

JEMEZ POTTERY

A QUESTION OF REVIVAL

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Photos by Blair Clark



A Jemez Black-on-white olla group by contemporary Jemez Pueblo potter Joshua Madalena. The faded olla in front was fired at the highest temperature. Madalena's biggest concern when firing is to prevent the black designs from fading or disappearing into the lighter clay.

Native American Pottery Traditions of the Southwest have never been static. From the archaeologist's perspective, fabric, form, and style change continually, and provide both a reflection of cultural change and a means of dating archaeological sites. In today's art-driven market, Native pottery traditions are a mix of stability, that which defines the tradition as Native American, and innovation, that which distinguishes each artist's work. Within this framework, revival has played a frequent role. The most famous case is the revival of Tewa Polished Black Ware by Maria Martinez at the turn of the last century. Through skill and experimentation, she successfully resurrected a lost suite of techniques, invigorating the Tewa pottery tradition to the point

where what once was lost is now taken for granted.

We may be witnessing a parallel resurrection within Jemez pottery today. Nearly a thousand years of pottery knowledge held by the Jemez people and their ancestors was abandoned and lost over several generations in the early eighteenth century. That loss is being reversed today through the work of a Jemez potter, Joshua Madalena. Through his skill and experimentation, archaeologists and collectors can be transported back to experience the look and feel of vessels that have not been manufactured for nearly three centuries. Time will tell whether Joshua's efforts will spark a revival or simply a footnote, but the story is fascinating in either case.

THE JEMEZ OR TOWA PEOPLE trace their origins to the landscape of the northern Four Corners area. Archaeologists believe they can distinguish this ancestral population as early as the eighth century, a time when they lived in the mountains and valleys of the headwaters of the San Juan River. Their pottery is distinguished by the early but ephemeral use of a galena-derived lead paint, followed by reliance on a vegetal or carbon paint and a distinctive design style called Rosa Black-on-white. While the lowland residents of the Four Corners area and the San Juan Basin pursued their lives in areas that would become known today as the Chacoan world, the highland peoples held themselves apart, living in and defending their mountain homes. They moved inexorably southward through the centuries, carrying their distinctive approach to

pottery with them. Vegetal paint techniques and a unique approach to design continued to set apart the pottery that archaeologists now call Gallina Black-on-white. As climate change restricted the farming potential of the northern Southwest in the thirteenth and later centuries, the ancestral Towa people continued their southern movement along the highlands. In the fourteenth century, communities were established in the Jemez Mountains, building the foundations for the strong and independent Towa communities that were encountered by the Spanish.

Traditional potters throughout the world build their pottery with local resources. As communities move, potters are brought into contact with new and often very different clays, requiring changes that may be minor or major in scale. The



Early attempts: a progression from a bowl that fired all black, to subsequent pieces (all by Joshua Madalena) coming through the firing process with the beginnings of contrast.

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common thread in the deep history of Towa pottery is the use of vegetal paint to produce the contrast between dark design and light background. Initially, the vegetal paint was simply a binder that carried powdered galena pigment from the brush to the pot. Galena was a poor choice of mineral pigment, working well in some cases, but usually failing in the poorly compatible reduction atmosphere of their firings. When the galena failed to fuse into a lead glaze, the design was still often preserved in carbon from the vegetal binder. This carbon was trapped within the surface of the vessel, and the success of this approach to design (paired with the right clays) led to the binder being used by itself as a vegetal paint.

Little change in pottery technology was required as ancestral Towa communities drifted south along the mountain chain. The resulting continuity is refreshing in contrast with the much more convoluted patterns of adaptation archaeologists cope with in other Puebloan pottery traditions. The change that did occur was positive, in that the Jemez Mountains yielded clay with beautiful qualities. Whereas the clays in the Gallina area supported vegetal paint designs with a reliable mediocrity, this new clay of the Jemez Mountains yielded a pearly lustrous surface under the strokes of the polishing stone. Vegetal paint soaked deep into the surface, and with careful firing, designs were preserved in a rich black paint. The contrast between the clay and paint was dramatic, giving the potter (and the archaeologist) a distinctive look that easily could be distinguished from the rest of Puebloan black-on-white pottery.

The painted designs of Jemez Black-on-white were of their time, sharing motifs with pottery of other regions while remaining distinctive in emphasis. Designs were dominated by geometric bands, with both coarse and narrow line work and common rows of triangles. Steps and lines were combined into figures that are described as terraces or clouds, feathers, and birds. The closest similarities in design



Learning by failure: a bowl by Joshua Madalena that “popped apart” in the fire because it did not have enough temper and was fired with too much heat, too fast.

content were with contemporary Rio Grande Glaze Ware pottery, but Jemez Black-on-white remains enigmatic. Glaze ware from the south and east and Biscuit Ware to the north were widely traded, showing up in significant amounts far from the communities where they were made, including in the Towa villages of the Jemez Mountains. In contrast, very little of the pearly lustrous Jemez pottery was traded outward. The lone

exception is that archaeologists are not surprised to see Jemez Black-on-white potsherds on Navajo sites in the Dinétah area, the seventeenth-century homeland of the Navajo that had been the tenth-century homeland to the Towa people.

