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Pottery and Baskets: c. 1100–c. 1960

Anasazi Cylinder Jars, c. 1100

A thousand years ago, American Indians used plants, bone, skin, earth, and stone to fashion the objects needed for daily life: pots for cooking, baskets for storage, or arrowheads for hunting. Many of these objects indicate, in addition to a concern for usefulness, a deep regard for beauty.

The pots and baskets illustrated are indeed beautiful, and also provide a glimpse of the cultures and traditions that produced them. Each object exemplifies a craft and a tradition that were handed down and improved upon through generations. A stylized corn stalk painted on a cooking pot reminded everyone of that crop's central importance in their lives, and a better source of clay meant that new pots lasted longer than the old ones. These cylindrical clay jars, made by potters about eight hundred years ago in the Four Corners region, where the modern-day borders of New Mexico, Arizona, Utah, and Colorado converge, are evidence of a remarkable American Indian culture that flourished there.

The Anasazi people were farmers who not only built homesteads and small villages across the Four Corners region, but also built a great cultural capital in Chaco Canyon in the northwest corner of what is now New Mexico. Between 900 and 1150, they dominated the region. Their engineering feats included towns with multistory apartment buildings and a road network to connect them. The largest of the apartment buildings, or great houses, is Pueblo Bonito in Chaco Canyon.

These six jars were found with about one hundred others in one of the rooms of the Pueblo Bonito great house. To make

each pot, circular coils of clay were layered over a flat base and then given a smooth surface by hand or use of a scraper. The smoothed surface was covered with a slip (a thin mixture of clay and water) and painted with a mineral-based color. When the pot was dry, it was fired, or baked, in a kiln to harden it and set the decoration.

We do not know how these jars were used. The cylindrical shape, which is rare in Anasazi pottery, varies slightly with each pot: some are fatter, some are taller, and some are a little tipsy. They have flat bottoms and can stand upright. Small holes or loops near the opening show they could be hung by some kind of cord, perhaps, as some archaeologists think, for use in rituals.

The geometric designs, painted with black lines on a white background, give the pots their individual character. The designs are hand drawn with a relaxed asymmetry. Squares stretch over one jar in a form-fitting grid that seems to reveal every bulge of a squirming body beneath. A crooked line of triangles travels down another, and up and down on a third. The slimmest pot is made to look even thinner by vertical striping, and the two widest pots appear even broader because their designs twist from the vertical and move diagonally across them.

Chaco Canyon's dominance was short-lived. By the end of the thirteenth century, the Anasazi had abandoned the area and migrated south and east to smaller settlements. Their descendants are the Pueblo peoples who now inhabit the region.



I-A.1 Anasazi pottery, c. 1100, Pueblo Bonito, Chaco Canyon. Jar at left, height 10¼ in. (26 cm.). Photograph by P. Hollembeak. © American Museum of Natural History, New York.



I-A.2 Sikyátki polychrome bowl, c. 1350–1700, height 3½ in., diameter 10¼ in. (9.3 x 27.4 cm.). Catalog no. 155479. Department of Anthropology, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. Photograph by D. E. Hurlbert.

Sikyátki Bowl, c. 1350–1700

By the mid-1300s, Sikyátki potters from the First Mesa area, about 125 miles west of Chaco Canyon, had developed a decorative style that was strikingly different from the symmetry and basic geometric designs of the jars found at Pueblo Bonito. While Anasazi pots have a background of white slip (watery clay), the background of Sikyátki pottery is bare clay and decorated in a wider range of plant- and mineral-based colors. Firing at a higher temperature, made possible by the use of coal, also made the pots more durable. Decorations combine abstract geometric shapes with forms derived from nature: rain clouds, stars, the sun, animals, insects, reptiles, and birds (the human form is rarely depicted). This Sikyátki bowl, made sometime between 1350 and 1700, has geometric decoration on the exterior, but greater attention is focused on the interior, which seems to contain a great reptile that slithers and spins around the inside. The creature is something more than the reptiles that commonly scurry over rocks in this arid land: it wears a three-feather headdress, and its snout and one of its toes stretch to fantastic length.

