

Past Forms

Gallery Guide

ASU Museum of Anthropology

Spring 2009

Why Past Forms?

The past forms you see here have inspired some of the ceramicists exhibited in Simply Formal and will continue to inspire artists in the future. While choosing objects for this exhibition we were influenced by the work of these contemporary artists, searching for similarities of form, design and technique across time.

The varieties of objects exhibited here are examples of how clay has been shaped to serve functional, aesthetic and ceremonial purposes across time and cultures. Today we can find ceramics in almost every room of our homes, still expressing both form and function. The same principles used to make these ancient pots and contemporary arts were used to make your favorite coffee mug. Ceramics are truly timeless.

While the contemporary ceramics on display mainly serve an aesthetic purpose, our past forms filled a variety of functions and meanings for people in the past. These past forms are now in their second life, taking on new meanings for those who view them. They have transformed from functional and ceremonial everyday objects into documents, opening a window into the past.

The School of Human Evolution and Social Change holds a vast archaeological, ethnographic, and physical anthropology collection, primarily used for research, teaching and exhibitions. The objects in this exhibition are from the ethnographic and archaeological collection. The Archaeological Research Institute (ARI), located in Tempe Center, curates more than 70,000 archaeological specimens from central Arizona, houses the school's ceramic sherd type and whole pot collections.

Past Forms was curated by students in the Museum Anthropology program's Exhibit Design and Development course taught by Professor Judy Newland.



Black on White: Anasazi Chic

Assembled upon this pedestal, you may find that these ancient vessel forms and their painted designs evoke thoughtful and inspired comparisons to more familiar modern-day forms.

Repetitive geometric designs of Black-on-White pottery, also known as Cibola White Ware, reveal a transcendent quality of workmanship and a love of beauty.

Carbon/mineral paint applied with simple tools and skillful hands adorn these ancient pots, created a thousand years ago when relatively few utilitarian and ritual wares were painted with so much detail.

Anasazi Black-on-White pottery remains classic and timeless, engaging in its decoration and functional form.

Do you relate more easily to the ceramics of past cultures or contemporary forms?

Does the black and white encourage associations to other style trends?

Faith Oberstein

Cibola Whiteware, Anasazi (Bottom Left)
Ceramic Jug w/ Handle
1969.1.137

Gila Polychrome, Hohokam (Top Left)
1950.1.20

Cibola Whiteware, Anasazi (Top Right)
Ceramic Bowl
1969.1.121

Cibola Whiteware, Anasazi (Bottom Right)
Vessel
1968.10.294

Cibola Whiteware, Anasazi (Middle)
Ceramic Jug w/ Handle
1962.31.3160



Anasazi Pot, Moenkopi Corrugated

1970.14.1

This cracked corrugated Anasazi pot can make you think of several related topics. You might wonder how the pot was made, reflect on Southwestern Native cultures or even contemplate the nature of time and decay.

Or does something completely different and perhaps a little off-kilter pop into your head—perhaps the reconstructed Deathstar from the Star Wars movie saga? One's culture cannot help but inform how we look at the world around us, including the viewing of objects from different cultures.

So what do the materials in this museum remind you of? A past experience, a place you have visited, or maybe a fantastical space epic that still cleaves to your imagination? If the latter is the case, you might not be an immature adult, just a target of 20th century American movie culture.

Bobby Bonner



Bird Effigy, Casas Grandes, Mexico

1968.6.49

Talking Birds and Plumed Serpents

Gentle hands took a lump of clay and began to work and form it. Slowly it began to take shape; a head, a body, a tail, a beak and wings, until it looked as though it could soar into the sky. The exact meaning that effigy vessels held for those who created and used them can never be known; still they leave us with clues to the past.

Earth and Sky; Male and Female; Snakes and Birds. Duality was important in all aspects of life for those from Casas Grandes. Birds and serpents are the two most common animal images incorporated into vessels. Birds represented the upper world where as snakes represented the under world with humans in the middle. Only talking birds and plumed serpents could travel between the two realms.

Can a modern day effigy pot have meaning beyond being decorative?

What might people in the future think about an effigy pot created today, such as the one by Tom Turner?

Kristi Martin



Owl Effigy, Zuni Pueblo, New Mexico
1962.35.8

The date of this Zuni owl effigy pot is unknown; however, it circulated in the tourist trade in the early part of the twentieth century. The owl figurine in Zuni ceramics is a tradition that dates back to before this effigy was created.

This piece continues use of long-established design elements, simultaneously holding aesthetic and traditional meaning. As the art of Zuni pottery continues to be revised, the owl prevails as a point of inspiration for artists.

