

MIMBRES PAINTED POTTERY

Preface to the Revised Edition

The first edition of this book, published in 1977, was part of the School of American Research's Southwest Indian Arts Series, conceived by the School's then president, Douglas W. Schwartz, generously supported by the Weatherhead Foundation, and published by the University of New Mexico Press. The book was generally well received and stayed in print for about twenty years. For the most part I liked it, especially the sections about design analysis and iconography, which are reprinted here with relatively few changes. Still, even at the time of publication, I was not happy with all of it, as I made clear in the original preface, which follows this one.

Yet I was optimistic about the future of Mimbres research, and my optimism proved justified. Even as I was writing and editing the original manuscript, between 1973 and 1976, an almost forty-year hiatus in Mimbres archaeological research had already ended. Field programs that began in the early 1970s with Steven LeBlanc and his young Mimbres Foundation colleagues and with Harry Shafer and his Texas A&M University archaeological

field schools were only the first of a series of archaeological investigations that are still taking place in Mimbres country. As important as the fieldwork has been the nearly universal commitment by the many different researchers to conscientiously and creatively publish about their work and its implications. Individually and collectively they have modified our ways of thinking about the ancient Mimbres people, cleared away much of the "trash," answered many of the chronological questions, refined taxonomies, and developed some theoretically fascinating propositions about the Mimbres and their art. Almost simultaneously, Mimbres pottery paintings came to be featured in national and international museum exhibitions that generated the publication of important analytical and interpretive essays about the art by art historians and other scholars.

The many changes I have made in this volume are responses to those contributions. I have rewritten some chapters almost entirely and left others nearly unaltered. To summarize: The original preface is unchanged. The introduction and chapter 1, "Discovery of the

Mimbres,” are modified in relatively minor ways that recognize the passage of time and bring the history of Mimbres archaeology up to date. In chapter 2, “The Mimbres in Their Place and Time,” I have excised several egregious errors, added details, and made other, more minor changes. Chapter 3, “Mimbres Village Life,” is radically altered to incorporate information and interpretations generated since the mid-1970s. I have replaced its original focus on the Swarts Ruin with a synthesis based on more recent fieldwork and on reinterpretations of larger Mimbres villages in the Mimbres Valley such as Galaz, NAN, Mattocks, and Swarts. Chapters 4, “The Mimbres and Their Neighbors,” and 5, “Inventing Mimbres Painted Pottery,” are also greatly modified to take into account a generation’s worth of investigation, analysis, and reinterpretation of Southwestern archaeology and the art and archaeology of the Mimbres region. Chapters 6, “The Potters and Their Craft,” and 7, “The Form and Structure of Mimbres Classic Black-on-White Pottery,” have been modified with the addition of new insights into the technology of Mimbres pottery painting, its developmental history, and its visual and expressive qualities. Chapter 8, “Representational Paintings,” is significantly altered in many respects, but chapter 9, “Ethnoaesthetic and Other Aesthetic Considerations,” is substantially unchanged.

I have also adopted with minor modifications—as have most other researchers working with Mimbres materials—the terminology and chronological sequences proposed in 1981 by Roger Anyon, Patricia Gilman, and Steven LeBlanc (see table 1). Thus, “Classic Mimbres period” replaces “Mimbres phase,” “Late Pithouse period” overarches the Georgetown, San Francisco, and Three Circle phases, and the Mangas phase and Mangas Black-on-white are

abandoned, the latter usually replaced by either Style I or Style II Mimbres Black-on-white or, on occasion, Mimbres Boldface Black-on-white. I join most other specialists in making general use of the style phases initially proposed by Catherine Scott (1983) and later modified by Harry Shafer and Robbie Brewington (1995). However, for reasons noted in chapter 5, and especially because of my conviction that “transition” is a constant in any active art tradition, I consider the name “Transitional (Mimbres) Black-on-white,” which some analysts use to classify the unclassifiable paintings that seem to bridge different style categories, tautological. I find it more useful to simply note those paintings that seem to incorporate elements of two or more of the readily defined style phases.

