

March 2010

Talavera Pottery

Instituto Allende is probably the most famous center for Arts Education in SMA. It was begun by a Peruvian artist in the late '30's. It really expanded after WWII when GI's discovered that they could come down here under the GI Bill and get a BFA degree while spending \$5.00/month for rent. That influx of Americans put SMA on the map. A gringo named Stirling Dickinson expanded the Instituto. As a result he has a street named after him.

Bellas Artes is another cultural center. It's an old convent that's been converted into an arts center. They offer courses in Pottery-Making, Painting, Drawing, Weaving, Sculpture, Music and Dance. Anzie signed up for a month-long weaving class. She plans to weave at least one Mexican-style patterned rug.

We just completed a week-long tile painting class there last week. The two instructors flew in from the Corcoran Museum School in D.C. All of the paints are made from dry mineral-based pigments and water. We were very productive, as you can see from the attached photos. It was a lot of fun and we learned a lot. The difference in colors before and after the kiln is amazing. Now that we know a lot more, we'd like to try it again.

Last Thursday after our three-hour class our instructors drove over to the town of Dolores Hidalgo which is a center for pottery and tile making. We followed them, lost them, and finally found them again at this wonderful pottery shop. Here we bought unglazed terra cotta tiles and plates, to work on for our last class the next day. The shop exhibited a tremendous variety of Talavera pottery. This is the pottery that's painted in such fantastic bright, happy colors.

We first discovered Talavera in Arizona in 2007 at a B&B where we stayed north of Tucson. It just knocked us out! Our host directed us to the little village of Tubac, which lies south of Tucson just on the Mexican border. There we found several shops, all selling Talavera. We bought a lizard, a snake, a frog and a butterfly. They are now decorating the walls of our garden room. I was excited about a life-sized ceramic replica of a longhorn steer skull painted Talavera style. Anzie talked me down. We bought and installed a Talavera sink in our guest bathroom. We also found for sale on the internet complete toilets decorated in Talavera. I was ready to buy one. Anzie talked me down again, convincing me that they were a bit over the top. However we do now have three talavera sinks in on house in Mexico!

A little history:

The Talavera pottery has its roots in the Arab-Andalusia culture in Spain. About 8 centuries ago Arab potters settled in a location now days known as Talavera de la Reina and established and developed the techniques and procedures to create the

earthenware known as Majolica.

The word Majolica originated in Italy and it refers to a process that the Italians used in the 14th Century to produce ceramics. This technique consisted basically of applying or brushing pigments on raw or unfired glaze.

Majolica was introduced in Mexico in the 16th Century, when according to the most accepted theory, Spanish monks used craftsmen imported from Talavera de La Reina to teach native artisans living in the Puebla region how to work the clay in order to craft pieces comparable to the ones produced in Spain. The monks wanted to decorate monasteries and churches with tiles and religious figures.

The prehispanic cultures of Mexico had enjoyed for long time the work of skillful native potters that produced earthenware for daily use as well as for cultural and religious purposes. However, they did not use the potter's wheel or tin-glazed their pottery. The main characteristic of majolica ceramic is precisely its beautiful glaze work.

The Mexican craftsmen blended the majolica process with their own interpretation of the method to work the clays of the region and incorporated their art forms and colors. Their product became to be known as Talavera.

Talavera ceramic is made in several parts of Mexico, but the official Talavera is only produced in Puebla. The Talavera produced in certain workshops in Puebla is now officially designated, recognized and protected by the Government of Mexico. These Talavera manufacturers must follow a complex and strict technical fabrication process dating from the 16th Century and use only clay from a few approved clay sites in the Puebla area.

Since the mineral pigments needed to produce the color blue were very expensive, this color was reserved for the finest ceramic. Talavera buyers could easily differentiate the quality of fine ceramic from the one of lesser quality. During the 18th Century the Talavera artisans started to broaden the designs of their ceramic by using more colors, like green, mauve and yellow, in addition to the blue tones that were very popular in the 16th and 17th Centuries

Now you can find Talavera all over the place. Our favorite place in Mexico is in Dolores Hidalgo about a 25 minute drive from San Miguel. There's even a shop in Newburyport that's chock full of it. Attached you'll find photos showing the variety of Talavera styles.

A la proxima Chuck