime from the pots so they would last. So I experimented and finally got to washing and giving it time with a lot of water so that the finest grains would drop. When I got to where the finest grains wouldn't pass through anymore, I made my first pieces like that. I then buried them for months at the edge of the river. I'd take them out and then re-bury them, to see if with the temperature change there were no more eruptions. So I decided this was the way to wash the clay.

**Bill:** *Does all the clay around Mata Ortiz have lime in it?*

**Juan:** You have to make sure. How can I explain this? If the clay falls here close, it doesn't interest me. No matter how well you wash it. Any little thing can cause so many [eruptions]. If the clay is closer here, I leave it. I stay in zones where there is no lime. And I wash the clay well to avoid eruptions.

**Bill:** *Do you use the same materials for your pigments as those on Casas Grandes pots?*

**Juan:** The Ancients — well, the older people here used to say the Ancients painted with mule's blood! So I, ignorantly, even started to add animal blood — even human blood. But as soon as I fired it, well, it disappeared! I was never at ease with pure manganese [the mineral used for black paint], because as the temperature rises manganese starts to lose its blackness. So when the piece is fired, the black paint becomes brown. So I have been looking for a rock that was black.

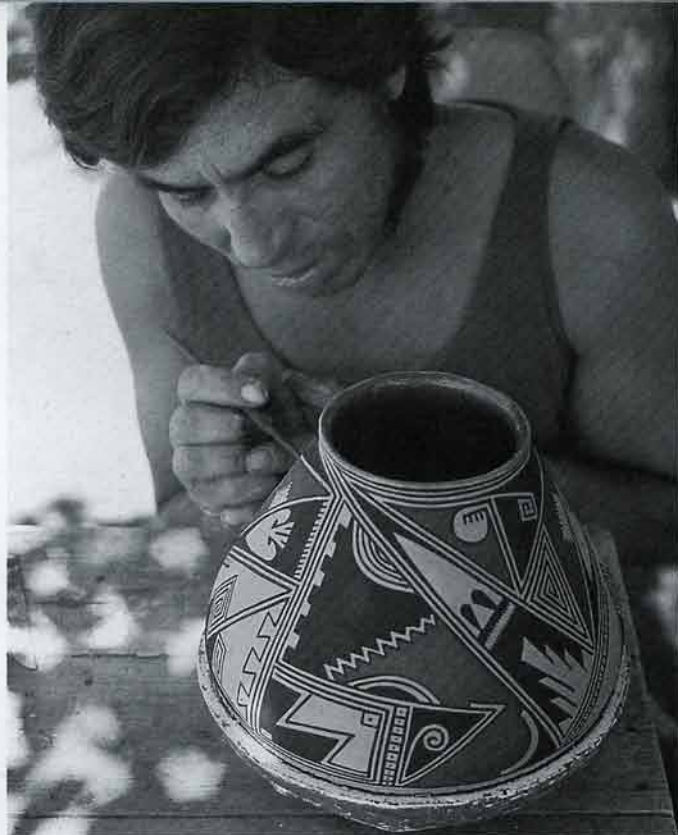
After experiments for a while, I finally found a rock that stayed black. That day I didn't even want to come home! This is what I was looking for. I ground it, added it to the manganese, and real black it came out, it didn't burn the glow off the black.

**Bill:** *Is it important for you that all your materials be natural from your local environment?*

**Juan:** I think that what you use and what I use, in the end it's all natural — almost. It's a compound of humanity, but in the end it's all natural. So, it does interest me, though, to be closer to nature as I am here. It's much more interesting to be near nature. When I bring something that is created commercially, it's not beautiful. I like to be in the midst of nature. I prefer to use what's natural. I want to get clay from over there. I want to feel good. I put the piece [pot] near the clay — some pieces wouldn't have a home — I like to see the contrast — that's where this came from — to put it among the grasses and clays—it came from there with a little bit of guidance, understand. I like putting it there. I like doing that.

