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**From the Selected Works of Jo Farb Hernandez**

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# Tradition and Innovation: Extremeñan Connections and Collaborations

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# Tradition and Innovation



## Extremeñan Connections and Collaborations

*Jo Farb Hernández describes a ground-breaking collaboration between Spanish creators of monumental storage vessels and California artist Sam Hernández*

In 1990, CERAMICS MONTHLY PUBLISHED AN ARTICLE entitled “The Last Tinajeros”, in which the author introduced potters who created monumental ceramic storage containers, or *tinajas*, while at the same time lamenting their passing. This article paralleled others, as authors rushed to research, document and mourn ‘extinct’ pottery villages in Spain: because many such ‘centres’ included only a single workshop, the death or retirement of a working potter in a remote area would signal the end of that unique local tradition.

Evolution of crafts and trades had tended to be slow and relatively constant in Spain until the Spanish Civil War and the onset of World War II. Then, these traumatic upheavals resulted in familial breakups and a decimated countryside, changes that forced many rural residents to move to the city. At the same time, increasing industrialization brought ‘unbreakable’ plastics and aluminium containers to the most remote areas and, little by little, utilities and running water were extended into rural homes. Together, these developments delivered a series of irreversible blows to the traditional way of life, with its requirements for numerous and varied pottery vessels serving a wide range of utilitarian functions.

In addition, manufacturing advances enabled new capital-intensive

*Moreno León Studio, Extremadura, Spain.*

*Drawing on his long-standing interests in traditional and popular cultures, and tempering his subject choices with respect for the centuries-old tinaja form, Hernández was able to layer his imagery onto the elegant forms without contradiction or incongruity.*





factories to produce objects similar to those traditional potters had created by hand – flowerpots, water jugs and the like – but their reduced production costs competitively undercut the sales prices of the cottage industries and made it difficult, if not impossible, for traditional potters to compete in the marketplace. Cast cement containers soon began to be used for water and wine storage in fields and warehouses, exacerbating the assault on a

modernizing home life with a parallel strike on agricultural, storage, and distribution sectors as well. By the late 1960s and 1970s, every article or book published on the topic – and all of a sudden, there was a flurry of them – hurried to document this ‘dying’ craft: the only direction this tradition could take, it was assumed, was toward extinction.

In many cases, this turned out to be a correct prognosis. Potters’ sons and daughters had second thoughts about following their parents into a dirty, labour-intensive occupation that promised only dwindling sales and declining opportunities. Some artisans’ children emigrated to cities in search of greater opportunities; others stayed in their hometowns but turned to other vocations with greater likelihood of profitability.

Yet paradoxically, the pottery market rebounded in other areas, thanks to an increased interest manifested by urban professionals, romantics, antiquarians and collectors, fuelled by municipal governments that saw a chance to piggyback on the national tourist office’s *España Desconocida* (Unknown Spain) marketing program by scheduling summer fairs and producing glossy brochures. This produced its own changes, of course, not all of them positive, such as wholesale purchasing of clay bodies or glazes in ‘artistic centres’ that makes every potter’s work in that region look alike. The types of wares produced were also significantly modified, sometimes with aesthetically horrific results. The increasing conventionality of these production-line wares has been particularly distressing given the remarkable historical distinctiveness of Spanish ceramics: in the prewar periods, scholars documented more than 200 different styles of water jugs alone. The role of the potter within the culture has therefore changed fundamentally, as the initial functional purpose underlying and justifying the craft has been almost completely eliminated. The potter now typically provides decorative works for anonymous non-peer audiences, more often than not of a higher socioeconomic level and not even sharing a common language.

Nevertheless, adaptation to these new circumstances has meant that traditional methods of fabricating and/or firing traditional shapes and forms have been able to continue in some areas. In contradiction to the 1990 article, for example, members of the Moreno León family in far western Extremadura continue their family trade of producing monumental *tinajas*, a trade that stretches back, by their estimation, at least 400 years. And given their ability to make changes in their work in order to accommodate new audiences and methods of marketing, they were also open to a groundbreaking collaboration with California sculptor Sam Hernández.