No other ancestral or modern pottery traditions share the unique clay and paint combination of Jemez Black-on-white, and the beauty of the pottery is unparalleled. Since the eighteenth century, however, this beauty has been enjoyed only in the context of heirlooms and archaeological collections. The specific reasons why Jemez



An early success: Black-on-white starts to come together the right way in a wave bowl by Joshua Madalena.

pottery production in the eighteenth century may be known among the religious leaders of the Pueblo, but for outsiders it is the subject of speculation. Stories include a desire to prevent the Spanish from learning the difficult secrets of the technology, or that it was a casualty of the repression of Native religion in the aftermath of the Spanish re-conquest. Regardless of the motivation, within a few generations, knowledge of the secrets of the technology was lost. Jemez potters continued to make cooking pots, and non-Jemez pottery techniques were slowly adopted from adjacent communities to fill the need for decorated vessels. These alternative pottery traditions have served as effective place holders in the art and craft economy of the Jemez people, but there has always been a lingering sense that contemporary Jemez pottery



Jemez Pueblo potter Joshua Madalena.

was somehow “less than” the pottery traditions of the adjacent Tewa and Keres pueblos.

JOSHUA MADALENA

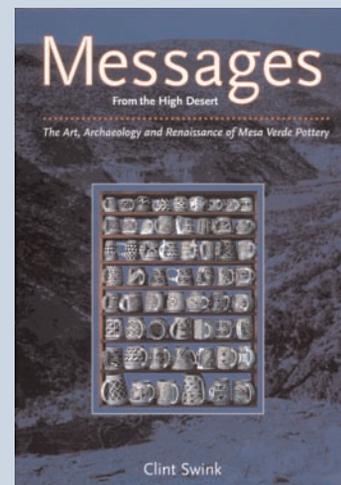
can trace his ancestry to both the Jemez and Pecos divisions of the Towa people. Although still relatively young, he reflects the diverse roles that many tribal members play in their communi-

ties. Madalena is a county commissioner, a monument ranger, has taken his turn in tribal administration, and is an active participant in the traditional religious life of the pueblo. Through work at Jemez State Monument and his participation in the final phases of the repatriation of Pecos ancestors, he was exposed to the “outsiders” views of Jemez Black-on-white, as well as knowing its place within the traditions of his own community. Through his grandmother, Evelyn Vigil, he was familiar with efforts to rediscover the lost techniques of Rio Grande Glaze Ware. In Madalena’s mind and heart, the time was right to revisit the question of Jemez Black-on-white pottery.

Although the Spanish, and now the Americans, are here to stay, the Towa people have survived the pressure to acculturate that was so intense in the eighteenth century. The Jemez survivors of the re-conquest have maintained

Replicating Ancient Technologies

Few ceramic technologies have captured as much public imagination as the Ancestral Puebloan or Anasazi pottery of the Four Corners area. Associated with the dramatic ruins of Mesa Verde National Park, Mesa Verde Black-on-white is the thirteenth-century expression of this tradition. Bold geometric designs appear on bowls,



mugs, and storage jars, but despite Mesa Verde pottery’s high profile, little was known about its manufacture. Native American pottery traditions today are descendant, but modern traditions have adapted to different clays, paints, and even aesthetics.

When the first ancient kilns were recognized in the 1970s and 1980s, no one knew how the kilns had been used to produce the beautiful Mesa Verde Black-on-white pottery. In 1991, a conference was convened at Crow Canyon Archaeological Center in Cortez, Colorado, to bring Native American potters, archaeologists, and artists together in an experimental effort to replicate Mesa Verde pottery. Clint Swink, a Colorado artist, emerged from that conference as the leader in a decade-long experimentation process. His book, *Messages from the High Desert*, documents the culmination of his work, providing a “how to” guide to the ancient techniques. Available at the Museum Shops, *Messages* is rich with detail and images, providing a modern window on a rich past. n

Messages from the High Desert, by Clint Swink, introduction by Eric Blinman. Hardbound only, 9 x 12 in., 321 pages, 655 illustrations. Available at www.swinkart.com or 970-563-4624.

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A maturing technique: Jemez Black-on-white pot with high cut outs.

By Joshua Madalena.

an incredibly high language fluency rate, their cultural institutions have proven to be strong, and they have built a robust sense of identity and cultural confidence. In the security of this context, the revival of Jemez Black-on-white pottery today could further strengthen—rather than prove a threat to—Towa cultural survival.

In the late 1990s, Madalena began the slow and painstaking search, first for the raw materials, and then for the techniques, of his ancestors. Modern science and archaeology had relatively little to contribute to his quest other than information on basic principles. He had to rely on intuition, a willingness to learn from failure, and traditions passed down through his family and community. The challenges of firing vegetal paint are huge, and there is only one successful model—Clint Swink and the reconstruction of Mesa Verde Black-on-white pottery (see *sidebar*). Success requires a delicate balance of air and fuel that fires the pot without erasing the ephemeral carbon design; the process differs significantly with each new combination of raw materials. Maria Martinez' successful reconstruction of the Tewa

Polished Black Ware tradition was relatively easy to accomplish in comparison. After countless failed pots, Madalena finally started to come close to success in the summer of 2005. Now the process is one of refinement, learning how to achieve the consistency and nuance that characterized the work of his ancestors.

As an archaeologist, I see Madalena's recovery of Jemez Black-on-white as a remarkable achievement in technology and skill. To collectors, a uniquely beautiful class of pottery has magically appeared, analogous to the innovations of a new artist but with the added sense of heritage from a long lost (or dormant?) tradition. The ultimate question, however, is that of revival. Joshua's Jemez Black-on-white pottery will have to be accepted within the homes and religious traditions of the Towa community if it is to make the transition from simply a hard-fought artistic discovery to a true cultural revival. Only in the hindsight of the next generation or two will we know if we are witnessing today a revival of the same importance as that of Maria Martinez. n



Side-by-side: Jemez Black-on-white handled olla (*right*), ca. 1425–1600, MIAC #8765, with small contemporary Jemez Black-on-white coiled olla (*left*) by Joshua Madalena .

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