Vintage Mexican Tourist Pottery
What’s Hot? Just About Everything!
by Lynne Doyle

Mexican folk art – in particular, pottery – has always been highly collectible, from the days when the most efficient way to travel to Mexico was by ship from New York to Veracruz, through the halcyon days of the brand new Pan American Highway, right down to modern times, when tourists and collectors are coming from everywhere in the world to enjoy Mexico’s beaches, mountains and colonial-era cities. Some people bring home the same things they could buy for less in their own malls, while others bring shells from Mexico’s gorgeous beaches. But by far, the most popular souvenirs by which tourists choose to remember their excursions to Mexico are the many varieties of folk art, and of these, pottery has always been and remains to this day the most popular of Mexico’s folk art exports.

What I find amazing these days is that right along with Talavera and the many other kinds of contemporary pottery leaving Mexico by the planeloads, collectors of Mexican pottery are spending even more of their hard-earned money on the pottery of yesteryear – most of which came from the Guadalajara area (the surrounding villages of Tonalá, Tlaquepaque and Santa Cruz de la Huertas), but some from Oaxaca as well. As the droves of tourists from the US carreened down the Pan American Highway when it opened in the early part of the 20th century, enterprising Mexican ceramists were busy coming up with whatever they could think of that might be of interest to these vacationers. In the process, some of Mexico’s most memorable ceramic traditions were born and are enjoying a truly magnificent renaissance today.

The entire culture of Talavera, both old and new, has been discussed to death, as has the black pottery of Oaxaca and the geometric designs of Mata Ortiz, and actually, these ceramic forms are really not pertinent here. For the purposes of this article, I am attempting to discuss pottery that has not, with a few imitative exceptions, been made for the last 50 years or so. This cheaply made, highly collectible Mexican tourist ware, which enjoys no extended and complicated artistic tradition, was designed and manufactured almost exclusively for consumption by the millions of visitors descending on Mexico with the advent of the ability to easily drive into the country. This pottery is – for whatever reason – in extreme demand among collectors today and is being gobbled up for astounding prices by hundreds of people dedicated to its form, and it seems to me not a bad idea to try to sort out – quickly and succinctly – some of the features, differences, and characteristics of which potential collectors might like to be aware.

When I got interested in this vintage pottery, there was so much to learn and to differentiate between processes and styles that I remained thoroughly confused for a very long time. Lucky for me, most of the people involved in collecting and selling this pottery are gracious, well-informed and very willing to share their knowledge, and there are several who fully qualify as experts who were unstinting in their efforts to help me along. I still don’t have it all completely straight in my mind, and there are new variations popping up all the time, but my hope is to make some of it clearer to those of you who might be interested.

Continued on page 2
As the Mexico presidential election wends it way through the courts and commissions, the more instructive, and possibly more important issue, just might be the three month teacher strike in Oaxaca. What started as a worker’s strike for higher wages has become a larger movement, one that questions the graft and corruption that has been ingrained in the country for, well, maybe forever.

Eduardo Martínez, a local union leader said “This is an opportunity to revise history, to restore dignity to our people and stand up against the powerful. With a popular movement, so much is possible.”

And this from Armand Pescard-Sverdrup, director of the Mexico Project at the Washington-based Center for Strategic and International Studies “This is a very difficult, potentially dangerous time because the battle is over which Mexico – the old or new – emerges.”

The cost to the city of Oaxaca has been enormous economically as the zocalo has become the focal point of the peaceful protestors. The state’s largest Indian festival, the Guelaguetza, was canceled, resulting in a $60 million loss in tourism dollars, and Day of the Dead is not far off.

It is not surprising that the teachers are at the forefront of this protest. Their union has 1.3 million members nationwide and is the largest union in Latin America. More importantly, in much of Mexico the teachers are the most respected members of the community, especially in the small, rural areas where they serve as de facto mayors where there are none. The teacher is often the only educated person in a village, working for little money. Their guidance and advice are highly regarded, much more than the politicians or the police.

Mexico’s new president, whoever that is, will not be able to ignore the growing discontent that is being voiced in Oaxaca. To do so would be foolish and detrimental to the country.