The Hopi people live in the First Mesa area now. Their traditions recount the destruction of the Sikyátki community by its neighbors even before Spanish explorers arrived about 1583. The meaning of the symbolism of Sikyátki pottery has been forgotten, but the Sikyátki style was given new life at the end of the nineteenth century, when a young Hopi-Tewa potter named Nampeyo (c. 1860–1942) drew inspiration from Sikyátki pottery designs for her own pieces. They found commercial success, thanks in part to the arrival of the railroad in Albuquerque in the 1880s and the popularity of the arts and crafts movement among collectors. Nampeyo’s work helped spark a revival in Hopi pottery that continues today.

MARÍA MONTOYA MARTÍNEZ (1887–1980) and JULIAN MARTÍNEZ (1879–1943), Jar, c. 1939

Just as Nampeyo was reviving the Sikyátki style in her community west of Chaco Canyon, another Pueblo potter was reviving an ancient style in her Tewa community, one hundred miles east of Chaco. María Montoya Martínez (1887–1980) worked with her husband, Julian Martínez (1879–1943), to create a new style based on archaeological finds from the areas around San Ildefonso, near Santa Fe, New Mexico. María made pots using the same coiled-clay techniques that native potters had used a thousand years earlier. Julian then painted and fired them.

The couple were contacted by an archaeologist in 1909, who asked them to find a way to reproduce the style of some of the ancient pottery found nearby. Although the local clay was red, the ancient pottery was black. After eight years of experimenting with the firing process, María and Julian discovered how to produce the arresting black-on-black finish of the jar shown here, which they made sometime around 1939. This geometric style with contrasting matte and gloss finishes characterizes their best-known work.

The jar is a study in opposing forces and restraint. The calculated design and natural irregularities combine to give the form a continual undercurrent of energy. Its bottom is slightly rounded and, when set on soft ground, snuggles into the earth. Positioned on a hard surface, however, the form balances on an invisible axis and appears to hover. Its silhouette is a combination of symmetrical and asymmetrical: the area of greatest volume (the pot’s belly) is situated exactly at mid-center. The jar is wider at the top than the bottom, and the pot’s outline curves inward in the top half. Even the black-on-black decoration holds hidden complications, containing a third color—white—wherever the surface reflects bright light. When the light is more subdued, the contrasts are less bold and the effect is more mysterious, as shapes move in and out of the shadows and negative and positive forms trade places. As though to keep all of these potent interactions in check, the abstract designs, refined and sharp as cut paper, form a girdle around the pot’s circumference, stretching to a point just below the belly.



I-A.3 María Montoya Martínez and Julian Martínez (San Ildefonso Pueblo, American Indian, c. 1887–1980; 1879–1943), Jar, c. 1939. Blackware, height 11¼ in., diameter 13 in. (28.26 x 33.02 cm.). National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington, D.C., Gift of Wallace and Wilhelmina Holladay.

The pottery of María and Julian Martínez gained national recognition and led to a revival of pottery-making in San Idelfonso and towns in the area. Today pottery-making holds an important position in the economies of both areas. It also reflects a wider resurgence of interest in Pueblo history and traditions.

LOUISA KEYSER (c. 1850–1925), *Beacon Lights*, 1904–1905

About seven hundred miles northwest of Four Corners, another group of American Indians discovered commercial value in some of their creative traditions. The Washoe people and their ancestors had lived as nomads in the area around Lake Tahoe for several thousand years. Their way of life altered suddenly with the 1848 California Gold Rush and the discovery of silver in the Comstock Lode in 1859. Travelers to California were followed by settlers who populated the Washoe area around Virginia City, Nevada. The settlers cut trees, built roads, put up fences, and laid out ranches. Adjusting to the new cash economy, the Washoe abandoned their nomadic life and began to work for wages.

For all its upheavals, the cash-based economy brought a new market for the Washoe's sophisticated basketry. The Washoe weaving tradition had produced baskets fit for hunter-gatherers, to be used as fish traps and cradles for infants. But in 1895, Abe Cohn, a merchant in Carson City, Nevada, hired a young Southern Washoe woman to produce baskets exclusively for sale to non-native buyers.

