



NATIVE AMERICAN CONTAINERS

Olla is a term that is used to describe certain containers in the American Southwest that have rounded bodies and narrow necks. This is especially true of those baskets and pottery that were used to store water because narrow necks slowed evaporation. While *olla* is a Spanish term, Native Americans throughout the region adopted it to describe both woven baskets and pottery.

Originally, Native American containers were made mainly for practical purposes, such as storage, cooking and the transportation of water. There was little thought given to artistic form or style. Most early containers in Native American culture, whether woven or fired, were not decorated and they were not symmetrical.

Historically, Ute women used a variety of coiled and twisted techniques to weave baskets. Local plant materials such as willow and three-leaf sumac were gathered in the spring. Both plant stems and strips of outer bark were used for several portions of coil-style baskets. Dyeing further improved the woven patterns.

Water bottles (*ollas*) were made either rough or fine, depending on the material and size of the coil and the outer thread. These bottles differed in shape; one style had round bottoms, another long, pointed bottoms; one had wide mouths, another small mouths; one style had a little handle (usually made from a small willow branch) on the side of the mouth like a pitcher, but the majority have one or two loops of wood, or horse-hair fastened on one side to allow for a carrying strap. Because these water *ollas* had been dipped in pitch, or resin, to make them waterproof, they were quite heavy. The same form is found among the Apaches, Mohaves, Mokis, and Rio Grande Pueblos; but it is possible that they were acquired from the Utes in barter or by purchase.

Ollas were also used for irrigation in the dry desert regions. Some *ollas* were not dipped in pitch to make them waterproof. Instead, the *ollas* were filled with water and buried next to plants. As the water leaked through the weave of these baskets, plants received the moisture they needed to grow.

Many historians and archeologists believe that pottery making evolved from basket making because ancient people originally lined their hand woven baskets with mud or clay. When the baskets were burned so that corn and other food could be dried, the basket dissolved, but the hard clay was left intact.