



**LEFT AND ABOVE:** Uriarte Talavera is the oldest Talavera workshop in Mexico, founded in 1824. Visitors can tour its tile-clad "casona" in the heart of Puebla. Its two large courtyards serve as showrooms for the pottery, while the upper floors are dedicated to the throwing of the clay, glazing and painting.



# Esteemed Earthenware

A look at Mexico's centuries-old art of making Talavera ceramics.

BY REBECCA L. RHOADES

**MEXICAN ARTISTS** have been creating a unique pottery known as Talavera for hundreds of years. While the unmistakable glossy glaze, bold hues and durable clay are beloved by tourists and coveted by collectors in the Southwest who fill their homes with the colorful pieces, the beauty of this timeless craft is just the beginning of the story.

"I oftentimes consider Talavera to be a metaphor for Mexico itself," says Cesáreo Moreno, chief curator of the National Museum of Mexican Art in Chicago. "It represents the 'mestizaje,' or miscegenation, that has happened there since the arrival of the Spanish."

Talavera, a form of majolica—a tin-glazed earthenware—was brought by

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conquistadors to the North American continent in the 16th century, but its roots date back even further. Originally developed in ancient Mesopotamia, majolica was introduced to the Iberian Peninsula through Moorish conquests, and the craft flourished in the province of Toledo, just south of Madrid. The clay work was later adopted and perfected by the Chinese. The Ming dynasty (1368-1644) is especially renowned for its exquisite porcelain with intricate cobalt blue designs.

As the Spanish opened up transatlantic trade routes, they would often cross Mexico, from Veracruz to Acapulco, on their way to and from Asia. Items from Europe and the New World were shipped from Mexico to China, and boats would return using the same route, bringing with them spices, textiles, gemstones and artwork. Thousands of Spaniards and Chinese also settled into what was then called New Spain.

“Mexico really benefited from being this place in the middle where all of these cultures converged,” Moreno explains. “By the time Talavera arrived, it was already imbued with ideas from diverse places and people—and just ready for the next chapter. I think people are shocked when they find out that this simple blue-and-white piece of ceramic has DNA from around the world.”

Shortly after the town of Puebla, which sits along the Spanish trade route, was founded in 1531, the colonizers were surprised to find an abundance of natural clay in the region, which indigenous craftspeople used to create sturdy ceramic vessels. Monks commissioned artisans from Talavera de la Reina, located in Toledo and from where the Mexican pottery takes its name, to come to the developing country to create tiles to decorate the churches, monasteries and convents that were being built. These ceramists also taught the locals their skills, introducing them to the potter’s wheel and tin-glazing, the use of a lead glaze with a small amount of tin oxide.



“Tibors” or lidded urns, are one of the most traditional forms of Talavera. Also known as ginger jars, their design originated in China during the Qin dynasty (221-206 BC). During the Colonial period, the Spanish used them to transport products to and from Spain to Mexico. They can range in size from 4”H to as tall as 4’H.

The work came to be known as “Talavera Poblana” to distinguish it from its European counterpart.

Because the clay was of such high quality, the artisans were able to take their craft to a new level, and Talavera soon spread beyond tiles to pots, tableware and religious figures. By the mid-1600s, Puebla had become the most important center for earthenware in New Spain.

Nearly 500 years later, artists in Puebla continue to produce Talavera using the same techniques, glazes and pigments as their ancestors did. The number of workshops have come and gone throughout the years. By the 18th century, there were almost 50. Today, only nine are certified by the Mexican government. The oldest and most well-known is Uriarte Talavera, which was founded in 1824.

Located in the center of town in a tile-clad “casona,” or mansion, Uriarte is also the largest workshop, employing approximately

100 craftspeople who make each plate, urn and bowl by hand. “Talavera is a particular kind of ceramic that is regulated by a council, which tells us where we can extract the clay and what kind of glazes we can use, and ensures that all glazes and colors are produced inside the workshop,” says Mariana Muñoz Cuoto, commercial director for the factory.

