

POTS WITH PAINTED PEOPLE



Pottery Discussion #4

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Summerhouse Indian Art

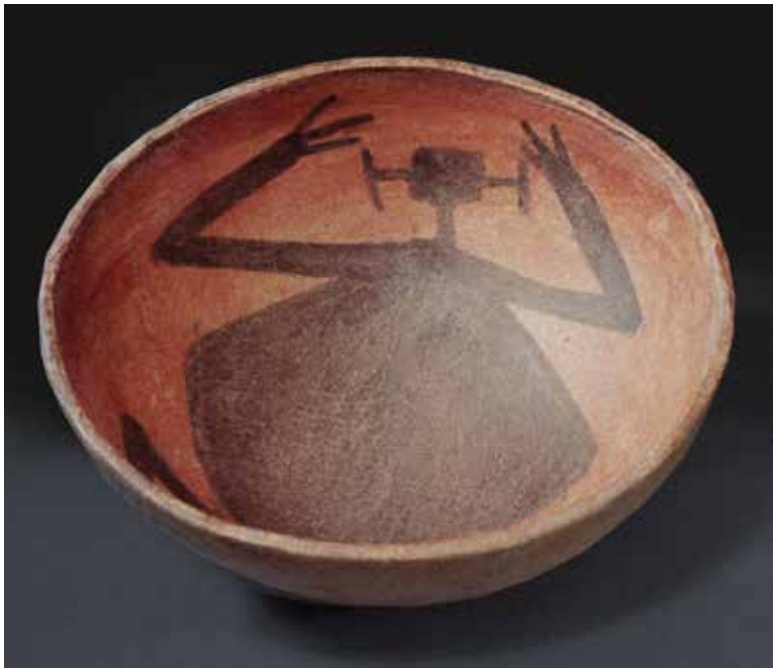
Just a tiny percentage of Southwestern pottery offers images of people.

We dug deep to find the examples in this piece, although we didn't have to look far for the one on the cover.

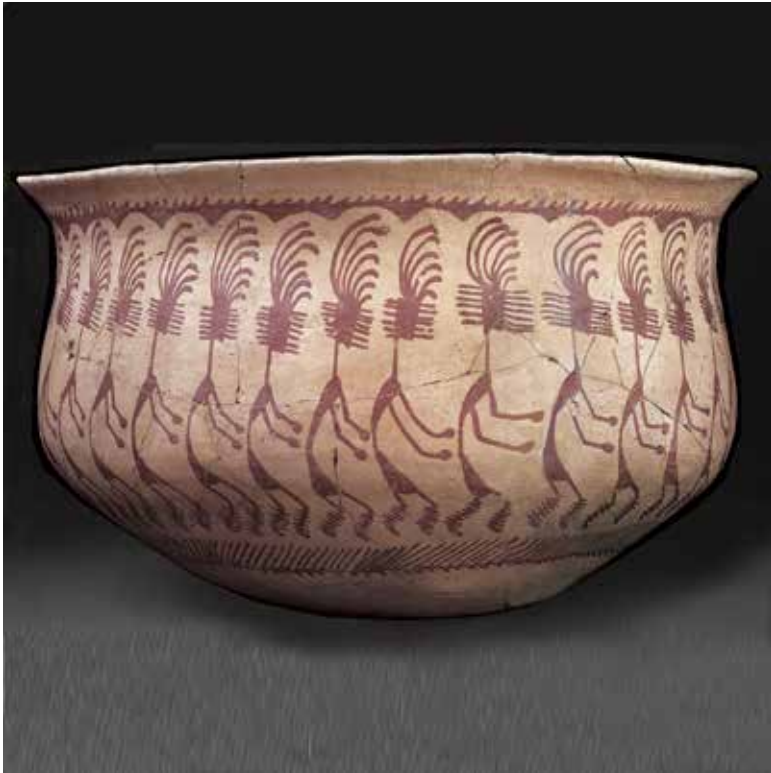
I have a special affection for it. It's a 6" wide homage to a massive sixteenth-century canteen that lives in a seldom-visited museum at an abandoned Pueblo. We showed it in our *The Desert Southwest*.

