Pueblo pottery of the Southwest is one of the most stunning, unique, and enduring artistic traditions in all of Native North America.

It is a custom rich in history as not only an expression of cultural identity, but also as a reflection of the relationship between Pueblo peoples and the influences from outside their own community. Today, there are about 20 pueblos with a total population in excess of 50,000. Pottery making is a specialized art and skill that has been passed down from one generation to the next for centuries. It is a practice flexible enough to adapt as necessary over time, while still adhering to established social norms.

Pueblo peoples have lived in the American Southwest for thousands of years. The region includes what are now New Mexico, Arizona, and parts of Colorado and Utah. Many tribal members continue to live in their villages, called pueblos, situated along the Rio Grande River and its tributaries. They are established from Taos to south of Albuquerque, New Mexico; westward to the pueblos of Laguna, Acoma, and Zuni and even further west to the Hopi villages located in northeastern Arizona. It is an arid region of high elevation plateaus punctuated by rugged mountain ranges and dramatic landscapes where rainfall is often less than 10 inches per year. This fragile environment, blessed with a great variety of natural resources, is also subject to damaging forces of nature such as harsh winters, hot summers, droughts, and late-summer cloud bursts. Since first European contact nearly 400 hundred years ago, the location of the pueblo villages has remained fairly constant. Pueblo peoples sought to maintain their cultural identity during Spanish and Mexican rule and later under the domination of the United States. Facing tremendous changes and hardships brought about by contact with non-Indians, many aspects of traditional pueblo life were somehow maintained. It is likely because the Southwest remained relatively inaccessible well into the 19th century. In 1883, however, the changes to Pueblo Indian life accelerated with completion of the railroad into the Southwest. Thus, it was possible for a great influx of settlers, tourists and anthropologists to visit the pueblos on a regular basis. It was also during this period that the Pueblo peoples were forced by necessity to transition from essentially a Neolithic hunter system to a cash economy. This ultimately affected all aspects of traditional life including the production of pottery. The Pueblo peoples have been able to adapt to their changing world and today Pueblo pottery has become a vibrant symbol of a surviving cultural tradition.

Curator Bill Mercer is a researcher and scholar of Native American art. He earned undergraduate degrees in Anthropology and History from California State University at Northridge, and a Master of Arts degree in Museum Studies from Texas Tech University. Bill also completed additional PhD education in Native American art history at the University of New Mexico. With more than 25 years of museum experience, he has curated numerous exhibitions, written several exhibition publications, and lectured extensively on various topics related to Native American art. Bill has spent a great deal of time in the Southwest and has a particular affinity for historic and contemporary Pueblo pottery.

PUEBLO to PUEBLO

THE LEGACY OF SOUTHWEST INDIAN POTTERY
The Southwest pueblos are among the most spectacular ancient ruins in North America. This exhibit represents 12 pueblos mainly located along the Rio Grande in New Mexico and in Arizona.
The Pueblo of Acoma has been home to an active community of potters throughout its history. Acoma pottery is characterized by its thin walls and light weight. Elegant high-shanked jars are the most common form, although bowls and canisters were also frequently made. The jars were typically produced with smooth curves that exhibit a graceful transition from one section of the body to another. The walls of Acoma vessels are generally much thinner than pottery from other pueblos. The ability of Acoma potters to make vessels with such thin walls is due in large part to their clay. The white clay of Acoma is very durable and, when mixed with ground sherds for temper and then fired, becomes watertight. Acoma vessels are usually covered with a white slip and then painted. The designs on jars were often defined by framing lines that created horizontal zones extending from the rim to the underbody. Traditional designs tend to be intricate, carefully-painted patterns of repeated geometrical and curvilinear motifs executed in black, red/orange, and yellow. The designs may not be symmetrical but are usually fairly well balanced and complement the shape of the vessel. Fine-line hatching is commonly used as a decorative element to fill outlined areas. In addition to the complicated geometric designs, traditional Acoma designs may also include parrots, recognizable by their curved beaks, and flowering plants.

