

CHAPTER SEVEN

One with the Clay

Economics, Art, & Tradition

H HELEN CORDERO'S GRANDFATHER inspired her storyteller figures: "He was a wise man with good words, and he had lots of grandchildren and lots of stories, and we're all in there, in the clay." Elizabeth White prayed to be "One with the clay. One with the Creator. One with every living thing, including the grains of sand."

We *are* all in there with the clay. And the clay is connected to the rest of a potter's world, to "everything in the universe," as Dextra Quotskuyva says. "Most of the time, I'm in there talking to the pots," says Dextra. "Indians always have too much to do. Harvesting time, planting, dances, we're very involved in cooking and all that stuff. We are baking from maybe Wednesday on for some occasion. We have Indian doings. As much as you want to fill orders, you can't explain because they don't know what we do besides making potteries. It takes time to make pottery."

Dora Tse-Pe says, "When someone orders a pot, they think you should have it by a certain day. You can say, 'I'll try,' but with our way of life, we have things coming up that happen just like overnight. There's no warning ahead of time. One evening they can come and

say, 'Okay, we want you at the kiva.' So you drop all your work and go to the kiva. So then your pot isn't going to be ready on the day that the person wants it. And that's really hard to make people understand."

"It's living in two worlds," Dora said in 1986. "I worry. Because if it's that way now, I worry about what it's going to be when my children are grown and they have children and grandchildren. I hope they can cope with it." Twenty years later, Dora's daughters are grown.



A century of marketing. Facing page: View toward Saint Francis Cathedral, 1986 Santa Fe Indian Market. Right: Maria André and Maria Sophina selling their Isleta pottery, circa 1902 (Detroit Photographic Company).

Candace Tse-Pe Martinez even has her first granddaughter to think about. Candace says, “I cope by staying home with my children, and part of how I can do that is my pottery. I’ve always tried to keep up my pottery. When I didn’t, I didn’t feel good. I have to have that in my life. I do it for myself, for my soul. I do it for the passion of it.

“My kids have an easier time living in two worlds. I see it in their artwork, their creative writing, their access to Native chat rooms on the Internet. Schools are more culturally aware. And pottery is part of that—being proud of being Native.”

Pueblo pottery is part of life, and Pueblo life is more than pottery. Nothing can be taken for granted. Will Pacheco left Santo Domingo for the University of New Mexico, where his classes in ceramics nearly broke his bond with the clay: “I began questioning the integrity of the work. It feels empty to make pots for the market. It’s an extension of yourself that you are selling. I’m not certain what the purpose is. It’s paralyzing.

“For me, the question, ‘What is the pottery for?’ is connected to ‘What is my life about?’ Pottery-making has been the artistic expression of who I am. It’s a whole lifestyle that you have to commit yourself to.” Pacheco finds solace in knowing that the “Pueblos are in a flux,” trying to figure out their place in the world, “especially through the arts.”

“In the olden days, Santo Domingos were taught to be respectful and not ask questions. Modern education teaches kids to ask questions. And Pueblo philosophy doesn’t have an answer for a lot of things that are occurring. Pueblo stories say we are climbing into a different world. Philosophically, we are moving into a different mindset and understanding. The struggle is, keeping our traditional lifestyle relevant to those changes.”

Words, stories, designs, pottery—all are part of being a Pueblo Indian. Delores Aragon treasures the

Acoma traditions that her pottery carries, “the shared stories, the shared songs.” Delores believes that “when you cook, don’t be mad, otherwise you are just feeding your kids anger.” In the same way, all your moods and emotions, your childhood and adult passages, your joys and sorrows—everything that makes you who you are, along with the entire history of your people, goes into each vessel.

It’s a circle, a connection between the artist and her world. When we react to these pieces of pottery, when we hold them in our hands, when we purchase them and take them home, we take a dynamic and ever-changing world with us.

The potters have realized that their ancestors constantly adapted to change. They moved to new territories, found new sources for clay and slips, and adjusted their temper and fuel to these new materials. They invented new designs for ceremonial vessels. The notion of “tradition” is, in some ways, an artifact of the twentieth-century art market, a set of “mythological principles” (in scholar Bruce Bernstein’s words) frozen in place by museum curators and collectors. Today’s potters are looking for personal artistic freedom yet find reassurance in looking back over the hundreds of years in which potters had to set up shop anew after migrating from one ancestral home to another.

