

Connected through Clay

The Rediscovery of Casas Grandes Pottery

by Justin Ritter

The shards of ancient pottery that twelve-year-old Juan Quezada pulled from the ground had likely lain there for hundreds of years. They were the remnants of a bygone culture buried in the deserts of northern Mexico—not far from Quezada's village of Mata Ortiz, the civilization of Casas Grandes had once prospered during the Precolumbian era.

While the cultures of Casas Grandes and Mata Ortiz stand a world apart, Quezada's discovery of those timeworn potsherds some fifty years ago, as well as his subsequent redevelopment of the Casas Grandes pottery style, has forever altered the relationship of the two cultures. Despite differences in time, size, style, and symbolism, their proximity to clay-rich hills, their use of pottery as an export, and their passion for the craft of pottery have forged a link between the people of Casas Grandes and Mata Ortiz, connecting them through clay.

From AD 1200 to 1450, Casas Grandes (Spanish for "Great Houses") was a thriving civilization. Built more than six hundred years ago, its capitol, Paquimé, was a massive, mud-walled city containing multistoried adobe blocks with some 1,600 rooms, communal plazas, and a ceremonial precinct with ball courts.¹ Nestled between the Pueblo civilization to the north and Mesoamerican cultures to the south, the city became a major trading center. Paquimé's large stores of copper and turquoise, as well as more than three million seashells discovered in its ruins, allude to Casas Grandes' former economic power. With Paquimé built far from the sea, the shells were valuable imports.²

The defining craft of this ancient culture was pottery. In addition to serving a utilitarian function, pottery making in Paquimé was an art form practiced by "specialists" who had their own individual styles.³ These artisans sculpted the white clay mined from nearby hills into a series of coils, then stacked them on top of one another to form pots. Next they smoothed the clay together with burnishing stones, fired the pots, and, using brushes made from hair, painted them with the colors of natural dyes—bold reds and midnight black.⁴ Both spiritually and socially symbolic, the figures painted on Casas Grandes

earthenware told the story of its civilization. Two of the more predominant figures depicted on Casas Grandes pottery included the winged serpent, believed by some to be Quetzalcoatl, and the macaw, a tropical bird the people used in trade and ceremonies.⁵ While there are many religious and other interpretations of the macaw and serpent figures, both are also tied to political and economic power.⁶

Over the centuries of prosperity at Casas Grandes, skilled artisans produced a vast assortment of pottery. Eventually, however, the economic and political power embodied in their work and symbolism dissipated. Whether their decline came as a result of war, famine, or social change, by AD 1450 the Paquiméans had abandoned their city and the pottery inside, leaving it to be covered by the hot sands of northern Mexico.⁷

A few shards from these ancient pots ended up in the hands of inquisitive Juan Quezada, who discovered them while collecting firewood for his family. Intrigued by the potsherds, Quezada began to experiment with clay. After spending the next several years trying to replicate the method used by Paquiméan potters, he finally succeeded.⁸ As a result, Mata Ortiz's pottery process is nearly identical to that of Casas Grandes, with potters like Quezada forming a clay *tortilla* to serve as the bottom of the pot, stacking coils on top to form the sides of the vessel, and smoothing it all together with animal bones, beans, and small stones.⁹

After being fired, the pots are painted with brushes made from human hair.¹⁰ Some of the designs and patterns the Mata Ortiz potters stroke onto their new pots are reminiscent of the symbols found on Casas Grandes wares, while others follow the individual style of each potter. In this re-emergence of Mexican pottery art, there is no pattern, cultural or otherwise, that artisans in Mata Ortiz use to learn and develop their individual styles.¹¹

Some designs are a blend of Casas Grandes tradition and modern Mata Ortiz innovation. For example, the Paquiméans often painted tiny checks, called *cuadritos*, on their pots. Around 1980, Quezada's daughter, Nena, was working with graph paper in her eighth grade mathematics class when she realized the squares could be used to

