

## Spirituality in Native American Pottery

The Native American Pottery in both Mint Museum collections represents seven Pueblos or villages of the Southwestern United States. They are Acoma, Hopi-Tewa, San Idefonso, Santa Clara, Hopi, Jemez, and Navajo.

An understanding of philosophy of Southwest Native Americans will help in a discussion of the role of spirituality in the creation of pottery in general. Specifics of the individual pieces in the museum collection will follow.

While each Pueblo's spirituality has its own individual characteristics, a common thread of emergence from the earth runs throughout. There is an existence of Spirit beyond the visible world and there is the Spirit of Nature; e.g. trees, animals, fire, clay etc. that are an integral part of their way of life. Native American culture shares the belief that people do not own the earth but are rather custodians—Respect for the Earth. Spiritual beliefs are not practiced as a religion but rather they are integrated into their being. Inherited traditions, e.g. welfare of the people (as opposed to the individual) are also part of their spirituality. The framework of life is manifest through cycles of continuity and change; there is a dynamic between circulation and return. Pottery is a continuum of that framework. A potter digs the clay, creates the pot, and returns the pot back to the earth so that another generation can dig the clay.

Therefore, with this understanding of philosophy, Native American pottery is in large part spiritual in nature.

The process of creating pottery is handed down from generation to generation. Originally, only women were potters but in recent centuries, men have become involved in the process. Women would shape the pot, men would paint the motifs. Tools, motifs, and art styles are specific to a Pueblo but again the underlying theme is to be in harmony with nature. Native American potters, following in the foot steps of their ancestors, honor the clay as a living gift from Mother Earth. Among the essentials of the craft are the potter's hands and heart which are considered an intrinsic component of their traditional pottery. A Picuris Pueblo potter, Anthony Durand, says "Pottery has always been with our people. There is a creative side making the pottery and there is the spiritual...saying our prayers silently while we work on our pots."<sup>1</sup> Another potter, Rose Naranjo, of Santa Clara says "The clay is very selfish. It will form itself to what the clay wants to be." If the potter has "a good intention"; is "one with the clay", the pot will please both the clay and the shaper. It will be an extension of the potter's spirit.<sup>2</sup>

The technique of creating Native American pottery today is done in the same way as their ancestors. The clay is dug from the ground and prepared into "dough". The pot is constructed by using coils of clay stacked on top of each other into the desired shape. Dora Jody Folwell of Santa Clara, says "My pieces start out somewhere deep down inside me. I feel that physically I just make what comes out spiritually; the pieces seem to mold themselves".<sup>3</sup> The pots are then smoothed. Tools for smoothing vary from

corn cobs to lava rock or sandstone. Slip, a thin solution of colored clay, is painted on while the pot is still damp. When the pot is dry, it is rubbed carefully with a polishing stone. These stones are sometimes handed down from generation to generation. Hopi potter Bessie Namoki uses a smooth gray pebble that was given to her mother in 1937. They both use that stone for polishing. Other potters joke about their "pet rocks" used for polishing. At this point, the slipped, polished pot is ready for design. Each pueblo has their own set of traditional designs but each potter paints in their own individual way. Pots tell "stories" through design. "The plants, the rocks, the sky... everything in the earth inspires you and with me, everything seems to have life" says Dextra Quotskuya, a Hopi-Tewa potter.<sup>4</sup> The pots are then fired in a outdoor kiln. Juniper wood, bark, and sheep or cow manure are used for fuel. Many potters call this "Judgment Day". This is a critical and risky stage; weather conditions, or imperfections (air bubbles trapped in the clay) can cause the pots to "pop" (break or crack). Nearly every potter has a few cracked pots in their home. All feel a great affection for them. Their philosophy can be summarized by Candelaria Gauchupin, a Zia potter, "Pots are like people. We people have imperfections... we don't destroy them. Pots are the same way.... You love them as much as you would a perfect pot".<sup>5</sup> Another potter, Emma Mitchell from Acoma Pueblo, "doesn't feel bad about the pots we lose in firing because we recycle .. we use them back in the clay".<sup>6</sup>

In conclusion, spirituality permeates all phases of Native American pueblo pottery. Contemporary potters just as their ancestors still approach their craft with respect to Mother Earth. The entire process is done with an understanding that they are creating from a living thing. They refer to the clay as having a "mind of its own", but the clay will allow the potter to be successful if he or she approaches creating the pot with good spiritual intention. The people build their designs- their "stories" into their pottery. Pueblo pots carry with them a part of the potter's spirit- all joined together, people and place in a single story embodied in clay.