A twentieth-century innovation for some Acoma potters was to seek inspiration from the distinctive tube-built, fine-line, black-on-white designs of prehistoric Mimbres and Tiwaios pottery. Lucy Lewis considered one of the great masterpieces of prehistoric pottery, became well known for reviving the prehistoric designs with her boldly-painted vessels. She also sometimes used a deer with a heart-line design, considered traditionally Zuni. Lewis claimed to have relatives from Zuni, therefore it was not culturally inappropriate for her to use the design.

The Pueblo of Zuni pottery emphasized polychrome designs on a white slip. Zuni pottery was made from locally-collected gray/white colored clay mixed with crushed petrified wood for temper. There were a variety of forms, with the most numerous being jars and bowls. The most common jar was a high-shanked form with either a pronounced or subtle transition from the shoulder to the neck. Zuni bowls characteristically have a slight constricted below a flaring rim. One specialized type of bowl has stepped sides and often was made with a strap handle. The Zuni people call these "cornmeal bowls" — they were used to carry the cornmeal for ceremonies. Common designs include geometric and spiral motifs as well as stylized birds, deer, and other animals. On cornmeal bowls, designs referring to water symbolism such as tadpoles, frogs, dragonflies, and butterflies were frequent depictions.

**CORNMEAL BOWLS**

These unique bowls were used to carry the cornmeal for ceremonies. The bowls feature stepped sides and were often painted with designs referring to water symbolism such as tadpoles, frogs, and dragonflies.
Historic Hopi pottery, more than that of any other Southwest pueblo, exhibits a direct connection to the prehistoric types made by their ancestors. This is partly due to Hopi potters using the same distinctive yellow clay, and a conscious choice to revive and refine designs used prior to European contact. Much of the Hopi pottery created in the past 120 years or so can be traced back to the Sikyatki revival began by the Hopi potter Nampeyo. Sikyatki Polychrome was originally produced between about 1375 and 1650 at the Hopi village of the same name, located not far from the modern village of Polacca. Sikyatki pottery is among the most elegant and appealing of prehistoric Southwest pottery. Between 1885 and 1890, at the urging of Jesse Walter Fewkes (an archeologist working for the Smithsonian Institution), Nampeyo and others began producing pots similar to the earlier Sikyatki vessels in their distinctive forms and imagery of abstracted bird, feather, and cloud motifs. The return to the Sikyatki style was swift, owing to its quick popularity among collectors. By reviving this older-style pottery, Nampeyo received a great deal of attention that resulted in a florescence of Hopi pottery making.

Nampeyo was photographed many times, and her image was used in advertising for both the Santa Fe Railroad and the Fred Harvey Company. Nampeyo demonstrated her craft for tourists at the Harvey Company’s Hopi House near the Grand Canyon, a market for Native American crafts, made by artisans on the site. Unfortunately, Nampeyo lost most of her eyesight in the 1920s. She continued, however, to shape pots for another 20 years, which her daughters then painted.

The Sikyatki revival style continues to utilize yellow clay although some potters have occasionally used red or white. Regardless of the clay, the vessels are left unglazed while the yellow clay, when fired, ranges from a pale yellow to a deep warm orange. The Sikyatki revival involved a shift to distinctive forms such as shallow bowls, cylindrical-shaped jars, and flat low-slung jars with little or no neck. Designs emphasize symmetrical complex compositions with elegantly-painted abstracted bird and feather representations. It should also be noted that as potters began to sign their work; some Hopi potters used an icon instead of their names. One example of this is Marcia Fritz who signed her pottery with an image of a dragonfly.
Historically, the pottery at Isleta Pueblo were usually tin vessels with red painted decorations and red bowls with smoothed black interiors up to the mid-nineteenth century. During the 1850s, however, these styles began to be replaced by a polychrome style introduced by potters from Laguna Pueblo who had moved to Isleta. The potters at Isleta even purchased the white slip and red and black paint colors for this new style from Laguna potters.