In addition to being made from a mixture of white and black clays extracted from nearby quarries, certified Talavera showcases only six colors: cobalt blue, light sky blue, green, yellow, black and sometimes a rust red. These shades come from natural minerals, such as manganese, cobalt oxide, copper oxide and dioxide. The powdered pigments, which are mixed with water to create a thick paste, are painted on an ivory-colored lead glaze base with tin oxide. When fired, the minerals fuse with the glaze, resulting in a durable glossy finish with some crazing, or fine cracking.

Certified Talavera must bear the signature of the artist, the logo of the workshop, the year of production and the denomination of origin, a designation provided by the Mexican Institute of Industrial Property given to a product that states it can only be produced in a specific area. All products from Uriarte must display the mark DO4/1—the fourth denomination out of 16 countrywide and the first producer of Talavera. Each piece also comes with a certificate and a holographic sticker that serve as proof of authenticity.

“When people hear the word ‘Talavera,’ they think of traditional designs with flowers and lots of shiny colors, but it is so much more than that,” Muñoz Cuoto describes. “It is about the process—the clays and the glazes—and it requires a lot of learning by the artisans. It is an art form that is passed down through generations, from fathers to sons, masters to apprentices.”

In 2018, *Phoenix Home & Garden* Masters of the Southwest award-winning artist Gennaro Garcia traveled to Puebla to

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study the art of Talavera at Casa Uriarte. “It is the oldest Talavera house in Mexico, and I wanted to work with it because of the prestige and because of the Mexican sentiment—it’s like love,” he says. “The artists work with the same technique and in the same style, and use the same type of brushes, that they did 200 years ago. Uriarte still has the mills that use stones to grind the minerals for the pigments.

“True Talavera is the most difficult art technique I have learned in my life. I still struggle with the cobalt blue. It can take me a week to do one piece with just cobalt blue. When I work in other ceramics, I can paint the Virgin of Guadalupe in 20 minutes,” Garcia continues. “But you see the artisans who have been doing this forever, and they do it so smoothly and beautifully that it’s almost like they’re drawing with a pencil. They’re masters.”

Garcia recalls his first day at the workshop and being laughed at by the

veteran artists when he unrolled his collection of luxury paintbrushes. “The brushes you’re supposed to use are handmade from mule or horse hair,” he says. Goat hair is used occasionally. “They need to be thick and stiff enough to hold all of the pigment, because each time you make a stroke, you have to have the same consistency in order to replicate tone and thickness of line.” According to Garcia, most artisans are very protective of their brushes and refuse to let anyone else touch them.

“Gennaro was really gifted in his abilities to learn to use the colors and glazes so quickly. It’s been fascinating to watch him develop,” Muñoz Cuoto remarks. “But that is not normal. It usually takes years for people to dominate the Talavera technique.”

