

**Genre** Informational Text

**Essential Questions**

How do people in your community celebrate art and culture?  
What inspires you about your community and culture?

# The Pot That Juan Built

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illustrated by David Díaz





**This is the pot that Juan built.**

Juan Quezada was born in Santa Barbara Tutuaca, Mexico, in 1940. When he was one year old, his family moved to Mata Ortiz, a village of dirt roads and adobe houses on the windswept plains of Chihuahua. It was there that Juan rediscovered the pottery-making process of the Casas Grandes people, who had vanished from that part of Mexico six hundred years ago.

**These are the flames so sizzling hot  
That flickered and flared and fired the pot,  
The beautiful pot that Juan built.**

Juan became a professional potter in the 1970s. Before that he worked as a farm laborer, a railroad hand, a sharecropper, and even a boxer. He has never been afraid of hard work and takes pride in using ancient methods and natural materials in his pottery making. Juan taught eight of his ten brothers and sisters and many of his neighbors how to make pots. They all developed their own special styles. Juan's discovery changed Mata Ortiz from an impoverished village of poorly paid laborers into a prosperous community of working artists.



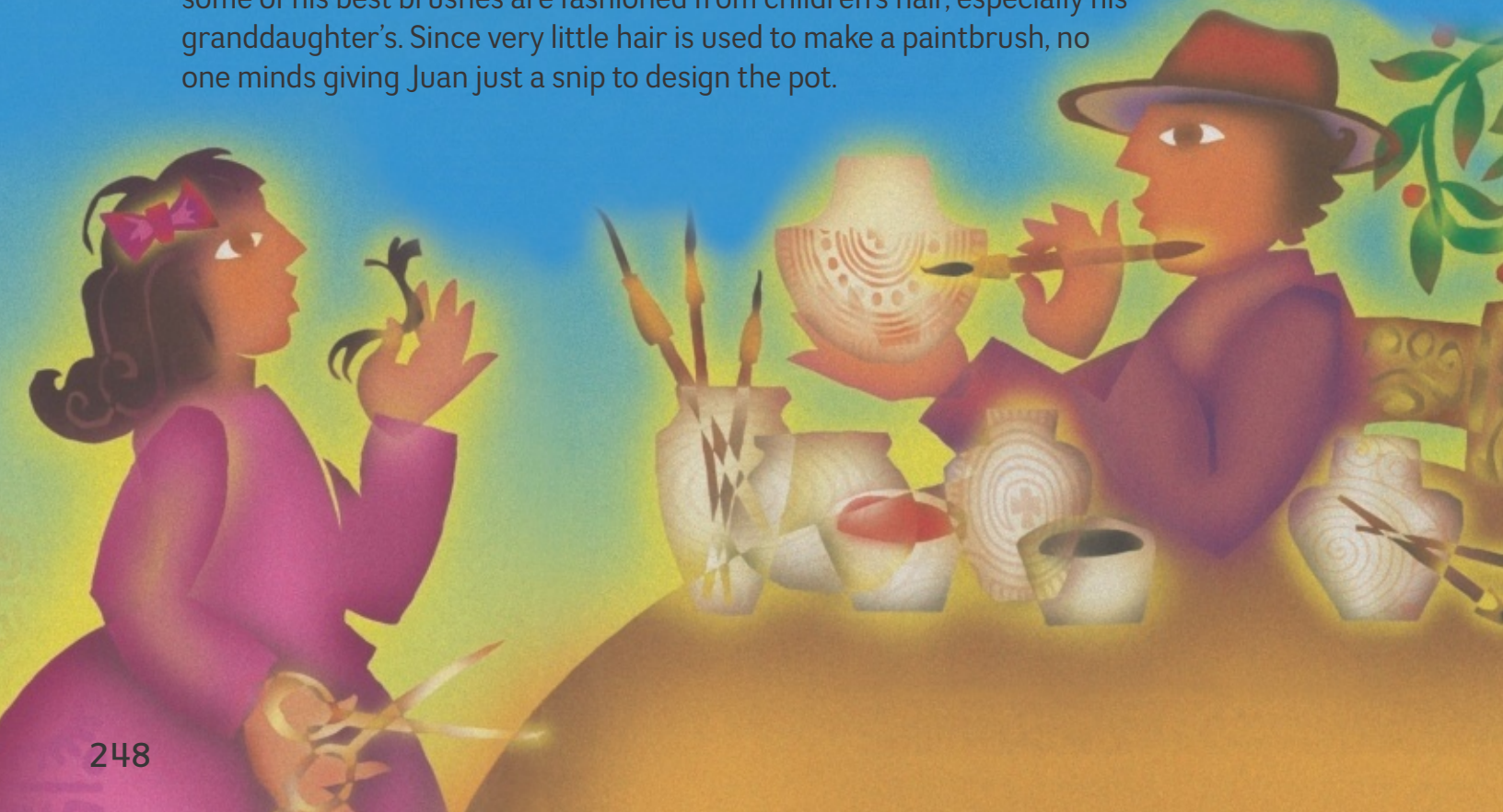


**These are the cows all white and brown  
That left manure all over the ground  
That fueled the flames so sizzling hot  
That flickered and flared and fired the pot,  
The beautiful pot that Juan built.**

Juan's pottery is fired the traditional way, using dried cow manure for fuel. He gathers manure on the cattle range that surrounds the village of Mata Ortiz. In his experiments Juan learned that manure from cows that eat grass, rather than commercial feed, burns at the best temperature to turn his clay pots into perfectly fired works of art.

**This is the brush of hair from his head  
That spread the paints all black and red  
That colored the pot for all to admire  
Before it was baked in the cow manure fire,  
The crackling flames so sizzling hot  
That flickered and flared and fired the pot,  
