Use of Textiles in Pottery Making and Embellishment

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USE OF TEXTILES IN POTTERY MAKING AND EMBELLISHMENT

BY WILLIAM H. HOLMES

Among the native tribes of a wide zone in southern British America and in northern United States and extending from the Atlantic to the Rocky mountains, the ceramic art was intimately associated with the textile art and the earthenware exhibits traces of this intimacy as one of its most constant characteristics. These traces consist of impressions of textile articles made upon the plastic clay during manufacture and of markings in imitation of textile characters traced or stamped on the newly-made vessels. The textile art is no doubt the elder art in this region, as elsewhere, and the potter, working always with textile appliances and with textile models before her, has borrowed many elements of form and ornament from them. Textile forms and markings are thus a characteristic of the initial stages of the ceramic art.

It is true that we cannot say in any case whether the potter's art, as practised in the northern districts, is exclusively of local development, springing from suggestions offered by the practice of simple culinary arts, especially basketry, or whether it

a. Use of a basket in molding the base of an earthen vessel. (Zuñi.)

b. Vase showing impressions resulting from the use of pliable fabrics in wrapping and sustaining the vessel while plastic.

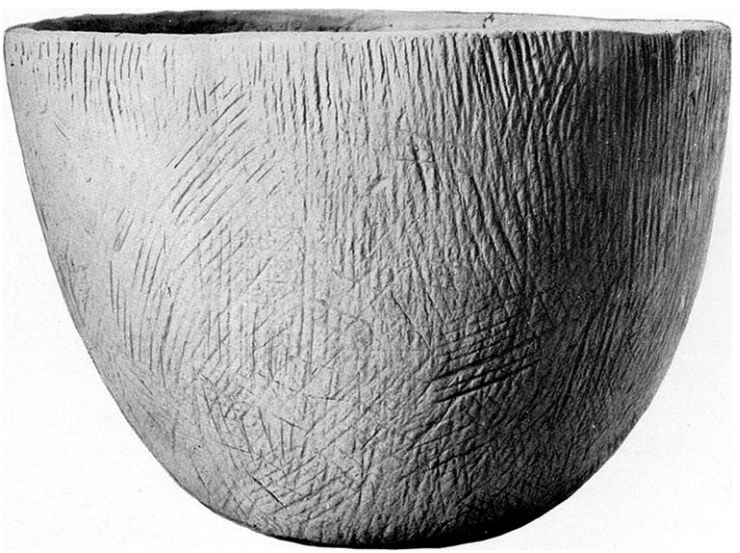
represents degenerate phases of southern art, radiating from far-away culture centers and reduced to the utmost simplicity by the unfriendly environment. We are certainly safe, however, in assuming that this peculiar phase of the art represents its initial stage—a stage through and from which the higher and more complex phases characterizing succeeding stages of barbarism and civilization arose.

Whether the art passed through the textile stage with all peoples may remain a question, for the traces are obliterated by lapse of time. We observe in passing southward through the United States that the textile-marked wares become less and less prevalent, though enough is still found in Florida and other Gulf states to suggest a former practice there of the archaic art and a development from it.

Textile markings found on pottery are of five classes: First, impressions from the surface of rigid forms, such as baskets. Second, impressions of fabrics of a pliable nature, such as cloths and nets. Third, impressions from woven textures used over the hand or over some suitable modeling implement. Fourth, impressions of cords wrapped about modeling paddles or rocking tools. Fifth, impressions of bits of cords or other textile units, singly or in groups, applied for ornament only and so arranged as to give textile-like patterns. In addition, we have a large class of impressions and markings in which textile effects are mechanically imitated.

The several kinds of textile markings are not equally distributed over the country, but each seems, to a certain extent, to characterize the wares of a particular region or to belong to particular groups of ware, indicating, perhaps, the condition and practices of distinct peoples or variations in initial elements affecting the art. There may also be a certain order in the development of the various classes of impressions—a passing from simple to complex phenomena, from purely mechanical to conventionally modified phases of embellishment.

a. Bowl from a North Carolina mound, showing prints of cord-wrapped maleating tool.



b. Bowl made by the author. The surface was finished with a cord-wrapped paddle.