Lilly Salvador says, “It’s not complicated to me because that’s what was left here for us. I don’t know how to describe it. You have to be an Indian to really understand it.” Of traditional pottery Mary Trujillo says, “It has to be that way. Our life is that way.”

A Sacred Business

For Lois Gutierrez-de la Cruz, the hardest part of being a potter is “the business.” She finds pricing difficult: “Before Indian Market, my husband Derek and I put all our pottery out. And that’s the hardest thing, trying to figure out how much we’re going to charge for some-

thing—to be fair about it to the customer and to ourselves, as far as the time and the work we put into it.

“I can’t hold on to every pot. Bills have to be paid. I enjoy it while I’m doing it. And I think that’s the important thing, to enjoy what you’re doing. If you don’t, I think it shows in your work.”

Derek adds, “When we first started out, Lois’s mom, Petra, said, ‘It’s okay to make a living. It’s okay to be good at it. But don’t get crazy about it. Don’t get greedy. Have respect for what you do.’” After Lois won Best of Show at Indian Market, the frenzy of the collectors so offended Derek and her that they decided to withdraw from competition. They continue to make pottery full-time but are taking Petra’s advice—they don’t want to go crazy.

Josephine Nahohai used the money she made from

pottery for her family: “I buy things for the home. That makes the house stronger.” Angie Yazzie says, “The pottery is the owner of the house.”

Bernice Suazo-Naranjo says, “Sometimes I wish that I didn’t need the money, so that I could keep some of the pieces. But that’s where some of the rewards come in. When someone else likes the piece, you feel really good. I like to sell to collectors because you know that they are buying it for their own self and they will hoard the pot. It’s a different feeling than selling to galleries or wholesalers.” Robin Teller Velardez feels that “selling to a gallery is like going to the dentist!” She has a hard time pricing her storytellers: “How can you say how much your grandchildren are worth?” Robin’s pieces “touch people, connect with something in their childhoods. Even though we all come from different backgrounds,

Roxanne Swentzell’s large bronze Window to the Past sits outside her Tower Gallery at the Poeh Center, Pojoaque, 2006. Swentzell chose to open her gallery here, near the homes of friends and family, to give them a better chance to see her work.





as a human soul, we experience the same things.”

Potters don't hoard the past; pottery is meant to go out on its journey. Rebecca Lucario says goodbye when she sells a piece: “I part with a goodbye prayer. My grandmother would always hold a pot to her chest with her hands. She would pray for the people taking it.” The late Acoma potter Juana Leno said, “If I don't give it away, what's the point of making it?” Experienced potters speak with glee of seeing their crude and crooked early pots in collections, almost as if someone else had made them. These potters live in the present.

The potters also speak of becoming lost in what they are doing, staying up until two or three in the morning working. Mary Cain says, “Sometimes I would sit there, busy, busy, busy, and I even forget to come in here to the kitchen and do the cooking for supper. On those days, my family excuses me. Then they take me to McDonald's.”

Gladys Paquin occasionally yearns for a “regular” job: “My mind tells me eight-to-five would be a lot easier. My heart tells me different.” Rainy Naha says, “It's a calling. We could be working at grown-up jobs. It's not an easy life. The ladies who work for the government eight-to-five, they are like an alien culture to me. They say, ‘You have it so easy.’ It makes me cringe!”

Dora Tse-Pe's pottery for sale at Santa Fe Indian Market, 2002.

Artisans & Artists

Few other Pueblo arts inspire such dedication. Pottery provides a living that comes right out of the culture: silverwork, sculpture, and easel painting have weaker connections to Pueblo tradition. Though some archaeologists persist in calling the revival of prehistoric pottery styles “decadence,” others have pointed out that such a revival quietly reflects the worth of the past, the importance of community values. Perhaps this is why there is such sadness among the older potters when they talk about the use of molded pottery, commercial paints and clays, and kiln firing.

Why should a twenty-first-century Pueblo potter *not* use all the tools available to her in order to create art? Can a single new technique like electric kilns destroy the continuity of a living culture that has survived for 1,700 years? Surely, making pottery with *any* deference to traditional materials counteracts loss rather than accelerates it. Caroline Carpio explains, “Why do I do what I do? To save our culture through our art.”

