Manuel David Reyes Ramírez & Maricela Gómez López | Mexico | Ceramics

Love and livelihood sculpted in clay

Manuel David Reyes Ramírez and Maricela Gómez López met in Cuernavaca where Manuel was working for the artist Juan Soriano and Maricela was the cook in the home of a well-known art collector. In 2003 they returned to their native Mixtec area in the state of Oaxaca, which has a ceramic history dating back at least 2,000 years. Inspired by both pre-Hispanic symbols and contemporary clay practice they decided to create their own style of pottery. In learning the craft they met Adelita Reyes, an 80 year-old potter who showed them where to dig for clay and how to use natural pigments to start creating their muñequitos (small animals and figures).

Manuel and Maricela dig the clay for their pots and sculptures within a 50-mile radius of their community, Yanhuitlán. The clay is prepared by hand as are colors from local natural pigments. “Because everything we make is by hand our most important tool is our hands,” explains the artists. Other tools, including the spine of a maguey plant and a worn-out plastic credit card, can also be used to achieve the surface texture of choice. For burnishing, a piece of quartz is used. Pieces that are fired are done so in a community gas kiln.

Because neither artist learned their craft from their parents, they decided to pass their knowledge on to indigenous youth in their community, offering classes and organizing events for students to display and sell their work. “Clay has become our love and livelihood,” they say. Both Manuel and Maricela’s work is on display in their community as well as at Mano Mágica in Oaxaca and the Museum of Arte Popular in Mexico City.