There are three primary varieties of processes that make up the overall genus of tourist pottery, namely glazed (vidriado), burnished (brunido) and painted (opaco) ceramics. Glazed pottery was double-fired – the first firing involving the original clay piece and painted design and the second at a higher temperature securing the shiny glazed surface. These pieces could be used for food service or to hold liquids, although the mixing and glazing processes were primitive and resulted in a rough surface with many flakes, air bubbles and glaze pops, and could be easily chipped with use. Glazed pottery from the Guadalajara area is generally associated with the town of Tlaquepaque, but in truth, could also have been made in the other two villages.

Burnished pottery, mostly accredited to the village of Tonala, consisted of bare clay sun-dried, brush painted, rubbed with either leather or stone to adhere the design into the clay and then fired only once at a medium temperature, resulting in a lustrous polished surface. These pieces were used primarily for food service or to hold liquids, although the mixing and glazing processes were primitive and resulted in a rough surface with many flakes, air bubbles and glaze pops, and could be easily chipped with use. Glazed pottery from the Guadalajara area is generally associated with the town of Tlaquepaque, but in truth, could also have been made in the other two villages.

Painted or opaque pottery is also slipped, brush painted, and single-fired with no finishing process (same as burnished without the burnishing), which produces a flat, fairly rough surface that can be easily scratched and damaged. Opaque is also believed to have been made mostly in Tonala, but we must keep in mind that there were artists in all three villages producing all three varieties of pottery, though most of it was marketed in Tlaquepaque because it attracted the most tourists with the most disposable income.

Of these three types of pottery, by far the most popular, in demand, and expensive, is glazed pottery, which also accounts for most of the various styles of touristware. The vast majority of it was made in the Guadalajara area, but there were also several successful styles generated in Oaxaca. Each has its own charm and appeal, but the greatest amount of material was made and sold in greater Guadalajara, and it is this pottery that is most sought after today and brings the highest prices from collectors.

Probably the most impressive tourist ware variation artistically is the painting style called Petatillo. These are colorful, fairly primitive designs painted on plates, pitchers, vases, and tea and coffee sets where the backgrounds of the designs are painted in tiny cross-hatched lines resembling straw, hence the name. These intricate designs are meticulously arranged with fantasized images of Mexican rural life, mostly in pleasant combinations of primary colors. There were many artists creating these pieces, perhaps the most celebrated of which are the various members of the Lucano family who worked during the mid-20th century. Of the Lucanos, Balbino is my personal favorite – his pieces are busy and complicated with every inch of surface covered in design and the very tiniest of hatch lines enhancing the backgrounds. Some of the pieces produced by other artists were not of the same caliber of work – namely the petatillo is large and somewhat crude – but all of it is interesting to see and, if signed, very valuable.

This extremely rare six-inch relish plate in mint condition is an extraordinary example of Tlaquepaque tourist pottery. It has graining, different but complementary designs in each of the five relish sections, along with a fully-decorated base tray, along with a complicated border, both sculpturally and color-wise – plus it is stamped ARIAS on the back. It’s worth well over $1000.
A variation of Petatillo is pottery that has the same general kind of design but instead of the cross-hatched background, has tiny white dots representing stars placed randomly on black or dark blue backgrounds, or less often, dark dots on lighter backgrounds. This style is called “night” and is usually even pricier than petatillo since there seems to be less of it around. There are artists today working in Tonala and Tlaquepaque (notably Jose Bernabe) producing this same kind of pottery, but it is easily distinguishable from the original. Back in the day, clay was hand-mixed and therefore prone to air bubbles and flakes during firing. Today clay is machine-prepared, resulting in a much smoother surface. Also, it seems as though the original pottery was seldom signed by the artist (except for the Lucanos, and even they didn’t sign everything) but rather had “Mexico” impressed on the backs or bottoms of the pieces. Today everything is signed and “Mexico” is written in ink or paint rather than impressed into the clay.

Next on the list of tourist pottery in demand by collectors is that which is known simply as Art Deco. It is not as valuable to collectors as Tlaquepaque or Guadalajara pottery. However, the value of this 11-inch plate (about $75) is somewhat elevated by the fact that its blue background color is speckled rather than even, and it has a sculpturally scalloped border.

