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contemporary pueblo indian pottery



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by
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and
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*Professional and Apprentice—
Santana Martinez of San
Ildefonso decorates a bowl.*

INTRODUCTION

Any sunny summer day in Santa Fe, the sidewalk under the *portal* of the Palace of the Governors on the plaza will be lined with Indians selling a variety of native handiwork: corn necklaces, turquoise jewelry, souvenir dolls, Navajo blankets—and pottery. Let's assume you are a visitor, unacquainted with Pueblo pottery. You think you would like to buy a piece of Indian pottery to take home. But which one? How much is it worth? Is it genuine? How was it made? From which pueblo did it come?

This booklet tries to answer these and some other common questions about Pueblo Indian ceramics. It does not try to cover the 2000 year history of the art, nor is it a manual dealing with primitive pottery making techniques. This subject is treated in other Museum publications. It does offer a quick look at the types of pottery most commonly offered for sale and their source. It says something about the people who make pottery, and a little about their methods.

Not all of the New Mexico and Arizona pueblos produce pottery. In some it is made rarely and in some not at all; some make it better than others.

While Santa Fe may be considered the center of the Pueblo pottery trade, much pottery is shown at the railroad station in Albuquerque, at stores in Taos, Gallup, Albuquerque, Grants, Flagstaff, and other towns, and at several National Parks and Monuments in the region. During the summer, Pueblo potters may display their wares at roadside stands. Some operate craft shops or curio stores in their villages. Highway curio shops often have some good Pueblo pottery, but also are likely to show Mexican wares or commercially produced ceramics unrelated to Indian work.

Most of the pottery produced in the pueblos today is made to sell. The Indians now make very little pottery for their own household use. There are a few exceptions, discussed later on. The mere fact that pottery is made to sell has little to do with its quality, however. The question of quality is a difficult one and opinions vary widely. Here are a few check points to keep in mind:

1. If the piece you are examining is a vessel, a jar, vase or bowl, balance it on the palm of one hand and tap it with your knuckle. It should ring. If it does not, it may be cracked or poorly fired. Thin, well-fired vessels will ring like a bell, but even the thicker ones should produce a tone, not just a thud. Much good pottery is thick. Figurines will usually not ring when tapped, nor will ash trays, plates, and the like.

2. If there is a painted design on the surface of the piece, wet a finger or a corner of your handkerchief and rub lightly. If the paint smears or comes off, it means the piece was painted after it was fired, and is therefore not of acceptable quality. Avoid any black ware with white paint or any other colored decoration.

3. Painted designs should be very neat and even, applied with a steady hand. Shape should be symmetric and surface finish should be smooth. Do not look for a glazed finish; there is no genuine modern Pueblo Indian glaze ware. It has not been made for nearly 300 years.

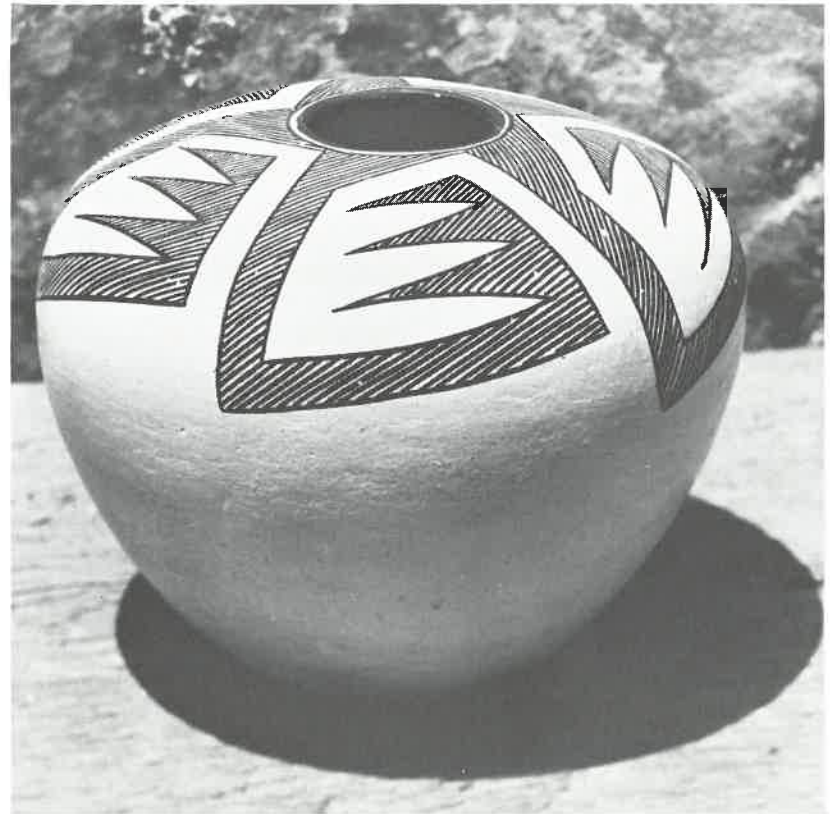
4. In general, the best bargains will be found in the pueblos. Like Navajo rugs,

