



Michael Wisner  
Evolving  
Tradition

*Article by D Wood*

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**T**HE MOGOLLON ARE REGARDED AS THE EARLIEST potters of the American southwest, a civilisation dating from 350 BC – 1150 AD; by 850 AD. Their neighbours, the Anasazi, were making cooking pots with impressed repeat patterns, called corrugations at the same time. The last culture known to have made corrugated pots was the Salado (1075 – 1400 AD) in central Arizona. Then this type of decoration in the region largely gave way to painting. Until Michael Wisner.

Comparing a Wisner pot with one of the ancient specimens creates a list of similarities: an overall ordered pattern with seamless beginning and end; a repeated motif that creates hypnotic lines around, across and down the vessel; a thin-walled clay body formed by means of coils; natural colours; and classic forms. The comparison might prompt the conclusion that Wisner set out to copy his predecessors. He did, in some ways, yet the unique woven patterns for which he has gained renown came about by accident.

Wisner's development as a potter comprises a number of links to native traditions in the southwestern US and Mexico. For a man who grew up on the Chesapeake Bay in Maryland, he has imbued and been embraced by cultures that, until about 18 years ago, were as alien to him as those of another planet. That he has been admitted to these cultures is a testament to his openness and quest for an authentic basis for his own art.

When Michael Wisner contemplated his future upon completion of high school, he knew that although he enjoyed drawing and was skilled at it, an education in science would lead to a job. With his mother's financial help he graduated from college and began employment in a pharmaceutical company. In 1988, as a gesture to repay her assistance, Wisner planned a mother/son vacation to the American southwest where they visited museums and ruins in Colorado, Arizona and New Mexico. As the trip progressed, Wisner became increasingly fascinated with the Mimbres and Anasazi pottery. He was drawn to the intensity of the painted geometric patterns and his mother remarked, "these remind me of the drawings you used to do as a kid".

After resuming his job on the east coast, Wisner sought local experts who could show him how to replicate the antiquities. There were none. Unwilling to let the memory go, he taught himself handbuilding during months of late nights and tried to recreate what he'd seen in order to "have a connection to these things that were so beautiful." Shortly thereafter, much to his mother's chagrin, Wisner quit his job and, with the aim of indulging what had by now become an obsession, made his way west to learn more.

With the ski slopes of Snowmass Village, Colorado, as a base, he studied with native potters in Arizona and New Mexico and then travelled to ISOMATA



(Idyllwild School of Music and the Arts) in California. With no pressing commitments elsewhere, Wisner volunteered as a workshop assistant for the summer session of 1989 and became part of classes taught by Lucy Lewis, Blue Corn and Fannie Nampeyo, illustrious masters of the Southwest Native tradition. Also that summer, Nicolás Quezada filled in for his brother, Juan, and Wisner had his first exposure to Mata Ortiz. "It was just enough to know I had to go there and study more."

Wisner describes why he was attracted to the techniques of Mata Ortiz: "In Mata Ortiz they looked for quality whereas Native Americans, sadly, had lost some of that through the past couple of hundred years. The indigenous pottery had become a commercial ware, no longer based on function. It didn't need to have the same integrity or strength as functional artwork so they did just enough to make it saleable for decoration. But Juan Quezada was and still is concerned with quality. That drew me in as well as the refinement – he had taken southwest pottery to a whole new level." And Wisner wasn't the only one who held this opinion: "Any American Indian would



say the same thing. They revered Juan for what he had achieved. He has an incredible genius that nobody denied or seemed to be jealous of; they celebrated the fact that there was somebody alive that they could all learn from."

That year, driving straight from California to northern Chihuahua, Mexico, Wisner knocked on Juan Quezada's door for the first time. Although Quezada was precluded from teaching, due to a contract with Fuji Corporation, he agreed to a week of lessons after which Wisner just stayed on. "I watched and at the time I had no Spanish at all - I knew the cuss words that every kid knows - but I didn't have any ability with the language. I quickly reverted to a child-like disposition where I couldn't communicate with adults and I followed people around. I became like the village idiot but Juan was gracious, he let me be the village idiot. And it made me notice how much higher education gets in the way of learning. I was so used to articulating everything, coming from a word world, and there I was reduced to a visual world. I was amazed at how much I learnt, in a different way, because I relied on my sight alone."

Wisner adopted the learning methods of his surroundings: "What interested me was that the Mexicans learn like that as well. They haven't been through a rigorous education system - they don't think the way we do and they don't learn like we do. They'll sit around and watch for days and all of a sudden they've got it. Not a lot of questions. When I teach now I notice that people who have a simpler educational background just watch and get it."

The Quezadas incorporated Wisner into their family for a month on that first visit, sharing their meals and giving him a bedroom. In the subsequent 15 years he has been back for more than two years altogether.

