

POTS ABOUT BIRDS



Pottery Discussion #6
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The first two of these Discussions started with paintings of museum-quality pots by Kevin McDermott, and so does this one. This time, he gave us an early 20th century Acoma olla with a parrot.

You expect to see a parrot on an Acoma pot, but once you think about it, you have to wonder why Acoma potters keep painting a rare bird from somewhere else. Parrots aren't native to any part of the pottery southwest.

Quick answer. The ancients prized parrots and traded for them, bringing them in from far down in Mexico for close to two thousand years. According to Emil Haury, who excavated Snaketown, the Hohokam brought parrots and macaws in as trade items as early as 100 A.D. Parrot images may not show up on Hohokam pottery, but they show up a lot of other places.



Even the secretive Mimbres had parrots, and they put them on their bowls. This 10" diameter Mimbres Classic bowl from 1050 shows two of

them standing on their owner's back. It's not always easy to explain why people act the way they do on Mimbres pottery.

What we can explain is the wide interest in parrots. It makes a lot of sense. When you look at the southwestern landscape, you don't see vivid reds and greens. We learned that bright reds were so scarce in California that basketmakers took the red crowns from woodpeckers and put them on their finest ceremonial baskets. When the Spanish arrived in their great ships wearing red-dyed clothing, it was pretty obvious that these new guys packed a lot of important magic.

So it's no surprise that parrots were a valuable commodity in the prehistoric southwest. Just for our own collection, we've found prehistoric bowls with parrots from as far west as Hopi and as far east as Santa Fe. Some came from areas that dropped below freezing in the winter, so keeping those parrots healthy would have been a major problem. Nevertheless, they proliferated.



This one is a 6" diameter Cedar Creek Polychrome. It was made about 1350 near the snowy Alpine mountains of Northern Arizona, four hundred miles away from Mimbres country.

It started our search for ancient parrots.



These are details from two other pieces we have at home. The left detail shows the parrots on a Bidahochi Polychrome jar from 1450 that came from Hopi country. We show that one in our books. The right-hand parrot is on a Medio Glaze Polychrome bowl that's in the third of these discussions, the one on Glaze Paint Pottery. That bowl came from near Santa Fe about 1475.

When the Spanish arrived, the parrots were still around. As Kevin McDermott's painting on the cover reminds us, they settled in at Acoma and stayed there. This 10-1/2" diameter jar from 1850 in Lanmon and Harlow's *The Pottery of Acoma Pueblo* is the earliest Acoma parrot piece



I found. Acoma potters remembered how to draw a parrot, and it didn't take long for them to take their parrots to new heights. The painting on the pot on the cover may have been taken from a museum piece, but it has nothing on the fabulous parrot on the 12" diameter jar on the left. That piece dates from 1885.



It also can't compare with the parrots of today. The 10-1/2" diameter olla on the right was made by Joseph Cerno Jr. in 2010. In the 170 years since they made the piece on the previous page, Acoma potters have created thousands of spectacular parrots.

Parrots weren't the first birds to show up on Southwestern pottery. Although the Hohokam brought in the first ones, they didn't bother to make parrot images. They did give us hundreds of images and effigies of other birds during their thousand-year existence, and they weren't always precise in their species portrayals.

Some Hohokam birds are easy to identify, but most aren't. The squawking whatever-bird on the left is Sacaton Red on Buff from 1050. It's just 5-1/2" long, but its quack resonates as loudly as ever.



The 10-1/4" wide scoop on the right dates from 1350 and gives a better hint. The birds running across it look like turkeys.

Over the centuries, the prehistoric potters gave us a lot of birds. We can identify a few, but others defy analysis.



The fat bird on the left might be a quail. It's a Salado Red from 1350, and it's 6-1/2" long. There's no easy identification for the 8-1/4" long Ramos Polychrome bird. It's from the Casas Grandes culture below the border in Chihuahua. It dates from 1450 and once had a strap handle, but that handle is long gone.