Pueblo pottery tends to go up rapidly in price the farther it gets from the source. Good, modern pieces of medium size (six inches high) may be priced from \$5 to \$20. Smaller pieces often can be found for much less. Be prepared, however, for tremendous variation, depending on who is selling the vessel. As a guide, a well-made water jar (a typical size is ten inches high) may cost \$20 if of recent origin, \$35 if it was made in 1925 (or much less if it has been used). In judging the real value, keep in mind the many hours of labor which go into these handmade pieces.

PUEBLO POTTERY TRADITIONS

The Pueblo Indians are famous for the magnificent pottery they have been making for nearly two thousand years. Their work is not only superior to most other Stone Age ceramic wares from Europe and Asia, but also compares favorably with that of much later civilizations or cultures. Their high standard of artistic and technical excellence is all the more remarkable when you consider that the Pueblo pottery makers have always relied upon rela-

Acoma jar based on prehistoric pottery design. Height 4¾ inches.



tively crude and simple techniques. They have never used the potter's wheel. All their jars and bowls are formed by hand, using a variety of methods, the best known of which is the laying up of successive coils of clay and shaping the body of the vessel by scraping away the excess. All this is strictly women's work; Pueblo men may help occasionally, but usually with the decorating only.

The fine surface finish on all the better Pueblo pottery is the result of patient polishing with a stone or a piece of cloth or leather. And when it comes to firing their wares the Pueblos use no kiln. The sundried vessels are placed upside down on a base of rocks or scrap metal in a selected place on the open ground on a calm morning. Dried dung is heaped over the pile and burned for an hour or two, until the fuel is reduced to a fine, powdery ash. The temperature approximates 1600° Fahrenheit as compared to an average of about 2300° required for stoneware in a modern kiln.

The Pueblos use almost nothing but local materials from start to finish, although they may import some special clays from a neighboring pueblo for the slip or finish coat. They dig their clay from chosen banks, and make

their paints from native plants and minerals. Glaze paint was used from about A.D. 1200 to 1700 for decorative purposes, but it is not found on modern Pueblo pottery.

The many apparent variations in Pueblo pottery may be confusing to the newcomer at first, but only a few basic styles really exist. For example, it does not take long to recognize the fine, thin-walled Acoma vessels with their highly conventionalized designs, and to distinguish them from the heavier but beautifully polished black San Ildenfonso and Santa Clara wares. A photographic guide to the principal pottery types included in this booklet will help to establish the key points by which these types are identified.

PRINCIPAL POTTERY TYPES

It is possible to arrange recent Pueblo pottery within a few major categories which will help in identification. A few exceptions may be found, types that fit several categories, and some rare but important varieties that fit none. In general, however, the following arrangement will serve most purposes.



*Picuris bean pot with "fire clouds."
Height 7 inches.*

MICACEOUS WARES

Micaceous pottery is readily recognized by the presence of tiny flakes of mica visible on the surface. The color of the pottery varies from brown to bright orange, with irregular, smudged areas ranging from gray to black. These smudged areas are called "fire clouds." They are produced in firing, are typical of the ware, and should not be considered faults in quality. There is no painted decoration on this kind of pottery, although it may be ornamented with punched or scratched designs, or with knobs or fillets of clay, especially around the rim.

