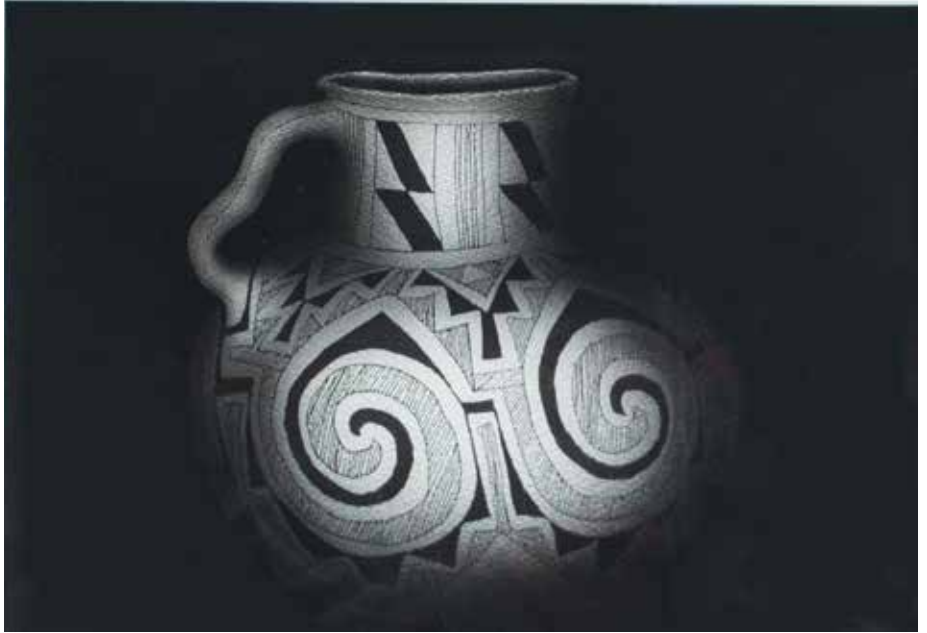


THE TULAROSA SWIRL



Pottery Discussion #1

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Back around 2000, my wife and I were deep into collecting Southwestern Indian pottery, to the point where we ended up writing five books about it. We also bought four excellent pieces of art by Kevin McDermott, paintings of important examples he'd sought out in museum collections.

The one on the cover was titled *Tularosa Anasazi ca. 1200 A.D.*

It meant more to us than the other three because we knew a piece much like the one in the painting, and it's not in a museum, it's on a shelf in our living room.

This is it.



It's a Tularosa Black on white pitcher, 7-1/2" in diameter, which is

probably close to the size of the one that McDermott painted and just about as good an example. We date it in our books as circa 1225.

Over the years, we've paid a lot of attention to its design. The Tularosa Swirl isn't a design that people would arrive at easily. It always has two concentric spirals. Sometimes they're connected in the center, but more often, they're not, as on our piece and the one McDermott painted.

Most pottery designs are predictable elaborations of simple doodles—straight lines, squares, dots, circles and so forth. There's nothing unexpected about a spiral, or even concentric ones. What sets the Tularosa Swirl apart is that one of the spirals is solid while the other one is outlined and cross-hatched. It's difficult to imagine and especially difficult to draw.

Yet they drew it a lot in the thirteenth century, sometimes to magnificent proportions, like on this 16" diameter monster pictured in Lanmon & Harlow's *Acoma Pottery*.



The Swirl wasn't confined to important pieces like the pitcher and this huge water jar. It appeared over and over on minor Tularosa pieces, and they're not hard to come by.

We have two other Tularosa Black on white examples from the

same time period in the collections we made for those books. Our three pieces and the big one on the previous page give an idea of the tremendous variety of ways that Tularosa potters used the design.



The one on the left is 4-1/4" tall, well-painted. The much rougher 5-1/2" diameter jar on the right has what appear to be applied animal features.

If the three pieces in the collection had been the only ones we'd seen, we probably wouldn't have paid much attention to the design. However, because it appeared so often, we started to wonder why potters would keep repeating so difficult a pattern.