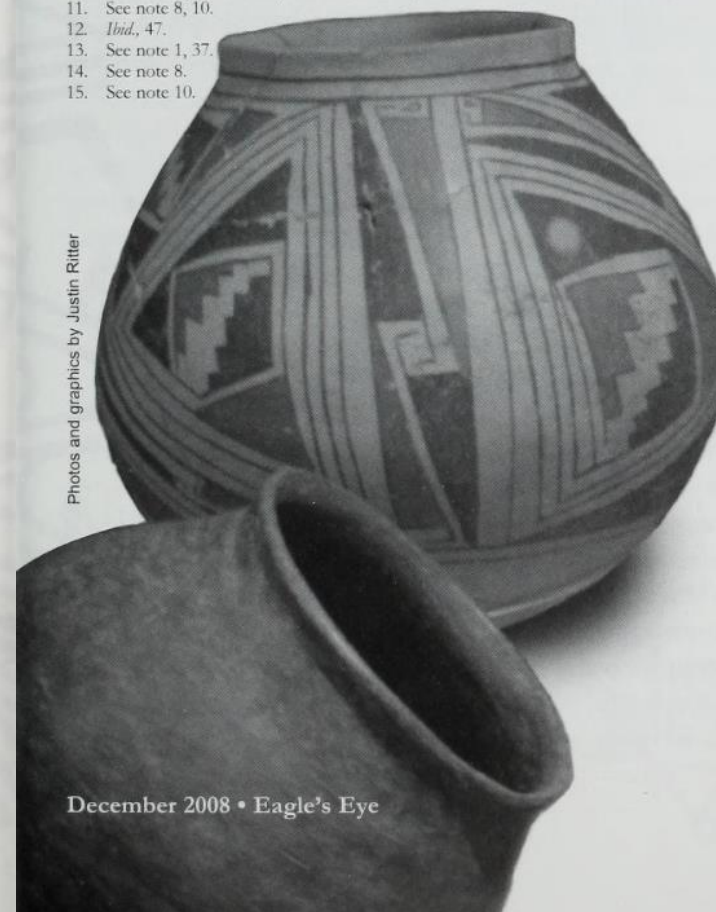
cover large areas of pots—a design that has since become popular in Mata Ortiz.¹² This evolution of the styles used by potters in Mata Ortiz hearkens back to Casas Grandes. The pottery is no longer an imitation of that found in Paquimé, but embodies the variety and imagination of the modern-day potters—creative traits they have in common with the artisans of Casas Grandes.¹³

After rediscovering the pottery process of Casas Grandes, Quezada taught it to his family members; eventually, other villagers joined the movement.¹⁴ In 1976, American anthropologist Spencer MacCallum discovered Quezada's work. Soon international attention was drawn to this resurrected style of pottery, and Mata Ortiz earthenware became highly sought-after. Now three hundred of Mata Ortiz's two thousand residents are potters, and their trade has breathed new life into the Mexican village. Pottery has become as integral a part of Mata Ortiz's economy as it was to that of Casas Grandes hundreds of years ago.¹⁵

Casas Grandes and Mata Ortiz stand in stark contrast to one another—large and small, ancient and modern, prosperous and developing. They are separated by culture, religion, and even time. But the incorporation of Casas Grandes pottery into the culture of Mata Ortiz has knitted the two places and peoples together, bridging the centuries through the medium of clay. The pottery itself is a witness to this blending of cultures: bright, bold designs crisscrossing a hand-polished pot that hints at an art as old as the buried clay of northern Mexico.

NOTES

1. Melissa S. Powell, *Secrets of Casas Grandes: Precolumbian Art & Archaeology of Northern Mexico*, (Santa Fe: Museum of New Mexico Press, 2006), 17, 20.
2. Museum of Peoples and Cultures exhibition, *Touching the Past: Traditions of Casas Grandes*, Brigham Young University Museum of Peoples and Cultures, Provo, Utah, plaque.
3. See note 1, 43.
4. *Ibid.*, 30.
5. See note 2.
6. See note 1, 50.
7. *Ibid.*, 36.
8. Lowell, Susan, et al., *The Many Faces of Mata Ortiz* (Tucson, Arizona: Rio Nuevo, 1999), 7–8.
9. Nancy Andrews-Goebel, *The Pot that Juan Built* (New York: Lee & Low Books, 2002), 10.
10. *The Potters of Mata Ortiz*, VHS. Directed by Barbara Goffin. 1994, Woodstock, New York.
11. See note 8, 10.
12. *Ibid.*, 47.
13. See note 1, 37.
14. See note 8.
15. See note 10.



Photos and graphics by Justin Ritter

During the Precolumbian era, the artisans of Casas Grandes used a unique process to create beautifully-decorated clay pots (left). Now, hundreds of years later, the potters of nearby Mata Ortiz, Mexico, use the same process to form their pots (right). They combine Casas Grandes symbolism and personal innovation to create their own styles.

BYU's Museum of Peoples and Cultures

by Justin Ritter

A faded clay jar, smoke-stained by an ancient cooking fire. A wide copper bracelet, its sheen dulled by the desert sands. A shriveled ear of corn, gnawed bare of its kernels long before Columbus ever set foot on the American continent. Traces of a vanished society, artifacts like these can be found at Brigham Young University's (BYU) Museum of Peoples and Cultures (MPC). Located just south of campus, the MPC gives its visitors an opportunity through its exhibits to see and experience both ancient and modern cultures.

The MPC brings a multitude of cultures to life with its many exhibits, which vary from a sampling of Latin American textiles to a collection of Mexican masks to an assortment of ancient Casas Grandes pottery. The collections are housed at the MPC for about a year and can be toured alone or with a guide.

The museum also hosts a number of programs, including Mornings at the Museum, a program for toddlers and preschool-age children; Culture-Me-Mine, a Friday night date activity; and Family Home Evening at the MPC, which allows family home evening groups to take a guided tour of the museum at a discounted cost.

As a cure for curiosity, a haven for history buffs, and a resource for recreation and learning, the Museum of Peoples and Cultures has something to offer everyone with a love for culture and a flair for the past and present.¹

For more information on the Museum of Peoples and Cultures, visit mpc.byu.edu.

NOTE

1. Museum of Peoples and Cultures, "Museum of Peoples and Cultures," BYU, <http://mpc.byu.edu>.