Virtually all Isleta polychrome pottery was made specifically for the tourist trade. Located just south of Albuquerque, Isleta potters regularly met the arriving passenger trains to sell their pottery directly to tourists and travelers. Characteristic forms included small, handled bowls in the shape of baskets, pitchers, cups, and other small pieces that appealed to non-Indian collectors and were easily portable. Figurative pieces were also produced, birds such as chickens and turkeys being the most common. Typically, the clay was a light brown or tan color, which contrasted sharply with a milky almost chalky-white slip. The red-painted designs ranged from dull orange to brick red, while the black was often a chocolate-brown color. In general, the designs consisted of geometric and floral motifs, similar to those from Laguna, yet Isleta painting tended not to be as precise as Laguna; painted lines often appeared thicker and more loosely applied.
Laguna Pueblo was founded in the 1590s and is located not far to the northwest of Acoma. Because of their proximity and common language, the people of Acoma and Laguna share many characteristics both culturally and historically. Laguna pottery frequently resembles that of Acoma such as the use of a white slip, and jars are generally the same high-shielded shape. Care is also taken to ensure thin yet sturdy walls. Typically, the polychrome designs on Laguna pottery reflect the intricate combinations of curvilinear, geometric, and floral designs found on traditional Acoma pottery. There are several features that may be considered unique to Laguna pottery. The clay used at Laguna is judged to be slightly denser than Acoma clay. While Acoma clay is mixed with crushed potsherds for temper, Laguna potters are more likely to mix sand with the crushed potsherds.

A decorative feature often characteristic of Laguna pottery is the use of comparatively large interlocking motifs such as hearts or diamonds painted around the middle of the vessel. At the points of connection, the orange or red motifs are continuous and not interrupted by the black outline. Laguna potters also took great advantage of their proximity to the railroad and would often meet passenger trains to sell their vessels. This emphasis on selling pottery to tourists resulted in many Laguna potters creating smaller inexpensive pieces that could be easily handled by passengers on the train. They also made whimsical forms that would be especially appealing to those who had no prior knowledge of Pueblo pottery.

Zia Pueblo has been a center of pottery production for centuries. Zia ceramics were often traded for agricultural crops from Jemez and San Felipe Pueblos. Traditional Zia pottery is made from reddish clay with ground black basalt mixed as temper. The use of basalt as a temper results in heavier vessels than those familiar from Acoma, Laguna, and Zuni. The most common forms among Zia pots are jars, bowls, and canisters. Zia bowls have flat bottoms and were created in a variety of sizes with the largest rivalling the monumental “dough bowls” used for mixing bread dough from Santo Domingo.

Zia vessels were usually coated with a white or buff-colored slip except for the underbody, which was often given a red slip to match rims or interiors of jars and bowls. The designs painted on many Zia vessels are worked within a design field extending from the rim to the underbody. This area, which may or may not be further divided into registers or panels, is always framed by one or two lines around the top of the underbody, which creates a grounding line for the composition, and other one or two lines around the rim. Traditional designs include bold geometric elements similar to those at Acoma and Laguna Pueblos. A common geometric element on Zia pottery is a stepped motif representing clouds.

The motif most characteristic of historic Zia pottery is a distinctive style of bird that first became popular in the mid-nineteenth century. The bird is depicted in profile with a large eye, feathers atop its head, a straight beak, and a long tail that may or may not be split. Potters identify this bird as a roadrunner which, to the Zia people, is a symbol of speed and a bearer of prayers. The roadrunner was frequently painted in association with a red or orange/red arc. This arc, representing the rainbow, serves as both a decorative element and a framing device. Other common design elements include abstract feathers, feathered prayer sticks, and plants.
San Ildefonso Pueblo

has the most innovative and diverse pottery of the Southwest pueblos. San Ildefonso potters often created lovely polychrome vessels that featured black and red painted designs on a cream-colored slip. A common variation in its long history was a black-on-red style. In some instances, their painted designs were visually similar to those of the nearby Tesuque Pueblo.

San Ildefonso pottery underwent significant changes after Maria Martinez and her husband, Julian, first introduced black-on-black pottery around 1919. The style instantly became popular among collectors, and other San Ildefonso potters quickly began copying it. As a result, the older polychrome and black-on-red styles were virtually abandoned.