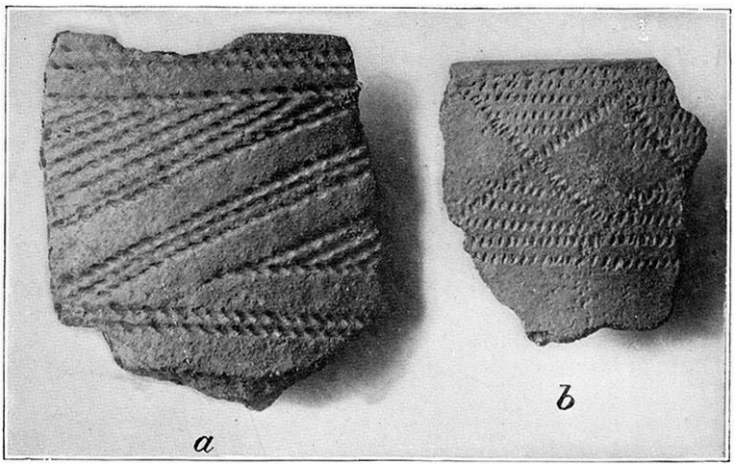
Baskets used in molding and modeling.—The extent to which baskets were used in modeling pottery in this great province has been greatly over-estimated. Instead of being the rule, as we have been led to believe, their use constitutes the exception, and the rare exception.

The functions of the fabrics and textile elements used in connection with the manufacture of pottery deserve careful consideration. There can be little doubt that these functions are both practical and esthetic, but we shall not be able to make the distinction in all cases. Practical uses may be several. In modeling a clay vessel a basket may be used as a support and pivot, thus serving as an incipient form of the wheel (plate VII, *a*). It may equally well assist in shaping the bodies of the vessels, thus assuming in a limited way the functions of a mold. The mat upon which a plastic vessel happens to rest leaves impressions rendered indelible by subsequent firing. The same may be true of any fabric brought into contact with the plastic surface, but the impressions in such cases are accidental and have no practical function.

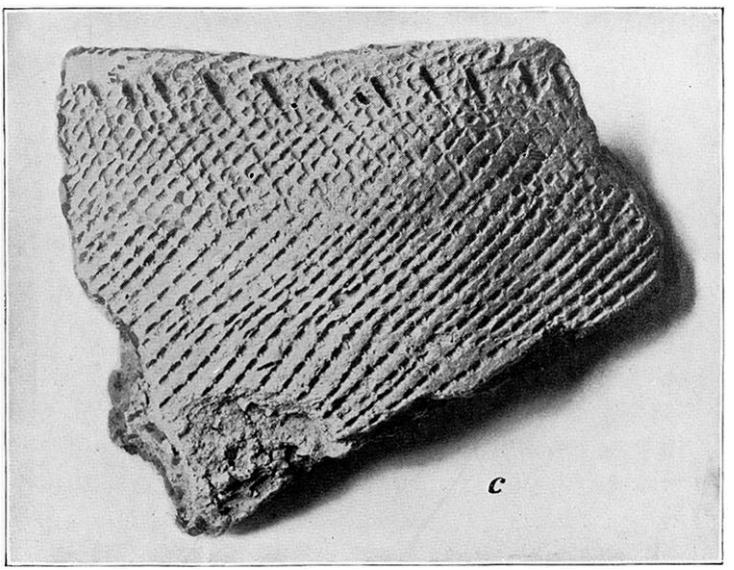
That baskets were used in the east as molds is attested by historical evidence. I can but regard it as remarkable, however, that in handling thousands of specimens of this pottery I have found no vase the imprints upon which fully warrant the statement that a basket was employed as a mold or even as a support for the incipient clay form. Many assertions to the contrary have been made, probably through misapprehension of the nature of the markings observed. On fragments of imperfectly-preserved vessels distinctions cannot readily be drawn between disconnected impressions made by the partial application of pliable fabrics or textile-covered stamps and the systematically connected imprintings made by the surface of a basket. The unwary are liable even to mistake the rude patterns made by impressing bits of cords in geometric arrangement about the rims of vases for the imprints of baskets.

Pliable fabrics as aids in modeling.—Pliable fabrics, such as sacks, nets, and cloths, were made use of as exterior supports in holding or handling the vessel while it was still in a plastic condition. Mr Mooney says that the Cherokee use a rag when lifting the pot at one stage of its manufacture, and it is easy to see that cloths or nets wrapped about the exterior surface of the plastic walls would serve to prevent quick drying and consequent cracking of the clay along weak lines. Binding up with cloths or nets would interfere with the deforming tendency of pressure during the modeling process and of sinking from weight of the plastic walls. Mr Sellers, a very acute observer, believed that the modeling of certain large salt basins was done on core-like molds of clay. In such a case, or where (as observed by Hunter) blocks of wood were used, the cloth would serve an important purpose in facilitating the removal of the plastic or partly dried clay shell and in supporting it during subsequent stages of the shaping and finishing processes. Such removal would probably be accomplished by turning the mold, with the vase upon it, upside down, and allowing the latter to fall off into the fabric by its own weight or by means of pressure from the hands. An excellent example of the impressions made on the surface of vases by fabrics applied in the course of manufacture is shown in plate VII, *b*. The specimen is a small vessel from a mound in Lenoir county, North Carolina.