Innovators like Diego Romero find themselves caught between markets: “I’m this kid from Berkeley who is half-Indian. If I do the traditional craft, it’s not accepted. If I do my own thing, it’s breaking the rules, changing the market.

“There are some who are scared of it—it’s not Indian art. There are some who are critical of it—it’s political. Others say, ‘We needed that.’ All that reassures me. If it’s that powerful, it’s art.”

Acoma potter Mary Ann Seymour at Santa Fe Indian Market, 2005.

A delicate balance exists between buyer and potter. Fire clouds and pitting make pottery undesirable to many consumers, so the Indian women reluctantly resort to kiln firing to solve these problems. When collectors then refuse to buy pottery because it has been kiln-fired, potters are caught in the middle of irreconcilable demands.

Pueblo potters can recognize commercial shortcuts because these make the pieces look “too perfect.” Though many potters strive for perfection, they always compare pottery to people, and because people are not perfect, pottery can be the same way and still be valid.





Prize-winning Zia pot by Elizabeth Medina, Santa Fe Indian Market, 1986.

Clarence Cruz notes that galleries may label a pot as traditional because the *person* who made it is traditional: “People need to be truthful. If the appraiser catches you, all hell breaks loose and that artist is blackballed.”

At the cutting edge, the most creative artists pull the market along with them. The collectors then push the rest of the potters to follow. This push-pull is the driving evolutionary force in the art pottery world.

Potters still pray to Clay Woman before making their pots, but they must depend on their work for a living. Some skilled Pueblo potters paint molded “ceramics” in the belief that they can earn better wages

by doing so. It’s tempting to avoid all the work of preparing clay, molding, and sanding and to get right to the business of demonstrating their painting skills. Clarence Cruz asks the critical question: “Do you think your grandmother said it was too much work?”

Pottery scholar Rick Dillingham pointed out a positive aspect of glazed ceramics. Because traditionally made pottery has become too valuable to keep, Pueblo families use greenware painted with familiar old designs—flowerpots or candy holders sitting on windowsills, serving pieces on the dinner table, chalices on the altar at the local Catholic church.

Competition has isolated potters from one another. In 2003, when five potters created a single figure at the School of American Research—a project captured in the 2003 film *Clay Beings*—the collaboration thrilled them. As a small statement in favor of collaboration over competition, the five signed the piece on the inside of the figure where no one can see their names. It’s the opposite of commodification, a bow to the spiritual and cultural traditions.

Delores Aragon hates to see all the ribbons go to contemporary artists: “My mom [Marie Juanico] enters every year—nothing. Aunt Ethel [Shields] enters every year—nothing.” Delores fantasizes about conspiring with her cousins Rebecca Lucario and Charmae Natseway: “This year, let’s not enter, so the elders can be recognized. They are the people who created the market. I’m so proud of our family.”

So many potters acknowledge mentors and teachers. Hubert Candelario, at San Felipe: “My melon bowls were inspired by Nancy Youngblood. I’m overwhelmed when I see Lonnie Vigil’s pots—they are so gracious.” Larson Goldtooth: “Virgil Ortiz’s stuff is amazing, mind-boggling.” Dorothy Ami: “Mark Tahbo saw an interest in me and encouraged me and told me he would help me. To this day, he still does.”

One historian of Pueblo pottery distinguishes between artisans and artists. The latter are the conscious

innovators, and the innovations have been happening for centuries. So has the business. Pueblo pottery played a part in the nation's oldest culture-based economy—pots were traded for Mexican macaw feathers a thousand years ago. Just before Americans introduced factory-made vessels to the Southwest in the 1800s, Pueblo potters were making pieces to supply forty thousand New Mexico settlers, as well as for their own use. They traded pottery for goods in those days. Now, they sell their work on the Internet and ship the pieces anywhere in the world. Robin Teller Velardez acknowledges that, in addition to being an artist, a potter must be “an accountant, a publicist, a marketer.”