The obvious answer is that it must have had great spiritual significance, and people who enjoy speculating about things like that have written a lot of explanations. The truth is, though, that, in the absence of contemporary written references, a meaning can't continue unchanged over eight hundred years. Even if it's passed down faithfully through the generations, it gets embroidered and altered. Any contemporary explanation, whether it comes from an anthropologist or a Native American scholar, can't tell you what people thought it meant back when they made these pots.

So we started by trying to figure out where the design came from. The general conclusion is that it first appeared in the Tularosa mountains of north-central New Mexico. Although it shows up on types from nearby areas, the presence of it on other types suggests that it was copied from traded-in Tularosa pieces.

We found hints of an earlier origin. The 5-1/2" diameter bowl on the next page is in our own collection. We'd had it for years and never really noticed what makes it important: concentric hatched and solid spirals, done so crudely that we looked at for years without it dawning on us that we were seeing the Tularosa Swirl in its infancy.

Claire Demaray, the archeologist who introduced us to prehistoric pottery, identified it as Kiatuthlaana Black on white, a type with mineral paint decoration from the Tonto Forest a hundred miles west of Tularosa country. J. Scott Wood's authoritative *Checklist of Pottery Types for the Tonto National Forest* dates the type as existing from 800 to 900 A.D. We dated it at 650 in our books, but Wood's dating is better researched.

When we read Wood's type description carefully, we wondered if Claire had missed on the identification and it was actually Reserve Black on white, a type from 50 miles closer to Tularosa and dated 1000 to 1150, which brings it closer to Tularosa's 1150–1300.



However, something else Woods said caught our attention. He pointed out that Kiatuthlaana occasionally used designs from Gila Butte Red on buff, a Hohokam type that dates from 700 to 850.

Hohokam pottery normally came from the Arizona desert another 150 miles to the west, but during the Colonial period, the Hohokam settled sites up in the Tonto Forest near Kiatuthlaana country, and Gila Butte was the prevalent Hohokam pottery type in those years.

Gila Butte's time in the Tonto overlapped with Kiatuthlaana's, and

Woods' reference hinted at another possible early inspiration for the Swirl design.

So we decided to check out Gila Butte, and we didn't have to look far. We have an 8" diameter Gila Butte plate sitting on a shelf near our Tularosa pitcher. We dated it at 750, in the middle of the Gila Butte time span.

Here it is, and here are those hatched spirals. So we're not ready to dismiss Claire's Kiatuthlaana call on our little bowl.



What this tells us is that the Swirl didn't happen overnight. It might have taken four hundred years for it to settle in at Tularosa.

By 1200, though, it had made it to Tularosa, fully designed. Potters there put it on hundreds of pieces it for the next hundred years or so.

It didn't just stay in Tularosa. It escaped a couple of hundred miles to the west.

The Swirl made its way north and west across the Arizona border to the left-center of what scholars now call Cibola country, the place where Mogollon and Anasazi cultures intermingled. While the Mogollon potters at Tularosa stubbornly clung to the old-fashioned black-on-white pottery, the Cibola potters were making red pots with black and white decoration.

These new polychromes became the fashion of the day, and they had a whole new design vocabulary. Yet we found this.



It's a St. Johns Polychrome bowl, 8-1/4" in diameter, and it was made about the same time as the Tularosa specimens. Apparently, whatever magic the Swirl held wasn't lost on the Cibolas.

Normally designs stay in fashion for a while and get supplanted by newer ones, and that happened to the Swirl. As Tularosa Black on white died out around 1275, potters used other designs, and most of the pots that they put those designs on were red rather than white.

At Zuni, they started decorating their pots with glaze black paints around 1300, and some years after that, they made a lot of their pieces with white backgrounds. This 9-1/2" diameter, four-lobed jar dates from 1450. The maker wanted you to be sure you didn't confuse it with one of those old Tularosa Black on whites. The black paint is shiny glaze and there's a strong red stripe circling the base.



So we've seen glimmerings of the Swirl as early as 750 or so on the Gila Butte plate and a rudimentary swirl on the Kiatuthlaana bowl from perhaps 850 and full-blown swirls on this Zuni jar from 1450.

It seems safe to say that the Swirl lasted for six hundred years in prehistory. It took less time than that to make it into modern times, where it's alive and well.