I have also made every effort to delete some common terminology that I consider inappropriate and misleading, such as the word “borrowed” to mean the appropriation by one society from another of ideas, styles, words, or other notions. “To borrow” is an economic transaction—to accept a loan that is expected to be repaid—and I have never heard of the return of a “borrowed” idea, with or without interest. With less conviction I have generally bowed to the political needs of the moment and tried to find reasonably accurate substitutes for the useful notional term “Anasazi,” which is now anathema to some Pueblo people. What is still wanting is an agreed-upon neutral term to distinguish the ancient Pueblo societies of the Colorado Plateau from other ancestral Pueblo societies, including those we call Mogollon. Finally, the abbreviations B.C. and A.D. have been replaced in this edition with the “common era” abbreviations B.C.E. and C.E.

There is greater understanding today than there was thirty years ago of the geographical

range of the Mimbresños and the subtle flexibility of their adaptations to their dynamic physical and social environments. There is also lively, ongoing debate about how and why it all ended, about the dispersion of the Mimbres people, about how their pottery art functioned in their society, and about what it might have meant to them. Perhaps most remarkably, the foolish fear of art that once characterized American archaeologists trained during the third quarter of the twentieth century seems finally to be fading. Many Mimbres archaeologists now accept the obvious and agree that expressive art is clearly part of the Mimbres archaeological record and must be examined with as much serious objectivity as any other component of that record. Consequently, in recent years some have made important and creative contributions to formal, theoretical, iconographic, and chronological studies of Mimbres art—and the more they practice, the more skilled they become.

Still, I am both puzzled and bemused by a sense that many archaeologists remain unconvinced that art objects are multifunctional social tools. They continue to believe that the primary objective of representational picture making is to replicate an aspect of the tangible world as it is, rather than to create visual metaphors. I hope that someday most archaeologists will subscribe to the propositions that art is by definition an act of imagination and that it is a fit subject of study in their discipline for no other reason than because it is an ordinary and essential act of social communication practiced in all human societies.

Late in the 1970s, largely through Steve LeBlanc's efforts, the Maxwell Museum of Anthropology at the University of New Mexico, where I then worked, became custodian of a Mimbres photographic archive that now

numbers about sixty-five hundred pictures of Mimbres painted vessels. In subsequent years, many scholars in various disciplines used this invaluable resource, and it became a critical stimulant in developing new understanding and debate about Mimbres art. The archive played, and still plays, an important role in the spate of analytical, technical, theoretical, speculative, and popular publications about Mimbres art that began in the 1970s. Of special value to me, despite inevitable disagreements, are those by Roger Anyon, Steve LeBlanc, Steve Lekson, Marit Munson, Margaret Nelson, Catherine Scott, Harry Shafer, Brian Shaffer, Rina Swentzell, and Mark Thompson. Most are listed in the highly selective bibliography to this edition, which has only to be compared with the much shorter but virtually encyclopedic one published in the first edition of the book to see that far more has been done with Mimbres art and archaeology, on the ground, in museums, and in publications, during the last thirty years than in the previous seventy.

I must also acknowledge the great impact that several thoughtful reviews of the first edition of this book and of an earlier draft of this manuscript had on me. Among others, Roy Carlson (1978) and Florence Hawley Ellis (1978) took me to task for failing to pay more attention to the ethnology, oral traditions, and ethos of the Pueblo Indians and for being less than positive about the interpretive value of those factors for Mimbres materials. I took those criticisms seriously enough to do more homework during the intervening years and to reconsider and modify my earlier positions—but only somewhat, and I expect and welcome further debate on those issues. More recently, two anonymous reviewers of this volume provided some critically important suggestions that, I think, improved the work considerably. I

thank them. Finally, during the last thirty years I have listened to and spoken with so many people about Mimbres painted pottery that conversations, names, faces, and places are all hopelessly blurred in my mind. Still, some emerge and I am more grateful than I can tell for insights gained from listening to Nathan Begay, Eric Blinman, Bernard Cohen, Bill Gilbert, Harry Shafer, Brian Shaffer, and Rina Swentzell.