Louisa Keyser was also known by her Washoe name, Dat So La Lee. During her thirty-year business arrangement with Cohn, Keyser produced scores of decorative baskets, most notably Washoe degikup (ceremonial baskets). She introduced new designs and experimented with shape and size to attract buyers. The basket shown here, a two-color degikup that Keyser made in 1904 or 1905, was constructed by coiling long strips of willow in layers and then connecting the rows with thousands of tiny stitches of thinner pieces of willow. Designs in redbud (a red-brown color) and bracken fern (brown or black) were worked into the weave in a staggered pattern. The basket is shaped like a slightly squashed sphere, and opposing visual forces create a crisp tension. The coil rows make the form seem to swell outward, but the dark pattern checks the expansion by emphasizing the vertical with wiggling lines that appear to inch their way to the opening at the top.

Commercial success encouraged other Washoe basket makers to follow Keyser's lead. Although demand for Washoe baskets declined after 1935, Keyser helped transform the non-native perception of Washoe decorative basketry from utilitarian objects to works of art.

**CAESAR JOHNSON (1872–1960),
Gullah Rice Fanner Basket, c. 1960**

In coastal South Carolina, an important tradition of basket weaving arrived from West Africa more than two hundred years ago, traveling by ship across the Atlantic with slaves. The descendants of those slaves still live in the long, narrow strip of islands that stretches along the South Carolina and Georgia coasts. Gullah is the name of their culture and their creole language, which is remarkably similar to Sierra Leone's Krio language.



I-A.4 Louisa Keyser (Dat So La Lee, Washoe, c.1850–1925), *Beacon Lights*, 1904–1905. Willow, western redbud, and bracken fern root, height 11¼ in., diameter 16 in. (28.58 x 40.64 x cm.), T751. Thaw Collection, Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, N.Y. Photograph by Richard Walker.



I-A.6 Attributed to Caesar Johnson (1872–1960), Gullah rice fanner basket, c. 1960. Rush, height 2½ in., diameter 17½ in. (6.35 x 44.45 cm.). Courtesy of the South Carolina State Museum, Columbia, S.C. Photograph by Susan Dugan.

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in the Sea Islands, rice plantation owners paid a premium for slaves from the rice-winnowing areas of West Africa, who knew how to manage the crop. The marshy conditions that made the land ideal for rice also led to the isolation that created and then preserved the Gullah culture.

After the Civil War, many Gullah purchased the land they once worked for others. They maintained their sense of separateness from the mainland and continued to make fine baskets. The flat basket illustrated is a rice-winnowing tray attributed to Gullah artisan Caesar Johnson.

These trays were used to separate out the chaff (the dry, outer husk) from the grain of rice after it was crushed in a mortar and pestle. Chaff is lighter than grain and when tossed together in a tray, the chaff floats away on the wind. The winnowing tray and other basket types were made of bulrush (a type of marsh grass) and saw palmetto or white oak, all of which grew in the area. The structure of the basket provides its only decoration. Its design evokes the motion of the tray in use: the spiraling coils seem to contract and expand — the center advancing, then retreating — while color variations and little diagonal stitches make the disk appear to rotate.

CARL TOOLAK (c. 1885–c. 1945), Baleen Basket, 1940

Although an ancient tradition of birch-bark basketry was practiced among women of the north Alaska coast, a new and unusual basket form was developed in the early twentieth century by male artisans. A non-native whaler, Charles Brower, commissioned a basket from a local man. It was an unusual request because the basket was to be woven of baleen, the stiff, fibrous plates in the mouth of the baleen whale that filter plankton.

The Inupiat have hunted whales for centuries. Whales supplied food, fuel, and construction materials, and the Inupiat wasted none of it, including the baleen, a material that men traditionally worked. Baleen is pliable and resilient, making it ideal for sled runners, bows, rope, even shredded for fishing line. During the era of commercial whale hunting (1858 to around 1914), Westerners used baleen for buggy whips, umbrella ribs, and stays for women's corsets. When petroleum and plastics replaced these whale products, commercial hunting dried up, and with it, jobs for Inupiat workers.

Brower continued to commission baleen baskets to give as presents to his friends. Gradually, the demand broadened and a new tradition was born.

Carl Toolak was among the first of the baleen basket weavers. This basket shows his style from around 1940. Because baleen is too stiff to form the tiny coils that begin the basket at the center bottom, Toolak used a starter plate of ivory. He stitched the first strip of baleen to the edge of the starter plate through holes drilled around its perimeter, and finished the separate starter piece for the lid with a knob.

