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	by David Sash	1050
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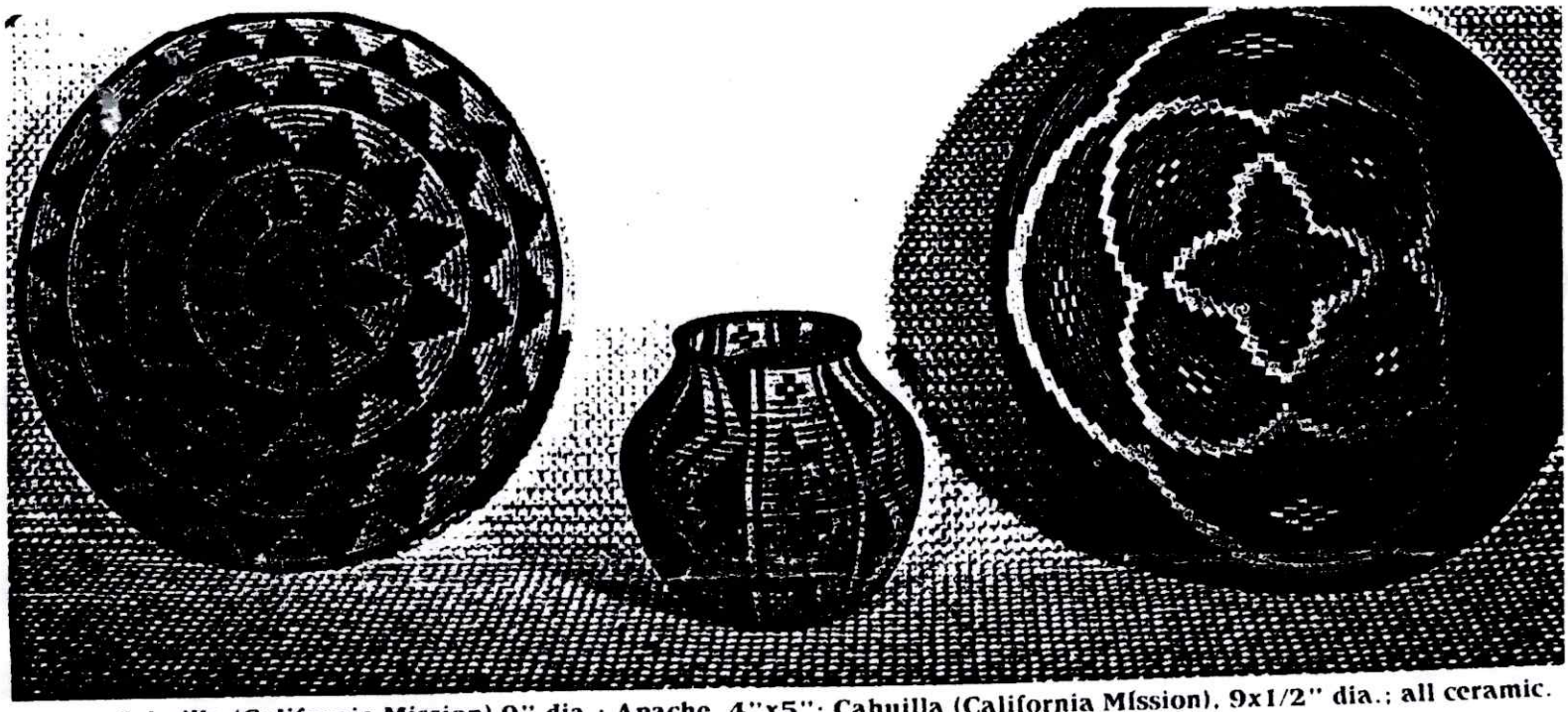

Cahuilla (California Mission) 9" dia.; Apache, 4"x5"; Cahuilla (California Mission), 9x1/2" dia.; all ceramic.

DAVID SALK, ARTIST

Creating pottery that emulates woven baskets to preserve this American Indian art form for generations to come

Story, Jann Arrington Wolcott
Color photography, Mark Nohl

"I guess you could call me a basket case," said ceramicist David Salk with a disarming grin. "The name would fit because I love Native American baskets so much."

In fact, David's wheel-thrown clay baskets look so much like authentic Indian woven baskets that you have to touch them to tell the difference. And, like the originals, his replicas are one-of-a-kind works of art. He researches and painstakingly reproduces the intricate designs and coiled shapes of 18th and early 19th century Southwest Indian baskets, firing the designs into the clay with iron oxide. In this way he hopes to preserve them for future generations.

