

## Mata Ortiz Pottery

### How Are the Pots Made?

The pot making process at Mata Ortiz was developed over many years. Since Juan Quezada did not have a teacher, it was trial and error, adjust and try again.

Pot making starts with the clay. The hills around Mata Ortiz are rich with the same clays the Paquimé Indians used. Different colored clays are used for the pottery, but the white clay is the rarest. Initially, potters would seek out their own sources of clay, and they kept the source secret. Clay is put into buckets to soak and later passed through a cloth strainer. Only the clay which has been strained is used to make pottery.

No two potters form a pot exactly the same way. They do not use a wheel. First, they use a plaster-of-paris mold, coated with vegetable oil, to form the pot bottom. Then the potter takes a piece of clay and flattens it out like a pan-cake (tortilla?) to the right thickness and pushes it firmly into the mold. Next, the potter forms a large piece of clay, shaping a chorizo (sausage) coil into a doughnut shape and attaches this to the edge of the pot bottom. This is not a small coil of clay to be built up in stages, as with a New Mexico pueblo pot. The clay is pinched, rotated, and gently formed into the lower part of the pot, then the middle, and then the top part of the pot until it achieves the desired form. The only tools used in this process are a flat metal or wooden blade, and a sponge. If the artist is skilled, the pot will have a uniform thickness and evenness. Sometimes, the potter uses a second doughnut of clay to form the rim. This “single coil” method was developed by Juan Quezada. Finally, the pot is dried and sanded, and vegetable oil is applied and rubbed in several times to seal the outside of the pot. Then the pot is polished with a cloth, or to achieve a higher sheen, with a stone.

Most of the paints and pigments come from the surrounding area – iron, copper, and manganese oxides. Some of the younger artists now used some commercial paints in many colors. The brushes are the finest imaginable, using just a few strands of human hair several inches long, usually from a child. The painting is done with the whole brush, not just the tip. Years of practice have taught the artists the complex and precise techniques needed to make intricate geometric shapes and lines. Starting with the rather simple designs of the Paquimé Indians, the current stylistic range of Mata Ortiz ceramics is vast. After the paint has dried, the pot may be polished once or twice again, depending on the effect desired.

Most potters fire their pots in a pit in their backyard. A “beehive” of stone with a metal cover is formed over the pot. Then cow chips are piled on this and splashed with kerosene. The fire burns for about a half-hour before the pot is exposed and allowed to cool gradually. It is now finished and ready for use.

Oscar G. Quezada is the oldest son of the renowned Juan Quezada's sister. Here he shows how he makes a pot “the Mata Ortiz way.”

1. Oscar G. Quezada readies the clay by flattening it.



2. He places the flat piece of clay over the bowl and begins to form the bottom of the pot.



3. Making a coil of clay.



4. He continues adding coils and smoothing the clay pulling up the sides of the pot until it is the desired height.



5. Taking a sharp tool he smooths the rough outside of the pot while his fingers smooth the inside.



6. The pot must be painted before being fired. Oscar paints using several strands of hair from his infant daughter. The brush pictured is over 3 years old. With a steady hand, Oscar paints a beautiful geometric design on the pot.



7. Oscar places two pots under a metal container and begins to place cow dung around and over it.



8. Accelerant is placed around the bottom of the pile and ignited. The fire will burn for about 40 minutes.

9. Oscar begins to move away the hot cow chips to expose the metal container.



10. The 2 pots have completed their firing.