

CLAY CULTURE

the talavera tradition

by Lauren Karle

Talavera ware pulls from many rich, historical ceramic traditions to create work unique to its region. The skilled craftsmen preserve colonial patterns while also incorporating new designs that continue to push the potential of the materials and aesthetic into the contemporary world.

The tradition of Talavera production—a mixture of Islamic, Italian, Spanish, and indigenous Mexican ceramic techniques—goes back to the early colonial period in Mexico. During the “golden age” of Talavera from 1650 to 1750, there were 46 workshops regulated by guilds. Today, Talavera is still made using the same 16th-century process and materials and is regulated by present-day Mexican law to maintain high quality and the traditional crafting process. In the summer of 2013, I spent two months in Puebla, Mexico, working at Uriarte Talavera, the oldest of only nine remaining certified Talavera workshops. I had the privilege to learn about the process and reflect on its historical influence and contemporary relevance while being immersed in it.

Arriving at the bus station in Puebla one encounters large banners with images and information about Talavera hanging overhead. Walking around the city, Talavera tiles are always within sight. They decorate the facades of many churches and homes, are found on fountains and patios, and form an important part of Puebla’s Baroque architecture (1). The tradition is an important force that shaped Puebla’s history and is one of the city’s current icons.

Talavera is unique to the region right from the start. Two kinds of clay, white and brown, are dug from the ground locally and arrive at the factory looking like hard chunks of mud and rocks. The clays are mixed in calculated proportions and slaked down before going through a fine-mesh screen to remove organic materials and



pebbles. The slip is then pumped into a compressor to remove the excess water. The resulting galletas, or “cookies” of clay are put through the pug mill twice to create a workable clay body.

Forms are created on the potter’s wheel or using press molds. The artisans are specialized, so they do their part of the process for nine hours a day, five days a week. They are masters at what they do. I watched in amazement as an employee named Salvador made 100 vinaigrette bottles with exactly the same curves, proportions, and height (2). As a graduate student earning my MFA in ceramics, I am expected to develop a certain level of skill, but watching my hands attempt what Salvador had just demonstrated for me made me feel as if I’d never touched clay before. There is no wasting time; everything is created with efficiency. The wheel is on or off, since speed cannot be adjusted. Pots are set on the chuck to be trimmed as the wheel is spinning and lifted quickly after they are done without turning it off.

Luis is the master mold maker who creates the original form and plaster press molds for the handbuilders to use. I watched Luis and Romeo, another employee, make a five-part mold of a 4×5-foot *tibor* (jar) by using curved walls of clay secured by cloth as coddles. By using clay rather than straight wood boards, molds are lighter and do not waste plaster. Once the molds dry, then *tortillas* (slabs) are pressed into each piece of the mold and joined (3–4). When I began to make work, I started by handbuilding with slabs as I do in my studio at home. The first week, everything I tried to form cracked and fell apart. The clay has very little plasticity, so I had to learn their tried-and-true press molding technique to create forms. It’s no wonder that they’ve used this method for hundreds of years!

Making the form is only half the challenge. Pieces are flipped and rotated for four to six weeks to dry evenly without warping. Once bone dry, they are bisque fired in a huge gas kiln that has two cars (5). The kiln is carefully loaded and stacked for optimal results. Plates are placed rim to rim in stacks of six. Tiles are loaded three high in a honeycomb formation. The firings usually last 10 to 12 hours, and afterwards each piece is examined by quality control before moving on through the process.

Work that is free of defects is sanded to erase tool marks and soften edges. The dust is blown off with an air compressor before glaze is applied.

The off-white majolica glaze is a hallmark of certified Talavera and can easily be distinguished from the stark white of knock-off work. Another way to identify certified Talavera is by the DO4 painted on the back of each piece. This stands for Denomination of Origin 4, the Mexican government’s denotation signifying its authenticity. The majolica glaze is applied by dipping into a large vat of glaze made by the factory chemist. As my former professor Eddie Dominguez once told me, majolica is a “mean” glaze, and the thickness must be just perfect. Crevices of pieces are brushed with water before dipping to prevent too much absorption. Where the work is held and the angle at which



1 The facade of the Uriarte factory, representative of how Talavera tiles decorate many churches, parks, and architecture all around Puebla.

