

CLAY : VERONICA CASTILLO



MEET Veronica Castillo. **WATCH** a video that features the artist at work.
MAKE an artwork inspired by the artist. **REFLECT** on your finished artwork.

MEET

MEET VERONICA CASTILLO,
a ceramic folk artist carrying on
her family's tradition.

"This is tradition we pass down from family to family"

—Veronica Castillo



VERONICA CASTILLO is a ceramic folk artist who honors the traditions of her family and of her community by using her hands to sculpt in clay. At a young age, Castillo was exposed to the ceramic traditions of her family by her parents, Don Alforio Castillo Orta and Doña Soledad Martha Hernandez Baez. Using the skills she had been developing since a young age, the artist began to make works of art in the established, time-honored methods of her ancestors, and to illuminate the connections between culture, faith and community. Her eye-catching, hand painted work leads the viewer through a narrative depicted with brightly colored and elaborately designed ceramic details. These intricate, detailed works are built on a system of coil-based, handcrafted branches, including hand modeled figures, created into a form known as The Tree of Life.

The tradition of building the Tree of Life began prior to the Spanish Conquerors when the indigenous people of Mexico began to honor the Sun God over 9 days in December, but this motivation for making was replaced with the introduction to Catholicism in the area, and with it the Tree of Life began to represent Christian beliefs, biblical stories, and holidays.

For Castillo's lifetime, the tradition of creating The Tree of Life was embedded in her ancestry starting, "from our period of Olmec Culture... [and has been] passed down from family to family" Crediting her parents for raising her to deeply know and understand the medium, the artist began to take part in the creation of these works to honor and to observe holidays such as Navidad, and Dia De Muertas, as well as for celebrations and for ceremonial exchanges between communities.



Top: Veronica Castillo, *Nacimiento (Nativity) Tree of Life*, courtesy of the artist. Above: Veronica Castillo demonstrating her process, courtesy of Craft in America.

As Castillo evolved as a ceramic artist, she not only used The Tree of Life motif to celebrate and honor the stories, relationships, and traditions of her community, but she also began to use the medium to elevate the voices of those who found themselves without one. In FolkLife magazine, Castillo revealed, “I want to make trees with themes, themes for those who cannot speak,” and expressed the gratitude she felt for the permission her parents gave when she began to explore this shift in her work. She added, “I did this without losing the techniques, the traditions, nor the heritage of my family.”

Castillo is a member of the Castillo Orta folk art family from Izucar de Matamoros in Puebla, Mexico, and is widely known in the ceramic community for her thematic, impactful, socially inspired Tree of Life candelabras. She has been awarded the prestigious NEA National Heritage Fellowship for her extraordinary work and passes on the tradition of creating The Tree of Life designs just as her parents passed on the tradition to her so long ago.

WATCH



WATCH Veronica Castillo taking part in the time-honored process of creating folk art in clay. Listen to her discuss the generational exchange of working in this manner. Observe the connections she makes using her hands and simple tools.

<https://youtu.be/bPCcGVT9vrA>

After viewing the segment, consider the following:

- Castillo began working in this tradition through the teachings of her parents. In what way has her role as a teacher of the next generation apparent in the segment?
- Among Castillo's work in the segment, see a work created for Navidad. Where would you place such a sculpture in your home? Why this place?
- Castillo's work is deeply connected to the stories and celebrations connected to her culture, and we see many repeated symbols in her work. List the symbols and design motifs you see repeated in her works.
- After viewing the segment on Castillo, how would you describe her use of color and pattern in her elaborately designed pieces? How does her use of color and pattern support the meaning found within her works of art?
- What aspects of the act of making The Tree of Life do you think the artist values the most? Why do you say this?

“I want to make trees with themes, themes for those who cannot speak.”

—Veronica Castillo

Make a clay sculpture on a topic that you feel needs a greater voice. For example, do you believe there should be more discussion about environmental concerns? What topics are you concerned about?

Refer to CLAY: MEDIUM & METHODS and decide if you would like to work in relief or in the round. You might use a slab base to create a work of art in relief, or craft a ball of clay into a sculptural form using a subtractive method. Consider if you would like to add coiling to your sculpture or your relief slab, review the process of joining clay pieces with the score, slip and smooth method.



Veronica and Patricia Castillo make a traditional Navidad Tree of Life, Mark Markley photograph.

- What kind of sculpture will you create?
- What will the message of your artwork convey?
- What symbols might make the message of your artwork clear?
- Aside from your hands, what tools might you use to model form and create detail?
- Gather everyday tools—a container of water, a few toothpicks, a place setting consisting of a knife, fork and spoon, and a sponge.
- If you have access to ceramic tools, you may consider a fettling knife, a wire loop tool and a ribbon tool to assist in carving your clay.
- Envision the final product and think about how you might decorate your piece. Will you use solid colors or vibrantly painted designs?
- Use a damp sponge to smooth out the areas on the surface of your work that require a more polished look. Consider a simple toothpick, a fork, or the tip of a pencil might add texture to the surface area.
- Use the damp sponge to smooth the underside of your work.
- Think about how your piece will be displayed. You might add a hole to tie a string or wire after the firing process. You might smooth the bottom surface of your piece so that it will not scratch the surface of a table.
- Do not forget to consider a signature for your work. How will you be known as an artist? To this day, Castillo includes in her maker's signature...a “C” for Castillo, “M” for Marta, and “A” for Alfonso, in reference to her parents. Who inspires you to create?
- After ample drying time, reach out to a local ceramics studio or school to fire your completed piece.
- To decorate your artwork, if you have access to traditional glaze, consider the impact of matte and high gloss finishing, and if you decide to work with acrylic paint, consider lightly sanding your work and priming the piece with a coat of gesso or household primer.

REFLECT

LOOK at your finished product.
Think about the process.



Veronica Castillo demonstrating her process, courtesy of Craft in America.

- How did it feel to manipulate clay in your hands? Did you find the process satisfying and stress-relieving, or perhaps a bit more cumbersome and sometimes too messy?
- How do you feel your creation communicates your message?
- What design decisions did you make in the sculpting and decorating process to connect the viewer to your idea?
- Are you pleased with your finished piece? Why or why not?
- What else would you like to make out of clay?