The new one is by Michael Kanteena of Laguna Pueblo, and he was at the Wheelwright Museum Trading Post where I saw it in 2011. I said, "Oh, you've been to Gran Quivira and seen the pot." He answered, "No, I copied it out of your book." Obviously, we had to buy it.

The earliest piece I found is a Bluff Black on red that's in a Bureau of Land Management museum. It's 9" in diameter, dates from about 825 and came from the Abajo mountains in Utah. Abajo is near Hopi, and its figure suggests a long-standing custom. What sticks out from the side of the figure's head seems to be the hair whorls that young Hopi women still wear ceremonially. They occasionally show up on pots. A few pages on, there's one from 1600 and another from 1995.



A few years later and a few hundred miles away in Arizona, the Hohokam made Santa Cruz Red on buff pottery. The big one below is from the Phoenix area and dates from about 875. The parade of more than two dozen dancers surrounding it makes it the most populated piece I found in my searches.



It's not that figurative representations are scarce in prehistory. Most of the early cultures made figurines, and the Hohokam made a lot of them. The rock art of the day showed all kinds of human and animal figures, often cartoony like these dancers. It's just that they seldom painted them on pots.

Most of the early pots with painted people we've seen are from the Hohokam and other Arizona groups. Despite the Utah piece on the previous page, they're scarce in the Ancestral Puebloan world.

Up north in what we used to call Anasazi country, finding people painted on pots is next to impossible. In all the searching we've done over the last thirty years, we've only found one we could bring home, and we've seen few others. It's on the next page, and the amount of surface area it devotes to the image says a lot about how comfortable the Ancestrals were with portrayals.



This is a Mancos Black on white from about 1025. It's 4-3/4" in diameter and it came from southwest Colorado, a couple of hundred miles east of the Abajo mountains where the earliest pot in this exercise came from. I always loved the little six-fingered man and can't help wondering if something genetic was going on in Mancos back then.

Whatever reticence they had up north about portraying humans on pots didn't extend a few hundred miles south to southern New Mexico. A few years after the Anasazi made this, the Mimbres redefined pictorial imagery on pottery. Between 1050 and 1130, the isolated Mimbres culture produced hundreds of pieces of pictorial pottery, and a lot of them had human figures.

Although the Hohokam piece on the previous page showed dancers in motion, most early portrayals were static, like the little man in the middle of the Mancos pot. Mimbres pottery showed people in every kind of conceivable action and occasionally in inexplicable action, like the 9-1/2" diameter bowl at the top of the next page.

All the Mimbres Classic pieces pictured here have a hole punched through the bottom. Those holes are a big part of the Mimbres mystique. Many came from burials, carefully laid over the deceased's face with a hole punched through to allow the spirit to escape. Those

punched-hole pots may not always be from burials. This one with the strange crawling guys has the hole punched through from the wrong side, which suggests a later dealer trying to add a bit of mystery.



Not every Mimbres Classic piece showed strange behavior. Quite a few depicted everyday life. The 7-1/2" diameter bowl at the left below shows a happy hunt with mom, dad, the bagged quarry and the family dogs. The 10" one on the right suggests a far less successful hunt with the bear the clear winner.





The Mimbres pictured every kind of human and animal action and interaction, but not always prettily. The childbirth on this 7" bowl may not be as romantic as I'd wish, but the child is at least waving hello.

The Mimbres didn't last forever. By 1150, they dispersed and their pictorial pottery disappeared.

Farther north, a new religion with new iconography emerged. By 1300, kachinas offered new magic and the pottery respected it. The 11" Four Mile Polychrome bowl on the left dates from around 1325 and the Pinedale Polychrome bowl next to it came about 25 years later.



Meanwhile, over at Hopi, human figures started to achieve a more representational appearance. The Jeddito Black on yellow bowl on the left is about 7" in diameter was made around 1350, and it shows people standing in a circle watching dancers. Now we're not looking at stick figures or abstract distortions, we're seeing normally proportioned people.