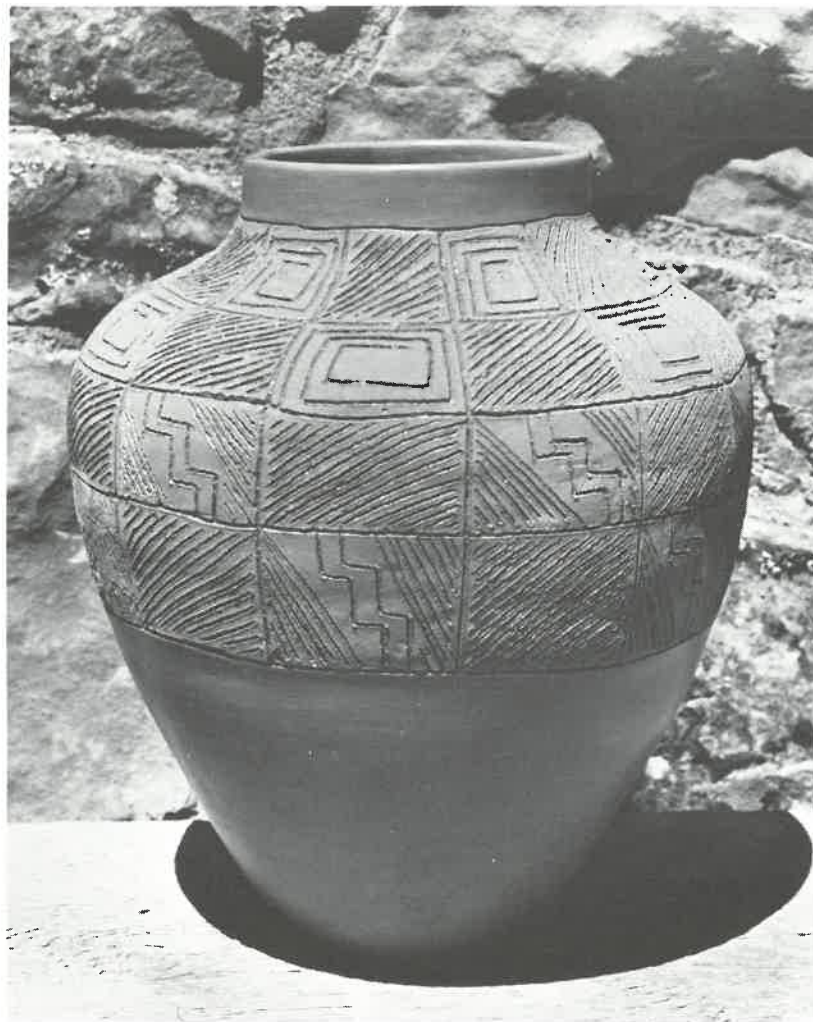
The two northernmost New Mexico pueblos, Taos and Picuris, have made micaceous ware for more than 400 years. It is principally a utility type, still much used for cooking and serving, especially at Picuris, an isolated pueblo with population of less than 200, deep in the Sangre de Cristo mountain range. Picuris "bean pots" are much prized by Indians and whites alike, as they are considered just right for cooking beans or chili. Picuris makes some of the best micaceous ware found today. It is carefully shaped, thin-walled, and so well-

fired it gives out a sharp ring when tapped.

While micaceous ware is mainly associated with Taos and Picuris, other pueblos have included it in their minor output. At Tesuque, several women make very large micaceous pieces, elaborately ornamented. A few very well made and hard-fired micaceous vessels are still produced at Santa Domingo. These differ from the northern products in shape and in the type of clay used. Except for the mica, they resemble the utility ware of the southern pueblos. At San Juan, micaceous slip is painted into the incisions of the famous incised ware that a few potters produce.

POLISHED WARES

Polished black ware is probably the most widely known contemporary Pueblo pottery. It is characterized by a dense, deep black surface polished to a high luster which appears almost iridescent. Some of the most beautiful pieces are entirely undecorated, simple in shape and flawlessly made. Other examples have designs carved or pressed into the surface, inside or out, or areas may be painted



San Juan incised ware. Height 13 inches.

with a substance that fires dull black. The latter type is described as matte-black-on-polished-black. Polished black ware carries no design in white or in any color other than dull black.

Polished red wares are closely related to polished black, actually differing only in the firing technique. Red ware is fired in an "oxidizing" atmosphere, whereas black ware is fired in a "reducing" atmosphere. In the former, the fire has free access to air and burns cleanly. In the latter, the fire is smothered with straw or pulverized manure in the later stages, resulting in an overabundance of carbon which produces a permanent black color on the pottery surface.

So-called "red" wares are actually rust or ochre-colored. True red is found only on poster-paint wares. Red wares may be plain, or may have dull red designs just as the polished black may have dull black paint designs. In addition, however, the painted designs may be pink, gray, yellow, or other subdued colors derived from natural clays or mineral paints.