The beautiful pot that Juan built.**

Juan makes paint out of local minerals such as black manganese and red iron oxide. He makes paintbrushes from human hair. He says that some of his best brushes are fashioned from children's hair, especially his granddaughter's. Since very little hair is used to make a paintbrush, no one minds giving Juan just a snip to design the pot.







**These are the rocks of red and black  
Brought down from the mountain on burro-back  
To make into paint all black and red  
Spread with the brush of hair from his head  
That colored the pot for all to admire  
Before it was baked in the cow manure fire,  
The crackling flames so sizzling hot  
That flickered and flared and fired the pot,  
The beautiful pot that Juan built.**

When he was twelve years old, while bringing firewood down from the hills on his burro, Juan found his first potsherds. They were pieces of broken pottery from the ancient Casas Grandes city of Paquime, which was located fifteen miles from present-day Mata Ortiz. The potsherds inspired Juan to create something similar. Even though he had never seen a potter at work, Juan began experimenting with local materials. His mother declared that he was always covered in dirt of many colors from his experiments with minerals and clay.





**This is the tool that's made out of bone  
That rubbed the pot until it shone  
And glittered and glowed and glistened and glimmered  
And gleamed and beamed and sparkled and shimmered  
To show off the paints all black and red  
Spread with the brush of hair from his head  
That colored the pot for all to admire  
Before it was baked in the cow manure fire,  
The crackling flames so sizzling hot  
That flickered and flared and fired the pot,  
The beautiful pot that Juan built.**



After his clay pots dry Juan polishes them before he applies the paint. To polish his pots, Juan uses animal bones, smooth stones, and even dried beans. Animal bones are abundant because of the deer hunting and cattle ranching that help feed the people of Mata Ortiz. Smooth stones are available in the Palanganas River, which runs along the eastern boundary of town. Of course dried beans can be found in any kitchen in the village.