Hernández, who is best known for his work in wood, met the Moreno León family on a trip to Extremadura in 2002 that included visits to several family potteries in this remote region. He was already very familiar with the monumental *tinaja* form: while living for six months in the southwestern Catalan village of Horta de Sant Joan in 1999, he had daily passed a half-dozen of these discarded vessels outside a wine warehouse on the outskirts of town – *tinajas* that he ultimately ended up purchasing. Hernández was immediately struck by the monumentality and elegance of the ceramic



Top: Greenware vessels air-drying.  
Moreno León Studio.

Centre: Carlos Moreno coils the  
second stage for *Dichos y Bichos*.

Above: Rafael (Rafa) Moreno and  
Hernández discuss next stages of  
*Cigarra* sculpture.

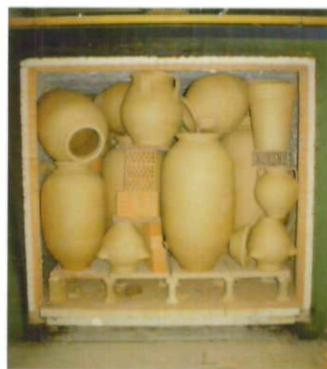


forms he saw in the Moreno León studio, as well as by the professionalism of their production pottery, so he arranged to return in order to spend time working with them. The works illustrated here were created during two different visits, in 2005 and 2008.

Although, as noted, the audience and market for their ware have changed dramatically over the generations, the Moreno León brothers basically create the same kind of functional vessels that have been produced by their family for centuries. (The main innovation in terms of type of ware has been the development of the *Fogon de Daniel*, a portable ceramic oven that can be used for outdoor cooking; created by Daniel, father of the three current potters, it has become a best seller.) While other ceramic centres in Spain concentrated on such products as the water jug (see, for example, my chapter on Evelio López Cruz in *Forms of Tradition in Contemporary Spain*), the Moreno León studio was primarily known for its enormous *tinajas*, typically used for wine or oil storage.

The very monumentality of these functional containers requires a team approach in order to maintain studio efficiency while managing the crucial fabrication issues of building up the walls of the vessels, as well as drying and firing the completed works. Typically, both eldest brother Rafael and youngest brother Antonio will centre and throw an initial mass of clay to a height of some 12 to 15 inches, depending upon the size of the final vessel. It is then removed from the small electric wheel with a simple but ingenious bat system to dry for hours or days, depending on the ambient humidity and temperature. When this bottom section has set up, middle son Carlos will work with large coils, known as *rollos*, thick cylindrical loaves of clay that he has previously wedged on top of a worktable. He flips the end of the *rollo* along his right arm, ending on his right shoulder, while he eases it with his right hand around the outside diameter of the top of the vessel walls, supporting it on the outside with the flattened palm of his left hand. He presses in the coil with a twisting movement of his right hand as he builds up the vessel wall and simultaneously smooths the exterior surface with his left hand. During this stage of the process, Carlos accesses all sides of the pot by walking around it in circles. *Subir la pieza* (raising the piece) continues in this manner, adding 6 to 10 inches in height. The piece is then wheeled out of the way to set up briefly before being returned to the wheel for Antonio or Rafa to smooth out and throw the new coils, melding them into the not-quite-leather hard first stage. The process of coiling is termed *urdir* and continues, alternating with the throwing, until the vessel has reached its desired form and height. Markers with standard measurements located immediately next to the wheels help them to maintain size standardization among the numerous iterations of the same form. Once the vessel has been completed, it is wheeled off again to dry with plastic sheeting used to cover fragile joints, handles or lips, as necessary.

When Hernández conceived of the idea of working with these master *tinajeros*, he was attracted not only by the graceful vessel forms but also by their very monumentality. American innovators in ceramic sculpture – including Pete Voulkos and Don Reitz, for example, two of Hernández's friends – were acclaimed for expanding the scale of their work, providing a more substantial structure on which to base their expressionist and deconstructivist explorations. Hernández, in contrast, wanted to work with the elegant vessel forms, altering them to express his own imagery but not so much that the basic vessel shapes and their sense of balance were obscured in the process. Prior to beginning each piece, he and Antonio or Rafa



Top: Antonio Moreno closes top of *Cigarra* form.

Centre: Carlos, Antonio and Hernández attach Little King's head to torso.

Above: Kiln loaded with greenware.