It should be kept in mind that modern polished black and polished red pottery is in-

tended for decorative use only. It is fired at a relatively low temperature and as a result will be soft. For structural strength, therefore, it is thick-walled and heavy. Polished black of a century or more ago for which Santa Clara, San Juan, and other pueblos were well known was much harder fired but not so intensely black.

The finest examples of polished black or red ware come from the Tewa pueblos of San Ildefonso, Santa Clara, and San Juan. It is not always possible to determine the precise origin of a particular piece, but there are some distinguishing features. Almost identical pieces of polished black ware may come from either Santa Clara or San Ildefonso. If the piece has the distinctive "bear paw" imprint on it, it almost certainly is from Santa Clara.

Red ware is seldom made at San Ildefonso but is common at Santa Clara. If it is painted in several colors, it quite certainly is not from San Ildefonso. Santa Clara's painted red ware usually shows designs in fine white lines with enclosed areas filled with pink, pale yellow, or gray—all fired after painting. The paint is fairly smooth in contrast to the rather rough, dull paint designs on San Juan pottery. Pieces

*Santa Clara polished black with
bear paw design. Height 6¾ inches.*





Upper left, Polished Wares: San Ildefonso mat black on polished black, San Juan polished red, Santa Clara polished red with carved serpent design on mat tan background. Upper right, Micaceous Wares: Picuris (left) and Taos. Lower left, Poster Paint Wares: Tesuque (left) and Jemez.



Left, Polished Wares: Santo Domingo mat black on polished red, Santa Juan polished red, Santa Juan polished red with carved design on tan background. Right, Micaceous Wares: (left) and Taos. Lower, Water Paint Wares: Tesuque and Jemez.

Upper, "White" Wares: top left Zuni, right Cochiti; bottom left Santo Domingo, center, Zia, right Acoma. Lower, Hopi Wares: left flat jar with constricted top, by the late Nampeyo, noted potter of Hano Pueblo, center tall jar, right bowl, pueblo of origin unknown.



from the two pueblos thus can be distinguished. San Juan painted ware is often grooved and has large areas decorated in rough red, white or tan. Sometimes only the rim and the base will be polished red. These are recent developments in San Juan pottery, and examples are usually of small size.

Better known are San Juan's beautiful, incised micaceous pieces, or the plain red and tan made in the old style. The incised ware may have some polished red surface combined with a well-smoothed tan or pinkish surface in which a design has been scratched or carved, the grooves then being filled with micaceous slip. This pottery derives from a prehistoric ware made in the area during the period 1450-1550, and is made at no other pueblo.

The plain, polished red San Juan jars and bowls made in the old style are equally distinctive. The base is smooth tan, the upper body polished red. The inside usually is polished tan, a rare feature in modern pottery. The bowls have a tan base and a polished red concave band under the exterior rim.

Polished red or black pottery is made in small quantities in other pueblos, but it is in most cases inferior to that described previ-

ously. Such items from Taos are often crudely shaped and poorly polished. The color may be more orange than red. Good black ware is now rarely made at Tesuque. Santo Domingo has produced some inferior polished red or black ware, with or without white or other colors painted on after firing and thus easily chipped or rubbed off. Both shapes and designs are crude, and the product has a glossy, varnished look. Acoma, farthest west of the Keres pueblos, makes a limited amount of polished red pottery for actual use in the home. It is thin and relatively hard, with red slip inside and out which is polished, although not to the high luster of the Tewa pieces.

WHITE WARES

The term "white ware" is meant to include pottery whose principal background color is white, cream, or light gray, usually decorated with black and red or orange. Present styles generally resemble closely those which have been made for a hundred years or more, and thus are less "modern" in appearance than the polished black and matte productions.

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ware" is meant to include principal background color is light gray, usually decorated with red or orange. Present styles are closely those which have endured years or more, and are more "native" in appearance than the native productions.

A typical white ware water jar will have many characteristics common to all pueblos that make this type of pottery. The bottom usually will be concave (from the days when jars were carried on the head). Both the bottom and the outer base will be colored red or black, the color extending part way up the side. Above the upper limit of the red there will be one or two encircling black lines. The main design will appear between these lines and the rim in one or more bands around the jar. Only rarely will the color be omitted from the base or the jar left all white. The bases of bowls likewise will be colored and surrounded by black lines framing the design.