**Here's the tortilla—slap, SLAP! pat, PAT!  
And the sausage of clay so slick and fat  
That became the pot, imagine that,  
In the wink of an eye and the blink of a cat  
Before it was rubbed with a piece of bone  
Over and over until it shone  
To show off the paints all black and red  
Spread with the brush of hair from his head  
That colored the pot for all to admire  
Before it was baked in the cow manure fire,  
The crackling flames so sizzling hot  
That flickered and flared and fired the pot,  
The beautiful pot that Juan built.**



Juan hand builds all his pots. He begins by patting out a flat piece of clay he calls a “tortilla,” which becomes the bottom of the pot. He then rolls out a sausage-shaped piece of clay called a “chorizo” and presses it onto the edge of the tortilla, pinching and pulling it up to become the walls of the pot. Juan makes his pots in a small workroom behind his house, often in the company of chickens and his calico cat.



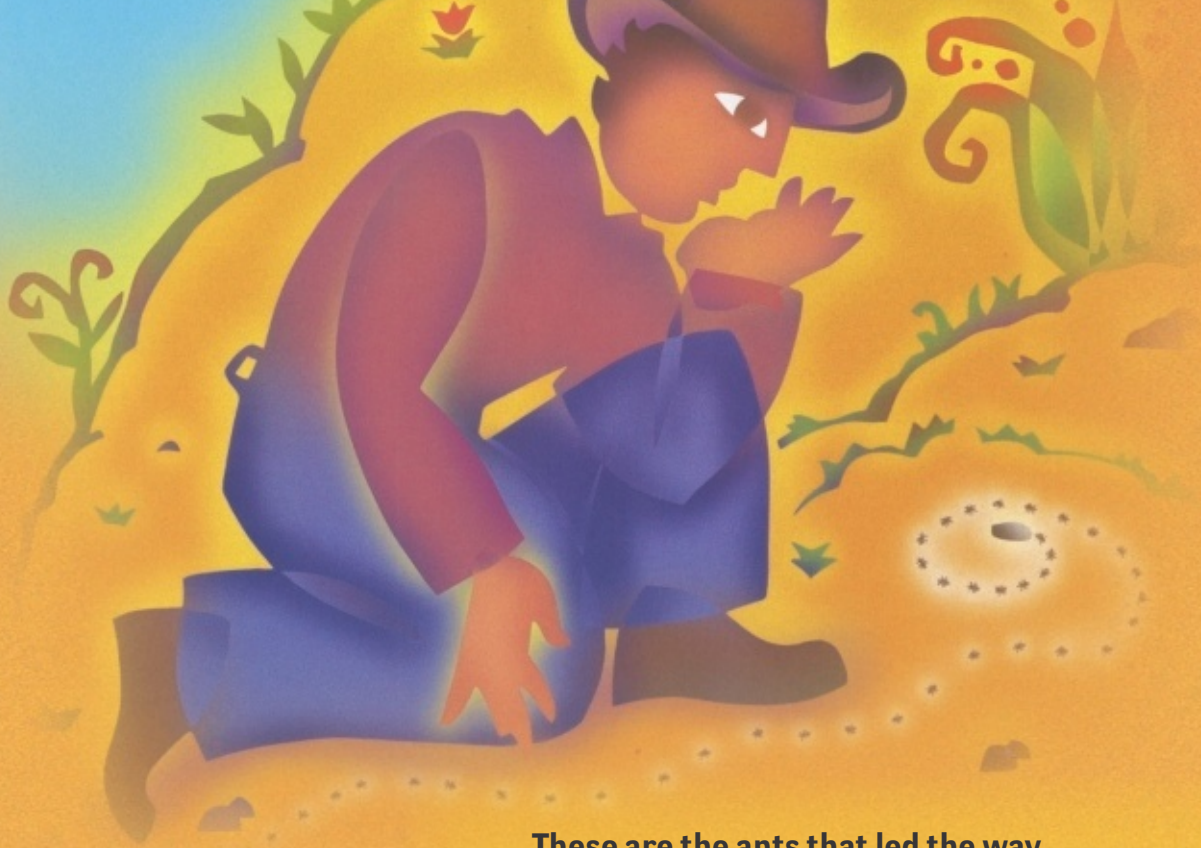


**This is the clay all squishy and white  
Dug in the hills from morning till night  
To make the tortilla—slap, SLAP! pat, PAT!  
And the sausage of clay so slick and fat  
That became the pot, imagine that,  
In the wink of an eye and the blink of a cat  
Before it was rubbed with a piece of bone  
Over and over until it shone  
To show off the paints all black and red  
Spread with the brush of hair from his head  
That colored the pot for all to admire  
Before it was baked in the cow manure fire,  
The crackling flames so sizzling hot  
That flickered and flared and fired the pot,  
The beautiful pot that Juan built.**