Polished black pottery had long been produced at Santa Clara and San Juan Pueblos. But it was Maria Martinez, who through trial and error, rediscovered the art of making black pottery and went on to develop the world-renowned glossy-black-on-black technique. Maria, who made but never painted the pottery, collaborated with her husband Julian, who painted the designs. The pottery was formed with local red clay and the entire surface was covered with the same-color slip before giving it a high polish and painting the designs with a black mixture. Using the oxygen-reduction firing process, the surface of the vessel develops into highly-polished black and the painted designs become matte black. When the vessels were fired in the oxidized process, the surface remains red and the painted designs become matte cream. In addition to these black and red techniques, Maria developed an extremely high-polished style with a gray appearance. These vessels are quite distinctive and are described as having a "gumnaest" finish. As inspiration for Julian's designs, he often referred to the designs of the ancient Mimbres of the Southwest. His repeating feather motif became especially popular.

Over the course of her lifetime, Maria Martinez made thousands of vessels, first in collaboration with Julian, and later by herself and with other family members. Not only was she a prolific artist, but she was especially innovative and deserving of all the accolades that have been bestowed upon her. She is without doubt the most significant pueblo potter of the past two hundred years.

**Maria Martinez and her Husband, Julian,**

first introduced the world renowned black-on-black pottery style around 1919.

Maria formed the vessels and Julian added the painted motifs.
Santa Clara potters historically have emphasized form over decoration. Most traditional Santa Clara pottery consists of highly-polished, unpainted black or red vessels with relatively thick walls. Typical forms include bowls, long-necked jars, and extremely large storage jars with rounded bottoms. A distinctive shape that originated in Santa Clara is the double-spouted wedding jar with a strap handle. These unique vessels appear to have first become common shortly after 1900 and became a popular form for potters of other pueblos, as well. In response to the growing market for Pueblo pottery in the 19th century, Santa Clara potters began to create an even wider range of forms, including interpretations of non-Indian shapes such as pitchers, soup bowls, candlestick holders, and cups. They also created a large quantity of small animal figurines. In some instances, the “animalitos” as they were referred to, were made by children as a way for them to learn how to work the clay.

Santa Clara pottery was not painted but decorated. One technique was to impress a design into the surface of the jars before it was completely dry; in most instances, the impressed design was in the shape of a bear paw, a reference to the belief that once during a drought a bear led the people of Santa Clara to water. In the 1920s, carving designs into the thick walls of vessels first became popular, possibly in response to the popularity of the black-on-black pottery produced at nearby San Ildefonso Pueblo. In some examples, these deeply-carved designs were quite elaborate. The most common featured stepped mounds and the avanyu, or water serpent.

The art of pottery making is typically passed down within a family for generations, so many members of the same family might become well-known for their pottery making. At Santa Clara, the Tafoyas are considered the most famous, with one such family, Sorrel Tafoya, considered the matriarch of the family. Tafoya was born in 1863 and was renowned for creating large storage jars with a bear paw impressed decoration. Three of her children also became potters, including her daughter, Margaret Tafoya, who is regarded as one of the foremost potters of the 20th century, and whose works are prized by collectors and well-represented in museum collections.

**DOUBLE-SPOUTED WEDDING JAR**

One spout of the vessel represents the husband; the other, the wife. The looped handle represents the unity achieved with marriage. The space created within the loop represents the couple’s own circle of life.

At San Juan Pueblo, traditional pottery vessels were polished black or red with the most common form being a nearly spherical-shaped jar with a short neck. This style of San Juan pottery was not usually carved, and the polished surface was restricted to the upper portion of the vessel with the underbody left unpolished, giving it more of a matte finish. By the mid-twentieth century, San Juan potters began to be more experimental, decorating their pottery with commercial paint and engraving the surfaces in patterns to appeal more to the collector market.
Santo Domingo

Older Dough Bowls

are commonly more than 20 inches in diameter
and weigh more than 10 pounds — much larger
than those produced at any other pueblo.

The Santo Domingo Pueblo is often regarded as one of the more culturally conservative of the pueblos. That same conservatism is reflected in a traditional pottery style that has changed very little over the past two centuries. The most common pottery forms created at Santo Domingo are jars and bowls. The largest bowls are frequently much larger than those produced at any other pueblo. It is not uncommon for older Santo Domingo dough bowls to be more than 30 inches in diameter and weigh more than 10 pounds. The decoration usually begins with a cream-colored slip, sometimes with a red-slip underbody. The painted designs are placed within a framed horizontal band on the exterior of bowls, just below the rim. The horizontal band containing the design elements on jars is focused around the mid-section of the vessel.