2 Salvador trimming one of the 100 vinaigrette bottles he threw. 3 Slabs of clay are pressed into both sides of a mold. 4 The finished piece in the mold.



5 Two cars (one kiln load) of bisque work rolled out of the kiln after cooling from a firing. **6** The stencil is placed on a glazed piece and a bag of charcoal is pounced on the surface. **7** The charcoal dust is left in the small holes of the stencil, creating an outline for the painter to follow. The bowls are an example of how an outline is painted in.

the pieces are pulled out both contribute to success.

Once the glaze has dried for at least 24 hours, the surface is touched up. Women use popsicle sticks to remove a fine layer of glaze in areas where it is too thick. They also scrape away the majolica on the feet so that it won't adhere to the shelf in the glaze firing. Any fine air bubbles or finger marks are painted over until the form has an even canvas of majolica glaze for the decorative painting.

Patterns used on Talavera are the results of an immense his-

tory and evolution. Designs on Islamic pottery were brought to Spain by Moors who made Hispano-Moresque ware at the end of the 12th century. They continued to influence the rest of Spain and Europe and were brought to Puebla during the early colonial period. Mexico is a mix of many cultures, not just Spanish and indigenous, that are reflected in Talavera. Talavera is named after a Spanish city that contributed to its style, Talavera de la Reina. The lines between what is indigenous and what has originated in other cultures are blurred. Just as we in other nations build on



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8 A table setting with the Caledoscopy pattern in the entry of Uriarte.
9 Talavera ware with the Medallion Morisco design.

the traditions of our past, adding our own current perspective, so have the Talavera artists over the centuries. Uriarte potters are known for preserving colonial patterns at the same time they continue to push the potential of the materials and aesthetic into the contemporary world.

Designs are often radial or symmetrical. Once a pattern has been chosen, a stencil is made by placing a piece of vellum over the drawing. A line of tiny holes is poked through the vellum and paper using a needle on a wooden dowel. The stencil is placed on a glazed piece and a bag of charcoal is pounced on the surface. The charcoal dust is left in the small holes of the stencil, creating an outline for the painter to follow (6). The stencil is rotated until the decoration on the piece is complete (7).

Overglaze colors are prepared by the chemist using traditional grinding methods and oxides. Special brushes made of mule hair hold a lot of paint but come to a tip for even flow. If the design has a black outline it is painted first. Each color needs to be applied in the right thickness. If it is too thick it will bubble, but if it is too thin it will be faint. I was surprised by how much texture the cobalt blue has before firing and how much it retains after glaze firing. If the application is not perfect—if it is smudged, the line is too thick, or the feathers in a design are touching—a small tool is used to scrape away the color layer without removing the majolica glaze underneath. Painting is the most time-consuming part of the process, and every detail of the design is applied with care and accuracy.

The kiln is loaded differently for the glaze firing, since work cannot be stacked. Special shelves, designed for each size of tile and plate, are used to separate the work while maximizing kiln space. When the work comes out after the firing, it goes through quality control again. Any pieces with imperfections go to “remediation” where areas that need improvement are hammered, chiseled, sanded, and repainted. About one third of each glaze kiln is filled with work that has been touched up and is going through a second glaze firing. Uriarte maintains the highest standard of quality control, and only the best pieces are sold (8–9).

During colonial times, Talavera was Puebla’s product of trade. A wide trade route reaching all the way to Europe and Asia was established. Today, Uriarte continues to sell its work locally and internationally. Talavera is a large part of the city’s identity and is an example of the role craft can play in shaping a culture. Although artists and the Mexican government acknowledge the value of the Talavera tradition, the craft still faces challenges. Talavera has been at risk in the latter part of the 20th century and early 21st century because of competition from cheap imitation work made in other places and because of the lack of young people interested in learning the trade. Yet it was the people who make the work who had the biggest impact on me during my time at Uriarte Talavera. The artisans are the keepers of hundreds of years of knowledge and the necessary skills of a valuable ceramic tradition.

the author *Lauren Karle recently earned her MFA in ceramics from Kansas State University in Manhattan, Kansas. To see her work, visit www.laurenkarle.com.*