

Promoting developing society crafts:  
The case of contemporary pottery from Northern Mexico

A Presentation  
by  
Esmeralda de los Santos, Ph.D.  
University of the Incarnate Word, San Antonio, Texas

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Contemporary pottery in Northern Mexico continues to enjoy commercial success in the world's arts and crafts markets. Mata Ortiz, Chihuahua, is a rural village in the state of Chihuahua, Mexico, and it leads in the production of contemporary Mexican pottery. The manual production of decorative clay pottery, with roots in the ancient Casas Grandes and Mimbres culture, has attracted many university students, researchers, anthropologists, potters, collectors, gallery owners, and art wholesalers from the Southwest U.S. (de los Santos and Medina 2002). With over 500 ceramic potters (Parks 2011), the village continues to provide opportunities for the investigation of channels of distribution and related promotional activities in developing society crafts.

## **Introduction**

The sustainability of crafts as an economic opportunity for artisan producers and the transmission of cultural products is contingent upon a system of distribution, or channel flows, that link the artisan to the global marketplace. The marketing task is to help match particular crafts with market segments most likely to appreciate and purchase them. In the case of the potters from northern Chihuahua, promotional activities facilitate trade through recognition, product validation, and dissemination of information.

Recent activity promoting the region and its potters, for example, book publications, a stronger presence in U.S. juried arts and crafts exhibitions, and artisan demonstrations at U.S. art schools and academies are indicative of the continuing interest on this side of the border for fine quality ceramics from this region. Kunal Basu (1995) recognized that "the network of entrepreneurs and institutions that interfaces between creators and consumers is diverse and is viewed as indispensable in terms of economic sustenance of the industry" (p. 278). Promotion plays a greater role in the distribution function in cultures, locales, and regions without formal methods of communication, such as this rural area in Northern Mexico. Without a marketing entity tasked to promote these crafts in the United States, a haphazard promotional system emerges. To maintain the continuing success of this ceramics movement, specifically, 'precious crafts,' identified by Basu as products with high market value, it is necessary to identify and create a typology of facilitating agents, actors, events and venues. They serve as disseminators of information who facilitate access to international markets.

## **Method**

From 1998 to 2007, several visits were made to the village of Mata Ortiz, Chihuahua, to interview artisans, traders, and tourists. Understanding how pottery is created, sold to the intermediaries, and transported out of the village required immersion in the culture because the context shapes the practices and behaviors of the study's participants (Creswell, 1998). Household production procedures, export methods, developing country marketing practices, market segmentation and channels of distribution were documented (de los Santos and Medina 2002; Medina and de los Santos 2002). Multiple interviews and observations identified the main sources of sales within Mexico: traders, collectors, and tourists. For example, traders, predominantly from Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and Colorado, purchased for their U.S. galleries and tourist stores. Some traders were beginning to sell on the internet (de los Santos and Medina 2002). Collectors purchased for museums and extensive personal collections. Tourists, driven by curiosity and adventure, purchased pottery as regional memorabilia that is both portable and affordable. For the most part, artisans sold pottery from their living rooms.

The Mexican government through its exhibitions, publications and museum, has played an important role "in developing and preserving traditional folklore and crafts by establishing a wide range of activities and institutions for their protection and production" (Kaplan, 1993, p. 113). Nonetheless, without an organized structure to interface with U.S. demand, "little was

resold in Mexico (Parks 2011, p. 117).” In addition, the increasing penetration of the drug trade into the northernmost reaches of the state of Chihuahua has significantly diminished tourism and the flow of U.S. dollars into this area. Accomplished artisans are seeking new venues for the sale of their pottery. Therefore, facilitating market encounters on this side of the border is critical to ensuring the viability of art production in Northern Chihuahua. Accessing the wider U.S. market requires promotional and market support mechanisms.

Basu proposes that “to the extent that the overall craft profile of a developing country invokes awareness and interest among consumers, promotion serves as the key element of “pull,” or creating receptivity in external consumer segments (p. 292).” Offering possible directions for change, Basu’s (1995) framework suggests new areas for research. To this end, organizing current events in the Southwest U.S. reveals a variety of activity lending itself to a proposed classification of promotional tools as seen in Table 1. The table of activities is directed toward attracting a specific market segment, purchasers of high value pottery. It recognizes events and institutions, such as funding sources and museums, not typically found in traditional distribution channels.

**Table 1: Proposed Classification for Market Support**

| <b>Funding Sources</b>                                 | <b>Intermediaries/Agents</b> | <b>Events and Venues</b>              | <b>Media</b>               |
|--|------------------------------|---------------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Grants, e.g.,<br>National<br>Endowment for the<br>Arts | Traders                      | Museum exhibitions,<br>event openings | Metropolitan<br>newspapers |

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| Federal or state agency funding                     | Artists                                  | Gallery openings  | Community newspapers focusing on local events    |
| Museum funding                                      | Tourists and Collectors                  | Non-juried arts and crafts fairs  | Internet newsletters and calendars of events     |
| University funding                                  | Brick and mortar retailers               | Juried art fairs  | Books  |
| Private funding to include non-profit organizations | Internet retailers                       | Airport galleries   | Academic journals                                |
|   | Museum stores                            | Craft schools and academies,  | Expert commentaries in art journals              |
|   | Museum directors and curators            | On-site demonstrations and workshops by artisans e.g., Idyllwild Arts, Idyllwild, CA. | Direct mail, e.g., opening show announcements    |
|   | University museum directors and curators | Lecture series; book signings   | You Tube Videos, e.g., “Making a Mata Ortiz Pot” |
|   | Gallery owners                           | U.S. based tours into Mexico  | Films, e.g., “The Renaissance of Mata Ortiz”     |
|   |  | International Art Exhibitions, e.g., Franz Meyer Museum, Mexico City                  |  |

## Discussion

Organizing the market’s response can offer a way to analyze the functions of each agent and provide the basis for a promotional model. In this table, each entity plays a promotional role. Funding sources provide the resources to museums that introduce and confer credibility to the artisans. Intermediaries not only purchase and sell pottery but also offer program coordination, market access, informational resources, advice and at times, financing. Events educate by promoting awareness, disseminating information, offering opportunities for interaction with artisans, and providing venues for purchase. Media, also educational in nature, communicates to all interested and potential stakeholders. While some functions overlap, this table acts as a starting point for conceptualizing the flows that promote the sale of fine global art in the U.S. The table also acts as a support mechanism, outlining a specific marketing system that facilitates a myriad of transactions necessary to move product from the producer to the desired market segment.

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