"Native American basket weavers have traditionally been women," he explained. "Baskets were such an integral part of their culture and their everyday lives: they used them fo everything — from sacred ceremonies to gathei ing and storing food. Indian women decorate their baskets with designs and symbols tha represented their lives. But there are very fe weavers alive today. It's fast becoming a lo art." He went on to say that while a wove basket has a life span of 5000 years at mos his clay baskets could last 100,000 year "They may break," he admitted, "but th shards will remain, and perhaps they will b put back together, showing our descendan what an Apache *olla* looked like. I hope to lea behind a record of this beautiful Nati American art form for whoever is he thousands of years down the road."

> "...I hope to leave behind a record of this beautiful Native American art form for whoever is here, thousands of years down the road."

David's talents are by no means limited ceramics. He also expresses himself throu

painting, sculpting and woodwork. But his passion is his clay baskets. "They've been the biggest challenge of anything I've done in clay," he said. "I hope to continue to reproduce and document baskets as long as I'm able — as long as my hands remain steady and my eyes don't give out."

The unusual concept of clay baskets developed from a desire to produce unglazed ceramic pieces — pottery that would highlight the beauty of the clay itself. "I considered various ideas," he said. "But my love for baskets led to the idea of creating pottery that emulates woven baskets. I checked around to be sure that no one else was already doing it. Then I experimented until I came up with techniques that worked."

Tall and trim, with a deep tan and hair pulled back in a neat ponytail, David looks younger than his forty years. Frequent smiles deepen the laugh lines in the corners of his warm brown eyes as he describes the joy he finds in his work. He's a man at home in his own skin — a person of strong convictions and humanistic concerns. That's not surprising, given the fact that he comes from a family of dedicated humanitarians. Dr. Jonas Salk, the microbiologist who developed the first successful polio vaccine, is David's uncle. Another famous uncle is Dr. Lee Salk, noted author and child psychologist. And his philanthropic parents, Herman and Sylvia Salk, are both veterinarians who for years spent family vacations distributing medicine, food and clothing to Navajos in Monument Valley, Arizona.

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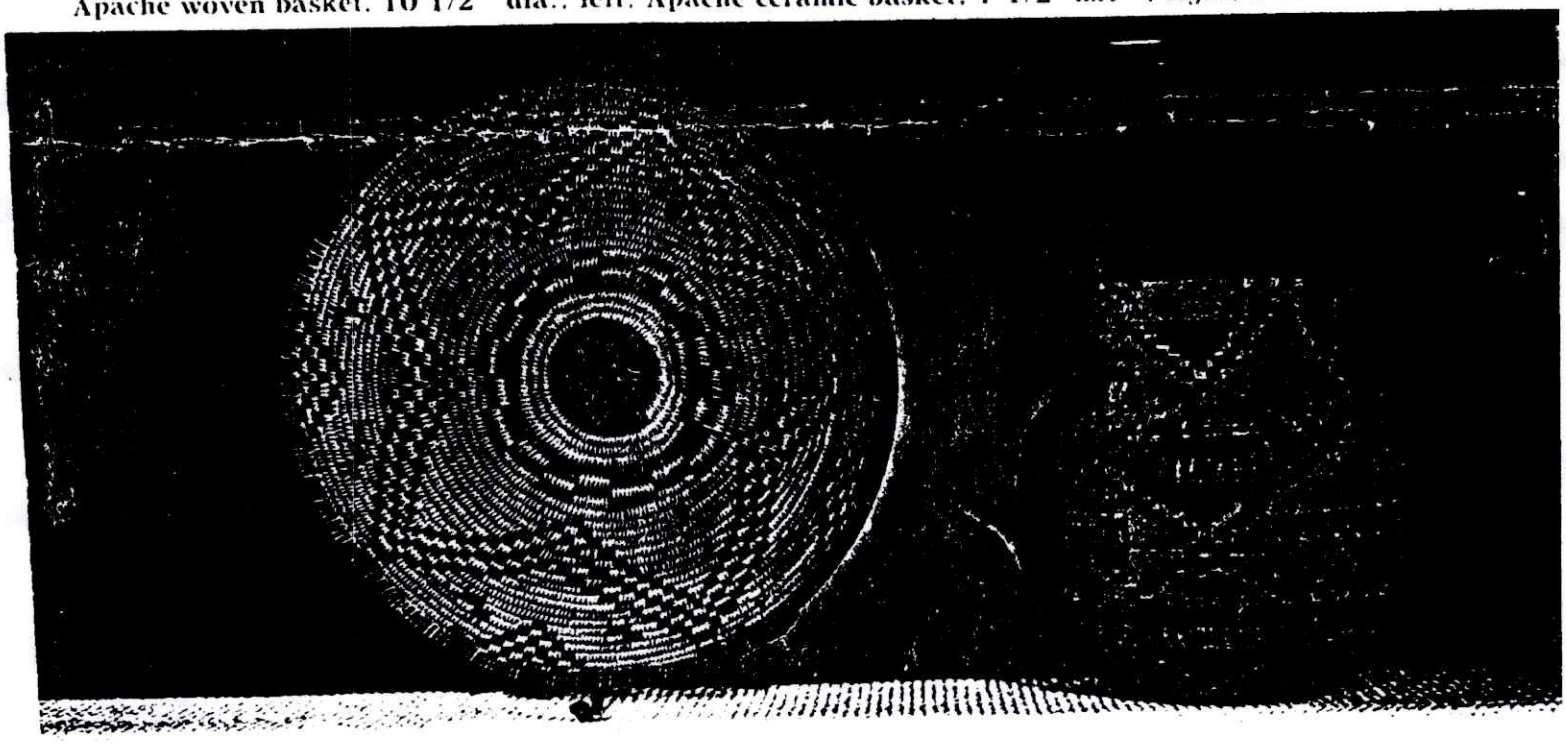
Those childhood trips marked the beginning of David's deep admiration for Native American culture. His feelings were reinforced when he had the opportunity to study with famed San Ildefonso potter Maria Martinez for three summers prior to her death in 1980. During that time he grew close to her large family — an attachment that remains strong to this day. He also maintains a close relationship with acclaimed Acoma potter Lucy Lewis and her family. "People who see my work often ask if I'm an Indian," he said. "I have to admit that I don't actually have any Indian blood, but I feel that I'm Indian in my soul."