Acoma Pueblo sits on a mesa perhaps fifty miles north of the northern edge of Tularosa country. Sometime around 1900, Acoma potters started using Tularosa designs.

Lanmon & Harlow's *Acoma Pottery* mentions the phenomenon and offers this 12-1/2" diameter piece as the earliest known dated example. They state it was made between 1910 and 1920.



Years ago, we were talking with longtime pottery dealer Eric Erdoes, and he told us that an older Acoma potter had told his parents that her family had a cave where they kept old pieces whose designs they learned and copied. They kept the cave's location secret from other families so the designs would be theirs and theirs alone.

Acoma is about fifty miles north of Tularosa country, and Tularosa pottery made it up to the Pueblo, not just to secret caves. The slopes below the old mesa city are littered with prehistoric sherds, so plentiful that potters grind them up and use them for temper. We saw a potter on the mesa selling ancient sherds for fifty cents.

It's no surprise that Acoma potters saw enough pieces with the design that they could replicate it. And they replicated it a lot during the years after 1920.

We kept finding pieces from the 1920 to 1930 period that played the theme over and over. Here are a few samples, ranging from the masterful to the clumsy and from the predictable to the surprising.



We put a 1925 date on the 11-1/2" diameter olla at the left. It's a fine piece that came with an attribution to Mary Histia, the Acoma Mary whom observers at the time believed was Acoma's greatest potter. The 8-5/8" diameter jar next to it is something else. It probably dates from 1930, is clunkily shaped, fire-clouded and inexpertly painted, and was probably dashed off for quick sale to an indiscriminating tourist.

The two pieces below really stretch the idea.



The 7-1/2" diameter seed jar is not just the only piece we've ever seen in this shape with Tularosa swirls, it's the only jar we've ever seen in this exact shape. And the 6" tall vase is the only piece we've ever seen that puts the swirl in Technicolor.

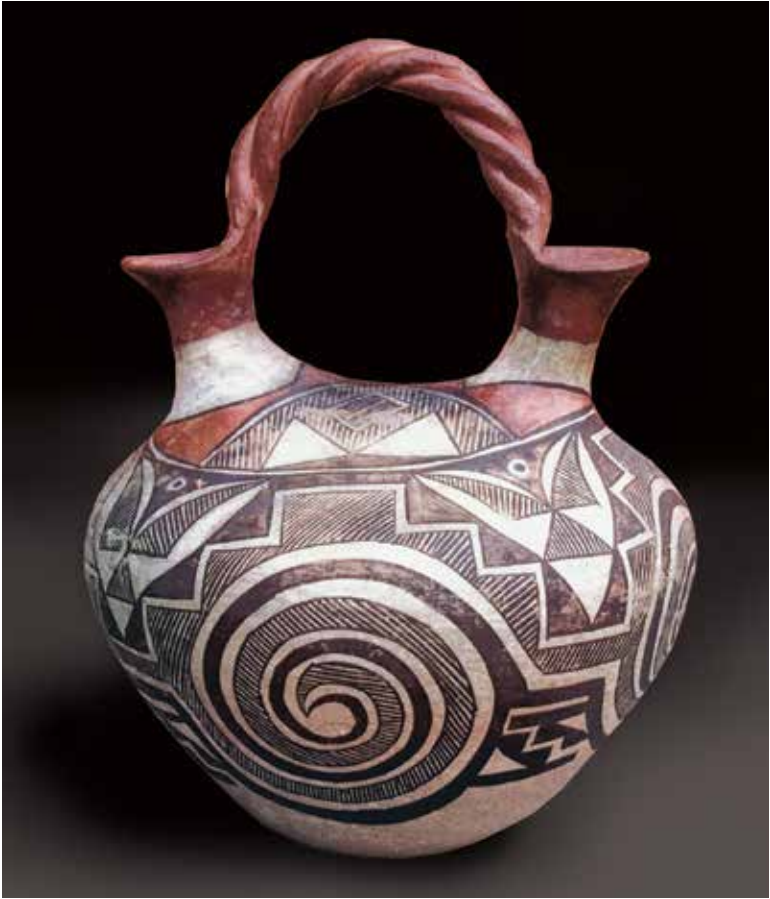


The only other early piece Lanmon and Harlow put in their book was this 13" diameter olla that the owner purchased from the maker in 1926. It looks a lot like Mary Hestia's jar on the opposite page.