**Bill:** *And your brushes for painting, at first were they made of hairs or something else?*

**Juan:** At first, with bird feathers and with hairs of all animals. I wasn't at ease. I was experimenting with everything at once. When I finally achieved the pieces I was talking about, then the first line...But, no. I didn't like it at all. I saw the Ancients' [line] and I lacked the steady hand. So when the pot was fresh, I would take some thread, I would mark on the pot like this. I wanted to go on the line, but it would go off — my hand wasn't steady. I always like the lines of the Ancients — very firm — that fascinated



Juan Quezada. Photo by Bobby Furst.

me the most. The lines and the drawings, but mostly the lines. But, little by little, the hand, the brush got steady, and I controlled it.

**Bill:** *At first, you covered the pot with a clay slip before painting?*

**Juan:** Yes. I used a base, a white slip base.

**Bill:** *When did you change from using clay slip on the entire surface to your present system of sanding the pot down and painting directly on the polished clay?*

**Juan:** The idea came about because when I painted the fresh pot it was all too fast. I couldn't get away from it when I had to get away. When I was painting it and I became too involved in it with too much inspiration — when a stronger urge would come and I had to get away — but then the pot would be ruined. So I was experimenting with sanding it down, painting it when I wanted to. I started using sandpaper. I didn't use water like I do now — never — I didn't like the surface. It came out too rough, you know, too ordinary. Then I started using water. First I used petrol, to prevent humidity from penetrating, as a barrier. Then I tried different oils, like we do now.

**Bill:** *...with mineral oil or...?*

**Juan:** Vegetable oil.

**Bill:** *When did you change from using clay with added sand to your present pure clay? [The clay used for fine pots has no added temper or grog.]*

**Juan:** Well, when I was hundred percent sure that pots with aggregates were good — how can I say it? — I noticed when I brought the clay how it felt without the aggregate. When I added aggregates it felt — you know — so I started to mix the clays with them and with water. I needed a clay not too gummy. I did a piece, a small one, it came out good. So I began looking for clays that nat-



Juan Quezada. Photo by Steve Rose.

usually had aggregates. Some clays have too much and they don't work at all. You have to find — when I look for clays, I pay attention. I've got it down to where I know if it's got the right amount naturally.

**Bill:** *Can you describe how you developed your current method of firing?*

**Juan:** At first I used firewood. I didn't like it much. I started looking for different kinds of wood. I was thinking that it was all in the quality of the firewood. I used mesquite, *cascara* [bark], *encino* [oak], pine — all types in this region. No. No. None gave me the right results. Then I quit the firewood. I went to the Sierra and found charcoal. I brought the coals and made a square cage of wire, very well-made. I added a little charcoal and put the pot at an even distance from the coals all around — two inches all around — tending, tending the coals, passing air so that the coals would heat up evenly.

I had this friend, we would go to the U.S. as wetbacks. I made about four or five pots. We went to this store and said, "Do you want to buy some pots?" The owner looked at them over and over and said, "I'll buy any that you bring me — all of them" at a certain price. [My friend and I] became partners. He was going to be my helper. "First we have to go up the mountain to get charcoal." We made charcoal and got it down together. I put the charcoal in the container with the pot inside and swayed it back and forth in the air. When I tired, I'd pass it to him. It was so hot the whole container was on fire. Then it would burn our clothes, sparks everywhere! When we didn't like a piece, "We won't even get enough for pants!" we'd say. [Laughter] When we saw the results finally—the pots would come out much too burned—overcooked. I want the paints to be shiny with quality. We threw them out.

Then I made cookers my way — well, you know, in the ground with firewood. [Here Juan is describing his method of firing one pot at a time in a saggar with manure.] Then, maybe, it wasn't hot enough. I'd put a lid on the pot until another day, but the pots wouldn't cook — they stayed raw. I made a few cookers like this — nothing. Don't like it. So then I made a bucket-like wire cage. I didn't like the stains it made on the pots so I didn't let it touch the pot. I put in firewood and I like it so-so. I needed a material

that burned quicker and lasted more. So I said, maybe the buÒega [cow manure]. So I fired some more and it came out almost to my liking. So I fired several like that. I kept a spacing so it wouldn't touch. Then the bucket wasn't working as well. Sometimes it altered the color of the piece. So I made a cover of clay — of the same clay — I fired it and it worked well. I spent some time making the covers big and small. The clay was of good quality, it wouldn't break.

