FIRE CLOUD POTS



Pottery Discussion #8
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Some pots have black smudges. They're called fire clouds, and they happen when hot coals scorch them in the firing. On some, a fire cloud is a disqualifying flaw. On others, it's the main decorative element.

Potters have loved and hated fire clouds for centuries. The pot on the front is a Tuzigoot Red pitcher from about 1300, made by the Sinagua people of central Arizona. Of all the early peoples, the Sinagua cherished the fire cloud the most and mastered it the best

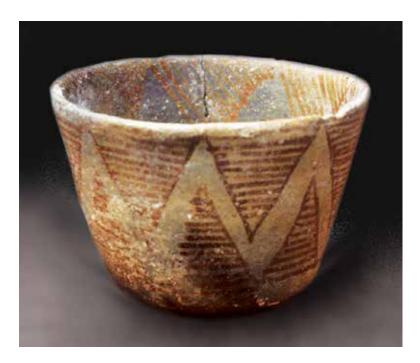


Across most of the prehistoric Southwest, fire clouds weren't an issue. This lumpy little Alma Plain bowl is from around 400. It's the earliest fire-clouded piece in our collection, and it's pretty clear that the Mogollon who made it didn't worry about black clouds. In most places, potters didn't worry about them for another eight hundred years.

The southern-Arizona Hohokam were the exception, although they weren't quite as fastidious in the beginning as they became later.

The 4-3/4" Snaketown Red on buff bowl on the top of the next page dates from about 600, and it's one of our earliest Hohokam pieces. It has a shaded clouding on its interior and a prominent cloud on the outside.

Based on what we've observed from looking at hundreds of

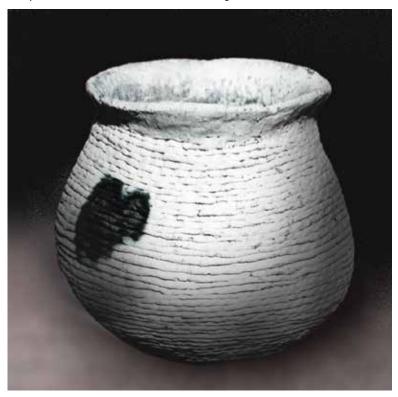


Hohokam pieces, those clouds never would have been tolerated later. If you look through the Hohokam pages in our books, the clouds on this jar are the only ones you'll see on any of the red on buff pieces the Hohokam made until the 1300s. It took until the 1100s for them to get comfortable with fire clouds, and that only happened because they were influenced by another culture and used them on their redware.

Other cultures tolerated fire clouds. Anasazi pieces like this 9" long Lino Gray ladle dates from around 650, and as with the little Mogollon jar, the clouds were irrelevant.



It's not clear whether the Anasazi or the Mogollon invented corrugated pottery, but by 900, both cultures made a lot of examples. They didn't make a lot like this one, though.



Fire clouds showed up on Ancestral pieces for the next few centuries, but never more emphatically than on this 6-1/4" tall Chaco Corrugated jar from around 900. It's the only corrugated jar we've ever seen that has a white kaolin slip,. That black cloud couldn't have a greater showcase.

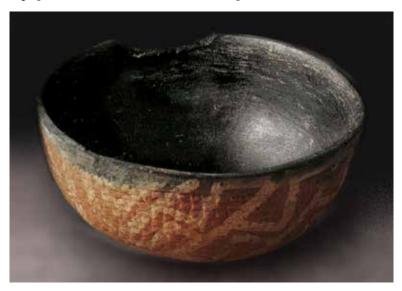
While the Anasazi were busy up north making their white and gray ware, the Mogollon stayed in central Arizona and New Mexico and continued making brownware. Early on, they started tooling the surface of their pieces with intricate designs and centuries before anyone else in the Southwest, they figured out how to give their pieces a hard polish.

Like the Anasazi, the Mogollon weren't bothered by fire clouds. The 6" diameter Three Circle Neck Banded jar at the top of the next page is from 750, and it has all the characteristics that defined the best early Mogollon pottery. It has shiny high polish, it has fine tooling around its neck, and it has a total disregard for fire clouds.