Juan says his painted designs look best on *barro blanco*, a pure white clay he digs in the Sierra Madre Mountains above Mata Ortiz. He uses the ancient designs of Casas Grandes potters for inspiration, but he doesn't copy them. Juan never plans the decoration in advance. He lets the pattern develop as he paints it onto the clay pot.







**These are the ants that led the way  
And showed Juan a vein of special clay,  
The very best clay all squishy and white  
Dug in the hills from morning till night  
To make the tortilla—slap, SLAP! pat, PAT!  
And the sausage of clay so slick and fat  
That became the pot, imagine that,  
In the wink of an eye and the blink of a cat  
Before it was rubbed with a piece of bone  
Over and over until it shone  
To show off the paints all black and red  
Spread with the brush of hair from his head  
That colored the pot for all to admire  
Before it was baked in the cow manure fire,  
The crackling flames so sizzling hot  
That flickered and flared and fired the pot,  
The beautiful pot that Juan built.**

One day while Juan was out searching for minerals and clay, he noticed a colony of ants burdened with tiny cargoes of white material. Looking closely, Juan realized that the ants were transporting bits of clay from underground up to the edge of their anthill. So Juan dug a hole near the anthill and unearthed a vein of white clay, the finest clay he had ever seen.





**This is the cock that crowed at dawn  
That greeted the village and woke up Juan  
To ride the range at break of day  
Gathering rocks and hunting for clay,  
The very best clay all squishy and white  
Dug in the hills from morning till night  
To make the tortilla—slap, SLAP! pat, PAT!  
And the sausage of clay so slick and fat  
That became the pot, imagine that,  
In the wink of an eye and the blink of a cat  
Before it was rubbed with a piece of bone  
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Juan gave away his first pots as gifts to family and friends. Today his work is exhibited in museums and art galleries all over the world. In 1999, Mexico's president, Ernesto Zedillo, presented Juan with the National Arts and Science Award, the highest honor for any artist in Mexico. Pope John Paul II received a Juan Quezada pot as a gift from the people of Mexico. In spite of his fame and wealth, Juan cherishes most of all the time he spends in solitude, exploring the hills above Mata Ortiz in search of minerals and clay. If he is very quiet, Juan says, the voices of the ancient potters can still be heard.

**The beautiful pot that Juan built.**







# Afterword

Juan Quezada's story is closely connected to his people and his land. His village, Mata Ortiz, lies on the high windswept grasslands of northern Chihuahua, between the Palanganas River and the foothills of the Sierra Madre Mountains in northern Mexico. The history of Mata Ortiz and its surroundings is richly diverse. The area was home to the Casas Grandes civilization from the eleventh through the fourteenth centuries. Later, Apache tribal people occupied the region for about three hundred years. At the end of the nineteenth century Mexican troops forced the Apache tribes to leave that part of Mexico. Mormon farmers from the United States then immigrated into the area, and Chinese immigrants and other new arrivals began settling in Mata Ortiz to work on the railroad.

During the Mexican Revolution of 1910 to 1917, soldiers from opposing sides battled throughout the region, causing many people to flee. After the revolution, Mata Ortiz was home mainly to railroad workers and others who found jobs as seasonal laborers in nearby Mormon orchards and packing houses. Local farm labor income was supplemented by fieldwork in the United States and whatever cattle ranching and farming families could manage on their own at home. Until the 1980s life was very hard and family incomes were barely enough to feed, clothe, and educate the children of Mata Ortiz.