The 1970s created the Indian art market. Anthropologist Bruce Bernstein believes that the sixties counterculture's romantic notions of American Indians contributed to the Indian jewelry boom and consequent blossoming of Indian art galleries in the Southwest. The 1962 founding of the Institute of American Indian Arts encouraged individualism. In 1974 the Maxwell Museum exhibit *Seven Families in Pueblo Pottery* opened in Albuquerque. This event, along with the publication of Rick Dillingham's best-selling catalog, marked the beginning of collectors searching out individual potters, pueblo by pueblo. Suddenly, Indian material culture had become art. Pueblo women found themselves speaking for the first time for their

Jemez potter Fannie Loretto admiring clay sculpture by her daughter, Kathleen Wall; Santa Fe Indian Market, 2005.

communities with the new status granted them by the dominant culture.

Santa Fe began staging the first version of Indian Market in 1922. Today about eighty thousand people come to Santa Fe for the annual event. They spend nearly \$20 million in two days and more than \$100 million statewide in the course of their weeklong August visit. An estimated \$2.5 million goes directly to the Indian people exhibiting at the market, and many millions more are spent in the dozens of Santa Fe galleries, on pieces by artists who were first discovered in a market booth.

The potters speak time and again of trying to save their best pieces for Indian Market, for the Hopi and Zuni shows at the Museum of Northern Arizona, for the Heard Museum Indian Market in Phoenix, or for the Eight Northern Pueblos Show. Noreen Simplicio, at Zuni, especially treasures museum purchases of her work: it means that your pot “is the best of the best.”





Setting up on the plaza before dawn, Santa Fe Indian Market, 2005.

Robin Teller Velardez has realized, “Three hundred years from now, my pieces will be in museums. This is how I’m going to live forever!”

Hopi potter Larson Goldtooth captures the scene at First Mesa the day before Santa Fe Indian Market—three hundred miles away: “We’re still here firing at 9 or 10 in the morning, when we should be on the road. By the time we get to Santa Fe, we’re totally burned out. You’re just sitting there in your booth, staring.” He rallies, of course, when people come by, delighted with his Hopi figures: “I had to learn to talk. Now, I can rattle on and on about making the art.”

These days, buyers come to potters’ homes year-round. This helps young potters without vehicles. It also helps collectors understand the work—seeing the rooms where potters create, looking at the views they ponder

while imagining designs. On workbenches in front of those windows, cell phones rest next to paint rocks and yucca brushes, and buyers call frequently, pushing and prodding, some gentler than others. Saving a pot for a big show takes willpower when a potter knows that it will sell immediately for a good price. As much as potters love their work, the product supports them. Clarence Cruz says, “I’ll have to make bigger pots when my son goes to college!”

Those prices keep going up. “Sometimes the prices shock *me!*” says Jean Sahme of her fine Hopi pots. “I’m sure they are worth it. I remind myself of all the hours I put into it.” Dollie Navasie remembers how her heart raced when she was asked how much one of her award winners cost (“I couldn’t breathe”). She answered with her highest price ever—\$10,000.

Angie Yazzie felt guilty charging so much for each of her large, fine Taos pots, until she remembered what her grandmother, Isabel C. Archuleta, told her: “Mother Earth provides us with everything we need. We build houses with Mother Earth. We have food from Mother Earth. The money we make we use to feed our families. We help people in the community. Mother Earth is providing us with these things.”

Hopi potter Gloria Mahle sees a generation-to-generation tradition in collectors, just as with potters: “A lot of the collectors have already been exposed to pottery, maybe by their parents or grandparents.” Others worry that the younger generation is so entranced by technology, with no connection to the earth or to older, slower ways of creating art, that these future buyers won’t be interested in traditional pottery. Also, people hold on to their money in chaotic times. After September 11, 2001, people retreated—they weren’t buying art.

Potters clearly pay attention to what their customers want. They quietly keep tabs on the marketplace, mostly through their own experience of what sells and what does not. Wayne Salvador knows that his wife, Lilly, will do well at the Heard Museum if she brings pots with Mimbres designs. The Heard has hosted a Mimbres exhibit, so people there “recognize that type of art.” Stella Teller says that nativity scenes sell best at Santa Fe Indian Market, corn dolls in Arizona, and that Europeans always buy the most expensive pots, Texans the biggest. The Nahohai family’s bear figurines sell fast in California. “Older ladies” buy Virgil Ortiz’s “most outrageous pieces.” Younger collectors buy “safer pieces.”