**Bill:** *Do you think the ancient potters used wood to fire their work?*

**Juan:** I think they fired with ashes — with *cascara*, not with firewood but with bark. I think they fired one or two or three at the most. I think it was the same as right now. If you make a good piece that you like, you will try to protect and preserve it to the utmost. So I don't think they would have mixed it up with too many [others in one firing]— just like now. I don't want to fire a piece that I really like, mixing it up too much. I fire it especially on its own.

**Bill:** *In Mata Ortiz you use molds to form the base of your pots and they look a lot like the Pueblo potters' pukis. How did you start using a mold in your work?*

**Juan:** The idea came to me of using molds, now that I have seen that they have them there, too [the Pueblo potters' *pukis*]. Then I had the idea, firstly I would take a cloth or rag on a plate, to find the form to start the job. Back then when I was looking around in caves once inhabited by the Ancients, scratching and digging, I found some clay molds. I thought they were *casuelas* [bowls] for a while, but then I thought, no, because they were sanded very smooth. They were definitely molds.

**Bill:** *Now all your molds are made of plaster, not clay.*

**Juan:** Yes. I wasn't satisfied for a long time using pans and plates as molds. They didn't please me, to make a pot that was "aided" by some plate, you understand? I wanted to create the mold myself. Many times the molds would stick. I'd make a piece and when I was going to paint it — *Hijo!* [Laughter]—I had already invested the work and the paint. I had to pull hard and some pieces would stay stuck. So I experimented with some materials and I found that plaster worked. The clay comes right off the plaster. I stayed with that because it didn't give me problems.

**Bill:** *Were your forms and designs at first in the Casas Grandes styles?*

**Juan:** Yes. More Casas Grandes — the pots and the drawings. I was never in agreement [satisfied]. You see, it was more to impress myself with a drawing that I liked. I would put it on one of my pots. I was not at ease with this and changed little by little. Now I have a style — if there is a drawing that I like, I'll do it in my own style.

**Bill:** *Currently there are many potters using Mimbres designs. Did you use them at one time?*

**Juan:** Well, I'll tell you something very...hmmm. When I started to make pots, I went a long time not knowing what Mimbres was. I didn't know Mimbres at all until when I worked at the railroad. I saw pots around but I didn't know [*Paquime*] from Mimbres. I just liked them — didn't know what they were called — not until I started to go to the U.S. did I start to understand what was Mimbres. Then from the beginning, I made designs on pots because I liked

them. I liked them all — the Mimbres. Sometimes I make Mimbres style bowls with Paquime designs.

**Bill:** *Did the Mimbres culture extend as far south as Casas Grandes?*

**Juan:** One time when we were excavating, I asked the Doctor [Di Peso], "How many Mimbres ruins — homes — did you find in the [region] of Mata Ortiz?" "No," he said. "There I didn't find any." I don't think so — there were many Mimbres. "I can count now six or seven very large homes of Mimbres," I told him. "They're not Mimbres, probably," he said. "Next time, send me some shards, some coals and *metates*." I don't know if I brought him some — I sent them with Spencer. But he said they were indeed Mimbres. It had passed him up because the ruins, as I understand it, you have to have experimented much with ruins to be able to say, "Yes, they are Mimbres." Because the Mimbres ruins, as I understand it, are very similar to Apache ruins — very related.

**Bill:** *There is the Paquime tradition. But also in this town there is now the Juan Quezada tradition. There are many potters who use your designs.*

**Juan:** Yes, there are many who copy my designs. Yes. The other day I saw a pot in a book — the one with little squares — what a hard job to copy that! *Hijo!* To me it is laborious to copy. I don't like it. Aside from being complicated, I just don't like to do it. It loses validity, to copy something already made by another. Apart from not being as valid, it is complicated. Even if it isn't complicated, it's difficult.

**Bill:** *How did your work first get to the U.S.?*

**Juan:** When I achieved the pots at first, I didn't even like them — even less, other people. I showed them to friends, to my children. They didn't really notice. I didn't feel that they liked them. I didn't like them, either. Bit by bit, I started impressing myself.