Verna Witt, Docent 2006

1: New Mexico Magazine: Elliott, Melinda, "Mother Earth's Shining Gift"; Santa Fe. N.M.: 1996, pg 85

2. Talking with the Clay; Stephen Trimble, The Art of Pueblo Pottery, Santa Fe, N.M.: School of American Research Press, 1987, page 13

3. Ibid page 14

4. Ibid page 22

5. Ibid page 28

6. Ibid. Page 28

## Bibliography

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LeFree, Betty. Santa Clara Pottery Today, Albuquerque, N.M., University of New Mexico Press, 1975

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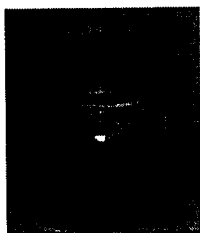
A Rainbow of Spirituality Native American Religion,  
[http://home.earthlink.net/~ glbrainbow/id9.html](http://home.earthlink.net/~glbrainbow/id9.html).

Native American Spirituality,  
[http://religiousmovements.lib.virginia.edu/nrms/naspirit\\_old.html](http://religiousmovements.lib.virginia.edu/nrms/naspirit_old.html).

Seeking Native American Spirituality, <http://www.native-languages.org.htm>

Native American Spirituality, <http://www.religioustolerance.org/nataspir.htm>.

**MINT MUSEUM OF ART COLLECTION-- STORRS GALLERY**



**TONITA NAMPEYO**

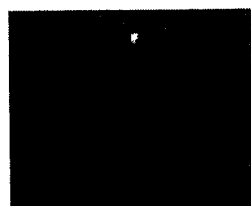
Hopi-Tewa Reservation, Arizona

Jar 1979

Pottery with Brown, Orange, Black and Red slip paint

Daisy Wade Bridges Collection H1980.234.3

From the First Mesa village of Hano, Tonita takes her name from her ancestor Nampeyo who studied shards from prehistoric Hopi pottery of 1375-1625 of Sikyatki designs and revitalized that style in 1880's. Tonita continues in the style of her ancestor.



**ALBERT VIGIL AND JOSEPHINE VIGIL**

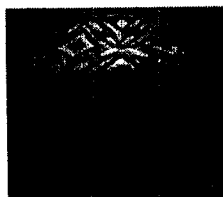
San Ildefonso Pueblo, New Mexico

Redware Bowl with Resist Feather Pattern 1978

Burnished slip painted pottery with matt slip designs

Daisy Wade Bridges Collection H1980.234.2

Burnished slip with matt slip design is typical to the Pueblos of San Ildefonso and Santa Clara. Albert is the son of Maria Martinez's sister. Maria Martinez was noted for her black (burnished) on black (matte) pottery and along with her husband Julian popularized Native American Pottery in the early 1900's. Maria is credited with elevating Native American Pottery to an art form.



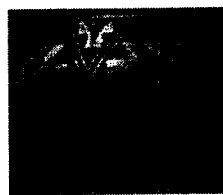
**CARRIE CHINO CHARLIE**

Acoma Pueblo, New, Mexico

Vessel 1979

Pottery with black and white Slip paint

Daisy Wade Bridges Collection H1980.234.1



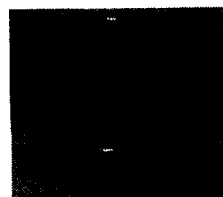
**UNKNOWN ARTIST**

Acoma Pueblo, New Mexico

Vessel early 20<sup>th</sup> Century

Pottery with black and white slip paint

Museum Purchase H1979.72.12



**STELLA CHAVARRIA**

Santa Clara Pueblo, New Mexico

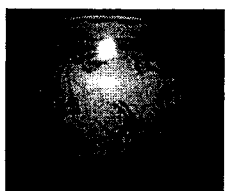
Blackware jar with Carved Feather Motif 1978

Burnished black pottery

Daisy Wade Bridges Collection H1978.1774

Stella is a descendant of the Tafoya family of potters. Influenced by Maria Martinez, this family carved into their pottery to create three dimensional motifs.

**DELHOM GALLERY (NO LONGER ON DISPLAY)**



**RUBY MEDINA**

Not marked (possibly Zia Pueblo, New Mexico)

Large Jar circa 1980-1990

Earthenware

Daisy Wade Bridges Collection H2004.108



**ANNE LEWIS HANSON** (daughter of Lucy Lewis), 1925-

Acoma Pueblo, New Mexico 1925-

Hunting Scene Polychrome Jar circa 1975

Earthenware

Daisy Wade Bridges Collection H1980.234.9

Note the Museum of Craft + Design has a Lucy Lewis vessel on display. She is a well known and admired Acoma potter. The animals depicted on this jar all have "spirit lines". These lines extend from the mouth to the inner organs which symbolizes supernatural power. Also, a break in the line so that the soul may not be imprisoned.



