

Reflections

In this current era of COVID-19, it's not uncommon or unusual for me to ponder and reflect on life prior to the pandemic as well as how day-to-day life will be drastically different post-pandemic.

Prior to isolation, I had been an avid volunteer at Millicent Rogers Museum (MRM) for 2½ years, also becoming a docent and leading tours the past year. I thoroughly enjoyed greeting guests and visitors as they arrived at the Museum and providing information on and insight into Millicent herself and the superb collection, exhibits and galleries they were about to explore. It was also quite fun to chat with our visitors and learn what brought them to our gem of a museum and to hear their impressions upon exiting.

This is such a special place, celebrating the arts and cultures of the southwest with 15 galleries and just about an even split between permanent and rotating exhibits. It is perfectly sized, occupying a home built in the 1940s, one Millicent visited often, and which was donated to the Museum in 1968. With a collection exceeding 7000 fabulous items and limited space, the Museum takes the opportunity to change about half the exhibits during the year to allow our visitors to be exposed to the vast collection including textiles/weavings, pottery, jewelry, Hispanic devotional art, sculptures, paintings, Spanish colonial furnishings, plus so much more. All is expertly displayed with extremely informative written descriptions.

Although I am an immense fan of all the galleries and exhibits, there is one gallery which truly "grabs me" and one I take great pleasure in showing to visitors. This is Gallery 4, celebrating Maria Martinez, the famous potter from San Ildefonso Pueblo, and her family. This room never ceases to fascinate and mesmerize me with what it contains - sheer beauty and creativity inspired by the genius and artistry of Maria Martinez, potter, and her husband Julian, painter.

The majority of what one sees in this gallery was donated to the Museum by the Martinez family, by Anita Da, one of Maria's daughters-in-law, who had befriended Paul, Millicent's son who is responsible for establishing the Museum in 1956, and this is part of the permanent collection. MRM now has the honor and obligation of being the caretakers of this art and tradition, something Millicent strove to accomplish with her collecting. There is a story in the Museum's archives that says that Anita had come to visit the Museum, saw a necklace in the jewelry exhibit that she remembered Millicent and Paul buying at the pueblo when she was young and mentioned this to Paul. Based on this discovery, she and Paul developed a friendly relationship and this may have led to Anita's decision to donate these items to MRM rather than to another museum or to be held at the pueblo.

Not being an artist at all, I'm enthralled by the fact that a lump of clay, some sand, volcanic ash, water, cow manure and scrap sheet metal can be transformed through skill, talent, creativity and imagination into such exquisite and beautiful pieces of art.

Maria was a genius. She was able to masterfully integrate traditional pottery making methods, honed to an artistic science, with brilliant innovation and imagination. The traditional process is time-consuming, intensive, requiring infinite patience: gathering and breaking up the clay (involving prayers, thanking Mother Nature for allowing her to take from her, corn meal offerings), sifting, blending, soaking, kneading, adding coil upon coil, sanding and smoothing using natural ingredients such as stones and

gourds, all done to perfection without a ripple or blemish and with incredibly thin walls, applying slip, polishing, burnishing to a shine like no other potter and creating a surface for painting of beautiful designs; and then comes the intricate firing process requiring constant vigilance beginning with the methodical building of the fire pit with the pots strategically placed, surrounded by sheet metal and large cow patties, smothering with dirt when the fire reached the critical point (here we see an amazing intuitive grasp of chemistry and physics, understanding just the correct heat/length of time) to create masterful works of art that were later emulated. She became a trendsetter much as Millicent herself had become.

The famous polychrome and black (or matte black) on black pieces that became the trademark of the Martinez's had an interesting beginning. Back in 1907 when Maria was only 20 years old, she and Julian were captivated and fascinated by the Pre-Columbian pottery sherds and their designs from excavation work of archeologist and researcher Hewitt at ruins not far from San Ildefonso (what is now Bandelier). Hewitt strongly encouraged Maria to continue and develop her pottery making and create pots using the same designs as found on the sherds (which actually were black on cream) and this led to their beautiful polychrome pottery and to re-creating and re-inventing the highly polished and lustrous black on black pieces, a far simpler form of which existed ages before. At this young age, Maria was already an accomplished **potter** but more for utilitarian purposes; what she became very quickly with Julian was an innovator and great **artist** who continued for 70 years developing and refining her genius.

This reinvention and development of matte black on black developed through experimentation and trial and error. Although it appears the designs and figures are painted onto the pottery, it is rather the opposite. It is actually a kind of negative process: before firing, using yucca leaves as brushes, Julian, already an accomplished painter, outlined figures (the avanyu, feathers, geometric figures, animals, plus so much more) on the polished finish, then matte painted the background using a diluted clay and mineral powder mixture; after the intensive firing process, the pots were carefully removed with the lustrous polished areas glowing in black, the figures themselves appear as if they were what was painted rather than the background – a marvelous conception. Further cleaning off of ash, more polishing and burnishing and, voila, exquisite pieces of art.

Maria and Julian worked side by side until his death in early 1940's. Meanwhile, Maria was teaching and sharing with family members and other pueblo potters her technique. For painting after Julian's death, Maria teamed with her daughter-in-law Santana, her third son Popovi (whose wife was Anita mentioned above), and her grandson Tony Da, a superb potter and painter himself, to ensure her legacy would be passed down through generations, keeping the tradition alive, by watching and working side by side. The talent, skill and genius continue today as one sees in this room and in the Museum's marvelous store, with great grandchildren and great great grandchildren producing magnificent pieces of art.

Maria was humble and unprepossessing, loved to pot, was very grateful to Hewitt for his encouragement, was eager to teach and demonstrate, plus she was also very much a member of her Pueblo community sharing what she had -- food, money, aid – and all the while garnering awards for her genius.

I never cease to be in awe when visiting this gallery. There is a quote I read in one of the many books on clay owned by the Museum that I find quite apropos here: "The gift of a great pot is the gift of what its creator put within it, which it will forever contain. It holds the ether of genius." Maria Martinez.....a veritable genius.

Gallery 4 is just one of 15 impressive galleries at Millicent Rogers Museum and I, for one, am looking forward to the Museum reopening and again welcoming guests and visitors. I heartily encourage anyone interested in the arts of the southwest to come by and visit as well.

In the meantime, the Museum's store, which is another gem and a wonderful extension of the Museum itself, is currently open on a limited basis, Thursday through Saturday from 12 to 4, free of charge. The store offers an incredible variety and array of original-only and handmade art of the southwest, creations of the past as well as current day, and creations by pueblo and local artists including traditional and contemporary styles -- something for everyone!

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