When I say, more or less, there were several people in those days — Jesus Chavez, Alejandro Peras — who were going to the U.S. and brought radios, second-hand shoes, pants, clothes, and sold them here. Then I thought, since these guys are going to the U.S., I'm going to give them some pieces to see if they can sell them around.

I didn't see any interest at first. But they took them and sold them. Soon they returned and said, "Juan, we want more pots." So I began making lots — badly made, almost all with white bottoms, others with yellow bottoms. So I was glad that someone was liking them.

I lived like that for a while. Then along came a friend, Jesus Chavez. He told me, "Juan, they're selling your pots over as ancient pots." Then my spirits fell. "They're deceiving you." "Yes, yes, I know," I said. "Look, I know a lady, Maria Martinez," said this Jesus Chavez, "in the U.S., and her pots are valued highly — but she signs them all." Well, you see, in those days I really needed money, but first of all I wanted people to like what I did. I didn't care who — anybody who'd like it. As much as I needed money in great quantity, I wanted that approval more. So my motivation was in question. When that "dude" came along, my spirits really fell a bit.

I started to sign my pieces with the same paint. I didn't know anything about signatures on works. I made a — well, I didn't have schooling, they used to tell me that your signatures had to look the same. But how could I do it? I couldn't even write! So I figured to make them all the same I was going to make a seal.

What to make it out of? I then found a root of *alamo* [cottonwood], because it's the most porous. Then in block letters I made this seal. I'd fill it with paint and put it on the pieces! Everyone told me the signature had to be the same!

I started selling again, with signatures. Many told me they didn't want them with signatures. "No," I said. I was like that for a while. Then I saw they were sanding the signatures, and the same problem as before! So I began to think, how can I make it so that the signature isn't erased? So when the pot was fresh, with a steel point or a hard stick, I'd write on it. So I didn't have a problem of erasing or sanding because my pots were always thin.

Then in that time — a bit before the signature — Spencer MacCallum found some pots in Deming [New Mexico]. He said he saw some pots that I made without the signature. He liked them and bought them. He decided to come find the person. (He thought it would be a woman, he told me. "Why?" I said. "Because in the U.S. potters are often women." "No," I said, "you were wrong.")

Spencer came and found me, with three photographs. He said, "I'm looking for the person who made these pots." "I made them," I said. "Are you sure — can you demonstrate?" I took out three pots I had. He liked my pots so much, he said, "I'm going to pay you so much a month so that you experiment with the clay even more. The pots are not quite yet of quality." I looked at Spencer — incredulous! — that he'd want to pay me to experiment.

Without even the agreement of having to produce anything each month, nothing except to be able to experiment and show proof that I was experimenting. So I doubted in that time that there would be a person like Spencer — even if he had money — who would invest in something of the sort. For me it was something. I said, "There are good people in the world. There are people interested in many things." Then I started experimenting, it's what I enjoyed. It seemed absurd that someone would pay me to do what I enjoyed — explore the Sierra looking for clay. I was very happy.

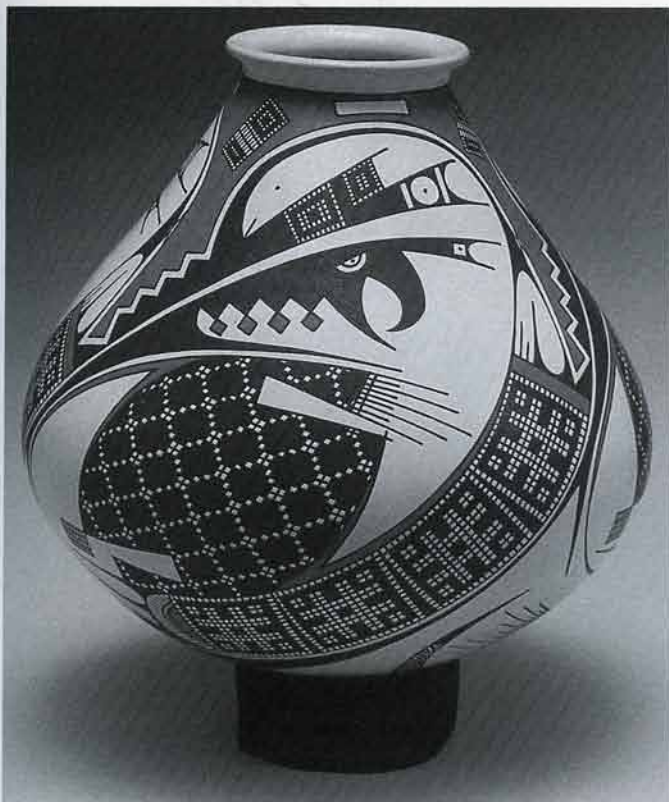
**Bill:** *In this time did your work change significantly?*