Life experience has taught me that more often than I like to think, clichés are true, old saws are pertinent, and the road to hell is paved with good intentions patterned by the law of unintended consequences. When I wrote the original edition of *Mimbres Painted Pottery* I should have anticipated, but did not, that it might further stimulate an already overheated market for Mimbres pottery art. It did that, and thereby contributed to the increased scale of looting of Mimbres sites by commercial pothunters that had begun during the 1960s. They were responding to market demand, and their looting totally destroyed many ancient Mimbres villages and degraded many others. Because untouched sites are now few and far between, and the most vulnerable of those that remain are reasonably well protected, I doubt that this new edition will lead to much further harm.

The 1977 edition also contributed more subtly to the rising market value of Mimbres painted pots, in that a monetary premium was placed on privately owned vessels that were pictured in it. Furthermore, implicitly and in some cases erroneously, my book certified them all as authentic, and they all became desirable trophies. I have been asked to identify more specifically those whose authenticity I now question, but in a litigious society it is unwise to publicly call anything “fake” without

technical evidence. Therefore, beyond assuming that any vessel that has neither provenience nor a solid provenance is either a fake or so altered that it might as well be one, I sidestep the issue here. Caveat emptor. Looting follows the money, some collectors are greedy, even more are naive, and the most destructive looting of archaeological sites everywhere in the world is a direct response to an art marketplace that is childishly easy to manipulate. Rather than directly contribute again to an inherently destructive antiquities market, I have used in this edition, with a few necessary and carefully screened exceptions, only Mimbres paintings that are in publicly owned collections, presumably insulated from the marketplace.

This revised edition came about with the support and advice of two valued friends, Joan O'Donnell, then director of the School of American Research (SAR) Press, and Douglas Schwartz, then president of SAR. As the volume moved forward, James F. Brooks, now director of SAR Press, staff editor Catherine Cocks, and freelance editor Jane Kepp eased the process with their guidance and assistance. I am grateful to all of them, to Cynthia Dyer who designed this volume, and to many other people and institutions for their help. In the original volume I acknowledged taking advantage of my position as director of a museum to intrude on other museums and private collectors. Now that I am in that world by courtesy only, I continue to take advantage of my former position and continue also to be warmed by the generosity of onetime strangers and former colleagues.

Many of the same people and institutions who helped me in so many ways to prepare the first edition and are acknowledged in the original preface helped me again with this one, and I thank them one more time. In addition, I add

Cynthia Bettison, Museum of Western New Mexico University; Lisa Stock, Lori Pendleton, and David Hare Thomas, American Museum of Natural History; Mike Lewis, Maxwell Museum of Anthropology; Valerie Verduz and Chris Turnbow, Museum of Indian Art and Culture/Laboratory of Anthropology; Ruth Brown and Sharon Lien, Deming Luna Mimbres Museum (Deming, New Mexico); Steve Whittington, Hudson Museum, University of Maine; Ruth Selig, National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution; Bruce Bernstein, National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution; David Rosenthal, National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution; Linda Cordell, Deborah Confer, and Stephen Lekson, University of Colorado Museum; and Lyndel King and her incurably

helpful staff at the Weisman Museum of Art, University of Minnesota. Once again, so many people spent so many hours helping me locate, look at, and photograph Mimbres pottery that I cannot possibly name them all. I trust they will still consider their help to me as bread cast upon the waters.

Finally, I rededicate this book to that same hardy quartet (and now their associated progeny) who braved the near-Arctic conditions of East Anglia during the oil-crisis winter of 1973–1974 so that the original manuscript could be written. The memory may have faded, but history tells us that chilblains and a three-day work week were British responses to that crisis, and it was in that year we learned that climate, not woad, painted the ancient Picts blue.

Excerpt from

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