

# Ceramics for the Archaeologist

## An Alternative Perspective

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*An engaged anthropology succeeds when a traditional practitioner begins to analyze and articulate his or her own practice. Felipe V. Ortega, a Hispanic and Jicarilla Apache Penitente Brother and full-time potter, considers his own viewpoints on the cultural underpinnings of his craft in the following article. His viewpoints may be mirrored in the works of Morris Opler and other anthropologists but have never been directly tied to northern Río Grande micaceous pottery traditions. As a potter who has helped and taught many archaeologists the art of micaceous pottery making, he has learned much of how we think about ceramics. Here he explains the meaning of micaceous clay and the relationship of pottery to a living landscape and cosmos. This contribution is emblematic of an engaged anthropology in which native voices contribute to theorizing about place and craft. In creating the vessel pictured on the cover of this volume in honor of Dick Ford's many contributions to Southwest anthropology and archaeology, Mr. Ortega has succeeded in bringing this perspective to life. [The Editors]*

Indian people view pottery, not only as containers for food or other items, but also as containers and givers of life. They are beings, created by the union of clay and water through the potter's hands and thoughts, which are transferred into the vessel. They have a life and a history, and they can bring good or harm to people who use them or eat from them. When they are fired, they are born. When they are broken, they die and go back to Mother Earth. To understand the meaning of pottery from this alternative perspective, it is helpful to start at the beginning, with clay, rather than at the end, with the finished pot.

Here at the beginning is where I will start my analysis of ceramics for the archaeologist; with clay and our connections to this land. By making reference to Anna O. Shepard's 1956 seminal volume of the same name, my goal is to honor this work while highlighting a complementary and, I hope, growing perspective among Río Grande archaeologists. The specific clay that I will speak about is micaceous clay that is found eroding from rich mica schist deposits in the Sangre de Cristos and San Juan Mountains of northern New Mexico. This clay has been used for nearly 800 years to make cooking and other kinds of vessels

and figurines. The fabric of the clay is more than 80% mica and the surface of a finished pot glitters like gold when it is fired. Nothing has to be added to the clay to make a good paste. It can be gathered, cleaned, and then shaped and fired. The mica acts as a natural temper, both strengthening the walls and making them resistant to thermal or other physical damages. The only decoration added to finished pieces is the occasional incised design, appliqué, or handle. Archaeologists typically refer to the finished pieces and fragments they find on the ground as “utility” wares and associate them with mundane cooking and trade.

Prehistorically, micaceous pottery was made by several northern Tewa Pueblo pottery communities. Starting in the historic period, the Jicarilla Apaches, Taos Indians, and Picuris Indians began to make micaceous pottery. Soon after, Hispanic women, many of whom were descended from Indian people, started to make it. The Pueblos and Hispanics used the clays that were located close to their villages or they exchanged clay with their neighbors. The Jicarillas on the other hand used all of the regional clay pits and marketed clay and vessels with the aid of their horses to make a living from trade. Many of the same clay pits are still being used by these people today. The clay continues to provide for our people as our pottery has become popular in modern Indian and Spanish markets. We have come to share a tradition and a mutual understanding of our deeply held connections to our land through micaceous pottery. As this has happened, clay has taken on new political and economic roles in our society even though most of it is now located on federal land.

In the northern Río Grande of New Mexico, where I have practiced as a potter for over thirty years, the land cannot be owned no matter what the “legal” documents say. She is our Mother, and we care for her. The region is culturally diverse, but what people share in their common connections to this land is more important than what separates them on religious, cultural, or political grounds. I am, like many of my relatives, part of a heritage that has resulted from over four hundred years of life on this stage. We have lived in the small village of La Madera since the early 1800s and have Jicarilla Apache relatives at Dulce whom we visit often. I have traced my own genealogy back to my Jicarilla Apache great grandmother, María Soledad Jaramillo, who was adopted by my family in 1864. My family remembers her relatives coming to visit from the reservation at Dulce. They would pitch their skin tents on the ridge above the village and sit on the floor in my great grandmother’s house gossiping and laughing till the wee hours of the morning. I can still see their tent rings on the ridge above La Madera today. Frequently they came to get clay from nearby pits for making pottery during these visits, as they had done for generations before. The Jicarilla once lived in the mountains surrounding La Madera, which they considered sacred precisely because of this clay. When the Jicarilla were told to leave the area by the U.S. military in the 1890s, many refused, preferring instead to relinquish their tribal status and remain a part of the community and part of this land. I learned pottery-making from one of these women, Jesucita Martinez, who was 90 years old in 1969 when I began my apprenticeship. What I know of clay and the cosmology behind it comes from my Apache heritage.