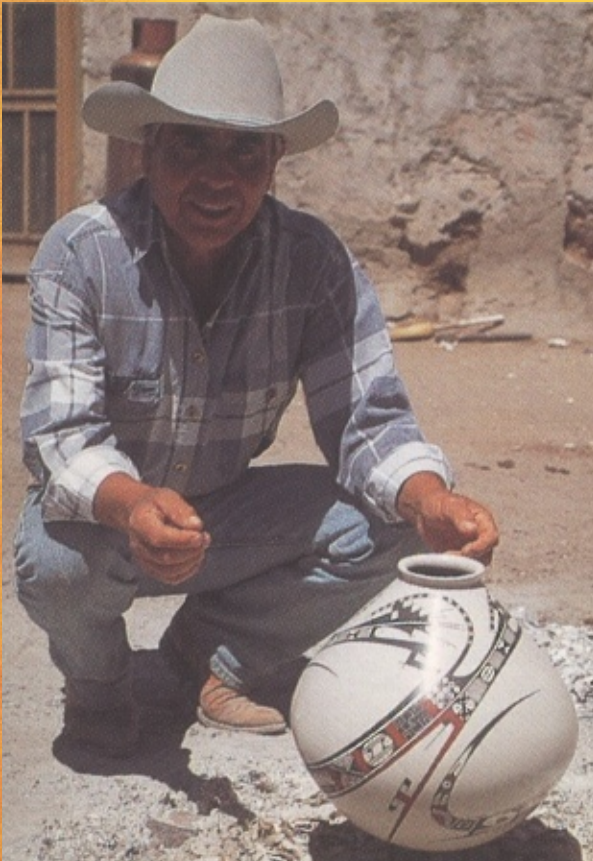




**Mata Ortiz today**

Today Mata Ortiz looks much the same as it did back in the early 1980s. Burros still wander along dusty lanes lined with modest adobe houses and the occasional shade tree. Sandal-shod children play in the streets with the simplest of toys, while women, forever battling dust with brooms and buckets of water, keep watch over them. Old men returning on foot from the nearby fields, tools resting on their shoulders, give no hint of the amazing transformation that has occurred in Mata Ortiz.





**Juan Quezada  
with one of his pots**

In 1976 an anthropologist named Spencer MacCallum came across some remarkable pots in a second-hand shop in southern New Mexico. MacCallum became so interested in the pieces that he set off for the Mexican *frontera* and found the pots' creator, Juan Quezada, in Mata Ortiz. Juan explained to the visiting anthropologist that he hand built the pots, using only local natural materials. He told MacCallum that ever since finding ancient potsherds as a child, he had known he could create pottery from the natural resources around Mata Ortiz. After twenty years of experiments he had succeeded in recreating the primitive pot-making process of the Casas Grandes people. Spencer MacCallum encouraged the talented young artist to continue his work while he introduced Juan's pottery to art patrons in the United States. Motivated by growing

interest and recognition, Juan began producing more and better pots. He taught his family and neighbors to do the same and helped transform Mata Ortiz from a poor neglected village into a community of world-famous artists.



**One of Juan's unique pots**



Museums, galleries, and art lovers around the world prize the beautiful pottery from Mata Ortiz. Nearly every day visiting collectors can be found in the village, making their way from house to house, hoping to return home with a treasured piece. The people of Mata Ortiz now enjoy the security a stable local economy provides. The simple adobes have modern kitchens, heating units for the freezing winters, and bathrooms with hot and cold running water. Shiny pickup trucks are found in many backyard corrals alongside the chickens and pigs.



**Another one of Juan's beautiful pots**

Reflecting on the changes the art movement has brought to Mata Ortiz, Juan Quezada observes with characteristic enthusiasm, "People in the village are happy. They no longer have to leave their hometown to find jobs. Their work is here with their families." He further adds, "The pottery is so important! To me, all the world's pottery is wonderful, but especially when it is produced naturally, in the traditional manner, the way we do it here in Mata Ortiz. I really do believe that it's what makes our pottery so interesting. We'll pass this work on to our children and our grandchildren for their futures, for the future of Mata Ortiz. My hope is that one day the village will have a nice art history museum here in the old train station. It will have big shade trees all around, a pleasant place for people to sit quietly and reflect on their lives and on the past, the present, and future of our village."