As the potter’s world widens, unpredictable new problems arise. The line break seems to be dying out because buyers think that it makes the design look unfinished. Stella Teller sometimes has to refire her pots after shows, to burn off the greasy, sticky fingerprints left by people eating fry bread and honey. Glendora

Fragua cringes as people wearing chunky rings handle her painstakingly polished pots: “You can hear the SCCRRRTTCH” as the jewelry rubs across the surface. Karen Abeita worries about her hands. Besides making Hopi pottery, her other passion is softball: “I don’t care where the ball hits me, just not my hands!”

Many potters keep to themselves. A woman living in a cinderblock house a quarter mile from an old adobe pueblo talks about friends who live “down at the pueblo” as if they lived miles and miles away. Most potters say that they pay no attention to anyone else’s work. Many live up to this claim. Some say a jealous word or two, accusing others of using commercial clays or paints, painting molded



Jacob Koopee (left), Hopi potter, bringing his Best of Show piece to Indian Market (2005) at 6:00 a.m. It sold immediately.

greenware, or even sanding off the name from the bottom of a pot and signing their own. Rainy Naha believes that there is “a tremendous amount of spirituality and unity” in the circle of potters at Hopi: “Most of the backbiting is political and religious, not in the art world. Even those who are experts still call around for help.” Jean Sahme wishes that everyone could just show their work and not do juried shows: “There are so many very talented people out there.”

For the sake of “progress,” we often strike devil’s bargains to gain something new. Individuality creates artistic freedom, but a nourishing sense of community is lost. Success and wealth and “career” can stifle both cultural connection and creativity.

Nancy Youngblood treasures the rare compliments from other potters in her family: “When it does come, it means something. They know the time, how technically difficult it was. They know you took a chance. When my aunt LuAnn Tafoya comments, ‘That’s beautiful,’ it’s like Best of Division, Best of Show.” Nancy’s highest praise came years ago when her grandmother, Margaret Tafoya, looked at one of Nancy’s early miniature Santa Clara melon bowls and said, “I think I could make that piece, but I don’t think I could polish it.”

Some tribal leaders and potters get upset with Indians who give demonstrations at museum shows or teach pottery workshops to non-Indians, fearing that

they are giving away “secrets.” Every potter who takes such a step must ask herself why she does so. Susanna Denet used to see her people “cut down to nothing in price.” Her response: “I wanted to do something to help my people. I demonstrate to educate the outsiders so that they will know what goes into the potteries.” Her family supported this decision. Candace Tse-Pe Martinez often demonstrates pottery-making. For years, she worked as a hotel concierge in Santa Fe; in that role, she helped people understand “the whole culture.” Candace feels like “an educator of the Southwest” and believes that “the buyers are intrigued by the whole process, not just the piece itself.” It’s a long way from the thirties and forties, when the great Zia potter Trinidad Medina toured the United States, demonstrating at world’s fairs. Seated behind a railing, she remembered feeling just like “a cow in a corral.”

Children and grandchildren continue to take up pottery-making. It’s a choice today, rather than an

unquestioned element of Pueblo identity. And with the increase in prices, more people can make a living as full-time potters. As a result, the twenty-first-century Pueblo pottery marketplace is lively. Acoma and Santa Clara each claim more than three hundred potters. Rainy Naha guesses that at Hopi only fifteen to twenty people “really work” at pottery at First Mesa, but their “dedication” to their work as the real “culture preservationists” nourishes her hope.

When Max Early’s teenage son made pottery, he



*Nathan Begaye claims both his lineages:
Hopi and Navajo. Does he make
“Pueblo” pottery? 2006.*

chose to make a little replica of a Game Boy controller out of clay. Max, a born teacher, said to him, "You know how you are with your video games, how you play and play? That's how I am with my pots." His skeptical son went away with new understanding, new interest. Max believes that it takes "a certain mind frame" to learn pottery-making: "You have to be almost like an artist already." Some of the finest potters leave that judgment to the outside world. Robert Tenorio says that he

always "would prefer to be called a potter rather than an artist."

Dora Tse-Pe is afraid that pottery-making is "going to go" one day: "I tell my girls, 'I feel good that I'm helping keeping it going. And I want you to do the same thing.'" In 1986 she was proud to say, "They are following my advice." In 2006 her daughters still make pottery. Dora's mantra echoes through all Pueblo families: "I hope they always will."

The micaceous glitter of San Felipe pots by Hubert Candelario, 2006. With its winding black line, the "evolution" plate "is about myself evolving in my life."

