

HOW PUEBLO POTTERY IS MADE

Follow the step-by-step process of creating Pueblo pottery

(taken from collectorsguide.com)

There are probably countless reasons why pueblo pottery is so appealing to the eye, so valuable. Chief among them, however, are the tremendous artistry and patient effort that go into making a piece--techniques that, in part, trace back to those used in creating the crude, undecorated pottery that appeared in the Rio Grande valley around 700 AD. Pottery then was utilitarian, providing for food storage and preparation, water transportation and the like. It was not until the late 1800s that Indians began producing pottery for tourists and collectors. And from the 1950s to the present there has been rapidly escalating appreciation of and encouragement given to continuing the traditions, elevating the craft, and developing innovative aesthetic expressions using age-old materials and techniques.

Fine craftsmanship at each stage

The construction of fine pottery is time-consuming and care is necessary at each step--each piece is unique and pitfalls abound. Let's look at the creation of a San Ildefonso black-on-black pot as an example.

Preparation



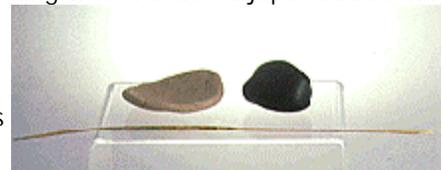
First large lumps of dry clay are pried with pick or file from the quarry, taken home and laid out in the sun to dry for a couple of days. Evenly dried clay is put into a vessel with enough water to cover and soak for two to four days. After several rinsings and then mixing, the solution is passed through a sieve to remove pebbles and other impurities, yielding a milkshake-like material. This is allowed to "set up" for several days.

Before the modeling can begin, filler or tempering agent made of volcanic tuff, is laboriously mixed with the clay. This helps counteract shrinkage and facilitates drying, thus lessening the likelihood of cracking.

Modeling



The potter takes a lump of clay about the size of a fist and pats it into the shape of a cone, forming the base. Using a shaping spoon or kajape usually made from a gourd, the potter scrapes and thins the clay. Continually turning and working with the wet kajape readies the base upon which rolls or coils of clay are then built up to roughly form the vessel. Continual moistening, rubbing, and turning gradually smooths and thins the walls and refines the shape. After curing for a few days, additional scraping further thins and evens the walls.



Finishing



Additional drying--2 to 4 days depending on weather--readies the pot for sanding. After sanding with coarse and very fine sandpaper, the pot is smoothed again by rubbing a wet cloth, which redistributes surface particles to fill in scratches. Next a "slip" is applied to improve surface color and texture. The slip, a suspension of clay in water in the consistency of thin cream, is applied either by brush or small folded cloth. After one or two applications of slip, the potter begins the process of rubbing with a polishing stone, called burnishing. When fully burnished, a

thin coat of hand-applied grease or oil, followed by more rubbing results in the highly reflective finish that some confuse with a modern-day chemical glaze.

Decorating

Using the same clay that formed the slip, the potter makes a thin suspension as a paint. With a simple brush, sometimes the leaf from a yucca plant chewed or frayed at the end, the design is painstakingly painted on (no erasure is possible without sanding away the error and again slipping and burnishing). In the case of this black-on-black San Ildefonso pot, the painted-on areas will be matte after firing and the rest of the surface will retain the shininess of burnishing. (Other forms of decoration include carving the clay with tools, impressing a design in the moist clay, or incising an intricate image).



Firing

The final step, firing, is one of the most precarious. If the vessel is not properly dried, or if air pockets exist, those days of previous effort can be rendered useless by an explosion. Fortunately this doesn't usually happen. A kiln or oven is formed above a fire pit by assembling tin cans as supports, grates and sheets of tin to enclose the pottery. Combustible material is arranged under and around the kiln and set afire. For red pottery the fire is allowed to burn down completely before removing the vessels--usually about 30 minutes. For blackware, the materials and steps of preparing the clay, modeling, finishing and decorating are the same as for red pottery. But at the point of firing, a technique rediscovered by Maria and Julian Martinez is necessary. In this method, powdered cow dung is used to surround and cover a pot, thus blocking the entry of oxygen around the pot. The clay is impregnated with black soot and what could have been a red pot, becomes



black.