Around 1100, the Mogollon learned how to make those clouds practical.

This 4-1/4" diameter McDonald Corrugated bowl from that period shows how the Mogollon captured the fire cloud and put it to use. They turned their bowls upside down when they fired them and created a high polished black interior that made the pieces easier to clean.



Those shiny black bowl interiors weren't a Mogollon exclusive. The Salado people lived up the hill from the Hopi, and they used them on their red bowls as well.

Then, according to oral history and pottery evidence, some of them came down the mountain around 1100. They moved in with the Hohokam, merged their pottery traditions and copied each other's styles. Up the hill, the Salado made red on brown pieces that looked like Hohokam pots while down on the flatland, the Hohokam made red bowls with black-fired centers like the Salado.

When the Hohokam started making this new red pottery, they really got into it.

The Salt Red jar below sits in an Indian museum in California, and it's about the biggest Southwestern pot we've ever seen, more than three feet in diameter. Pottery scholars from the area have told us about even bigger ones and stressed the point that potters arranged their fuel deliberately to create fire clouds as a decorative element. The black spaces on this piece were no accident.



I'm less impressed by its fire clouds than I am by its size. I try to picture a native potter forming it, handling it, arranging the fuel for firing and taking it out of the coals. Immediately, the picture becomes

surrealistic, since I'm picturing a woman who probably wasn't much more than four feet tall picking it up and carrying from the house to the firing pit and back.

The Hohokam may have used fire clouds as a decorative element, but they were nowhere near as skilled with them as their neighbors to the north.

You'll read that the Sinagua from central Arizona primarily made undecorated plainware, which is about as mindless a description as I can imagine. They polished their undecorated red pots to a sheen that few other early peoples ever achieved, then carefully arranged different fuels around their pieces to create clouds with startling color variations.



This Tuzigoot Red bowl dates from about 1300. It's 11" in diameter, and anybody who tells you it's an undecorated piece needs to do a lot of rethinking.

I meant it when I said the Sinagua were the masters of the fire cloud.

As the years went by, painted decoration became more important. Potters paid less attention to plainware,. It had less trade value than the fancy painted pieces.

Fire clouds weren't compatible with the painted designs, so as the Hohokam had done a thousand years earlier, potters learned how to avoid them in firing. As a result, you won't find a lot of prominent clouds intruding on historic pieces.

There were only two places where they were broadly accepted. One group had a technique that made them unavoidable, and the other, like the Hohokam and Sinagua, used them as decoration.



On Navajo pottery, clouds were just about universal. This 6-3/4" tall jar is nearly a century old. It has all the characteristics that have distinguished Navajo potter since the 19th century. The fine brown clay, the sculpted fillet rim around the neck and the resin coating define the craft. When the Navajo made pottery, they'd fire it, then waterproof it

by coating it with resin right after they took it out of the fire. Fire clouds may be scarce on historic and modern pottery, but you'll have a hard time finding a Navajo brownware piece that doesn't have them.

Ohkay Owinge was the other exception. During the years when it was still called San Juan Pueblo, potters made distinctive redware and blackware with no painted decoration. The style first appeared in the 19th century and lasted until it went out of fashion about 1920,

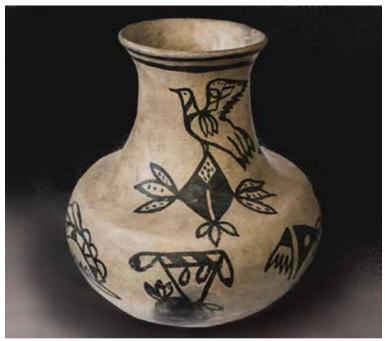
Although Santa Clara potters made a few pieces, the style was really San Juan's property. All the pieces had high polish and, whether they were fired red or black, jars and bowls always had a slipped upper body and an equally well polished unslipped underbody that provided a color change.

The redware almost always had prominent fire clouds. You'd even see darker black clouds on the unslipped underbodies of the blackware.



This little (4-5/8") bowl is from about 1910. Its shape gives it special interest. I've never seen this undulating rim on another piece of San Juan pottery from the period. However, nothing else about it is unusual. The high-polish red upper body, the polished tan lower body and the fire clouds make it s clear example of the time, the place and the type.

