

Andrea Fisher

Fine Pottery

Leonel Lopez

Mata Ortiz and
Casas Grandes



Jar by Leonel Lopez



Jar by Leonel Lopez, Jr.

Leonel Lopez is best known for his intricate sgraffito work. He usually begins with a white-body pot, then adds slips of different colors. He has also developed a slip of multi-colored dots and another that emulates brush strokes.

After settling on a design and firing a pot he picks up a dental pick and painstakingly cuts through the various surface layers until he reaches the white body of the pot. He scrapes away at the surface until the design stands out in a bold and colorful relief against the background of the white clay base.

Leonel is known for sculpting fish, wildlife, birds and incredibly detailed forest and desert landscapes. He also incises geometric designs, nativity scenes and Day of the Dead/Night of the Dead motifs on his pots.

Prior to the drought that hit Mata Ortiz in 1992, Leonel had worked his fields and tended his stock while his wife Elena (one of Manuel Rodriguez' sisters) made pottery figures. In the depth of the drought, Leonel was sanding and polishing pots for his wife as there wasn't much else to do. Then he started filling in her designs, then began making his own pots. After the first year he graduated to buying unfired blank pots from others, painting them and firing them. Then in 1995 he started to use the sgraffito method of decorating his pots. His brother-in-law Oscar Rodriguez was his inspiration to go into sgraffito but Leonel took it to a whole new level.

As much as Leonel is a full-time artist now he also finds time to tend his cattle and help with the roundups and the branding.

Leonel's son Leonel Jr. is also a potter, generally making slipped spherical pots and decorating them with sgraffito geometric designs. He also sometimes fuses animal shapes into his geometric designs.