Little of this vintage pottery is signed. However, experts in the field have found ways of distinguishing the many different styles of the artists of the period and have even attributed names based on these styles. For instance, one artist whose pieces generally had a blue donkey included somewhere in the design has become known as “Donkey Blues.” Another whose drawings were often built on a yellow surface depicting a road or field is referred to as “Yellow Brick Road,” while still another who portrays his roads with a multi-colored pebbly surface called graining (which also seems to increase the value of the piece) is called “Delicate Dan.” I’m not at all sure how much faith I put into these attributions because many of the design elements overlap between artists, but it seems as though if someone somewhere states that a particular piece is “attributed to” an individual artist, even though there is no signature and the artist’s real name is not known, the price goes up.

Variations of Tlaquepaque pottery include simplistic figural designs known as Aztec (showing images presumably taken from ancient ruins and codices), Art Deco (usually fanciful drawings of plants and birds) and molded (designs are similar but images are raised against a flat background). Examples of these styles, while usually not quite as valuable as Petatillo and Tlaquepaque, do seem to be steadily increasing in price, as again, nowhere near as much of it is available.

Another diversification of glazed pottery from the Guadalajara area that is extremely popular with collectors is a style called Fantasia. These pieces seem to come in every color of the rainbow and the designs are usually limited to highly fantasized images of animals and flowers, although some have been found to include highly stylized people. These pieces are some of my personal favorites as they are colorful, very intricately drawn and totally unique in style. Again, some contemporary artists are attempting to replicate these designs, and some have been fairly successful, but the difference in the smoothness of the clay used can generally be depended upon to differentiate new from old.

The poorest cousin price-wise of Guadalajara-area glazed pottery is the redware called Bandera, named for the use of only terra cotta backgrounds with cream and green designs (the colors of the Mexican flag) in its designs. I absolutely love Bandera, all trillion of its patterns. Bandera is found primarily in many shapes and sizes of plates and bowls, although I have also found cups and saucers, and rarely, pitchers. Consisting of thin clay that is for the most part adorably misshapen, Bandera usually has a Tonala-style animal/floral inner design with an intricate border pattern around the piece’s edge, but I have found one cup and saucer done in plain green and ivory stripes. I was also lucky enough to find a plate in which the green was exchanged for a cobalt blue by some enterprising artisan. While some collectors would argue over whether this piece was Bandera at all, everything else...


September 8: Tepozteco Challenge – Tepoztlán, Morelos. Performance depicting King Tepoztecatl’s conversion to the Catholic religion. Procession leads to the Tepozteco Pyramid, where offerings are made. This event includes a food festival, chinelos, dances dating back to prehispanic times, and fireworks.

September 15–16: Mexican Independence Day – Nationwide. Mexico celebrates its declaration of independence from Spain in 1810. The night of September 15, marks “El Grito,” a dramatic reenactment of revolutionary Father Hidalgo’s call for his fellow Mexicans to join the uprising, which takes place at city halls across the country. On September 16, military parades are held in almost every Mexican city.

September 19–21: Fall Equinox at Kukulcán – Chichén Itzá, Yucatán. Thousands of people from around the world gather at this Mayan ruin on the Yucatan Peninsula to witness the afternoon shadow of the snake-god Kukulcán slowly “crawl down” the country’s largest Mayan pyramid, El Castillo.

September 16: Running of the Bulls at San Miguel – San Miguel de Allende, Guanajuato. Also known as the Pamplona, this festival is one of the many celebrations in honor of Saint Michael the Archangel. The event involves dances, concerts, fireworks and bulls running through town. Daring participants meet at high noon. www.sanmiguelguidel.com/tour-pamplonada.htm

September 24-30: National Antigue Festival – Saltillo, Coahuila. Now in its tenth year, this festival gathers together top antique dealers from all over Mexico and features exhibitions of international treasures, accompanied by a musical and educational program. www.muestraantiguadades.com