Beyond these common features there are numerous distinctive differences in design, shape, and construction which will help to distinguish the work of one pueblo from another.

Zuni white ware, which is made in the westernmost pueblo of New Mexico, can be recognized by its black, or very dark brown base. Zuni vessels differ in many less obvious ways from similar ones made at Acoma and Zia which may be difficult to distinguish at first glance. Potters of Acoma and Zia use a reddish slip on the base, that of Acoma tend-

ing to be more orange in color. Shapes are similar, and designs show certain resemblances. Acoma pottery, however, has thin walls formed of white clay, while the heavier Zia pottery is made of red clay with a black basaltic temper. Both these pueblos have long histories of extremely fine ceramics. The jars are usable as water containers.

The white ware of Cochiti and Santo Domingo is quite different from that just described, although both pueblos employ the red base and encircling black framing line. The Acoma-Zia shape is almost never used; bowls prevail, and jars are more globular or are tall with a flaring rim. The "ceremonial break," an interruption of an encircling line "to let the spirit out" used in decoration, is almost invariably and conspicuously employed. At Zia and Acoma the break is missing from modern pottery or is inconspicuous.

Santo Domingo white pottery is usually thick and heavy, and is decorated with very regular, simple, geometric designs or with characteristic birds. The paint is a very dense black.

Cochiti designs, in contrast, are usually drawn with finer lines and less regular place-

ment. Often the isolated figures bear little relation to one another. Cochiti is one of the few pueblos where use of the sacred symbols for clouds, rain and lightning is permitted on non-ceremonial vessels. The figures are often naturalistic animals, birds, and flowers. At both Cochiti and Santo Domingo, red color is used occasionally in design, but the plain black-on-white is preferred. Zia and Acoma, on the other hand, almost invariably use red in their designs. An exception to this rule is found in modern Acoma copies of prehistoric black-on-white bowls and jars.

A century ago, many more pueblos made white wares. Some of these have now either abandoned pottery making entirely, or have turned almost exclusively to other styles.

HOPÍ WARES

Good pottery is made by the Hopi, primarily those of the First Mesa villages. Hopi pottery usually can be distinguished by its designs, shapes, and surface appearance. Surface colors are usually white or very distinctive shades of yellow to orange; a typical vessel

often carries the color extremes blended smoothly in the background. Designs are usually in black and red, only rarely in white. White is used occasionally on an all-red background.

Most Hopi ware is polished and smooth, though not so glossy as Tewa ware even when produced by Tewa people who live at Hano, on First Mesa. Hopi-like designs are sometimes seen on Zuni, Acoma, and Zia pottery, but in other respects the Hopi styles are so distinctive in shape and background color that they can be identified immediately.

Some Hopi pottery is still used for cooking and serving. Cooking and storage jars are usually rough-finished, but they are well-fired. The Hopi make some canteens and a few very large storage jars. A characteristic Hopi bowl is one made for mutton stew. It has a rounded bottom and the rim flares outward in a rather wide band. Much of the Hopi pottery is decorated in an ancient style which was revived around 1900 by the famous Hano potter, Nampeyo. Her designs were copied from prehistoric fragments found in nearby ruins at the time of major archaeological excavations.

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*Maricopa jar (non-pueblo). Height
5½ inches.*

Indians, such as the Maricopa and Piman peoples, who live near Phoenix, Arizona. Occasionally, a Navajo woman makes pottery.

POSTER-PAINT POTTERY

Small earthenware items painted with commercial poster paint which is applied after firing are becoming so common that no list of modern pottery types would be complete without some mention of them. The principal output is from Tesuque, Jemez, and Isleta where the imagination of the potters seems to know no bounds. A typical piece, small vessel or figurine, is molded in the ordinary fashion and may be covered with a fairly uniform slip. After firing, it is painted with the brightest available colors applied in a bewildering variety of designs. The result is a ceramic novelty intended for the tourist. It is turned out in abundance, not infrequently in the oven of a modern stove, and in small pieces that sell cheaply. The profit comes from volume of sales. Collectors seldom bother with it, not so much because it is not a true Indian handicraft, but because it is of poor quality. The

poster paints rub off at the slightest dampening, or smear in handling. Firing is usually inadequate, and designs reflect nothing but a lively imagination.