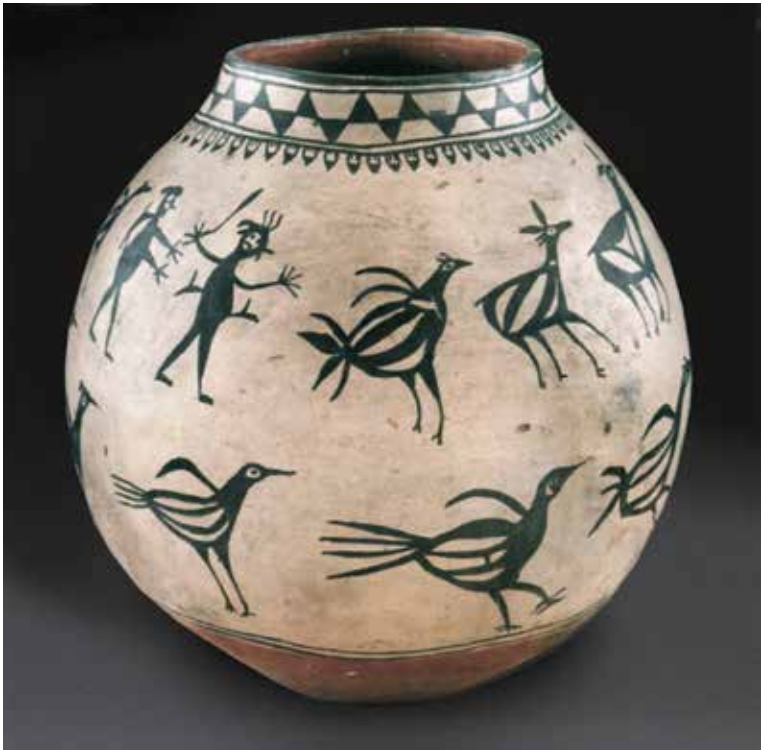


“Normal,” however, doesn’t exclude exaggeration. Just compare the hair whorls on page two with the ones on the maiden in this 10” long Sikyatki Polychrome ladle from 1600.

Accurate depiction wasn’t mandatory. It didn’t show up for a few more centuries.

When the railroad came to the Southwest in 1880, the tourist age began. Now there were dealers looking for profit, and at a few Pueblos, potters were willing to cash in on the new market.

Cochiti, the first Pueblo south of Santa Fe and Tesuque, the first to the north, were the first to leap into the tourist market. Early in the game, Tesuque started mass-producing figurines and made relatively few pots, while Cochiti provided pots with imaginative painted images. Some of them had people on them.



Just like at Mimbres, a Cochiti potter gave us the hunt, more organized than the Mimbres family affair and after far more plentiful game. This big storage jar dates from around 1895, is 19-1/4" high and now lives at the Field Museum in Chicago.

Cochiti made more figurines than pots in those years, but continued putting whimsical images on the pots they made.

These two pieces are from about 1910, and they show the range of subject matter Cochiti potters considered fair game. The 12" high stepped-rim bowl on the left shows Koshare clowns, the troublemakers at Pueblo dances, and the 11-1/2" diameter jar on the right from the Gallegos Collection gives us a hunt that's even more fun than the Mimbres one.



Tourists didn't just go to Santa Fe. We'd be hard-pressed to find a more blatantly commercial tourist piece than this 7-1/4" wide jar from the Maricopa Indians outside of Phoenix. The only place a Maricopa would have seen an Indian that looked like this would be at a Wild



West Show or on a penny. Pottery sales were an essential lifeline for the Maricopa during those years.

In the nineteenth century, they were a prosperous farming tribe, but by 1910, they were confined to surplus-land reservations where politicians and developers had siphoned off the water supply. Since the men could no longer earn a living farming, the women made up for it by making pots for tourists.