In other places, fire clouds were an accident but didn't necessarily disqualify the piece. The two pieces below, a 9-1/2" tall jar from Tesuque made about 1890, and an 11-1/2" olla from San Ildefonso made about 1910, both have those accidents.





The potters may not have cared for those clouds, but they weren't an overriding concern.

At Hopi, the story was a bit different. A big, black cloud would disqualify a piece, but Hopi potters used variations in firing material and placement to create subtle shadings.

The background colors on a single well-fired Hopi piece can vary from a pale yellow that's near-white to a strong orange.

The pot below tells a different story. It's Hopi from about 1870, and it reveals how Hopis fired a lot of their pieces back then. At most Pueblos, traditional pieces were either dung-fired or wood fired, and that's true of most modern traditional Hopi pieces.

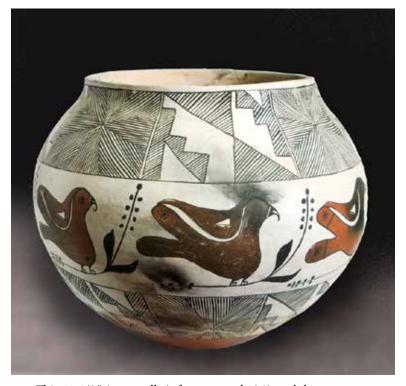


However, back when they made this 13-1/2" diameter jar, the fuel of choice was coal. The other fire clouds we've shown came from exposure to hot coals. This piece goes one better The black marks are actual coal that stuck to the piece during firing.

Here, "hot coals" has a literal meaning.

By the latter part of the 20th century, Southwestern pottery had pretty well stopped being utilitarian and had become for-the-market art. Dealers and buyers pushed the standards ever higher, and the market wouldn't accept accidental fire clouds.

The requirement became so universal that some Pueblos simply stopped traditional firing and switched to gas or electric kilns. It isn't easy to find a recent traditionally fired Acoma, Laguna or Zuni piece, and any other Pueblo who makes whiteware is most likely using kilns. The kiln even surfaced at Hopi, sometimes on their yellowware.



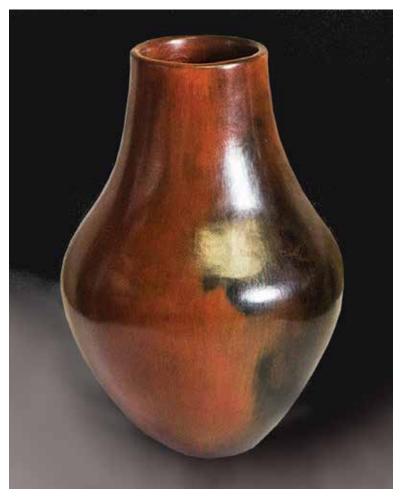
This 11-1/2" Acoma olla is from around 1960, and the potter probably burst into tears when she took it out of the fire. The most surprising thing about it is that she didn't break it and throw it away.

Fire clouds didn't vanish forever. The Navajo still liked them. By the

1990s, a new generation of Navajo potters changed the standards, but they didn't change the technique, and they kept the fire clouds.

They made their resin-coated brownware the traditional way, just like they'd made the lumpy jar a few pages back, but Alice Cling and her followers gentrified the art.

Work by Lorraine Williams, Susie Crank, Samuel Manymules and others changed the perception of Navajo pottery. Alice Cling made this 6-1/2" tall jar in 2018, and it displays the level of precision she'd established thirty years before.



Thanks to Alice and the others, dealers and collectors accepted fire clouds on Navajo ware, but wouldn't tolerate them on new pieces from almost aywhere else.

The prohibition held into the 1990s, then took another turn. For

quite a few years, the general thinking had been that the painted ware was the fine art and that the undecorated work was just utilitarian craft.

This mindset pushed a whole genre of pottery into the background. Since undecorated micaceous wares from the northern Pueblos weren't trying to be art, an occasional fire cloud seemed about what you'd expect.