October, all month: International Artistic Festival – Coahuila. During October the State of Coahuila is the host of this cultural event that gathers the presence of more than two thousand artists in all disciplines, from Mexico and the world. The festival is organized by the Instituto Coahuilense of Culture (ICOCULT), presents dances, theater, movies, literature, painting, poetry, among others. Information in ICOCULT: (844) 410 20 33 and 414 27 47 http://contraloria.sfochaihuila.gob.mx/icocult/index.php; www.coahuila.gob.mx; www.saltillomexico.org; info@saltillomexico.org

October, all month: 7th International Film Festival – San Miguel de Allende, Guanajuato. Showing an extensive range of film productions of diverse countries, included Mexico. Info: 52 (410) 1032984 and 52 (415)1546444 www.guanajuato-travel.com


October 5–7, Mexico Luxury Travel Expo – Riviera Maya, Quintana Roo. During the expo, North America travel agents will meet top-end travel suppliers and Riviera Maya Tourism Board representatives to learn more about the many unique attractions the Riviera Maya offers the discerning traveler. For more information, visit www.mexicoluxurytravelexpo.com.

October 4–22: 34rd International Cervantine Festival – Guanajuato, Guanajuato. One of the most important cultural events in Mexico, this annual festival fills the streets of this colonial town with visitors and performers from all over the world. This year’s host is the United Kingdom. www.festivalcervantino.gob.mx

October 6–28: 29th National Mole Fair – San Pedro Actopan, Mexico. Just south of Mexico City, thousands of varieties of mole will be prepared for sampling and competition. This spicy sauce is a Mexican staple and made of unsweetened chocolate, peppers and spices, often served with meat or poultry. Eat your fill and take some home. www.milpa-alta.df.gob.mx

Second week of October: Street Theater International Festival – Zacatecas, Zacatecas. This International Festival was begun in 2002. This event takes place at open spaces and in direct contact with the people.

October 13 – 15: International Nacho Fest – Piedras Negras. A celebration with music, contests and diverse gastronomy in this festival that has been celebrated for the past 8 years. Artistic and cultural activities are celebrated in this festival that includes “Miss Tourism,” as well as a contest for the biggest nacho of the world as registered in the Guinness Book of World Records. www.proltrac.com; protobufc@prodigy.net.mx

October 13–30: Revueltas Festival – Durango, Durango. Offers an extensive range of events for cultural lovers, dance presentations, music, expositions, literary events, poetry, story tellers, popular art, and an endless number of artistic expressions. Cultural Institute of Durango (01 618) 128-60-08 y 128-60-11 http://www.iced.gob.mx; diseno@iced.gob.mx; disenoiced@hotmail.com

Third Sunday of October: Tradicional Fair – Nochistlan, Zacatecas. See bullfights, cultural, and sports events, expositions. Among the main places of interest that can be visited are the temple of San Francisco, the temple of San Sebastián, temple of San José, the Market, the Arches (aqueduct of the 18th century), and more.


October 18–19: 2006: Baja California Meeting Point – Tijuana, Baja California. This summit will include hundreds of meetings, one-on-one consultations and a full two-day program of conferences and discussion panels. Discussion topics include financing, real state appraisals and valuation systems, tax and legal framework, sustainable development. For more information, please contact: armandolea@imacor.net or visit the web page: www.bajacaliforniameetingpoint.com
Many of the glazed styles – Fantasia, Tlaquepaque, Art Deco and Aztec – can be found in burnished pottery, although I have not seen or heard of petatillo being produced without glaze. All of the others, however, can be found with a burnished surface although these pieces do not seem to be as prevalent in these styles as the glazed. Popular burnished-only pottery designs are mostly from the Guadalajara area, done in a distinctly Tonala style, and seem to fall into three primary categories – linear patterns consisting of lines in varying thickness with occasional geometric shapes dividing them, what is known as the floral style, which includes very whimsical flowers and animals, and a final, less prevalent variation known as featherware, also showing flowers and birds, but created with a very feathery look to the painting. Sometimes burnished pottery has a lovely, smooth, delicately shiny finish that is flawless and beautiful to look at. However, because it is not glazed, the finish can also often be flamed from bumps and scrapes, or cloudy from having water applied to it, either inside or out. Also, the vintage variety is still made from hand-mixed red clay and is very susceptible to chipping.