**Juan:** Yes. Before it hadn't changed as much. If we didn't gather firewood one day, that day I'd go by foot to the other side of the Sierra. If I took the burros they would tire and not bring back any wood. Every day the burros were skinny, skinny. So I had to gather by foot. I didn't tire, really. I was used to it...

What was I talking about?...Ah, yes, yes, to perfect myself more...I'm talking about when I was 14 or 15 years old. I liked what I wanted, but I was very young...I liked girls. I'd come home from gathering firewood, bathe, and go out to the street to find the girls and talk to them. Then in the afternoon, quickly I'd do something with the clay. Then I didn't have much time, I had to do this or that.

But when Spencer came I was already married, and I didn't have to go looking around and I didn't worry about looking for food. I was being paid to do what I liked, so it was quickly that I perfected my work. It was very easy because I didn't have to worry about food, and I was happy. That's why I tell you that everything I have I owe to Spencer. Because he gave me the opportunity.

So soon I perfected myself, and Spencer came and said, "Well, Juan, now I want you to produce for me one or two pieces each month — or three, but of maximum quality." And I had for him 2, 3, 4 — until we counted a number somewhere around 75, or at the most 80, until he told me, "We're going to start exhibiting in the *fulano* [Arizona State] Museum."



*Decorated Pot by Juan Quezada.*

**Bill:** *When did you start showing the process to other members of your family, your neighbors?*

**Juan:** When I started to make pots and I wasn't fighting to find food. But my brothers were the same like we were before. I'd help them with five or ten pesos here and there — any little thing — for cigarettes. The first I showed were Consolación and Reynaldo, then Nicolas, to show them how. But Consolación, she just couldn't. "Look," I told her, "I learned by myself. I don't think you can't learn, with the clay already prepared, watching me how I do it." With much difficulty they learned.

Later I showed my cousins, friends. Later, he shows the other, the other shows another. Some people come to ask me to show them. Some have learned and some have not. That's how the fever over pottery started! But I think with much success because no pieces remain — neither ugly or pretty. They all sell. But many people don't seem to understand. I say, "Look, you have to sacrifice time."

Here, I don't think there are potters with the spirit of potters. Because I'm watching them all, I watch their movements. Some make very good pieces, but some aren't in the potter's spirit because they can't stop earning \$400 to go look for clay if they won't find it. I never see them looking, using up gasoline, time — being able to earn money. These people, I don't even ask them. They don't know how it feels to be a potter. Effectively no. I would love to see some guy here just looking for the clay in the Sierra, looking at a rock — none hardly. Because I don't mind losing one day or two or three. If I don't find a rock or a—well, if it's different, just a little, I come back enthusiastically, to prepare it to see how it comes out. If it doesn't, "No, I don't like it." Since I

don't write anything down, I throw them away. In time, I see them again — and like them. When time passes, it rains and the wetness changes the colors — I like it! Where did I get it from? That's happened to me several times. "Where'd you get this clay from? Come on, remember."

**Bill:** *Do you think your work is part of the same Casas Grandes tradition of Pueblo pottery?*

**Juan:** Yes. Definitely, yes. For me, the same thing.

**Bill:** *Do people in Mata Ortiz believe that the Ancients of Casas Grandes are their ancestors?*

**Juan:** Most people that I've spoken with in this region, many believe that. I have this theory in my — I never went to school or anything — but most people I've spoken to believe that those people disappeared. But I feel we are the same. We've been evolving. For me, I've heard: What happened to those people? Were they killed or what? I think that's how it is. All you have to see is the march of time. I feel that we are the same as the Paquimes, with other customs, evolving.