Above: *Diosa*. 2005, 2007.  
Earthenware, wax and oil pigment  
63 x 48.875 x 48.875 in.  
Photo by Jordi Puig.

discussed the basic size of the proposed work, as well as the level at which Hernández wanted to start his sculptural alterations. This was accompanied by sketches in chalk on the studio floor, as well as by much dialogue to ascertain that the appropriate setup was achieved. After a couple of 'detours', Hernández realized that he needed to be extremely specific about what he wanted when he was asking the potters to diverge from their traditional vessel forms. Although they had the necessary skills, as well as a clay body that could be adapted and pushed beyond expectation, conceptually they were tied to the centred roundness of their forms and were tentative about improvisation and, even, moving off-centre. Neither Hernández nor the Moreno León *tinajeros* knew what they were getting into when they started, or whether the collaboration would work, yet both sides approached it with interest, excitement and enthusiasm. The success of the process, as well as the finished pieces, propelled continuing efforts.

The clay used by the Moreno León family has outstanding plasticity as well as strength and can be stretched, added to and lengthened as required, without great effort needed to prepare for a joint nor with undue fear of cracking or breakage. When creating the *Diosa* (Goddess), for example, the artists were able to meld additional layers of clay onto the exterior vessel wall for the breasts, hollowing out from the inside to ensure consistency of wall thickness. The brothers alternately threw and coiled the clay, building up the height. Hernández alternated with them, sculpting the body to reference the proto-mother figure of the *Venus of Willendorf*.

Although the studio collaboration took place during the summer months, bringing with it the considerable dry heat typical of Extremadura, the studio itself was kept rather humid as a result of the dozens of drying vessels; therefore, several hours or even up to an overnight period was required for the lower sections to set up to a hardness sufficient to support the additional height of the growing vessel. To accommodate to this, Hernández worked on up to four works, more or less at the same time, so that he could move from one to another as their appropriate drying stages were reached.

Works such as the *Calavera*, *El Buda*, and *Dichos y Bichos* essentially maintained the full standard vessel form, although in the first two cases the upper mouth was completely closed off, with the air hole added below in the same manner and in the same form as the decanting plugs typically used for traditional vessels destined for liquid storage. These works, therefore, posed no surprises or technical issues for the *tinajeros* beyond those typically confronted in the production of such monumental vessels. For works such as the hair of *Diosa* and the beard of *Little King*, however, moving away from the standard centred vessel form brought with it new challenges. The latter, in particular, required separate sculpting of the attached forms for crown, nose and beard, melding them to the cone-shaped head and then careful support with a mountain of available bricks, balled-up newspapers and other *ad-hoc* braces to guard against slumping or collapse. As Hernández worked, the *tinajeros* were careful that the pieces did not rise beyond that which they could squeeze into the kiln after the standard shrinkage from air drying. Finally, at the leather hard stage, each potter, as well as Hernández, signed the back of the pieces, and/or marked

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them with their centuries-old family stamp and logo.

Following extremely slow air drying, the finished pieces were wheeled into the Moreno León's 14 cubic metre train-style gas-fired kiln and fired up to a high bisque of 1200–1430°C. This temperature enables their bisque vessels to maintain the coolness of their stored liquids through minimal yet constant evaporation. (If a waterproof vessel is required for specific usages, powdered natural tree resins are tossed into the interior of the bisque ware and then melted onto the inside with a small propane-powered torch.) The thoroughly dried greenware is stacked upright inside the kiln chamber, the bottom of one piece fitting into or resting on top of the piece below. Smaller pieces are carefully fit in sideways or placed inside of larger ones and little shards of previously fired bisque ware may be placed in between vessels to stabilize the stacking or to assure the proper flow of air during firing. While loading the kiln, Rafa constantly tests for stability as he attempts to maximize the space within; kiln shelves are never used. Precise placement of the greenware is crucial, for the shrinking of the ware as it comes to temperature can amplify any imbalance, be it of an individual vessel or of the stacking itself: the physical ordeal of the firing is enough to cause an imbalanced work to move or collapse, which can then itself damage many other works in the same kiln load.