One of four children, David was born in Michigan and raised in Palm Springs, California. He majored in science at the University of California at Irvine, planning to follow in the footsteps of his father and uncles. But he also had a talent for art that led to his enrolling in a ten-week "master's class" in ceramics. That's all it took; he was hooked. "I bought a small kiln and a thousand pounds of clay," he said, "thinking I'd just work with it for a while to see what evolved. As time went by I loved the work more and more. Had I become a veterinarian or a marine biologist, I know that I would have had to have some clay nearby to work with. The feeling of opening the kiln and seeing the finished clay baskets — there's just no thrill like it for me."

Apache woven basket, 10 1/2" dia., left; Apache ceramic basket, 7 1/2"hx7", right, David Salk.



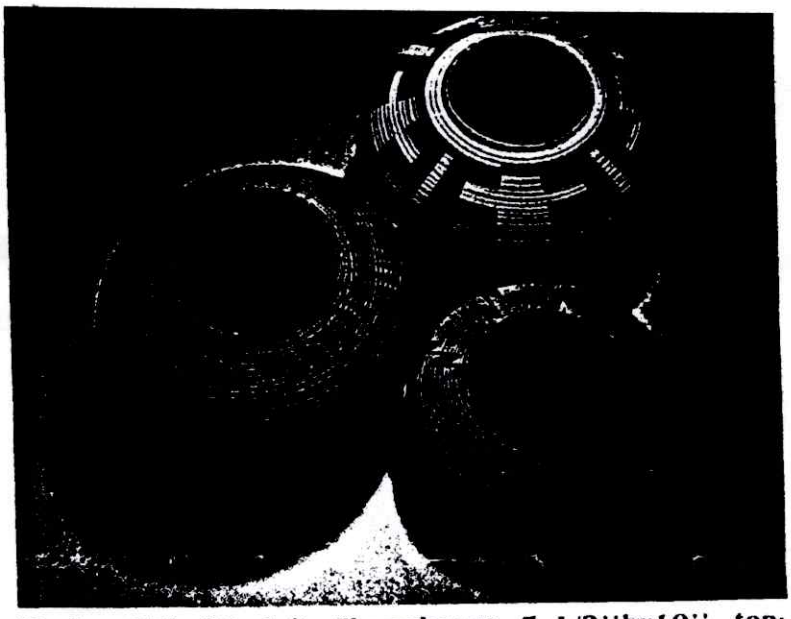
with an Australian sheep dog, two cats, two canaries, a great horned owl and a well-mannered skunk named Patty. His collection of animals is still growing. Employing veterinary skills learned from his parents, he takes in orphaned or injured animals and nurses them back to health. But several times a year he takes a break from his work and his menagerie to spend time in Northern New Mexico. "I feel energized and inspired when I'm in Santa Fe," he said. "It's a very spiritual and special place to me, for many reasons."

