



# The Road to Self-Discovery

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I always wanted to study ceramics in Mexico. The first time my grandmother took me to the artisan stalls in her little town of Acatlán de Osorio, I was 7. That was when I saw, “The Trees.” These candelabras portray a beautiful example of Mexican folk art. *Árbol de la Vida* (“Tree of Life”), *Árbol de Abundancia* (“Tree of Abundance”), *Árbol de Mar* (“Tree of the Sea”), and *Árbol de Pavoreal*, (“Tree of the Peacock”) are just a few examples of the numerous forms this particular ceramic art form takes. Inspired by heavy symbolism, colors, culture, and traditional ties, I promised myself to return and learn this craft of my heritage. This year-long trip would be one of self-discovery as well as artistically instructive.

The last week of August 2014, I met my uncle Javier in Mexico City. After a five-hour bus ride southeast to the small town of Acatlán de Osorio, Puebla, another 30-minute ride ensued, to the village of San Vicente Boquerón, where my grandmother Ines resides. The small village of Boquerón is in the middle of the mountains with mostly dirt roads, farms, and uninhabited wilderness for miles. This is the setting I lived in for the year. Quite a contrast from New York City life—from one of the most fast-paced cities in the world to a small town where I did not even speak the language. I jumped in headfirst and completely submerged myself into the people, culture, and way of life.

In October, I began my apprenticeship with local artisan Simon Martínez López in the town of Acatlán de Osorio. I traveled three times a week to his home, where he worked with his wife, Carmen. I remember the first day so clearly. Simon instructed me to roll coils and make spirals all day. I started to wonder what on earth I was doing there. For the first few months,



Simon Martínez López, 2012

I only worked about six hours, from 8 a.m. to 2 p.m., but as time passed I found myself staying much later in correlation with the complexity of the work I was producing.

The first pieces were simple forms, mostly cups, bowls, and vases. I became familiar with the techniques Simon used. The pieces created reflected the seasonal demand. For example, for *Día de los Muertos* (“Day of the Dead”), I made candlesticks and incense burners that are used on altars and graves. For *Navidad* (“Christmas”), I learned to make bells, fruit bowls, and other trinkets. Each new piece brought with it a new technique that was required to create the trees: a fruit bowl had the same base as the trees or candelabras, a handle to a vase was made the same way as the arcs for the trees, and so on. I was able to see how it was all connected and important to the craft. Acknowledging this fact curbed my impatience. About three months in, I created works that were hollow and more intricate. Simon was very proud of the fact that he never used molds. Many artisans made plaster molds, which allowed them to make large quantities of pieces quickly and easily. It was a business to them, not an art. At the end of my sixth month, I began my first tree, a small *Árbol de la Vida*. I continued to make trees exclusively from this point on. I was able to finish two pieces in the span of six days and had a total of 16 trees by the end of my apprenticeship.

## Building

Due to the slow process of building its structure, waiting for it to dry, and continuing to construct the small individual pieces of the turtles and fish, *La Sirena*, “The Mermaid” candelabra, took three days. After each tree is built, *las figuras*, or the figures of flowers and leaves, are made and put onto wires that extend outward from the side of the candelabras. The wires are placed into the clay while it is “leather hard” and remains there throughout the kiln firing. Most electric and wood burning kilns reach extremely high temperatures and would melt or completely burn away any metal or wire. Simon’s technique employs a low temperature wood-burning kiln.

## Sanding

Once the pieces are bone dry, which can take up to a day in the intense Mexican sun, each piece is sanded down with sandpaper. This technique is used to make the joints where two pieces of clay converge smoother and more delicate, and to even all sides. After a piece is sanded down, it is brushed free of all the excess clay dust. The process is done outside with plastic sheets covering your legs, so the excess clay dust can be collected and reworked into new clay once water is re-added.

## Applying Slip

Slip is a suspension of clay in water usually used in slip castings, or as a way of conjoining two pieces of clay when hand building. Simon used different clay bodies of gray or red pigments harvested in the mountains near his home. The slip is used to tint pieces by brushing completely over each piece. Three to five coats of slip are applied, and you wait for each of the previous coats to dry before brushing on the next. This creates a rind of slip over the bone-dry piece.



### Varnishing

Once the previous step is completely dry, water is brushed on to temporarily re-wet the outer layer of slip. While still damp, the shell of slip is rubbed vigorously with a plastic bag or a plastic pen casing. This varnishes the surface to look smooth and shiny.

### Painting

Depending on whether the base slip is gray or red, the opposite color slip is now painted on to create designs, patterns, or words.

### Varnishing

Once the painted designs are dry, Simon uses large, compressed graphite sticks, such as Lyra Graphite Crayons, to “draw” over the entire piece. This varnishes and protects the newly added designs from chipping off during or after the firing.

### Firing

The kiln is made of bricks, with clay covering the inside walls. The open top is covered with metal sheets to keep in the heat. The kiln has two holes on either side of the bottom where wood is set on fire. This wood-burning kiln is manually run for about three hours—chopping wood and pushing it into

the holes on the side of the kiln. The last hour is spent “smoking” *goma*, gum of the cactus plant, into the kiln. The *goma* gives the clay its colors, without the smoke. I’m told it all comes out white or an off-shade. Once completely cooled down, the pieces are removed from the kiln and cleaned of debris.

### Assembling & Varnishing

Every piece is varnished again. A pasty pink oil is rubbed into each piece, then set aside to absorb into the clay which is then rubbed with cloth to add shine and protection.

### Self-Discovery

On the days I was not at my apprenticeship, I worked on my oil paintings and spent time getting to know my family. I made friends, went to cafes, became integrated into the culture. I picked up odd jobs, teaching English in an after-school program, painting advertisements for a gas company, and on weekends I sketched portraits of people in the park. So many new experiences I bravely dove into.

During my almost eight-month stay with Simon’s family, we became very close.

Simon has three sons, all in their late twenties. None of Simon’s sons has a passion for the craft as their father does. Furthermore the town where they live is very small, not lacking artisans, but lacking the artist community; thus Simon feels quite alienated. He was very fond of me, always proud of what I did, constantly saying, “You learn fast because you like it, you want to know. With this thirst for knowledge, you can go anywhere in life.”

I became their daughter, sister, and aunt. I felt truly a part of their family. Many times, especially at the League, there was a sense of community, so, I understand now what artists mean when they say “art family.”

Being back in the States makes it seem as if it was all a dream. I made a home in Mexico. Ever since I returned in July 2015, I have been working on organizing workshops in collaboration with Simon, for other artists to go down and learn this beautiful craft. 🌿

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From left: Assorted ceramics; *Árbol de Mar* (“Tree of the Sea”), 2015