Other birds are easier to recognize. The Mimbres Classic bowl from 1050 at the left pretty clearly shows a turkey. However, as usual, the Mimbres leave us with questions, like why the turkey is standing on the dog's back.

Over the centuries, poultry kept reappearing. For the chicken at the right, we can thank Virgil Ortiz's great-grandmother. It's on a 5-1/4" diameter bowl that Reyes Romero made about 1960 at Cochiti Pueblo.

Acoma may have trademarked the parrot, but it wasn't the only Pueblo with a proprietary bird. Zia's roadrunner is every bit as ubiquitous.

The earliest one we've seen is in Harlow and Lanmon's *The Pottery of Zia Pueblo*, and it's an 11-1/2" diameter olla that could have been made as early as 1860. The birds around the neck are clear ancestors of the roadrunners that still romp about Zia pottery.



The roadrunner is the State Bird of New Mexico, and some probably still run around at the Pueblo, but Zia potters just call this the Zia Bird. It's not that its appearance or presentation is totally formalized. Its tail changes from pot to pot, as do its wings and its topknot.

It often doesn't run at all. It can stand placidly, like the birds on the jar above. It usually does run, but it also can leap, fly, or screech to a halt. The next page shows a couple of those acrobatic variations, but if you want to understand the basic Zia bird in its full glory, look at the canteen in the main illustration.

Remember this image and you'll know what a Zia Bird looks like, This 9" wide canteen was made by Kathy Pino about 1960. Kathy was one of the finest Zia pottery painters, and nobody would have been more qualified to define the evolved Zia Bird prototype.



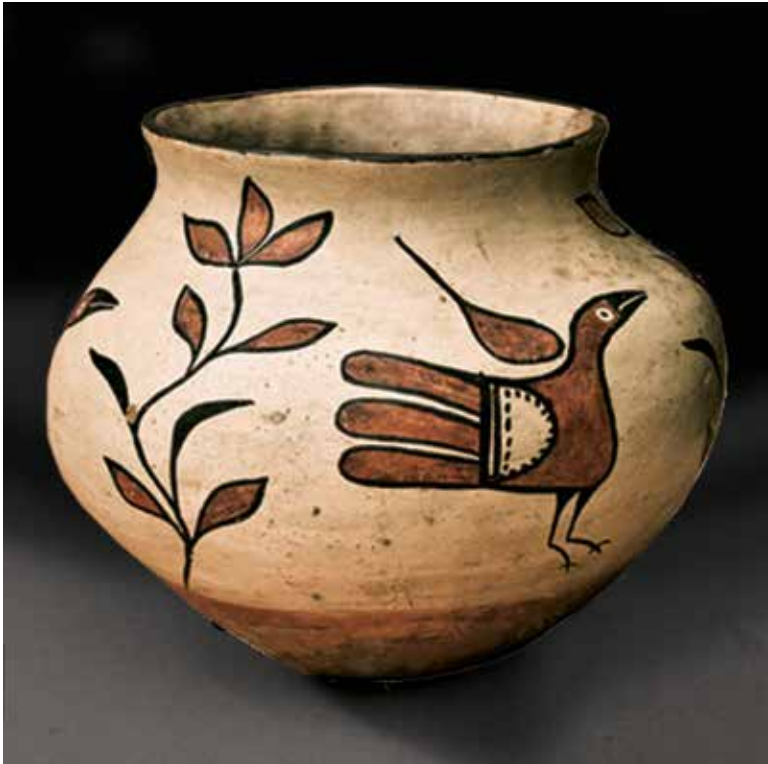
However, it's just a starting point. The two pots below begin to suggest how different each Zia bird could be from the next, both in gesture and in drawing.



The 4-1/4" high jar on the left with the backpedaling bird was done by Eusebia Shije in 1985. She was a well known and prolific Zia potter.