Textiles used in maleating the surfaces of vessels.—An extended series of experiments made for the purpose of determining the functions of fabrics in pottery making has led me to observe that the imprintings were in many cases not made by textiles used as supports, but were applied wrapped about the hand or a modeling tool as a means of knitting or welding together the clay surface. Experiment shows that the deeper and more complex the imprintings, the more tenacious becomes the clay. Scarifying, combing, pinching with the finger-nails, maleating with engraved paddles, etc., served the same purpose.



Potsherds showing simple method of applying cords in vessel decoration.



Potsherd illustrating the markings of a notched wheel.

Use of flat cord-wrapped maleating tools.—It was further observed, as a result of these investigations, that more than half of the textile markings upon vases are not really imprints of fabrics at all, but are the result of going over the surface with modeling tools covered or wrapped with unwoven twisted cords. This is well illustrated in plate VIII, *a*, *b*.

Plate VIII, *a*, illustrates a small bowl from a mound in North Carolina. The surface is completely covered with deep, sharp markings made by paddling with a cord-wrapped tool applied repeatedly and at various angles. Fig. *b* of the plate shows a similar cup, made of potter's clay by the writer as an experiment. The maleating implement was a Cherokee potter's paddle wrapped with native cord.

Use of cord-wrapped rocking tools.—Of the same general class as the cord-wrapped paddle were other tools, more or less rounded and wrapped with cord. These may have been applied as paddles, but were usually rocked back and forth, the rounder forms being revolved as a roulette. The impressions of the flat paddle are distinguished by the patchy and disconnected nature of the imprints. The rolling or rocking implement was not lifted from the surface, and gave a zigzag connection to the markings.

The rolling or rocking modeling tools had an advantage over the flat paddles where round surfaces were to be treated, and especially about the constricted neck of the vessel. They served the triple purpose (1) of modeling the surface, reducing irregularities; (2) of kneading and knitting the surface, making the walls stronger; and (3) of imparting a texture to the surface that may have been regarded as pleasing to the eye. It is seen, however, that whenever it was desired to add ornamental designs, even of the most simple kind, this cord marking was generally smoothed down over the part of the surface to be treated, so that the figures imprinted or incised would have the advantage of an even ground.

Cords imprinted in ornamental patterns.—Growing out of the

use of cord-wrapped tools in modeling and finishing the clay surfaces is a group of phenomena of great importance in the history of ceramic ornament. I refer to the imprinting of twisted cords, singly and in such relations and order as to produce ornamental effects or patterns. In its simplest use the cord was laid on and imprinted in a few lines around the shoulder or neck of the vessel. Elaborations of this use are imprintings producing a great variety of simple geometric patterns, differing with the regions and the peoples. Connected or current fretwork and curved figures were not readily executed in this method, and are never seen. Two examples of cord-imprinted patterns are shown in plate IX, *a*, *b*. Hard-twisted cords were in most general use, but their markings were imitated in various ways, as by imprinting strings of beads, and slender sticks or sinews wrapped with thread or other unwoven strands.

Imitation of textile characters variously produced.—It would seem that the textile idea went beyond the imprinting of textiles and cords and that textile markings were imitated in many ways, indicating possibly the association of ideas of a special traditional nature with the textile work and kept alive in ceramics by the imitation of textile characters.

Textile effects produced by the roulette.—The notched wheel or roulette was used in imitating cord-like patterns, and this was perhaps an outgrowth of the use of cord-covered maleating tools. This tool was confined pretty closely to one great group of ware—the so-called roulette-decorated wares of the northwest. The potsherd shown in plate IX, *c*, illustrates these markings as applied by the ancient potter.

Textile effects produced by stamps and engraved paddles.—Decorative effects closely resembling those produced by the use of cords and the rocking tool were made by narrow, notched stamps applied to the plastic surface. Connecting directly with this simple stamp work, in which a succession of separate imprintings give the textile effects, is the use of the engraved

modeling-texturing-decorating paddle, so extensively used in the southern Appalachian region.

Owing to the close association of these rouletted, stamped, and incised effects with the textile imprinted groups of ware, I feel warranted in speaking of them as growing directly out of textile practices, although they are not necessarily always so connected, since the use of the stamp may also have arisen from other sources, such as the use of non-textile tools in modeling.

The textile art has thus served in various ways to shape and modify the ceramic art, and the textile technic has bequeathed its geometric characters to the younger art, giving rise to most varied forms of embellishment and no doubt profoundly affecting later phases of its development.