When I was young — I began to think, to come to conclusions — that we were the same, because when I was young I remember — I was 7 or 8 — a person died. Back then they put the dead on wooden tablets, they'd put water, food in at night. And I'd ask why? If he's already dead, why? I remember the older people would tell me: it's because they have to drink water while they go to heaven and eat for the voyage.

Now that's not used anymore, it's disappeared. Like the customs evolve, in my own lifetime even. Nobody leaves water anymore. The [Paquimes] used to bury their dead with food and other things. When I was older, they didn't put food, only water. So I say, life has always been the same.

**Bill:** *Did you meet Maria Martinez on one of your trips to the U.S.?*

**Juan:** Yes. Maria Martinez. Toward the end. After the year... When we went we were with Spencer, a few newspaper people, reporters, when we went it was my brother, Consolación, Ermina, it was a group. Then we met Maria Martinez. She was already quite old by then, so she didn't want to talk to any reporters. She wanted to talk with me and my family. We went in, and I remember she was very static [unmoving, at rest] — but very happy — an old, happy woman. Then her daughter-in-law says, "It's been many years that I've seen my mother-in-law with so much enthusiasm — that she's talking with Juan." We conversed a while and that was it. It was not much later that I got news from friends, "Maria Martinez has died."

**Bill:** *Now, in Mata Ortiz traders encourage potters to make the black-on-black style pots. Is this a Casas Grandes style, or Mimbres, or from where?*

**Juan:** The black pot was first made accidentally here, I think, like Maria Martinez told me that it accidentally came out [at San Ildefonso]. I think that here Paquime also had black pots, but without painting. Very pretty, shiny, but without painting. By accident, I think. I wasn't very interested in it. I'd seen black pots but I was more interested in the designs. In the Ancients I'd seen black pottery. I don't know who pulled out the first one. They told me, "They're making some prettier black pots up there in the Pueblos." I saw them — they brought me one. And I didn't want nothing, nothing. I liked them but not to get too involved, only to have the satisfaction of knowing that I could make one of these pieces, too.



Then Nicolas and I started experimenting, but we couldn't get it black. So we said, "No, it's not paint — it would be too fine! How is it?" I explored and explored. "No, it's a paint." But never could I get it. Nicolas and I kept experimenting. But they, the Ortiz family, were the first ones who came out with the black pot here. I think accidentally. Because I don't think they saw it over there [in the U.S.]. Back then, there weren't any books. In truth, I like the black pots, I get along well with the Indios. But I don't like the black pots because I don't want to feel bad that I'm using their style for myself. Only just every now and then, to vary it up.

**Bill:** *You have your own style. Maria has her style.*

**Juan:** Many here started to make pots with the *cuchillos* [knife design based on Mimbres feather designs]. I didn't like it. Just too many traders, like in everything. There [are those that] are honest, and there are [those that] are dishonest, you know. I've never been or was in agreement. Some traders 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." Some listened to me and some didn't. Bit by bit that disappeared. But there was a time when I said, "No, no, no." We were not going well. Some started to make *cuchillos* and it was going bad. Then for you to feel well, there's nothing like being your own style and not to be taking advantage of what another fought for and suffered. It wouldn't sit well with me. That's why the black pots, I do like them a lot — just yesterday, I saw some black pots, very well polished, and I said, "I like them a lot" — but to make them, no.

**Bill:** *The work for the Japanese collector, Mrs. Horiguchi, seems to me very fine work. Are your favorite pots in the Japanese collection? [Juan had an exclusive contract with Mrs. Horiguchi for one year.]*

**Juan:** No. It's all mixed up with those pots that are in the U.S. I like them, only with the difference that...the Japanese collectors asked for them much larger. I've made many small pieces but with the same quality. Since we're used to seeing smaller pots, the big ones draw your attention and we think more of it. Maybe it gives it quality, I don't know. Because I've made some real simple ones and they were well-liked — much simpler than others I've sold in the U.S. So I think the quality is the same. The bigger a piece is, the more you can work it visibly. Some pieces are so small you can't put your hand in it to work it and perfect it; a big one gives you the chance to get your hand in there and all that — the curves are softer. So there are good and bad pieces in Japan — bad and good like I've sold in the U.S., too.