The 8" high canteen on the right was made about 1955 by Kathy Pino's older sister, Seferina Bell. During those years, Seferina was probably Zia's best-known potter.

Meanwhile, other tribes and Pueblos did other things with birds. Kewa Pueblo, which was called Santo Domingo in 1920 when this pot was made, has tribal customs which discourage animal portrayals, and birds are one of the few animals allowed. Kewa is a conservative Pueblo, and in the 1990s, a young potter, Andrew Pacheco, got around the prohibitions by putting dinosaurs on his pots.



The floral and bird images in black and red make this 10-1/4" diameter olla a pure example of the Santo Domingo Polychrome type. The other prevalent type at the Pueblo in those days, Kiua Polychrome, had black geometric designs with no red in the designs. This bird borrows a lot from Zia's roadrunner and Acoma's parrot. Acoma, Zia and Kewa are all same-language Keresan Pueblos, and crossovers in their designs show up often.

This olla and the the Zia pieces on the previous page are down-the-middle examples of their pottery types. Since we've always preferred the

old and unusual, we don't spend a lot of time looking for down-the-middle examples. Instead, we're more excited when we find things like this 6-3/4" long bird from San Ildefonso made in 1882.



The two birds below date from 1890. The 7-1/2" long bird on the left is from Tohono O'odham. We were told it's a dove, so I suppose we could call the San Ildefonso one a dove as well. The other bird, an undefined species, is from Maricopa. It's 6" long and it falls well within our old-and-unusual guidelines.

We search for pieces like these, and few of the pieces in this



exercise describe our goals better than the two on this page and the three on the page before.

Considering all we've learned about Indian culture and the importance of eagles and their feathers, we're a little surprised we haven't seen more eagles. In all our collecting, we've only come up with these two. The first is the eagle as we've always pictured him, wings spread, perched on a log. It's by Dorothy and Paul Gutierrez of Santa Clara, it's 3-1/4" wide and they made it in 1998.

The other is an eagle we never thought we'd see. It's a 5" high storyteller made by Loren Wallowing Bull of Jemez in 2014. The piece is fascinating, and the mental picture inspired by Loren's name is almost as interesting.



So far, we've spent a lot of time with parrots and roadrunners and a little with some other birds. There's one more bird that commands major attention in the Pueblos.

Acoma claims the parrot and Zia claims the roadrunner, but Zuni has just as strong a claim for the owl.

They've made hundreds, perhaps thousands of them since the 1800s in all sizes and shapes. In an intertribal needle, a Zuni potter explained why all Zuni homes have a owl sitting in the front window. It's a bad-luck omen for Navajos, so it scares them away.

The 7" wide fellow below, loaded with Navajo-intimidating attitude, was made about 1930.



Although the Zunis made a lot of less menacing ones, this one has all the Zuni owl characteristics. If it were the only Zuni owl you'd ever seen, you'd be able to recognize the next one you saw as Zuni,

We could fill page after page with Zuni owls, but they aren't a Zuni exclusive. Most other Pueblos make owl figurines.



This 4" tall fellow came from Acoma in 1960. The 6-1/2" tall one on the left below came from Cochiti about 1990, and Diane Wade of Isleta made the 3-1/2" one on the right in 2001. They're all different, but none offer particular surprises. The surprises come on the next page.



