

Ecos desde un vientre de barro

Entrevistas con la familia Castillo y Marco Iñiguez Alba

Izúcar de Matamoros lies one hour outside of the famed city of Puebla in central Mexico where *mole*, Sor Juana Inez de la Cruz, the smoldering volcano Popocatepetl, and the famous Cinco de Mayo battle against the French contribute to it's incredible rich legendary history. Unbeknownst to many of its inhabitants, in dusty Izúcar resides one of Mexico's living artistic treasures - la familia Castillo - renowned ceramicists, and namely Don Alfonso Castillo Orta, nationally recognized as a "maestro de maestros" and whose ceramic works of art form part of valuable international collections in Munich, London, Vienna, Chicago, and the Spanish Royal Palace of King Juan Carlos. In 1996 Don Alfonso received Mexico's most prestigious national prize, el Premio Nacional de Ciencias y Artes.

During the economic recessions of the 70s in Mexico Don Alfonso, as many others in Izúcar, was forced to abandon his daily life as a dairy farmer. Under these disillusioning circumstances he and his wife Doña Soledad Marta Hernández Báez, an artisan like himself and his most enthusiastic collaborator, decided to dedicate themselves entirely to the family craft - *artesanía de cerámica policromada*. The choice to continue the family legacy was clear, yet daunting for the growing family with children to feed.

As third generation ceramic artisans, they broke from family traditions fettered on ritual-religious oriented polychromatic pieces and experimented, "always looking for new themes and refusing to generate what the other brothers and sister-in-law were producing," claims Doña Soledad. Don Alfonso's siblings Heriberto, Agustín, and Isabel also have talleres and their own rich stories to tell. The breakthrough in the family trajectory came when Don Alfonso and Doña

Soledad rediscovered and re-appropriated natural colors and tints, reclaiming ancestral prehispanic traditions and followed in the footsteps of grandfather Simón Orta, who at the turn of the 20th century used natural materials available to him in el campo. Don Alfonso and Doña Soledad's ceramic compositions became more complex and elaborate pieces, which advanced them to new levels of artistic creation, in turn, opening up new spaces to sell their art pieces. The ancient árbol de la vida served as canvas for new narrative representations of life, history and tradition. In fact, la familia Castillo-Orta has as much claim to the familial origins of the tree of life as any other family in Izucar, known as the probable birthplace of the árbol de vida. More recently, the Castillo-Orta familia has become widely known for their clay pieces depicting intricately and delicately painted scenes with calaveras and calacas for Días de los muertos.

Recognition and praise came each season the Castillo-Orta family taller entered a piece in local, state, national and international competitions. And as Alfonso and Soledad's five children - Veronica, Alfonso II, Marta Angelica, Marco Antonio, and Patricia - matured they too have become artistic forces continuing with the rich family legacy. Their children, Alfonsina and Alfonso III, the eldest of the fifth generation, already participate

in the taller's everyday activities - watching, listening and playing with clay as their parents did when they were children, making *bolitas*-clay balls, *floreckitas*-flowers, and *pajaritos*-birds. Alfonsina at the tender age of 4 years old has expressed to her mother the desire to grow up to paint her own large pieces, not just make and paint "bolitas."

Below are two excerpts from a series of interviews I conducted in March 2002 in Izúcar de Matamoros, Puebla, with principal members of the Castillo Orta-Hernández taller. Additional interviews with historians, sociologists, museum/gallery directors, and other clan members with independent *talleres* will be compiled into a forthcoming book honoring the familia Castillo Orta's contributions to

Mexican art y la artesanía cerámica policromada. The following excerpts are taken from doña Soledad Marta Hernández Báez and don Alfonso Castillo Orta's interviews.