The works, while neither glazed nor subjected to a higher second firing, are sufficiently high-fired to attain hardness and compactness, as well as to maintain physical stability over time. After the single bisque firing, the works were returned to Hernández via truck to his home studio in Catalunya. There, he meticulously sanded and smoothed the surfaces of the vessels with varying grades of wet/dry sandpaper in preparation for a wax and light oil pigment treatment, a process that was almost as labour-intensive as the original fabrication of the piece. Hernández's intent was to reference the burnished surfaces of the ware of numerous traditional cultures – including pre-Columbian works such as those of the Nazca or Mochica, certain contemporary South- and Meso-American works and those of the American Southwest and Northwest, among others. Although the top layer is physically not compressed as traditional burnished surfaces are, the profundity of the medium is nevertheless evident through the translucent colour rubbed into the surface, enhanced by the satin sheen of the wax; one is able to see below this surface treatment in a way that would have been impossible if a topical coating such as a glaze would have been applied, obscuring the integrity of the material. The result is a tactile finish significantly more sensuous than the typical raw bisque surface.

Drawing on his long-standing interests in traditional and popular cultures, and tempering his subject choices with respect for the centuries-old *tinaja* form, Hernández was able to layer his imagery onto the elegant forms without contradiction or incongruity. The resulting works also play into one of the striking themes that run through Hernández's recent work in wood and bronze: the sense of conceptual balance that couples sometimes uneasily with a sense of physical imbalance – or, more precisely, with a sense of precarious physical balance. Although his *oeuvre* does



*Cigarra*. 2008. Earthenware, wax and oil pigment. 56 x 24.5 x 24.5 in. Photo by Jordi Puig.

In addition, manufacturing advances enabled new capital-intensive factories to produce objects similar to those traditional potters had created by hand – flowerpots, water jugs and the like – but their reduced production costs competitively undercut the sales prices of the cottage industries and made it difficult, if not impossible, for traditional potters to compete in the marketplace. Cast cement containers soon began to be used for water and wine storage in fields and warehouses, exacerbating the assault on a modernizing home life with a parallel strike on agricultural, storage, and distribution sectors as well.





include a graduate student sculpture that explored the idea of precarious balance (*Shuffle Off to Buffalo*, 1974, a music stand that was engineered to hold only a single piece of sheet music, that of the eponymous song), during the intervening decades, his sculpture, while often lyrical and even animated, was solidly connected to its earthly base. In concert with his increasing interest in the Asian scholars' stones in the early 1990s, however, Hernández began pushing his sculptures to balance on an unlikely axis. From earlier wood works such as *Belinda*, *Brevas*, and *Yada*

*Yada* to the massive piece *The Heroes Chin*, several of the *Anima* bronzes and many of the later iterations from the *100 Meditations* series, we see the play of weight and form striking an improbable equilibrium, a physical stability poised on the edge of a conceptual, almost treacherous, volatility. These new *tinaja* sculptures certainly can be counted within this area of Hernández's exploration, resting, as they do, on a seemingly impossibly small base. This sense of near-disaster provides a further dimension to those three more commonly explored as part of sculptural inquiry.

Hernández's collaboration with the Moreno León family has been ground-breaking for both parties and has pushed each to expand both the parameters and the limits of what the clay body could do. Each of the *tinajeros* has the skills to push his ware into new directions, but the intensity of their production schedule allows for little experimentation; nevertheless, in the past Rafa and Antonio had each created one or two personal works that played on the vessel as a human form. Their exceptional craftsmanship releases, rather than confines, their sense of creativity; however, the grueling schedule of ten-hour days, six days a week, as well as the task stratification that is essential to maintaining their production schedule, is hardly conducive to significant efforts towards alternative or creative pathways. The production of functional ware is their business, their livelihood; too much time and materials spent exploring unconventional forms would be too detrimental to the bottom line upon which this extended family depends.

Hernández approached this collaboration with admiration for the elegance of the traditional *tinaja* and respect for the masterful craftsmanship of the Moreno León potters. But the innovation in superimposing his own images – drawn from popular culture, historic art forms and motifs of other traditions – resulted in a completely new set of sculptures, which, while linked to his earlier *oeuvre*, are markedly different from it. Recontextualizing the *tinaja* into a contemporary narrative through the overlay of his chosen subject matter, Sam Hernández moved this collaboration into a new domain, as it simultaneously honoured the labour and persistence of these enduring *tinajeros*.



Top: Back row (left to right): Carlos, Rafael, Antonio and father Daniel Moreno. Front row: Sam Hernández. Centre: *Little King*, 2008.

Earthenware, wax and oil pigment.

59.5 x 27.15 x 27.15 in.

Photo by Jordi Puig.

Above: *Dichos y Bichos* (Detail in dried greenware stage).

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