In terms of pricing, burnished pottery does not seem to demand quite the same high prices as glazed, but sometimes an especially large or uniquely designed piece will come along that will end up selling for fairly hefty money. As in all tourist ware, the condition of the piece will weigh heavily in determining value – pieces that are mint or near-mint, or whose flaws are not visible, will always demand more than a piece with visible chips or cracks. Most collectors do not attach much importance to the ordinary blemishes expected to be found in hand-mixed clay unless they seriously interfere with the design of the piece.

There are some artists in the Guadalajara area today making burnished pieces in the same

I rarely see any feather-ware for sale anywhere, but I did find this lovely piece on eBay. Luckily, most people didn’t recognize it for what it is, so it became mine for $55.
HOSTAL LOS PILARES
by Lynne Doyle

Lynne Doyle is a longtime Mexico File subscriber and contributing editor from Maine. The object of the Las Joyas de Mexico feature is to highlight for MF readers some of the lesser-known but most rewarding of Mexico’s geographic, human and artistic treasures. Lynne can be contacted at LinfordD@aol.com.

On a mostly deserted little street in the barrio of Jalatlaco in Oaxaca, ten blocks off the beaten track of the zocalo and the Alcala, is the surprising little boutique hotel, Hostal Los Pilares. This is not a large hotel, nor is it well-known or heavily advertised, but it is a perfect little pearl of a place, where every corner of every room, staircase and corridor is carefully thought out and flawlessly decorated. Every need is anticipated, every service provided. It is, quite simply, an oasis of uniquely tranquil perfection in a city known for its quaint, picturesque hotels.

Los Pilares is a two-story structure with a rooftop restaurant, pool, and Jacuzzi. Its twenty or so rooms and suites vary in price according to size and amenities, but all are carefully arranged for maximum comfort. Suites have little tables in tiny courtyards complete with bottles of wine, and all suites and rooms have hand-painted frescoes of flowers and vines. Televisions are large and new with real English-speaking channels and not just CNN International. Common areas

All of the rooms I saw at Los Pilares were decorated in a manner similar to this one – light, hand-embroidered bedding, luxurious large bathrooms, dark rustic Mexican furniture, and some variation of the hand-painted leaf-and-bird design shown in this photograph. Each room’s numbers are hand-painted within a floral design. The attention to detail in this hotel is incredible.

The ambiance in this hotel bows to style, comfort, luxury and a stunning vignette of serene beauty in any direction you care to look. Last fall when we were there, even the ofrenda constructed in the lobby in tribute to the Day of the Dead festival had one of the most beautiful Catrinas any of us had ever seen.

Hostal Los Pilares is not my usual choice in hotels – as I spend little time in my room, I tend toward less expensive places that are clean and have decent water pressure. I also lean toward small, family-run hotels that are friendly and might notice if I didn’t come in at night. I don’t attach a lot of importance to hand-embroidered duvets or excessively fluffy towels, nor do I require lots of TV channels and slippers to be provided for me. However, this little gem of a place somehow captured my imagination – I think because it is such a feast for the eyes. And unlike many places similar to it, it isn’t really all that expensive. During the most important holiday of the year, a room could still be had for $110/night including breakfast. Suites were more in the range of $180-$240/night depending on size, but with these spacious, beautifully lit rooms, we couldn’t decide who would require a suite.

Since Oaxaca is famous for its many excellent and varied restaurants, we generally venture out for dinner at night, but one evening we instead enjoyed one lovely dinner at an umbrella table in Los Pilares’ courtyard. We had hoped to enjoy the sunset over the mountains from the roof, but our waiter patiently explained that the roof was uncomfortably chilly and he felt we would be more comfortable in the protected courtyard, even though it meant that he would have to run up and down two flights of stairs serving us. In the mellow lighting, we did indeed enjoy our various dinners of regional Oaxacan cuisine and some very nice Mexican wine, and we were pleasantly surprised at the very reasonable prices. However, there was no dissuading us from breakfast served in the sun every morning. Mexican service is seldom brisk and it wasn’t here, either, but the excellent endless coffee and the wonderfully Mexican tradition of leisurely, untrushed meals, the lovely potted plants and intensely colored bougainvillea surrounding us, along with the breathtaking views over the city and surrounding mountains, made the idea of waiting almost a bonus. For all the meals served at Los Pilares, I observed only one tiny fly in the ointment – a pat of butter frozen in a not-quite-square shape. Can you believe it?