During winters Wisner worked in the Colorado ski industry, initially as an instructor and later as a chef, but every fall and spring he was welcomed into the environs of Mata Ortiz. Each session focused on mastering a new technique. "At first it seemed like an insurmountable mountain because there was so much to learn." But broken down into achievable portions - blackware, polychrome, polishing, firing - Wisner accomplished his goals and eventually arrived at the point of asking himself, "What do I do now? I'm not Mexican, I'm not Indian. At first I wanted to master the techniques just to see if I could but I didn't want to be in competition with people whose tradition I had adopted." Juan and his wife, Guille, were also concerned. "Polite as they were, sometimes they would sit me down and say 'what are you going to do?' They would team up and have a kind of family talk." Wisner began to seek his own voice, a way to add a new dimension to the Quezada legacy.

"Once you feel you have mastery, you can start expressing the things you are passionate about. My father was a marine biologist and as a kid I had exposure to that. So I started doing aquatic scenes and marine life - for a long time I painted whales, fish, dolphins on pots. I painted for years in this manner and invented new colour and geometric patterns not seen before in southwest design. In addition I was consciously trying to use new forms."

Wisner enjoyed the way his work was progressing and though he was not seeking change, his ongoing research unearthed the revelation that would alter his direction. "Throughout history, potters have always pressed things into clay: ropes or leaves or shells. The Anasazi women pressed their fingertips in a systematic way around a pot. I tried this, just out of curiosity and it caught me. I thought, this is something new, something different. Overnight I dropped painting and went completely into texturing."

With this move Wisner further immersed his aesthetic in the historical precedents of the southwest. His construction techniques derive from Mata Ortiz, a genre inseparable from its founder and revered practitioner. The legend of Juan Quezada describes how Juan was inspired to replicate the prehistoric pottery of the Casas Grandes peoples. He discovered potsherds dating from 1100 to 1450 AD and through careful examination and years of trial and error, developed renditions that he felt were faithful to the quality evident in the relics of his ancestors. Juan then taught his family and friends in the village of Mata Ortiz and later passed on the legacy to interested students such as Wisner.

Mata Ortiz pots are constructed from local clay by

means of the coil and pinch method. Minerals such as iron oxide and manganese provide colour variations and after the pottery dries in the sun, it is polished to ensure a flawless surface for decorating. Wisner perpetuates this manufacturing custom even to the extent that he digs clay that he discovers while on his bicycle or hiking excursions in the Colorado mountains. His vessels are typical of the work of Juan's disciples, deviating from the originals in that his are fired in an electric or gas kiln.

"At first, I used my finger as a pressing device and then I considered using something more refined to repeat the pattern with more precision. I started making metal tools and I now have about 35 or 40 different ones that I've developed over the past four years." The realisation that a device as simple as a fingernail could be artistic was transformative. "This was a turning point because it released a whole new level of energy, a new avenue. And it was doubly exciting because I knew I was finally fulfilling the quest of all artists, to find something that hasn't been seen before. For me, it wasn't solely about trying to do something new, it was about listening to what was going on inside and expressing it; testing my instincts and intuition and doing what I believed was exciting."

The marriage of inner concerns and interests with outer expression derives from Wisner's belief in Tibetan Buddhism. "I practise meditation and I think that what's inside is not a whole lot different than what we start to express outside. When I teach I try to convey the importance of paying attention. Throughout your day, notice what gets your attention and then use those things as sources for your art." Lately, his Buddhism has been overtly manifest. "I've started working on big bowls - I've called them mandalas because they look like Tibetan mandalas. In Tibetan Buddhism vision is a primary means of gaining focus in the mind. If you look at a mandala and continually stare at it, the repetitive patterns draw attention inward. The more you look at it, the more layers you start to see." In Wisner's mandalas, "the pattern starts quite large and goes down to small pinpoints. What I love is that I do so little towards the finished pattern. I make my marks but so much happens with secondary or tertiary patterns and negative space. Sometimes, when I'm working, I assume that the patterns won't link up but the best results are those that I initially doubted."

Juan Quezada is pleased that his protégé has found



his niche and has speculated that, with the permutations and combinations that 40 tools afford him, Wisner has a lifetime of work ahead. This fatherly approval is cherished, as is the support of another significant influence on Wisner's career, Anderson Ranch. Since he has no formal art training (except the essential apprenticeship with Quezada), exposure to the Ranch's international roster of ceramics artists has provided him with further observations relevant to his craft. Doug Casebeer, the Ranch's Program Director for ceramics and sculpture, "has been unwavering in his support. I've made pots full-time for seven years. For the first three or four years I was cooking at night and making pots in the day. When I finally quit my cooking job, Doug said 'it's about time. I've been telling you to do this for about five years.' I didn't believe him. He always invites me back and is encouraging. It's rare to find someone who is that supportive."

Michael Wisner feels fortunate to be able to do what he loves and make a living at it. He credits his success to the genius of Juan Quezada, not only in influencing hundreds of people but in his encouragement of individual creativity. Yet Wisner can certainly be accorded a ranking on his own: he has explored and emulated ancient traditions of the Americas and Asia; he has adapted venerable techniques to his own ends; and he has experimented with and adjusted primitive processes so that his students in urban environments can follow their own paths. He is a testament to the wisdom of Thomas Edison who said that genius is one percent inspiration, ninety-nine percent perspiration. In Wisner's words, "The process is fascinating: finding something, refining it, and then making something of it. It is completely laborious." Evolution is usually that way.

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