Baleen occurs naturally in a range of shades from light brown to black. Toolak expanded his color range by adding a decoration of white bird quills to the weave. The body of the container is glossy and is enriched with a pattern of white stitches grouped in twos and threes. The pattern lines up with that of the dome-shaped lid, where trios of white stitches elongate into lines that converge toward the playful centerpiece of the work — a carved ivory seal who looks as though he has just popped his head above icy water.



I-A.5 Carl Toolak (c. 1885–c. 1945, Inupiat, Point Barrow, Alaska), baleen basket, 1940. Baleen (whalebone) and ivory, height 3½ in., diameter 3½ in. (9.0 x 8.5 cm.). Catalog no. I.2E1180. Courtesy of the Burke Museum of Natural History and Culture, Seattle, Wash.

TEACHING ACTIVITIES

E = ELEMENTARY | M = MIDDLE | S = SECONDARY

Before beginning the activities below, encourage students to spend a few moments looking at each of the objects on this poster.

DESCRIBE AND ANALYZE E | M | S

How are these objects similar? *All are meant to hold something; all are made from natural materials; all are circular; all but one are decorated; all but one were made by American Indians.*

E | M | S

If you could touch these objects, how would each feel? *The clay pots are smooth, possibly cool. The María Martínez pot may feel rough in the design area. The baskets are rough or knobby. The baleen basket has a smooth figure on top.*

E | M | S

What natural materials from their environments did the artists and craftsmen use to create these functional containers? *Clay was used for the Southwestern pots by the Anasazi, Sikyátki, and María Martínez. Animal material—whalebone/baleen and ivory—were used by Toolak. Plant materials—willow, redbud, and fern root—were used by Keyser, and rush was used for the basket by Johnson.*

E | M | S

Why did the Washoe create and use mainly baskets rather than ceramic vessels? *The Washoe moved often and baskets were lighter and easier to carry.*

E | M | S

The María Martínez jar, the Anasazi jars, and the Sikyátki bowl were all made in the American Southwest by the Anasazi or their Pueblo descendants. What features do they have in common? How are ancient jars different from Pueblo pottery? *All the pots were formed with clay coils. They feature geometric decorations, but the designs of the two later pieces also include forms based on nature. The Anasazi jars have a layer of white slip over the clay, but the newer ones have exposed clay.*

E | M | S

What inspired María Martínez and Julian Martínez to create black-on-black ceramics? *The discovery of ancient pottery did.*

E | M | S

Have students create a chart to compare Louisa Keyser's basket to Carl Toolak's basket. Create three columns. Label the first column "Features to Compare." Label the second column "Carl Toolak" and the third column "Louisa Keyser." In the first column, list general features that the baskets share. In the artists' columns, have students compare and contrast how Toolak and Keyser handled each of the general features.

FEATURES TO COMPARE	Carl Toolak	Louisa Keyser
Background value and color	dark; black, brown	light; straw color
Color of the design	white	reddish brown
Top/lid	closed with lid	open with no lid
Body shape	almost straight up and down (like a cylinder)	round or bulbous
Materials (Media)	baleen and ivory (stiff animal material)	willow strips (pliable plant material)

INTERPRET M | S

Ask students how American tourism in the Southwest influenced American Indian pottery. *Because tourists wanted to buy their pottery, artists began to create more of it and renewed this ancient craft.*

M | S

In the early twentieth century, what did tourists appreciate about Southwest pottery? *They appreciated its design, handmade craft, and the natural beauty of the materials.*

M | S

Why did collectors prefer pottery that was signed by the artist? *The artist's signature shows who made it and that it is an authentic piece of art created by this artist. Often a pot by a known artist is more valuable than an anonymous one.*

CONNECTIONS

Historical Connections: legacy and cultures of major indigenous settlements—Inupiat and other native Alaskan peoples, Cliff Dwellers and Pueblo Indians; slavery and slave trade

Geography: Mesa Verde; American Southwest; Alaska; American Northwest; Southern Coastal Region

Economics: cottage industries; technological advances in agriculture; nomadic, hunter/gatherer, and agricultural economies

Literary Connections and Primary Documents: *The Pot that Juan Built*, Nancy Andrews-Goebel (elementary); *Moby Dick*, Herman Melville

(secondary); *Call of the Wild*, *White Fang*, Jack London (elementary, middle); *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Harriet Beecher Stowe (middle, secondary); poetry of Phyllis Wheatley (secondary)

Music: American Indian music, slave spirituals