By the 1920s, the tourist market was booming for Acoma. The railroad stopped at nearby Laguna, and potters could bring their wares to the station and sell them to passengers who got off to stretch their legs. Most tourist pieces were small and specifically made to fit into suitcases.

But not all of them were. The wedding vase on the next page is a pure tourist piece. Although two-spouted canteens were useful in prehistoric times, they'd disappeared in modern manufacture until an enterprising Santa Fe dealer encouraged Santa Clara potters to make them and provided a ready new legend to accompany them. According to John Candelario at The Old Curio Shoppe, brides and grooms would each drink out of a spout at the wedding. It was fabricated tradition, but it stuck to the point that today, Santa Clara potters make them for weddings.

The piece on the next page is remarkable. It's 12" high. Its rope-twisted handle is a tourist-pleasing feature borrowed from the little suitcase-friendly pieces they were selling at the railroad stations. It adds color to the design in the top portion, yet stays absolutely faithful to the Tularosa standard around the middle.



The wedding vase dates from 1930, but the Swirl wasn't done at Acoma. The two below came from 1950. The olla is 9-1/2" diameter and the basket is 7" high.



The Swirls kept coming through the 1960s, and potters started signing their pieces and claiming them proudly. The 9-1/2" diameter olla at the left is unsigned, which makes us believe it's from early in the decade, but Maria Antonio proudly signed her mid-1960s 6-1/2" diameter orange-slipped bowl.



By 1970, important potters had discovered The Swirl. Juana Leno is so important that the Ha'aku Museum at Acoma elevated her to parity with Lucy Lewis and Marie Chino, two of the matriarchs in *Seven Families in Pueblo Pottery*, who dominated the art for the last half of the 20th century. A triple canteen by Juana got featured in a 1982 edition of *National Geographic* devoted to Pueblo pottery. It became a signature piece for her, and she made a lot of them.



This one from the 1970s appears in our books. It's 13-1/2" wide. Juana kept using the Swirl, and so did other Acoma potters. On the next page, we show a 1980 canteen by Juana and a 2003 small olla by Patricia Lowden.

Juana's canteen is 5-3/8" in diameter while Patricia's olla is 7-1/2" in diameter.



For a hundred years, Acoma potters have returned to the Swirl. Its original spiritual meaning may be long lost, but it's hardly forgotten at Acoma or across the railroad tracks at Laguna Pueblo. Potters there found ways to use it, and one noted Laguna potter built a career with it. Myron Sarracino got wide attention with major pieces featuring the Swirl. He's since moved on to other designs, but the Swirl brought him to prominence.

Thomas Natseway made faithful homages to prehistoric and historic pieces, but in the opposite direction from Sarracino. Myron made them big while Thomas made them smaller and smaller. He became a master of the subminiature, making pieces so tiny that you have to see them to believe them. Here's a piece by each, both made in the mid-1990s. They're both faithful to their Tularosa origins, with one difference. Myron's pitcher is 10" tall while Thomas's pitcher is 5/8" high. In one of our books we show a piece by Thomas similar in size to the one below sitting on a penny with room to spare..





This shows the two pieces in their true proportions.

So what does all this prove? Not much for the scholar looking for hard data, but it does bring to light one of the mysteries of human behavior.

There's no logical reason why, for more than a thousand years, people would take the time to make faithful recreations of a difficult design. It's easy enough to say that in Tularosa's time, it probably had important power and that people kept making it as a necessary part of their religion, but that hardly explains the last hundred years at Acoma and Laguna.

The answer may just be that people thought it was a really nice design and worth the trouble, and if that's the case, I'll thank them for showing it to me.

And if it's more than that, I'll never learn the reason.

I do know this, however. That 800 years after the Tularosa potters

made their pieces and 1200 years after the Gila Butte artist made hatched spirals, the design had enough power to make me sit down, ponder, gather the examples and write this.

Of all the squiggles in the world. It's the one that holds the most magic for me.



Images on pages 3, 9 and 11 are from *The Pottery of Acoma Pueblo* by Dwight Lanmon and Francis Harlow

All other images are from the joint Hayes/Blom collection.