



THE STEPS IN POTTERY MAKING

STEP ONE: CLAY

Clay is usually gathered from a nearby source. For many potters, the source is secret, its location passed from generation to generation. Once the clay is obtained, it is ground into a fine powder and soaked in water to remove any impurities. Then, the appropriate temper is added and the mixture is left to soak for about one week.

STEP TWO: MOLDING

Clay is divided and rolled into long rounded strips, or coils, which are used to build the pots. Southwestern pottery is not now, nor has it ever been thrown on a wheel. If the pot is large, a base, called a “puki,” is needed. It is usually the bottom of broken bowl or some other rounded form. The potter takes the first coil of moist clay and presses it against the inside wall of the round base. Each coil is then added, one-by-one, by hand, until the form of the vessel is completed. Contemporary potters are aware of the necessity for symmetry in the vessels they create, making the molding process even more difficult. Once molded, the pot is set aside to dry. Once it is dry, the vessel is ready for polishing.

STEP THREE: POLISHING

After a pot is dry, it is scraped smooth using a small tool. Potters have used small pieces of gourd or small stones to smooth the sides. Today, pieces of eyeglass lens, wooden spoons, or the tops of tobacco tins are often employed. Once smooth, the potter uses a wet stone called a “polishing stone” to finish the pot. The stone is kept wet as it is moved quickly over the surface of the vessel. Polishing stones are special and are closely guarded by each potter. Once polished, a slip of fine, watery clay is applied and the pot is polished again. This layering continues until the potter determines that the slip is the proper depth. The pot is then set aside to dry.

STEP FOUR: DESIGNING

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 is applied after the pot is fired.

STEP FIVE: FIRING

Several pieces of pottery are fired at the same time. Wood and brush are piled to make a bonfire. The pieces to be fired are laid on a metal sheet or on a layer of pottery sherds on top of the fuel. Additional sherds are layered around the sides and tops of the vessels. The whole mound is then covered with cow and/or sheep dung and the fire is started. Temperatures in the bonfire may reach as high as 1300 degrees Fahrenheit. At the appropriate time – determined individually by each potter – the fire is extinguished. The pots are allowed to cool and then removed for final polishing.