One of those reasons is that Adam and Santana Martinez, Maria's son and daughter-in-law, live in nearby San Ildefonso pueblo, along with Maria's younger sister, Clara. During a recent visit to Santa Fe, David was eager to check up on his old friends. Stopping first at a local supermarket, he arrived at San Ildefonso laden with gifts of fruit, fresh vegetables and candy. Adam and Santana, now in their eighties, smiled from the portal of their pueblo home as David (whom Adam has nicknamed "Chief") played with two of their great-grandchildren — carting 6-year-old Fred around the ancient plaza on his shoulders and holding fast to the hand of 4-year-old Clara. Before leaving the pueblo, David stopped for another affectionate reunion — this time with award-winning potter Blue Corn, who proudly displays one of David's clay baskets on a shelf beside her own work and that of other Southwest artists.

"I feel so privileged to be close to my Indian friends," he said, after finally tearing himself away from the pueblo. "I admire them very much and respect the way they live. For example, Maria would never take clay from the earth without giving the earth something in return. She wouldn't even light a fire under her pots without first making an offering of cornmeal to the spirit of the fire. When you compare her reverent attitude to today's unforgivable polluting and raping of the earth with no regard for the consequences, you realize that we're really missing the boat. I'm convinced that if we honored the ancient wisdom of our Native Americans, the world would be a much better place."

The artist formulates clays to match the patina of each. "This was clay when I made it," he said, holding an intricately decorated replica of a turn-of-the-century Apache basket. "But it's stone now, much like a fossil." The clay basket, a complex, figured Apache design composed of painstakingly drawn dogs (which played an important role in Apache life) and human figures, represents 45 hours in decorating time alone. When asked how it felt to undertake such a tedious project, David didn't hesitate. "It's a labor of love," he said. "With every brush stroke I feel that I am retracing an ancient but familiar path — following in the footsteps of a culture far older and in many ways wiser than our own." He ran his fingers lightly over the textured coils of the clay basket. "I like to think that if the Apache woman who wove this design could see how accurately I tried to capture her concept she would be pleased."

No doubt she would. David has received extensive international appreciation for his work. His clay baskets are in collections in 36 different countries — throughout Europe, Asia and Africa. And here at home, recognition of his talent continues to grow. He won first place in ceramics at the La Quinta Arts Festival (rated



Washo, 5"hx9", left; Chemehueve, 5 1/2"hx10", top; Chemehueve, 3 1/2"hx7", bottom; ceramic baskets.

"...When you compare her reverent attitude to today's unforgivable polluting and raping of the earth with no regard for the consequences, you realize we're really missing the boat..."

David Salk.

photo - Jim Gautier

one of the top ten art shows in the country, held near Palm Springs, California) four years in a row. And at this year's festival he was chosen out of 165 artists to receive the coveted People's Choice Award. In addition, he has been featured in many magazines, with Ceramics Monthly calling his clay baskets "completely unique in the field of ceramics."

David enjoys the well-deserved recognition. But most important to him is the fact that his work draws attention to the nearly lost art of basketmaking. He hopes that it will ultimately bring about more of an appreciation for the Indian. "It's very gratifying to realize that I've made so many people aware of these basketmakers through my clay baskets -- even people who probably never looked twice at an Indian basket. I feel a bit like an historian, working to preserve something worth preserving. What I make is so permanent. I feel a duty to do the best I can because my clay baskets will be around forever."

Because authentic antique Indian baskets are rare and very expensive, many collectors are finding David's excellent and more affordable reproductions an attractive alternative. "David's work fools even the most serious basket collectors," said Bill Bobb, owner of Cristof's, where David's baskets are shown. "They see one through the window and come dashing in, certain that they've discovered an antique. You should see the look of surprise on their faces when they touch it."

Like many artists, David sometimes finds it hard to part with his work. "Because I do as much as possible with my hands, using only those tools that are absolutely necessary, a lot of myself goes into each piece. That's the old way, and I believe the right way to create pottery." He credits his first ceramics teacher, Hovak Najarian, with instilling that concept. "Hovak has such a pure attitude about clay," he reminisced. "He taught me that something major is lost when ceramicists use tools for everything instead of using their hands. I've been fortunate to have had so many wonderful teachers."

David Salk's reaction to congratulatory comments about his success says much about the kind of man he is. "You must remember that the weavers themselves deserve much of the credit for what you're seeing," he insisted, referring to one of his clay baskets. "I did make this pot and I did decorate it, but there's an Apache woman somewhere in her grave who created the original beautiful basket. I'm just trying to preserve it for the rest of the world."