In southern Arizona, tourist pottery stayed important through the twentieth century. By the 1980s, an enterprising Tohono O’odham family named Angea started producing large amounts of pottery, and hit on a crowd-pleaser. “Friendship Jars” like this 5-1/2” tall piece from around 1995, showed a circle of dancers. These jars all looked pretty much alike, and the Angeas made so many of them that critics decided they were too popular and not worth serious attention.

So far, the Friendship Jar remains the only Southwestern pottery with people painted on it to be dismissed as too common.

The next wave of pottery with figurative images got its first serious attention when Rafael Medina of Zia started painting acrylic figures on his wife's pottery. Rafael's son Marcellus Medina and his wife Elizabeth continued expanding on the genre.

At first, Rafael and Marcellus confined their work to properly Pueblo subject matter, like Indian dancers..



Marcellus and Elizabeth made this 5-1/2" high jar in 1993, and in the years since, they've made increasingly imaginative pieces. In one of my favorite museum installations, Marcellus collaborated with Santa Clara sculptor Roxanne Swentzell to create a thousand-year historic timeline at the Poeh Museum at Pojoaque. Roxanne made the figures and Marcellus painted the backdrops.

Other potters began painting figures on their pieces, and sometimes it ran in families. At Hopi, descendants of Nampeyo's granddaughter,

Priscilla Namingha, have done a lot with pictorial pieces.

Jean Sahme, an important potter for forty years, gave us the 6-3/4" tile at left below in 1995. During that time, she made a lot of these tiles, some of which now line a sink counter in a bathroom at the Museum of Northern Arizona. That the Museum did this always disturbed us,. We still have visions of a clueless janitor cleaning them with Comet and wiping off the images.

We especially like this particular tile. Jean's goofy Vogue model Hopi maiden has her hair whorls in reasonably correct proportion. Judging by the pieces in this exercise, it took almost 1,200 years to get those whorls sized properly.



Ida Sahmie, a Navajo, married Jean's brother. She combined her Navajo disciplines with what she learned as a member of the Nampeyo family and developed a totally individual style. The 9-1/2" diameter jar on the right is from 1990. It currently rests in a private collection. For years, Ida has painted Navajo scenes, some with people, some with Navajo scenery including animals, buildings and cars, and some with everything all on the same pot.

Ida, Jean and sisters Rachel, Nyla and Bonnie continue to be powerful forces in the Hopi pottery movement.

Other families have had a big influence on pictorial representation on pottery, and two of them are represented on the jar on the next page. It's from a rarefied collection pictured in an imposing book by Charles King, one of the experts we most respect.

It's 12" high and was made in 2010 as a collaboration between a member of one of the most important Santa Clara pottery families and a member of one of the most important Hopi pottery families, and the work is so distinctive that it's hard to tell who painted what or who actually made the pot.



Les Namingha, the Hopi potter, has his name first on the attribution, and the abstract designs on the piece remind me of his work. Les's family includes the renowned painter Dan Namingha and the Sahmie sister's mother, Priscilla Namingha.

The other collaborator, Susan Folwell, belongs to a family that now might be even more influential. Her mother, Jody Folwell, leapt to prominence in the 1980s, to the point where the Smithsonian made a movie about her. Today, Susan's sister Polly Rose and niece Kaa have strong reputations, but Susan's fame might outstrip them all. In 2005, a museum in the Netherlands wrote a book about the five potters that represented the peak of the art, and Susan was one of the five.

Susan probably made the pot and Dan probably painted it, but Susan could have painted the figure. There's a large jar by Susan in the same collection. *The Attack of the 50-Foot Collector* is a Technicolor movie poster of a giant Anglo-looking woman terrorizing Santa Fe.



Lois Gutierrez and Derek de la Cruz work in Pojoaque Pueblo. For years, Lois has been established as one of the best and most versatile pottery painters. This 8-1/2" tall jar with the Indian on his Indian motorcycle explains why.

Like Lois, Jean Sahme and Susan Folwell, a lot of the best pottery artists aren't afraid to poke fun at Pueblo life. Diego Romero, another of the five potters that the book from the Netherlands celebrated, is from Cochiti, and the two 8" bowls below are typical of his work.