What do you think these objects will mean to society one hundred years in the future?

Meaghan Heisinger



Similar Designs, New Meaning

Meaning is fluid and changes over time. What inspired the artists of these pieces may be very different than the meaning we ascribe to them in the present. Throughout the life of each ceramic piece, it has served aesthetic, functional and ceremonial purposes depending on the meaning assigned to it. The designs will continue to inspire new meaning for future artists and viewers.

Red Bowl with Black Decorations, Maricopa, Arizona
Circa 1930
1962.35.12

Many Native groups, particularly in the Southwest, as well as religions such as Buddhism, Hinduism and pre-Christian European cultures frequently used the “running wheel” pattern.

Today it is more commonly known as the swastika. This design was once valuable to American Indian cultures yet now evokes different feelings amongst viewers who associate the symbol with the Nazi party. Many Native groups, as well as cultures around the globe, stopped using this design after World War II.

Should artists change their designs once those symbols take on new meaning?

Meaghan Heisinger



Human Effigy, Casas Grandes, Mexico (Left)

Villa Ahumada Polychrome

1968.6.113

Human Effigy, Mata Ortiz, Mexico (Right)

2008.11.9

Continued Tradition or Discontinuity?

The two human effigy pots seen here were created over 500 years apart. One was made in the ancient Mexican city of Casas Grandes around 1400 AD. The other is part of the revival movement of this ancient style and technique, originating in the 1960s in the Mexican village of Mata Ortiz.

Interlocking black and red symbols adorn the ancient pot, possibly representing the Mesoamerican god Quetzalcoatl. The central ladder on the modern vessel may also stand for this god, but these designs are more stylistic than symbolic.

Are the two pots connected by anything besides similarity of style? Should they be compared to each other or considered as unrelated traditions?

Hannah Kusinitz



Cooking Pot, Shoofly Village, Arizona
1993.8.3292

Form or Function?

This prehistoric ceramic pot was a collection of sherds when it was discovered at the Shoofly Village archeological site near Payson, Arizona. The pot was originally used as a cooking vessel and storage container.

After its discovery and excavation the pot was incorrectly reconstructed into its present form. Spectacular rough edges and interesting shapes formed by positive and negative space have transformed this pot from a functional object into a piece of art. Do you think it should be reassembled correctly, or should it be left as it is?

Elizabeth Heath



Amapa Bow/ Mexican Vessel, Nayarit, Mexico

1982.6.18 (Left)

1982.6.7 (Right)

Simply Formal, or Elaborately Functional?

Amapa grinding bowls, or molcajetes, are colorfully painted with intricate shapes and animal forms. More than three quarters of excavated Amapa ceramics have equally elaborate designs and appear drastically different from traditional grinding vessels.

Inside each molcajete are sharp notches which were probably used for crushing chiles, plants, and other soft objects into powder for food or ceremonies. Look closely for wear and tear around the large red circles at the bottom.

Anthropologists are uncertain why these tools were so decorative. The harsh use molcajetes often received seems to contradict the hard work needed to create them, making well-preserved samples even more curious. Imagine a similarly ornate object from your own home. Would you use it for something as physical as grinding? Would it hold up as well as these molcajetes?

Aaron Monson



Human Effigy Vessel, Mexico
Late 1800's
1972.3.0

Whoever said that it should be Function over Fashion?
This highly decorative vessel may appear upon first glance to have been used solely for aesthetic purposes. The intricate carvings on the face, body, and headdress of the man in traditional garb, makes this vessel a highly stylized work of art.

However, this piece was created with function in mind as well. This black-ware vessel is actually a functional pitcher that was collected from Mexico in the late 1800's. Notice the handle on the back. Do you have any ceramics in your home that are useful as well as beautiful? Can you spot more examples from this exhibit?

Lindsay Davis



Florero Vessel, Teotihuacan, Mexico
1982.6.20

When?

This vessel has a “florero” (flower) form, a type found at the site of the great civilization of Teotihuacan, but its twisted handle makes it distinctive. This type of handle didn’t appear during the Classic period of the Teotihuacan city-state. This led archaeologists to question from when this little piece came. What happens when you don’t know the when?

Archeologists now know that this florero came from the Epiclasic period, after the fall of Teotihuacan. Is it important to you to know the when?

Sari Alper

Beauty is in the Eye of the Beholder

When you describe something as plain and simple does the word ‘boring’ also come to mind? Well in the case of this plain and simple florero from the site of Teotihuacan in Mexico, we invite you to take a second look.