According to the Jicarilla, Killer-of-the-Enemies created the northern Río Grande in the form of his mother White Shell Woman. The father of Killer-of-the-Enemies was the Sun. The Sun in turn was the child of Mother Earth and Father Sky. Killer-of-the-Enemies made the area around Taos White Shell Woman’s heart. Four sacred rivers, the Río Grande, the

Canadian, the Arkansas, and the Chama, flowed from her heart. The Río Grande also was her backbone. He made a mountain ridge for her neck and Pike's Peak for her head. The Sangre de Cristos on the east side of the Río Grande formed one of her legs, and the other was the San Juan Mountains. Pedernal Peak was one of her nipples. The other was located at Rock Bell Mountain. Within the body of White Shell Woman reside the *Hactin* or Mountain Spirits. Every animal, bird, substance, or thing in nature has a *Hactin* which represents its inherent power or qualities. The *Hactin* are the spiritual advisors and providers for Jicarilla people, and the special rites and observances associated with the worship of White Shell Woman and the *Hactin* provided for the Jicarilla on their long journey through history.

Micaceous clay has a special place in this universe, for a specific *Hactin* is the life force of clay. Long ago this *Hactin* revealed himself to an old man and woman in their dreams. He took them to a place near Taos on the side of a mountain and showed them the clay. He told them how to dig it and told the woman how to make it into various kinds of shapes. He said that the Jicarilla should use this clay, dug from the body of White Shell Woman, to make their living; this clay would provide for them and their families. This is how the Jicarilla came to make micaceous pottery, and this is why they made so much of it. They worshiped this clay because it provided for them. They used many sources in their travels, and they provided finished pots and also raw clay to many households in exchange for food and other gifts.

*The divine provides for the daily needs of you and your family.*

This is a core belief for the Jicarilla. Because micaceous clay is the body of White Shell Woman, blessed with the power of the clay *Hactin*, every clay pit is taken care of by the community that uses it. These pits are part of the community and embody the health and status of that community. Offerings are made and brought to them as one would bring gifts to a relative. Whether words are spoken or not is immaterial since the act of the offering carries the thoughts and sentiments of communication. The act of prayer reunites the spiritual world beneath us and our activities on its surface. Even one's identity is not separate but is part of the whole. All of the seen and unseen is interrelated as one.

The potter waits to sense whether the time is opportune to dig or whether more offerings should be made. Sensing that the time is correct, the potter has the responsibility to gather enough material to make his or her creations and no more. The structure of creation is tripartite. Clay babies are born of the union between White Shell Woman (the earth), Grandfather Sky (the water), and the hands and instruments of the potter. Many metaphors express the respect people feel for this union. Digging—with digging sticks or today with picks and shovels—is symbolic of the impregnation of clay with the creative intentions of the potter. Part of the verbal prayer at the clay pit states: "I want to pitch my tent here and dwell with you and create the clay babies with you, oh our mother the earth, and from your own belly you gift us with this time." In the past, Jicarilla Apache women made much of their pottery by pitching their tents near or around the clay pit. The men were not permitted to enter this ground while the women worked on pottery for fear that their weapons and power would upset the delicate moment.

The potter must hold these thoughts carefully throughout the creative process. Before potters can “clean” the clay, they must wash their hands and refrain from contact with any contaminants that might spoil it. Washing is not for the benefit of the potter, but rather it represents a symbolic readiness to touch the “holy” body of White Shell Woman; a reverence for the otherness that is so powerful. This procedure ensures the continuity of all that is given for our well being through clay.