He titled the one on the left *Falling Down*. It represents a common Pueblo malady, falling off the wagon. It's part of his Chongo Brothers series. The chongo is a traditional Native hair roll that goes way back. You can see one on the Mimbres hunter who's losing his confrontation with the bear a few pages back.

Max, the bowl on the right, fits Diego's background perfectly. He and his chongo brother, the equally well known artist Mateo Romero, grew up in Berkeley, California, read comic books and went to Dartmouth. It makes perfect sense that he'd find space in his life to do a scene from Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are*.

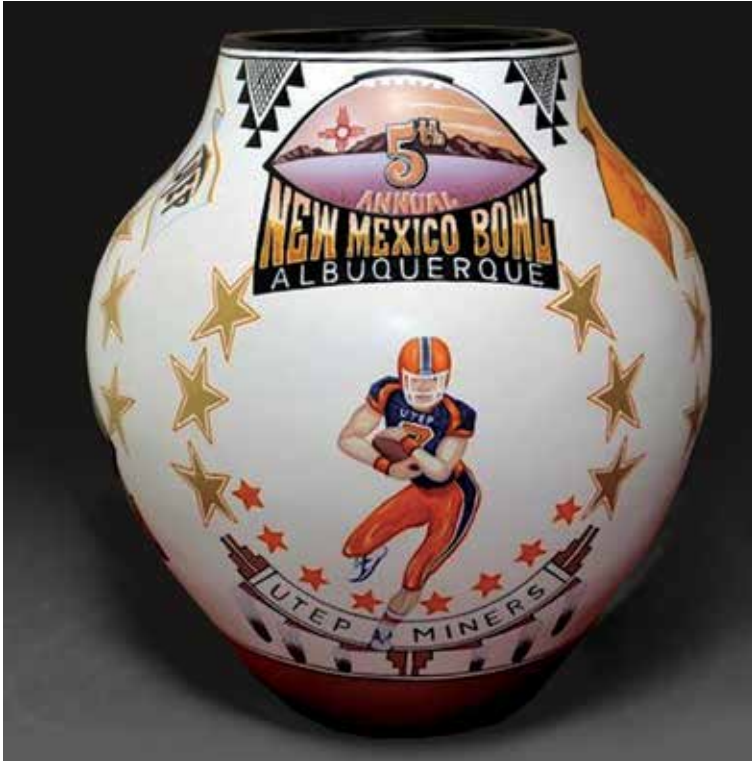


Santa Clara potter Jason Garcia's 8-3/4" *Wonder Woman* tile from 2011 brings everything together: Indian pride, Anglo culture and comic books. Of all the pieces we've collected, this seems to summarize

the evolution of the art. It helps explain why this pottery should be recognized not just as a regional ethnic craft but as an important mainstream American art form.

And in some ways, it is. The New Mexico Bowl pits two major college football teams against each other every December. As with most bowl games, the winning team gets a trophy.

Each year, the trophy is a big jar, 15" or so tall, made by Elizabeth and painted by Marcellus Medina of Zia. The year this was the trophy, UTEP didn't get it. It went to BYU. The Cougars beat the Miners 54-24.



What's more mainstream than a bowl game?

Page 2 image from *The Chappell Collection* by Nancy Olsen (Anasazi Historical Society)

Page 3 from *Re-Creating the Word* by Barbara Moulard (Bill Schenck collection)

Page 4 all images from *Painted by a Distant Hand* by Steven LeBlanc

Page 5 upper image from *Painted by a Distant Hand*, lower left from *Art of the Ancestors* by

George Everett Shaw, lower right from *Re-Creating the Word*

Page 7 from *Re-Creating the Word*

Page 9 left from *A River Apart* by Valerie Verzuh, right from *Two Hundred Years of Historic*

Pueblo Pottery, the Gallegos Collection by Francis Harlow

Page 13 from *Spoken Through Clay* by Charles King

Page 16 from Athlon Sports courtesy of New Mexico Bowl

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