

clay

Artists throughout Mexico share similar methods for making pottery. But the selection of shapes, designs, colors, and finishes varies, allowing for individual creativity as well as unique regional styles and specialties. Through this laborious process, Mexico's great master potters show the enormous versatility of clay and demonstrate their own formidable artistic genius.

extraction

Selecting clay is the first step in the production of ceramics. Master potters typically extract this raw material from clay banks near their homes. Once the clay is extracted, the paste is prepared, pulverized, sun-dried, sifted, and moistened. The clay is then ready to be shaped.

The composition of the clay in each region determines how it will be used. In some pottery centers like Atzompa, Oaxaca, people work with clay in its natural state, while in others, such as Metepec, in the State of Mexico, they mix different clays or add sand or *plumilla de tule* (tule flower) to make the material more cohesive.

shaping

Two basic methods are used to shape the pieces:

Modeling: Artists begin shaping clay with their fingers, then use a pick, needle tool, and, occasionally, a potter's wheel.

Casting: Pieces are created using molds made of fired clay or plaster. Sometimes a piece is made with a mold, and details are added by hand.

Once the pieces have been made, they are dried in the shade, and then placed in the sun to complete the drying process. The final steps are finishing and firing.

finishing

Artists use several techniques to give ceramics a specific finish. These techniques include:

Pastillaje: Raised clay applications called *pastillas* are placed on the unfired piece so that figures acquire a look of appliquéd embroidery.

Burnishing: Before firing, the surface is polished with a stone, corncob, or rag.

Engobe: Clay mixed with pigments is used to coat the unfired figure to give it a base color.

Polychrome: The pieces are decorated, both before and after firing, with vegetable, mineral, or commercial pigments made into paints. Artists use different motifs according to the geographical area in which they live.

Glazing: Before firing, a coating of *greta* (a type of enamel made with copper oxide dissolved in water) is applied to give the piece shine and resistance. The process also renders the piece impermeable to moisture.

Majolica: This technique consists of applying a tin oxide glaze once the piece has cooled after firing. The result is a shiny finish on a white background. Several days are allowed for the piece to dry completely. It is then decorated with mineral colors, including red, yellow, and blue. When dry, the piece is fired again.

Petatillo: Before the first firing, the pieces are given a background design of thin crossing lines. As a final detail, the pieces are glazed and fired a second time.

Bandera: This type of decoration is so named because it includes the colors of the Mexican flag. The background is red with white and green.

Canelo: Before firing, the pieces are decorated with pigments that turn a deep cinnamon red color after firing. Black and white clays are mixed to obtain the desired color.

Punteado: Using a squirrel's tail, artists paint small, uniform dots before the first firing. At the end, the piece is glazed and fired again.

Black Clay: Artists first polish the pieces, and then, during firing, cover the opening of the kiln to block the entrance of air. Diminishing the amount of oxygen for combustion produces a permanent black coloration.

firing

Generally, firing is done in open kilns, which are made of brick or adobe. Open at the top, the kilns have one or more openings at the base where fuel, generally wood or kerosene, is burned. Other types of kilns include bell kilns and underground kilns, which have openings or flues at ground level.

There are two procedures for firing:

Low Temperature: Firing occurs between 1,472°F (800°C) and 1,652°F (900°C) and lasts approximately four to six hours. Pieces must cool inside the kiln before they are removed.

High Temperature: Clay is mixed with other materials, which allows the pieces to withstand temperatures up to 2,192°F (1,200°C). The high temperature procedure occurs in two stages:

The first firing prepares the pieces for glazing, and serves as a quality control that allows defective pieces to be separated. Firing lasts from eight to ten hours at a temperature of 1,112°F (594°C) to 1,472°F (800°C). The second firing is done at 2,192°F (1,200°C) to make the piece hard and impermeable.