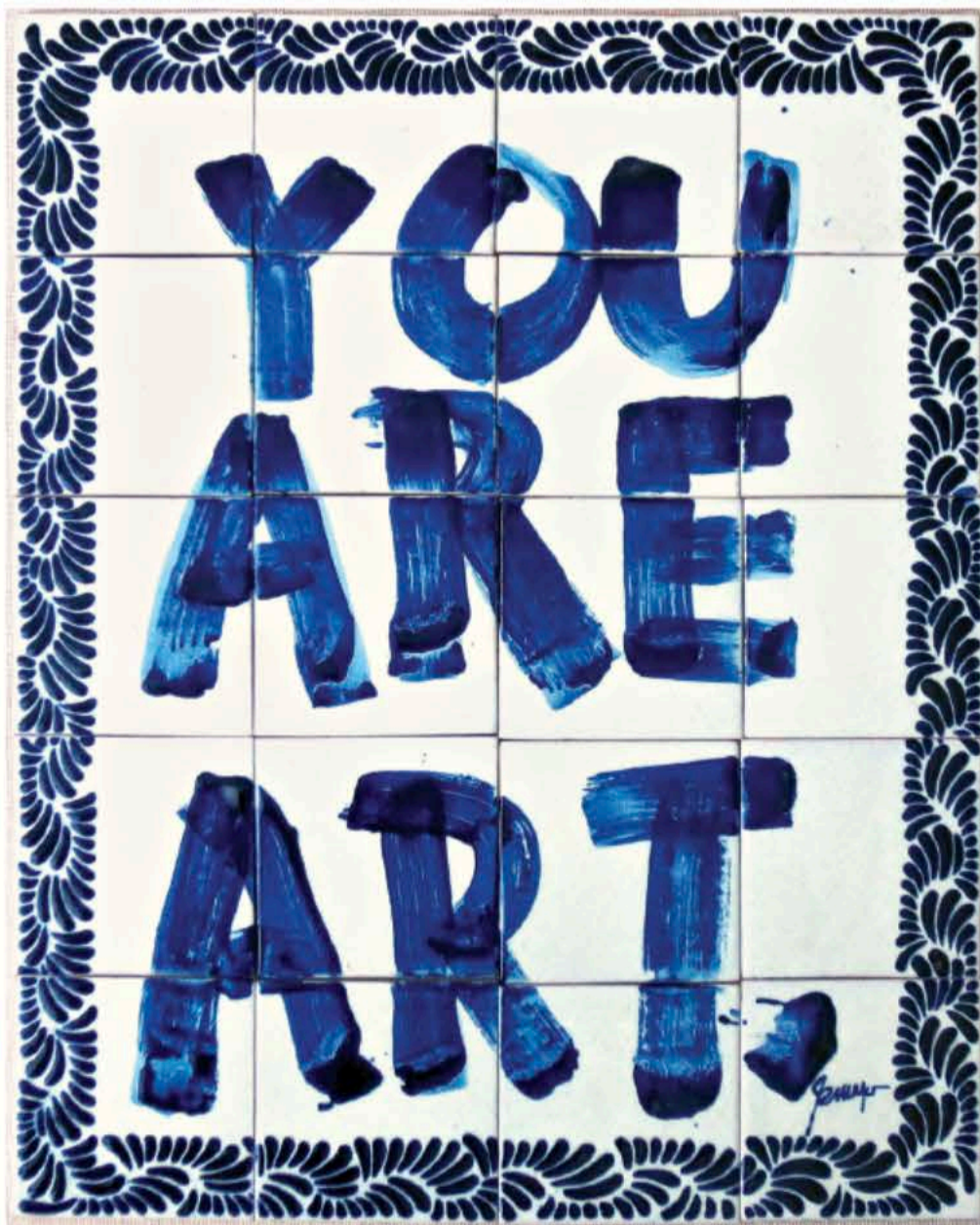
While Uriarte is known for its traditional designs—“tibors,” or lidded urns; amphora vases; and tableware, all with floral



Uriarte is renowned for its stunning handmade tableware, which has graced homes in Mexico since the early 1800s.



Phoenix-based artist Gennaro Garcia has been collaborating with Uriarte since 2018 to create his own Talavera tiles, urns and dishware. “My work is more modern, but I still use the ‘plumeados,’ a design from 200 years ago, around the edges,” he says.



patterns, Moorish crosshatches and dots, and “plumeados” or swirls—artists such as Garcia are bringing contemporary sensibilities to the age-old art. “I have painted cacti, Frida [Kahlo] and my ‘Hecho a Mano’ hands, but I use the plumeados from 200 years ago on the side,” he says.

Muñoz Cuoto explains that although Uriarte maintains an archive of more than 55,000 different designs from its history, it continues to add about 10 new collections annually. “A lot of people think that if you want to decorate your home with Talavera, you have to have an old hacienda-style dwelling. But there are a lot of contemporary minimalist details that we are adding,” she says. “Gennaro’s work, for example, integrates a lot of things from Mexico as well as pop culture, but it’s not so highbrow that it’s difficult to understand.”

According to Moreno, any good art form needs to adapt to the next generation or it will die. For Talavera to have remained relatively unchanged since its inception speaks to more than just its beauty. “There is so much honor that goes along with this tradition,” he notes. “It comes from the idea that there is a right way of doing this, and it’s our way. And the artists can back that claim up, with hundreds of years of their grandfathers teaching their fathers, and their fathers teaching them. There is a deep family pride of this legacy that was left to us.”

**For more information, see Sources.**