MODERN TRENDS

The three classic forms of Pueblo Indian pottery are those of the storage jars, typically eighteen inches tall, the waterjars, or *ollas*, typically nine inches tall, and the bowls which range from four inches to eighteen inches in diameter. Up to one hundred years ago, there were few ceramic innovations departing from these forms. Commencing with the opening of the railroads through the Southwest in the 1880's, the flood of tourists inspired a tremendous revival of pottery making. Styles at first followed tradition, but later began to show more and more the influence of commercial requirements. Bowls and storage jars were almost completely abandoned. Water jars and various other "vases" were decorated with new and more colorful patterns, and new forms began to appear.

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*Tesuque figurine. Height 6¼
inches.*



pleasing. Indeed, the late 1800's can be considered as one of the fine periods of Pueblo ceramics. Gradually, however, the quality declined, and the years between 1910 and 1920 saw an outpouring of atrociously decorated and poorly made vessels. Sales dropped so sharply that pottery making almost ceased. At that time, or not long thereafter, essentially the last traditional pottery was made at Zuni, Santa Ana, and Tesuque. Only one or two potters, who occasionally follow the classic styles, remain at each of those formerly important pottery producing pueblos.

The modern trend is by no means all bad. Much as collectors may deplore the passing of some of the magnificent wares, there are several cases where a replacement has been of considerable interest. From the very beginning, Indian ceramics have been made or adapted to fit the need at hand. Thus, when the need was for effective competition in an economic market, the challenge was met in traditional fashion.

One pleasing feature of the innovations of the last century is the accent on figurines. Most famous of these, perhaps, are the white ware effigies of animals and humans from Cochiti.

Also renowned for owl figurines is Zuni where this form is one of the few styles of pottery still made. Acoma turkeys and other forms are popular.

The polished black animal figurines of Santa Clara are available at stores throughout the Southwest. No collection should be without some of these quaint and inexpensive pieces. Their manufacturing technique follows in all details the crude and classic methods.

Tesuque and Jemez manufacture a profusion of fanciful little figures, which can be recognized by the poster paint in glowing aniline colors, applied after the firing. Few figurines are made by other Pueblo potters.

USES OF POTTERY IN THE HOME

People who like pottery find it useful as well as beautiful, and a reminder of uniquely preserved ancient traditions. Cochiti owls make eye-catching book ends. Smaller figurines are handy and attractive as paper weights. Fruit or gourds can be arranged as centerpieces in large pottery bowls, or with

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Acoma canteen. Diameter 7 inches.



sprigs of evergreen or dried foliage to decorate a shelf or nook. Variations in the use of pottery for home decoration are endless.

Some modern Pueblo pottery such as the Tewa polished wares is fired for beauty rather than for endurance. Water will mar the surface and, if allowed to stand in an unprotected vessel of this type, may actually crumble it. If you must put water into a polished red or polished black vessel, seal the inner surface with varnish or a commercial sealer. Better yet, insert a glass or metal container to hold the water. Never varnish or seal the outside. Even the finest of Pueblo pottery, fired at the highest available temperature, is not absolutely water tight. No Pueblo pottery has ever been glazed for sealing. On the other hand, the seeping of water through a water jar serves to cool it by evaporation. A well-fired vessel will hold water almost indefinitely without damage.

White ware vessels sometimes are improved by the application of a thin layer of grease, briskly rubbed by hand. In very dry climates, some of these vessels have a tendency to flake after a few years. The greasing process or an application of liquid celluloid averts this ten-

dency, serving the same purpose as the natural oils resulting from continual handling when the vessels are actually used by the Indians.

Both Acoma and Zia hard-fired white ware vessels can be used as flower pots. It is advisable, however, to drill a hole in the bottom for drainage. You can do this with an electric drill if you use great care and do not apply too much pressure or allow the bit to overheat.

Picuris jars are widely used for cooking beans and chili. Many Southwesterners maintain that their use imparts to these foods an unmatched flavor. To prepare a vessel for cooking, first fill it with water on which is floated a little oil or cooking fat. The water is then simmered away over a slow flame and the residual oil poured off. This seals the pores and takes away the earthy flavor. Waterproofing is achieved also by coating the vessel interior with vegetable oil and heating it slowly in an oven until the oil is absorbed. This should be done two or three times. The vessel can then be used and washed safely.

Micaceous bowls and polished pottery are used for salad serving, both in the large and small sizes. In this case, the salad oil serves as a sealer.

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Figurine, woman with loaves
of bread, Cochiti Pueblo

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