

## Mata Ortiz Pottery

### How Did This Happen?

About 20 miles north of the village is the pre-Columbian adobe ruin of Paquimé, once a great city inhabited by a sophisticated native people at about the same time as the Anasazi civilization to the north. These ruins are extensive in size, among the largest in North America. These ancient people produced and traded fine pottery on a large scale, and pottery fragments still litter the archeological site today.

The son of a farmer, and sixth of 11 children, Mata Ortiz native **Juan Quezada** became interested in the Paquimé pottery, and he set out on his own to attempt to recreate the beautiful pots from the lost civilization. With no knowledge of the craft, this aspiring artist worked in the 1950s to learn the secrets of obtaining clay and pigments from the surrounding hills and of creating, painting, and firing his own pottery. Over time, by trial and error, he began to see results. Yet he was still working most of the time as a farm laborer.

By 1976, he had achieved enough proficiency that he brought six of his pots with him when he went up to the United States to do seasonal farm work that year. He traded these pots for used clothing at Bob's Swap Shop in Deming, New Mexico.



An American anthropologist, **Spencer MacCallum**, visited the shop soon after. He was so taken with the three remaining pots he saw there that he bought them on the spot and vowed to find the person who created them. The shop owner said "they probably came from Mexico." Later, he set out to Mexico on his search. After some false starts, he visited the city of Casas Grandes in Chihuahua, which is near the Paquimé ruins. There, someone pointed him in the direction of Mata Ortiz village, down a 25-mile-long rough road over the hills to the southwest.

When Spencer MacCallum finally met Juan Quezada, he offered to pay him a stipend out of his own pocket so that the artist would be able to create pots full-time, improve his skills, and teach others the craft. Thus was the phenomenon of Mata Ortiz born. Juan Quezada started by teaching his immediate family to make pots, then friends, and neighbors. By 1995, over 400 villagers had switched livelihoods and become artists. The years have seen a large increase in both the quality and variety of ceramics, and Mata Ortiz pottery is now in demand by collectors around the world.

Both Juan Quezada and Spencer MacCallum are still alive and vigorous, well into their 80s. About 20 years ago, MacCallum relocated to Mexico and now lives in Casas Grandes, near the Paquimé ruins which inspired this amazing art form.

### **Who was Mata Ortiz?**

Juan Mata Ortiz was a general in the Mexican army during the Mexican war with the Apaches. He was killed in 1882. In 1924, the town of Pearson, Chihuahua, Mexico was renamed Mata Ortiz in honor of the general. Today the 1,100 citizens often refer to their town as Mata.



**What are some of the important dates?**

- 700-1475 AD the Paquimé culture developed.
- 1200-1400 AD was the height of the Paquimé culture, which was the largest in Puebloan world (Bigger than Mesa Verde, Chaco). “City” was 80 acres, located on a trade route. They dug wells and irrigation channels. They built ball courts, religious and ceremonial structures, and homes. They raised macaws and turkeys.
- 1500s The Spanish called the area Casas Grandes, “Big Houses.”
- Juan Quezada Celado was born May 6, 1940 in Santa Barbara Tutuaca, Mexico. When Juan was one, his family moved to Mata Ortiz.
- 1952 Juan discovered his first potsherds from the Paquimé culture.
- 1953 Juan went into a cave in the mountains and discovered a three-legged stool with an undamaged pot sitting on it.
- 1958-1961 Charlie De Peso and William Shirley Fulton from the Amerind Foundation worked with the Mexican National Institute of Anthropology to excavate Paquimé.
- 1976 Anthropologist Spencer MacCallum visited Mata Ortiz and met Juan Quezada and his extended family of brothers, sisters, their children and neighbors.
- December 2, 1998 UNESCO declared Archeological zone of Paquimé in Casas Grandes a UNESCO World Heritage Site.
- 1999 Juan Quezada was presented The National Award in Science and Arts by the president of Mexico.

FRONTLINE/World reporter Macarena Hernández talks to Spencer MacCallum about the legend of Juan Quezada and the discovery of Quezada's work.

<http://www.pbs.org/frontlineworld/stories/mexico403/anthropologist.html>