In the past, women cleaned clay either by picking out the larger stones with their fingers or by slaking the clay and drawing out the organic and other matter with water. Clay and water were often combined in a deerskin-lined depression in the ground. The heavy stones fell to the bottom and the clay and sand-sized particles floated to the top where they were mixed together as the water slowly seeped away. Today both men and women potters use cloth-lined vats or buckets, but the principle is the same. Once the clay was ready, the women sat on the ground near their tipi with corn-husk rings covered in chamois placed between their legs. The rings held the *puki*, a fired clay saucer, which served as the form for the base of the pot. By working there and forming the vessels between their two legs, the symbolic act of birthing clay babies was affirmed. Even today, with our modern tables and chairs, much of the work still is done on the lap. Similarly, the corn-husk ring is emblematic of the cosmic *sipapu* or opening through which we were brought forth into this upper world from the underground.

A ball of clay was, and still is, formed in the hand, patted or pinched flat, and then placed in the *puki* to form the base. Coils are then made and added one row at a time until the desired height is reached. As coils are dropped onto the opening of the vessel—symbolic of underworld—the wonderful moment of conception is realized again and again. Water is added to the surface of the coils to smooth the clay and form the vessel, but this is not just any water. It is the gift of Grandfather Sky that contributes life to the pot. Corncobs were used in the past to smooth vessel walls, and again this is not just any remnant of food. The corncob is symbolic of the cycle of life and plenty.

After the coils are fused through smoothing from the outside, shaping begins by smoothing from the inside, as we are all formed by beauty from within. A finished piece holds all beauty within it, even when it seems empty to the human eye. The vessel carries this beauty and shares it with its various users. After the pot dries, a knife or gourd scraper is used to remove any surface imperfections. A light coating of watery micaceous slip is applied to the surface and polished, first with a piece of leather and then with a smooth river stone. These are the formative years of the clay babies. The firing celebrates the rite of passage for the clay babies and is much like the long-life ceremony of pubescent girls in Jicarilla ceremony. They become real beings—beings with beauty from within—and they can now go out into the world on their own or stay by the home fire with their makers.

*All beauty comes from within . . .*

This is the final prayer of the blessing. With these words we pray before firing to all six directions, east, south, west, north, Father Sky and White Shell Woman. And we become the seventh direction, standing in the center and declaring finally,

*Beauty comes from within me. . .*

In the olden days, the vessels were taken care of as one would care for a revered member of the household. This may sound unlikely given the severe conditions in which most Jicarillas lived, but even though these vessels were “mundane” or utilitarian, they also sustained us in life and community. The traditional everyday living of Jicarilla Apaches looks very simple and void of high ceremony to us today. This is still true, but material simplicity belies a deep understanding of the spiritual realm. The deep-rooted and centuries old sensibility about the origin of clay vessels is permanently embedded in the consciousness of the clan that lives in harmony with all of creation.

The creation of a ceramic vessel then is not just the execution of a set of skills and operations. It is a window into the soul, personality, and mood of the maker and his or her connection to an unbroken line of a remembered past. In drawing our material from Mother Earth we become one with our ancestors, who, having taken from the very same place, unite us with a timeless cosmological reality. As a result, it is the clay and not just the finished pot that defines a potter’s core identity and tradition. The clay, in essence, is the physical manifestation of White Shell Woman and so is a living thing that must be respected and treated with care. A sense of self and place in a landscape is intertwined with this clay and becomes an expression of the union between us and our history when it is shaped into a vessel. The vessel, as emblematic of this union, in turn creates a sense of community and family when it is used, given, or sold. Today as I teach archaeologists and other people the gift of making pottery, they too join us in this history and become one with this land.

My own thoughts on this are that people in the distant past viewed clay and pottery in a way similar to what I have described here. The connections that are made today between clay and Mother Earth are very old and have continued up to the present. This is why some Indian people may object to the purely technical study of broken pottery found on archaeological sites without reference to the life-giving forces that bind these sherds to the living. But these same people forget that just as artifacts have returned to Mother Earth so shall we. For what these sherds teach us we remember to say thank you and offer a gift in return. That gift is knowledge.

### **References Cited**

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