The people of Teotihuacan valued minimalist artistic elements, typically choosing to focus on simple shapes. The florero’s rounded bowl, elongated neck, and flaring rim emphasize the dramatic proportions of the vessel. For the people of Teotihuacan the true artistry of this piece lies in its proportions, the balance, the pleasing curves, and the minimal ornamentation of the braided handle.

Lindsay Davis



Roadrunner Vessel Zia Pueblo

Continuing Tradition

This Zia pot made for the tourist trade continues the traditional imagery found on Zia pots dating back hundreds of years.

The roadrunner is most often the inspiration of Zia potters, such as the one depicted in this example. Zia potters have been considered stubbornly resistant to changing their potting style, and the colors, brown, white and red, as well as the animated designs make their style distinctive.

Should potters modernize their style and design, or does continuing tradition provide the piece more meaning and value?

Meaghan Heisinger



Fire-Clouding: Intentional or Accidental?

The large black areas on these vessels are caused by organic materials touching the clay during firing. When placed against the clay, the materials prevent a complete oxidization at the contact point and cause the clay to turn black. In the case of the small bowl, materials such as grass and wood were purposely placed inside the opening to create the black interior.

The Hohokam of central Arizona often used this technique, known as fire-clouding or smudging, in their ceramics. The process was intentional, but the results were unpredictable. However, some potters were skilled enough to create beautifully symmetrical designs.

What similar technique is still in use in contemporary ceramic decoration?



Hohokam Vessels
Salt Red w/ Fire Cloud (Left)
1959.53.7

Gila Red w/ Fire Cloud (Middle)
1968.10.286

Salt Red w/ Fire Cloud (Right)
1968.10.160

Fire-Clouding: Hohokam Raku?

Raku is a technique with origins in 16th century Japan. Like fire-clouding, the result relies on the firing process. Contemporary Raku is known for the post firing phase. The vessel is placed within a pit or container full of combustible material such as grass or sawdust and allowed to smoke for a length of time. The carbon in the atmosphere reacts with the glaze and the clay of the vessel, creating unique exteriors and effects.

Raku is a popular technique among ceramicists today.

Bethany Baker



Ceramic Handle Piece, Tula , Mexico

1960.1.1

Just a Piece of the Whole

What can we do with a broken handle? Mesoamerican peoples used to bury pieces of broken ceramics with their dead, believing that the pieces would become whole in the afterlife. For them, a piece had value because of it's potential to become whole again.

For archaeologists today, a ceramic fragment offers hints to what the whole piece might have looked like, what it was used for, and who used it. This gives it value in the museum, but does that give it value for you?

Sari Alper



Assorted Pottery Sherds

Various Locations

All Pots Start With Clay

Although modern techniques allow potters to use different tempers (binding agents) and finishing materials, all pots start with clay. Broken pieces of pottery, known as sherds, represent the work of potters in the Southwest from centuries ago. The clay came from different areas in different colors and qualities, as did the temper they used.

Although techniques may change over time both the ancient Native Americans and today's potters create ceramic pieces for utilitarian and artistic purposes.

Compare the core of the pieces and the finished products. How would you express your artistic flair on a vessel needed to protect your food and water?

Chavez Pass

Chavez Pass is on the Mogollon highlands, north of Phoenix. The ancient Sinaqua people produced Winona Brown (a pottery type) pots between AD 1050 and 1250, and Bidahochi Black-on-White (also a pottery type) from 1325 to 1400. The core was a hard paste mixed with a temper of very fine quartz sand.



Casas Grandes

Plainware from the Medio Period: AD 1200 to 1450

The Casas Grandes people widely exported their pottery throughout northern Mexico and what is now southern Arizona and New Mexico. The firing process is distinctive. The pots were painted, stone polished and allowed to dry for a few days. The pot was covered with dry cow chips, which were ignited for thirty minutes. The red hot pot was then removed to a cooling station. This oxygen-deprived process frequently produced bluish-gray surface deposits called "fire clouds."



Corrugated samples

Undecorated pieces like these corrugated samples were typically used for cooking. Fire would have eventually destroyed outside adornment, so the pot itself became the expression of the artistic talent of the potter. Typically, the layers closer to the lip lap over the layers below, creating a "shingle-like" appearance. Often, the coils are indented, or pinched, in an offset from one to the next coil. This probably added strength to the walls.



Contemporary pots made with ancient techniques
These sherds come from pots made around 1990 by an anthropologist/potter. They are made of local clays and tempers, and fired using the techniques of the ancient inhabitants of Arizona.



Contemporary works
The pieces these sherds came from were made in 2008 – and broken in 2009. The mass-marketed clay and temper is premixed and comes from multiple sites. Get the feel of ceramics from sherds in our “hands-on” box. Look at the cores to compare with these old and new examples.



Tom Walsh





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