Hostal Los Pilares can be found at Calle Curtidurias #721, Barrio Jalatlaco, and can be reached for reservations from the United States at 01 52 9 518 6999 or 01 52 9 518 7000. As yet, I have found no website for this hotel, nor have I found it listed on any of the general Oaxacan websites. I did discover that most cab drivers in Oaxaca don’t know where this place is, so it was most efficient

Continued on page 8
patterns as vintage burnished-only designs, but again, the texture of the clay can often be instrumental in determining if a piece is old or new. Also, pieces by contemporary artists will tend to be signed, as Mexican ceramists in this important shopping area have learned that signed items, even if no one has ever heard of the artist, are of more value to collectors. However, I have not seen today’s artisans making burnished pieces in the same patterns common to glazed pieces. It would be highly unusual, if not impossible, to find a new burnished Fantasia plate anywhere on earth, so if you should happen to find one of these very rare pieces, it will most likely be a vintage piece.

The last category of vintage tourist ware pottery is also the least in demand and the least valuable, although it is becoming more popular daily. This is the flat finish pottery known as Opaque. This pottery will be found almost exclusively in decorative items such as vases, little boxes, and chargers designed to be hung. Its designs can be just about anything except for petatillo, but mostly seem to be either linear, floral, Aztec or rural scenes similar to the Tlaquepaque form, but done in a distinctly Tonala style. The colors in Opaque pieces tend to be more muted than those found in Tlaquepaque, but are equally beautiful in their own way. Some collectors find them dull-looking, but I find that the subtlety of most pieces has a grace all their own.

Also important in the overall mix of Mexican tourist wares were the various varieties produced in Oaxaca, and I have found that some collectors have a strong preference for these items. Oaxacan ceramists were nowhere near as prolific as those in greater Guadalajara, perhaps because fewer tourists made their way as far south as Oaxaca, but for those who did, the rewards were enormous. All tourist ware I have found from Oaxaca has been glazed, and is completely and totally unique in style, both from each other and from anything manufactured further north.

Most popular and numerous among them is the very colorful Oaxacan drippware. This pottery is primarily table ware – pieces that at the time were perceived to be useful for dining – although like most vintage Mexican pottery, it is now known to contain lead. It comes in numerous colors and color combinations, the most valuable being the rarer colors such as plum and yellow, and pewter and white, and the most numerous being cobalt and green combined with white and riotous mixes of yellow, orange, blue and green on a white background. The paints appear to have been brushed liberally and haphazardly onto the clay pieces and they often mixed, so no piece is ever the same as any other, and often unusual and beautiful shades are created by the combinations running together. I have a particular fondness for drippware for two reasons – you can still buy it without first mortgaging your home, and the bright, intense colors are so cheerful and totally Mexican to my eyes. Also, Oaxacan ceramists created many unusual molds for their vessels that have not been duplicated in other kinds of potteries.

I think I have to admit here that my all-time favorite tourist pottery is what dealers refer to as Alfereria Jimenez, after the Oaxacan family that created it. This is a paper-thin variety of tableware done exclusively in rust and ivory colors. I have seen only four different patterns, three of which are based on geometric Mixtec and Zapotec designs and the fourth of which, called La Pluma,
Agave Fields and World Heritage

The agave fields, north of Guadalajara, have been added to UNESCO’s World Heritage sites. Since 1972 UNESCO has inscribed 812 properties in 137 countries worldwide on its World heritage list. It is Mexico’s 26th site to be added since 1972. The agave plant is used in the production of tequila, and is centered around the town of the same name.

Auto Exports on Rise

The Mexican Auto Industry Association reports that production was up 21 percent last year, while exports grew 32 percent. So far this year the numbers are up 37 percent and 48 percent. Since NAFTA was signed into law 12 years ago, northern Mexico has attracted billions of U.S. dollars for the U.S. auto industry. General Motors recently broke ground on a $650 million plant in San Luis Potosi and Ford Motor Co. is considering an investment of $9.2 billion in Mexico over the next six years.