**CLARA SHIJI**

Santa Clara Pueblo, New Mexico 1924-

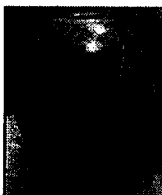
Wedding Vase circa 1979

Earthenware

Daisy Wade Bridges Collection H1980.234.4

Clara Shiji learned to make pottery from her mother Pablita Chavarria.

She prefers to make small pieces.



**FROG WOMAN DAUGHTER** (Joy Havasie)

Hopi Pueblo, Arizona 1919-

Vase circa 1980

Earthenware

Daisy Wade Bridges Collection H1982.214.30



**GRACE MEDICINE FLOWER**

Santa Clara Pueblo, New Mexico

Redware Sgraffito Vase circa 1970-1975

Earthenware

Daisy Wade Bridges Collection 1991.7.1

From a prestigious Santa Clara pottery family: Tafoya; Grace Medicine Flower is best known for her miniature carved pots.



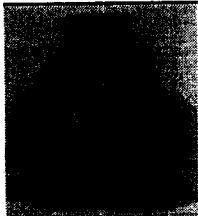
**BETH SAKERA**

Hopi-Tewa Pueblo, Arizona

Polychrome Jar circa 1975-1980

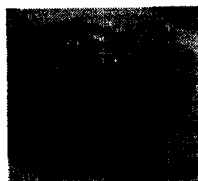
Earthenware Daisy Wade Bridges Collection H1980.234.7

**MINT MUSEUM OF CRAFT + DESIGN—Duke Energy Gallery**



**CASA GRANDES, Mexico**  
Olla (Vessel) Late 20<sup>th</sup> Century  
Coiled pottery, polychrome slip  
Promised gift of Gretchen and Nelson Grice  
PG2003.63.75

From Mexico, just south of New Mexico, this piece is included as Native American Pueblo pottery.



**ACOMA PUEBLO, New Mexico**  
Olla (vase) circa 1920  
design; circa 1920  
Coiled pottery, polychrome slip  
Promised Gifts of Gretchen and Nelson Grice



**CASA GRANDES, Mexico**  
Olla (Vessel) with Feather and Step  
Coiled pottery, polychrome slip



**LUCY MARTIN LEWIS, Acoma, 1890-1992**  
Black-on-White Bowl, 1980  
Earthenware  
Daisy Wade Bridges Collection; H1980.234.5



**LAURA GACHUPIN, Jemez, 1955-**  
Ribbed Jar 1992  
Native clay, hand built, burnished  
Gift of Gretchen and Nelson Grice; 2002.124.2



**FANNIE POLACCA NAMPEY, Hopi; circa 1904-1987**  
Polychrome vase, circa 1930  
Earthenware  
Daisy Wade Bridges Collection 1991.7.2



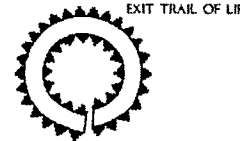
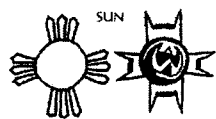
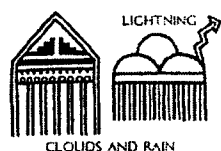
**HARRISON BEGAY, Navajo 1966**  
Bear Pot 1997  
Native clay, hand built, carved, burnished and textured.  
Gift of Gretchen and Nelson Grice; 2002.124.4

This artist learned pottery-making in the Santa Clara Pueblo tradition.

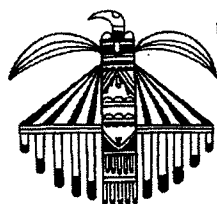


**SYLVIA NAHA, Hopi, 1957-**  
Seed Bowl with Lizard and Corn Motif  
Circa early 1990's  
Native clay, hand built, polychromed  
Gift of Gretchen and Nelson Grice; 2002.124.3

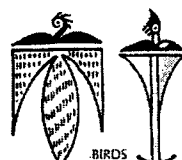
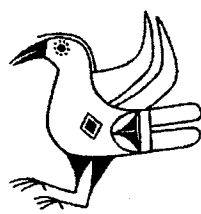
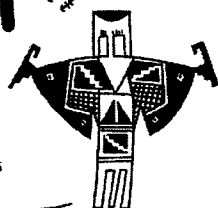
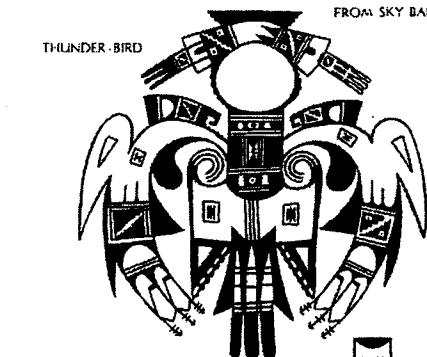
# Southwest Pottery Motifs



## REPRESENTATIVE UNITS AND SYMBOLS



THUNDER-BIRD



WORM (ON BASKET)