Don Alfonso Castillo Orta [interview by Marco Iñiguez, translation into English by Virginia Grise]

"I remember that when I was about eight years old I went to the fields with all of my family. When we returned we dedicated ourselves to make candelabras or whatever else was planned for that day. I remember that we, me and my brothers, had to make the arcs and other figures, and since I was one of the youngest I made small hanging figures for decoration - fruit, birds. Later when I was about twelve I learned to paint a little bit at a time. I would help my parents. My parents dedicated themselves more to the artesanía. They sold their work in Mexico and abroad. Eventually, they sold their land and the animals on it and gave themselves fully to the artesanía. Everybody in the family worked and gave themselves fully." - Don Alfonso Castillo Orta

Doña Soledad Marta Hernández Báez [interviewed by Marco Iñiguez]

¿De dónde viene su espíritu de artista?

Cuando me casé estaba yo en cero, no sabía nada de la artesanía. Al casarme empecé a pintar florecitas y cosas sencillas. Cuando mi esposo a los cuatro o cinco meses le dije -¿sabes que? Yo voy a pintar una pieza, yo solita. Ya me choqué de pintar puras flores, hojas, pajaritos, y cosas sencillas. Ya voy a pintar una pieza yo sola.

Él me dijo -¡no, no, no! sigue como éstas porque todavía no eres buena para hacer las líneas, las rayitas, y todo. Le dije que no. -Yo sí, ya puedo.

Como él no me dejaba, me voy con la hermana de él. Una hermana que también pintaba, Gloria Castillo. Le digo -Oye, Gloria, ¿me das chanza de pintar una pieza? Me dice -¿De veras quieres pintar una? -Sí- le dije -ya quiero demostrarle a mi marido que sí puedo. -Sale- dice -píntate allí la que gustes.

Me acuerdo muy bien que era un sahumerio que la familia estaba pintando, mi suegra y su hija. Me dieron una pieza de 27cm, un sahumerio o incensario. Lo pintó de la orilla hasta al final, todo. Voy con mi esposo, y le digo -oyes

'mano ven, mira esta pieza. -¿Y qué? dice. -Ah, está bonita. ¿Quién la pintó? Luego ya le digo -no, la pinté yo. -¿De veras, tú la pintaste? me dice él. Sí, eran como a los cuatro meses de que me había casado. Y dice -aah pues, ya puedes. Entonces ya pinta tu sola.

Y desde entonces yo empecé a pintar yo solita. Cuando cumplí seis meses de casada yo ya podía pintar las piezas yo sola. A mi nunca me gustó guisar, ni me gustaron los quehaceres de la casa. Me dije, pues con esto que aprendí..., ya me conseguí [alguien que] me ayudaba en la casa y yo me ponía a ayudarle a mi marido a trabajar el barro desde muy temprano hasta las 10, 11 de la noche. A veces hasta las 5, las 6 o las 4 de la mañana, según. Así ya me fui todo el tiempo.

Don Alfonso Castillo Orta [document source: Alfonso Castillo Orta, Premio Nacional de Artes y Tradiciones Populares]

Mi abuelo me contó lo que significa el "árbol de vida;" decía que en una comunidad indígena, cuando celebraban una boda, a los recién casados se les entregaba un árbol de

madera y se les preguntaba qué esperaban de su matrimonio y cuántos hijos deseaban concebir; a los siete años, si habían convivido bien y cumplían lo prometido, se celebraba una fiesta en la que la pareja entregaba el árbol de Madera para ser quemado; el más anciano les regalaba un árbol de barro policromado adornado con muñequitos y productos del campo, que representaba a los hijos que habían concebido. Este árbol, que es el principio de la vida, era el testimonio de que ya estaban preparados para su vida futura.



Editor's note: A great honor has been bestowed on the Esperanza Center and community who will host an exhibit, *Ecos desde un vientre de barro*, as a tribute or homenaje to Don Alfonso Castillo Orta and Doña Soledad Marta Hernández Báez and their family. Five generations of the Castillo family, including Verónica Castillo who has worked closely with the Esperanza's Mujerartes project, will be present for the exhibit to talk about the process, the history, and the significance of their work in clay. Join us on Saturday, September 28th, at 6 pm at the Esperanza Center for the opening of this extraordinary exhibit. The exhibit will run through November 15, 2002, at the Esperanza galería. (See back page for announcement.)