Los Pilares Continued

to say “near Casa Arnel” (the backpacker’s place every driver recognizes) and then direct the driver two blocks towards town on Calle Aldama and then a right onto Curtidurias for one block.

Even if you don’t choose to stay at Los Pilares, it is definitely worth the excursion for a breakfast on the roof – another special delight in the plethora of delights that is Oaxaca.

The hotel’s restaurant is at the opposite end of the roof from the pool, with a large patio between for sun chairs and enjoying the view. The roof at sunset is particularly breathtaking as you watch the sun slip behind the mountains and the lights of the city wink on along with the stars.

The delicacy of this pottery is what captures my imagination the most – I can’t figure out how any of it has lasted more than 60 years. The small tea pot on the left is the very unique La Pluma pattern, the eight-inch plate looks like a Zapotec design to me, and the larger tea pot on the right has a pattern similar to the mosaics found on the temples at Mitla, a Mixtec ruins outside Oaxaca. This kind of pottery is still very rare – from left to right, $40, $60, and $120

looks like leaves or plumes and bears no resemblance to the other three. The ivory glaze was applied over the red clay and the designs were scratched into the glaze, creating grooves and spaces through which the terra cotta color would then appear. Additionally, the Jimenez family would scratch into the back of the piece (with the exception of cups) “Casa Jimenez, Oaxaca,” and on larger plates would include the family’s street address and sometimes even the name of the design pattern used.

Because the clay was so thin, the shapes of these pieces are often asymmetrical, and it takes very little to chip or break them. However, without visible damage, this is some of Mexico’s most unique and beautiful vintage pottery. When I initially discovered it, the cost was surprisingly reasonable, but like its cousins, it is steadily increasing in value.

The last of the Oaxacan glazed tourist potteries is a cheerful, sunny little design called by dealers and collectors splatterware. This primarily tableware pottery has a dark tan background sprinkled liberally with spiky daisy-like white flowers with yellow centers and stylized green leaves. Its design is primitive, simplistic and impossibly cheerful and one collector/dealer/mentor of mine once justified her love of it by saying that it just makes her smile. I don’t have a lot of splatterware because it is still relatively inexpensive to buy and gets gobbled up almost immediately on the rare occasions that it comes up for sale.

The kicker to this discussion of these most collectible vintage potteries is that they do not, for all intents and purposes, exist in Mexico – anywhere. I have looked everywhere I can find an antique store in Mexico and have only once or twice seen any of it, and when I have, it has been so beaten up as to be virtually worthless. If you want this stuff, you are stuck with antique stores primarily in the Southwest, Texas and California, although some has been found in the Midwest United States, as well as with internet dealers. Most of my vintage tourismware has been purchased on eBay from dealers in those areas of the country. Occasionally a piece will turn up in Florida, I think because the people who used the Pan American Highway retired there. Only once, many years ago, have I found a collection being sold at an antique store here in Maine. I am told by my dealer friends around the country that all varieties are getting very scarce everywhere, but I have noticed that when a piece sells for huge money on eBay, more of it will turn up immediately following the big sale. So it’s out there and many collectors will part with some of their lesser pieces in order to purchase better ones. And you never know – someone else’s lesser piece could be your treasure. For the most part, dealers are knowledgeable and honest, but there are yard-salers out there who don’t know what they are talking about who will mislabel their items. Sometimes this works for you, as when they don’t know what they have, they also often don’t know what it’s worth, but sometimes they think what they have is worth much more than it really is, and new collectors can be misled. So if you have any interest at all in these beautiful pieces of pottery, start now before prices escalate even more, be careful and don’t be afraid to ask questions. There are many people out there – both dealers and collectors – who are willing to help you learn. It’s a wonderful hobby to have – even if it can cut seriously into your shoe or dinner-out budgets – and you can always tell your spouse that it’s home décor.

A tough little ceramic, Splatterware – when it is found – seems to be mostly in mint condition and doesn’t cost too much. Eight-inch bowl, $40, ten-inch pitcher, $65.