# SOUTHWESTERN POTTERY

When we speak of southwestern pottery, we are referring to that which was made, and continues to be made today, by the native people of New Mexico and Arizona. Specifically, we mean the Pueblo peoples of the Rio Grande Valley, the Hopi of the Three Mesas, and, to some extent, the Navajo of northwestern New Mexico and northeastern Arizona.

The indigenous peoples of the Southwest have been making pottery for over 2,000 years. For most of this time, we can divide the pottery they made into two functional categories: utility ware and service ware. The principal differences between the two types involve how the objects were finished. Utility ware, used principally for cooking and food storage, was left rough and unfinished. They were made to sit on rocks in open fires. Some had indented bases so they could sit comfortably on a person's head when carried. Symmetry was not important nor were aesthetics. Service ware, used for serving food, carrying water and as trade items, was finished with a finer texture, and featured polished and painted exteriors. While the color of the pottery was also a distinguishing characteristic, color depended more upon the supply of readily available clay rather than the ultimate use of the pot or jar. In other words, a piece of Mogollon pottery from 100 CE would be red whether it was a cooking pot or a serving bowl. The significant difference was in the finish, not in the composition or color of the clay used to make the vessel.

Southwestern pottery artists use three methods to create designs on their pottery:

- Incising: a design is cut into the slip before the pot is fired
- Sgraffito: a design, which usually encircles the entire pot, is scratched into the pot with a sharp tool
- Painting: paint, usually made from vegetal material, is applied after the pot is fired. While some potters use manufactured brushes, most still use a strip of yucca chewed lightly at one end to apply the paint.

For most of the 2000 years that southwestern artists have been fashioning pottery, they made it for their own use. While some pieces were used as trade goods, there was no "trade-pottery industry" in the pre-historic Southwest. The arrival of the Spanish in the 16th century altered those practices. The Spanish thought their metal cooking and serving ware was superior to Native American pottery. As a result, pottery making almost disappeared. A small revival occurred in the 18th century as the Spanish gradually tolerated more and more traditional Indian ways, and southwestern pottery became a common item along the El Camino Real trade route to the south. Pottery making suffered again with the opening of the Santa Fe Trail. Greater access to cheap glazed porcelain and ceramic wares from the East dampened southwestern pottery making. Another major shift occurred in the 1880s with the completion of the transcontinental railway system in

the United States. Railroads brought tourists who were eager to purchase "native" goods. The Harvey House Corporation, with its "Harvey House" hotels across the West, became a major purveyor of "native" pottery during the Gilded Age. For the first time, southwestern potters began to make their wares largely for another culture that wanted to collect it, rather for personal use.. The completion of the Chicago-to-Los Angeles highway, officially designated "Route 66" in 1926, boosted the market for Native American pottery once again. The multitude of small businesses that grew up along Route 66 in the Southwest provided a rapidly expanding market for Indian pottery between the World Wars. As a result, the traders and shopkeepers began to dictate what was to be made and sold. In some cases, this had a negative effect on pottery making. Some artists were convinced to make smaller pieces so that they could fit more easily into tourists' suitcases. "Tourist Pots," quickly made and poorly decorated items, flooded the markets and diminished the aesthetic and economic value of southwestern pottery overall. At the same time, other pottery-makers sought deeper connections with the past and with long lost traditions.

At the beginning of the 20th century, Maria Martinez, a potter from San Ildefonso Pueblo, rekindled interest in the black-on-black process of her ancestors. She exhibited her work at the 1914 Panama-California Exhibition in San Diego and at the 1934 World's Fair in Chicago. She won awards for her excellence. Her success increased the interest in and market for more traditional ware. At the same time, a Hopi woman, Nampeyo, returned to her ancestral roots to create fine tradition-based pottery. The quality of these women's work, and that of their descendants, has created a competitive contemporary market for high quality, traditionally made southwestern pottery. Tourists and serious collectors now seek an individual potter's work over that of an unknown artist. Today, the pottery of Maria Martinez (San Ildefonso), Lucy Lewis (Acoma), Christina Naranjo (Santa Clara), Fannie Nampeyo (Hopi), Margaret Tafoya (Santa Clara), and Lorraine Williams (Navajo), are highly sought after *objects d' art.*