**Bill:** *At first your market was in the U.S. Is there interest now in your work here in Mexico?*

**Juan:** No. Only in the U.S. No. Now I've started to sell up to \$3,000 here in Chihuahua for a piece. Few but it's there, yes. A few days ago, a friend comes and says, "Juan." He is American or like an Indian, big guy — I think he's American or [Yaqui] — looks Mexican. He's been very good with me, has bought many pieces. But he says, "Juan, I have some friends here in Chihuahua. Millionaire folk. I'll buy your pots." He's bought [my] pots. It's something for me that he's going to buy a pot for \$3,000 to give as a gift. "Because I'm going to give this pot, Juan." Just recently he came and said, "I want that one and that one and that one. Juan, I want them to give them to this person in Chihuahua, who has much

money, because I'm going to give this pot, and her friend will come and say, "I want one, too!" And the other one comes and — "That's how it's done." So, that man is helping me out here in Mexico. I've sold a few here. At \$450, \$1,000, they've bought even at \$3,000. But not until recently.

**Bill:** *We've discussed your ideas about simple and complicated designs—how the designs of other potters seem complicated, every square inch of the pot filled with paint.*

**Juan:** Well, there's another thing. I'm going to tell you that for inside of me I prefer a good pot, well-painted, but it doesn't matter if it has a lot of designs. I prefer simpler to all-covered because, like I've always said and continue to say, you don't have to cover the pot to make it of quality and pleasing. You can cover it for two, three, four or fifteen days, but if you can't combine the designs well....

I feel that I prefer to paint a simple pot, but I do feel inside of me that many people will equate this simpler designs with less workmanship. Like I'm committing a fraud to give up a work for so much, if it doesn't have the — you know what I'm saying? — that I feel something. But in me, I prefer not to see the big old pot filled with all kinds of complicated designs that don't fit. No, no. A few lines only. I don't want to feel — well, I've never really heard that, but inside of me I feel there may be people who say something. But personally I like the simple ones.

**Bill:** *There are many people in the U.S. who equate time with money. They prefer pieces all covered with designs. But it's not about the look of the design, just the perceived amount of work.*

**Juan:** I understand. I've painted many pots — "I'd like this for me!" — right from the start. But I've had to add more things because I say — well, though I haven't heard that — but I don't want to feel someone is saying, "This is costing this much for a few lines only?" But I like them so — I've had to add more drawings. They lose the original vision I had for them. Though I haven't heard anything, it rings inside of me. That's it.

**Bill:** *Your example has influenced the majority of people in Mata Ortiz. How do you feel, seeing what has happened here?*

**Juan:** Oh, very happy. I was successful at what I wanted, you understand. The indifference of some potters worries me, yet. But the important thing is that, as far as I'm concerned, we're earning money. If we don't secure some livelihood for the future — because I don't think this will be here for life — what I think is that many of us are not achieving what we're doing because we're not equipped. All that we earn, it's spend, spend. Maybe someday we'll look back on how we earned dollars!

But I feel satisfied for what I've done. Many people are eating. They've got their little cows. I've got mine. Many people make a living by pots. If I hadn't gone into pots, I never would have been able to afford [one]. Maybe when I was younger and went to the U.S. as a *mojado* ["wetback"] to find a boat or something. But now, thank God, with the pots I bought my little cow. So I feel very good that many people have done the same as what I did. Like I tell you, it's like a political party — some are pleased and some aren't. But that's secondary. What I care about is the improvement because of what I did. That's all. Some say this or that, but I don't care. Some say, "Because of Juan." Others say, "Because of me! I'm doing it myself!" They say!



Juan Quezada. Photo by Bobby Furst.

**Bill:** *Is there anything else you'd like to tell the potters of the U.S. about your work, your process?*

**Juan:** To the potters from the other side, for me, I'm very thankful, because we've exchanged materials, you understand — not to negotiate but to experiment—and that fascinates me. Experimentation. I've learned from them also. A lot from them. We've seen how they fire, paint, and I think from everyone we can learn something.

**John Davis:** *When will you retire?*

**Juan:** The day I can't any longer! That day. I believe like Maria Martinez and Lucy Lewis, the same, till I can't. Because all the time one must work.

*(Translated by Carlos Ancalmo.)*

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