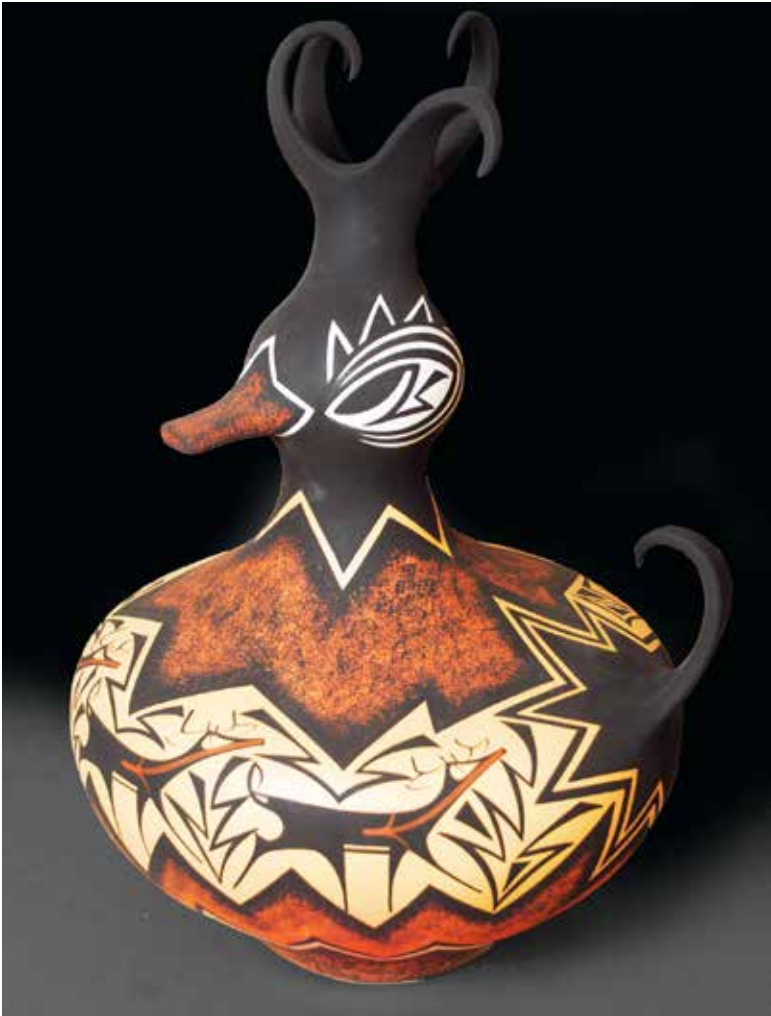
These aren't your everyday owls. Nicolas Ortiz of Mata Ortiz made the big black one in 2006. It's 12" high.

If you find this owl a bit unexpected, look at the next two.



The one on the left is by Laura Gachupin of Jemez. It's 4" wide and she made it in 1993. The one on the right is only 1-3/8" high. Cordi Gomez of Pojoaque made it in 1994. What these prove is that when you think you've seen it all, you haven't.





Of all the birds in this exercise, we offer this sort-of-a-duck as the most preposterous.

It's monstrous, 17-1/2" high. Anderson and Avelia Peynetsa of Zuni made it in 2014. They grew up knowing Zuni traditions, but nothing could be further in spirit from the naturalistic owls the Zunis have made since the middle of the nineteenth century.

One thing that shouldn't come as a surprise is that artists strive to find new ways to present things, and stretching reality has always been a favorite method. The quest leads to things like this science-fiction version of a duck.

This doesn't mean that every artist is leaving reality behind. At the 2019 Indian Market, I found the biggest surprise I'd had in years.

Bernice Suazo Naranjo has been known as a master of Santa Clara's incised polished brownware for thirty years. When I stopped by her booth, I saw a lot of the brown pieces I expected. I also saw this.



With its lid, it's 12-3/4" high, and it's totally matte. On reflection, I might have considered that Bernice is Jody Folwell's sister-in-law, and experimentation beyond the expected runs in the family.

This may not be old, but its romanticized realism, completely outside Bernice's Santa Clara tradition, makes it the winner for unusual.

As Alfred Hitchcock would have said, The Birds is here. Real or imagined.

Image on page 2 is from *Within the Underworld Sky* by Barbara Moulard
Lower left image on page 6 is from *Painted by a Distant Hand* by Steven LeBlanc
Image on page 7 is from *The Pottery of Zia Pueblo* by Francis Harlow and Dwight Lanmon
All other images are from the joint Hayes/Blom collection.