Santo Domingo potters have, remarkably, consistently painted the same design elements for the last two hundred years. These designs were often created by repeating simple geometric elements, such as triangles, and are strikingly bold. Frequently, the design was arrived at by painting an area in black and allowing the cream-colored slip to reveal the desired motif, thus creating a “negative” design. In addition to the bold geometric designs, formal and bird motifs are also common. A frequent motif was an abstracted representation of a bird with wings swept back as it soars. (Usually, this motif looks similar to a tulip placed on its side.) Another unique feature of Santo Domingo pottery is a visual break in the painted designs. This line break can be traced back to prehistoric pottery of the Southwest. It is a symbolic device, believed to provide an opening or outlet to prevent the spirit of the vessel from being trapped within the pattern.

Cochiti

Cochiti pottery was produced in a wide range of forms, including figurative vessels made in the shapes of birds and humans. Decoration on Cochiti pottery usually consists of black-painted designs on a white or gray slip with a red-slip underbody. A red slip is similarly applied to the interiors of bowls. The use of red as highlight or filler is a relatively recent practice and not readily found on historic vessels. The design is painted within an area defined by thick black lines. A characteristic line break is usually placed in the framing line around the rim. Although the design field is framed at the top and bottom, often the images are isolated and detached from the groundline, especially on the designs painted on the inside of bowls. They seem to float on the surface of the vessel.

Designs on Cochiti pottery are generally executed in loose, fluid brush strokes that are fairly thick and may appear to be rather quickly applied. Floral motifs are common, often in association with birds and geometric forms. There are also frequent representations of clouds, lightning, rain, and the awanyu, or water serpent. All are considered important symbols, associated with life-giving rain and water.

Figurative pottery has been made at Cochiti since before 1900. Birds and animals are common, but human figures are the more distinctive and well-known. Early in the 20th century, it was common for Cochiti potters to create large, free-standing figures representing HISPANIC or INDIAN, such representations, although originally encouraged by Santa Fe traders, were eventually discontinued by the 1920s.

Around 1920, Cochiti potter Helen Cordova created another type of human figure which she referred to as “a storyteller.” The most familiar type of storyteller is a seated man or woman posed as if telling a story, with as many as a dozen small children arranged around the figure. These figures have become extremely popular with collectors.
The pottery of Tesuque Pueblo has undergone tremendous change throughout history resulting in a variety of styles and forms. At the middle of the 19th century, most traditional Tesuque pottery was painted with complex motifs loosely executed in black on a white or gray slip, with a red underbody. In some instances, these vessels are stylistically similar to those produced at Chimú Pueblo, Tesuque’s closest neighbor to the south. However, unique to Tesuque pottery is an interlocking fret design that was commonly used to decorate bowls. In addition to vessels with black-on-white designs, a small number of black-on-red vessels similar to those from nearby San Ildefonso Pueblo were created. The potters at Tesuque created a full range of utilitarian vessels, such as lidded cooking vessels called “bean pots,” which were made from clay naturally infused with small flecks of mica.

Toward the end of the 19th century, at the urging of traders in Santa Fe, Tesuque potters began to create a variety of forms in response to the growing market for Pueblo pottery among tourists. Collectors even purchased vessels from Santa Fe traders via mail order. Pitchers and small flowerpots with drain holes in the bottom were produced and painted with typical Tesuque floral designs. However, by 1900, the most characteristic form of Tesuque pottery were small figures known as Rain Gods. They were produced literally by the thousands, and potters would deliver them by the wagon load to Santa Fe traders. The rain gods are seated human figures, often female, posed with their legs straight out, and holding a small jar. These figures appear to have been first developed around 1870; early examples were often made with micaeous clay (mica-containing), giving the clay a shimmering effect once fired and posed with bent legs. However, these figures were quickly replaced by small non-micaeous figures often decorated after firing. Sometimes they were simply covered with a coating of white slip; other examples have nothing more than small “rain” symbology painted on them. Commercial paints were used when they became available, a testament to the adaptability of Tesuque potters and Pueblo pottery in general.