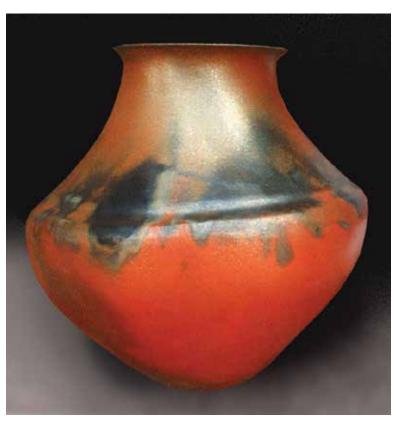
It took another potter to change the thinking.

Lonnie Vigil of Nambe Pueblo started out making polished pieces like they made at Santa Clara and other Pueblos, but in the 1990s, he got serious about micaceous ware and realized that fire clouds were an appropriate decorative element.

Before long, he was showing at Indian Market, winning an occasional ribbon and being told that, nice as they were, his pieces didn't belong there.

Then in 1999, a book on micaceous pottery came out, and in 2001, one of Lonnie's big micaceous pieces won Best in Show at Market.

When I say "big" in reference to Lonnie's work, it's not a relative term. The pot below is in that book, and the photo shows Lonnie sitting next to it. There's no dimension attributed to it, but like the Hohokam



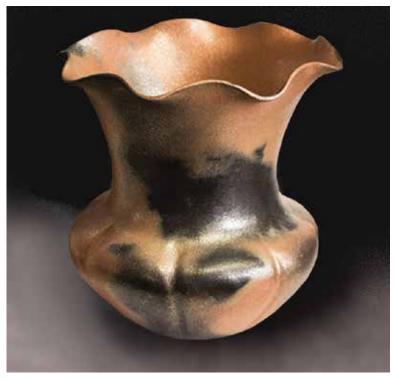
jar in the prehistoric section of this piece, it looks to be three feet or more across. It took only a few months after that 2001 market for the world to recognize him as a major artist.

Lonnie's work made it clear that his fire clouds were no accident, and ever since potters have proudly used them as the decoration on their unpainted pieces.

Fire clouds especially lend themselves to micaceous pieces, and Taos and Jicarilla Apache potters have made frequent use of them.

To me, Angie Yazzie of Taos is the most skilled proponent of the genre. Her pieces have a sculptural grace that few potters ever achieve, and she makes them thin and implausibly light in weight.

When some people toured my collection a while ago, I showed them this 9" tall jar Angie made in 2008. One woman picked it up and couldn't accept how light it was. She asked, "Is it plastic?"

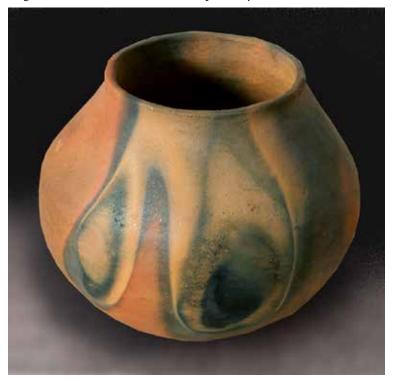


I'll probably never find a better example of the potter's craft. After I think about all the styles and genres from all the Pueblos and tribes and the thousands of pieces I've seen and held, its combination of imaginative sculptural shape, perfect surface and almost inconceivable thinness make a mere perfect ten score seem less than it deserves.

Angie's piece is fabulous, but we still can't say it reached the highest level of fire-clouding. There were those Sinagua pots with all their colors, and we never saw anyone else try anything like them.

Until 2001. This 8-1/2" diameter jar is by a potter named Martina Flores, and she's not from a Pueblo. She's a Kumeyaay Indian from the Southern California border. Although they concentrate on baskets, the Kumeyaay have a pottery tradition that goes back for more than a century.

We'd thought the Sinagua experiment was gone and done, forgotten forever. Then we saw some pieces by Martina.



Now, let's see what's coming next.

The jar on page 6 is in the collection of the Museum of the American Indian in Novato, California.

The San Ildefonso pot on the bottom of page 10 is courtesy of Pottery of the Southwest, Santa Fe, New Mexico

The image on page 14 is from *All That Glitters* by Duane Anderson. All other images are from the joint Hayes/Blom collection.