You will answer the comprehension questions on these pages as a class.

## Did You Know?

Near Mata Ortiz are the ruins of the Casas Grandes city known as Paquimé. People who visit there can see ruins of over 2,000 clay rooms. The original city had apartment buildings that were at least several stories high.

## Text Connections

1. How does Juan make paintbrushes?
2. Describe how Juan found “the finest clay he had ever seen.” If this were a fable, what would be its moral?
3. Give examples of ways that Juan is both a careful planner and a spontaneous artist.
4. How do both Juan in “The Pot That Juan Built” and Alma in “Island Treasures” show a love for the places where they live?
5. Describe something you worked hard to create, and how you felt when you were finished. Do you think Juan feels the same way about his completed pottery? Why or why not?
6. Why are old ways of doing things, such as Juan’s pottery method, worth preserving?





## Write

Write a nursery rhyme telling a story from your own experience.

## Look Closer

### Keys to Comprehension

1. Describe how Juan shapes his pots. Quote details from the text to support your answer.
2. Make an inference about the connection between the use of locally available materials and the prosperity of Mata Ortiz's potters. Quote from the text to support your inference.
3. Explain what chain of events first led to Juan creating pottery.

### Writer's Craft

4. Contrast the informational structures of "The Pot That Juan Built" and "Island Treasures."
5. Explain what *prosperous* means, based on the selection's context.

### Concept Development

6. How does the author support the point that Juan "has never been afraid of hard work"? Quote reasons and evidence from the text.







Read this Science Connection. You will answer the questions as a class.

### Text Feature

A **bulleted list** groups items that do not need to come in a particular order.

## What Is Clay?

You probably know that clay is the material from which people make pottery, tiles, and bricks. But what exactly is clay? Are there different types of clay?

In geology, clay is the name given to particles of soil that are less than 0.005 mm in diameter. Clay is mostly the result of certain rocks weathering over long periods of time.

Clay has the following special properties:

- It is plastic, which means that when it is damp or wet, it can be pressed into different shapes, won't break apart, and will hold shapes when you let go of it.
- It will vitrify when heated, or fired, to thousands of degrees Fahrenheit. To vitrify means to melt into a glasslike substance. Once fired, vitrified clay can be broken but will not become plastic if wetted.

It is the above properties that make clay so useful. Many thousands of years ago people discovered these properties, and realized clay would make wonderful containers. The plasticity of clay lets potters shape it. Its hardness when fired into the shape of a container protects the contents inside it.

There are many types of clay. Kaolinite is a type that vitrifies only at extremely high temperatures, is not always very plastic, tends to be very white, and has fine grains. Ball clays are very plastic, have fine particles, and, though often gray, fire to a light tan. Stoneware clays have bigger particles than ball clay and are very strong after firing. Earthenware is often red due to iron, and must be fired at lower temperatures.

Today, many potters simply buy commercial clay blends, but a few choose instead to dig directly for clay in nature. These potters must do a lot of experimentation once they find natural clay. By figuring out the clay's properties and making their own mixtures, potters can fashion pots using indigenous clay blends that are truly unique.





**Kaolinite has many uses. It is the main component of porcelain, which is a delicate ceramic material prized for its beauty. However, it is also used in toothpaste, cosmetic products like facewash, and can be used to give paper a glossy finish.**

1. Explain what the property of *plasticity* is.
2. Which would make a better water jar: a fired clay jar or a clay jar that was only dried in the sun? Explain.
3. With a partner, create a chart to compare and contrast two clays mentioned in the article. Compare and contrast each clay's plasticity, color, and grain size. Based on information from the Science Connection, make an educated guess as to what the clays can be used to make.



## Go Digital

Research photographs of the variety of pots created at Mata Ortiz. What types of clay do you think are indigenous to this area?