



Burnished jar, 10½ inches (27 centimeters) in height, with iron slip, by Alice Cilng, Navajo.



"Snow Cloud," 13½ inches (34 centimeters) in height, by Nathan Begaye, Hopi/Navajo.

INDIAN MARKET

New Directions in Southwestern Native American Pottery

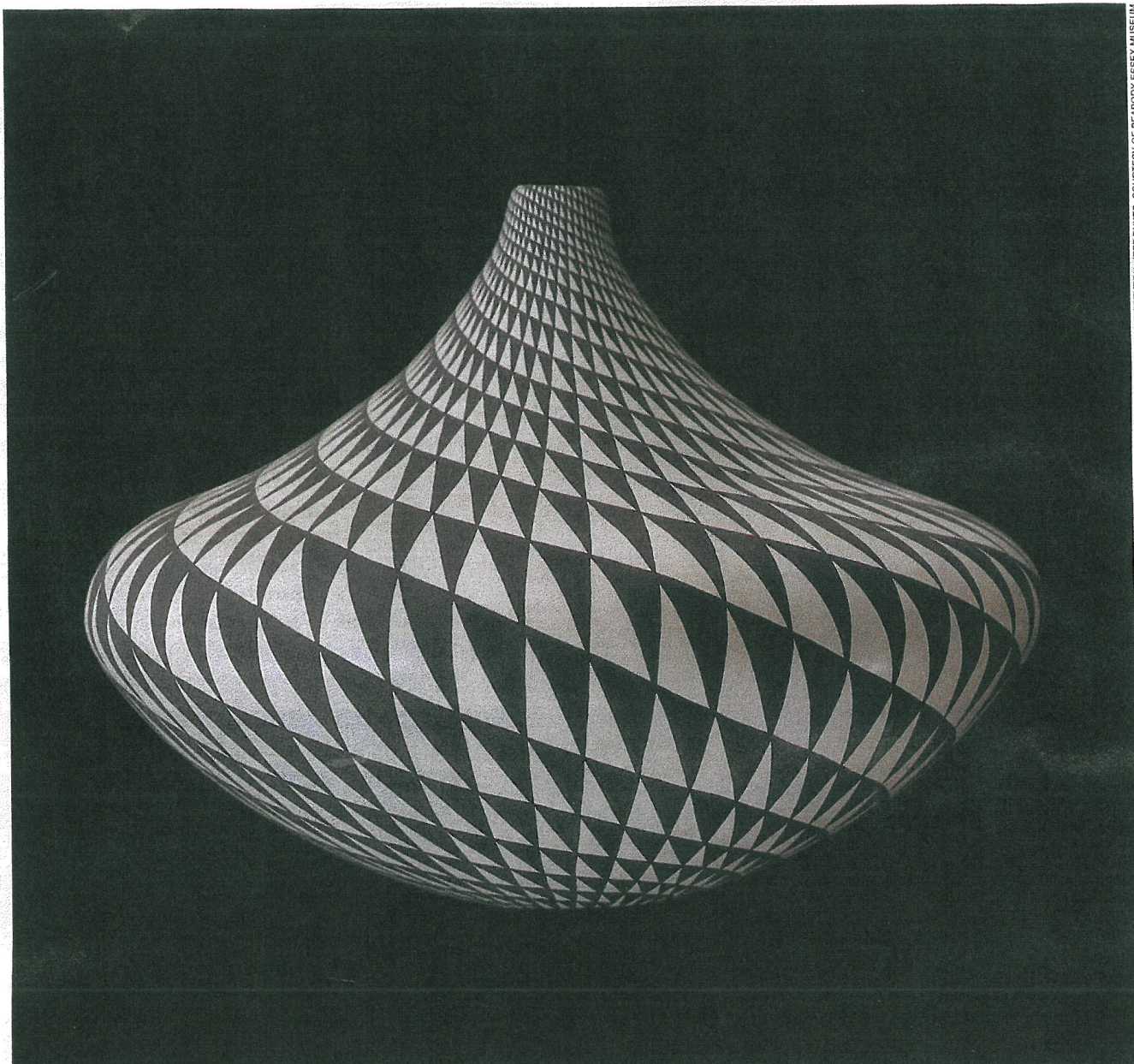
by Merrily Glosband

Early southwestern Native American potters, creating beautiful functional pieces both for everyday and ceremonial purposes, would undoubtedly be surprised by current developments in their medium. It might be difficult for them to understand that today's pottery need not serve a functional purpose, may draw inspiration from many cultures and eras, and might even cost as much as a luxury sports car.

Instead of transporting water or storing seeds, contemporary works made by Native American potters beautify homes, offices and museums. They are rarely (if ever) called upon to perform either mundane or sacred functions, as in the past. These changes in use, as well as in motifs and styles, have not been sudden—rather, they are the culmination of continuous internal and external influences, coupled with individual artistic expression.

Beginning with the ancient traditions of the Hohokam, Mogollon and Anasazi peoples, pottery adapted to the needs of the population. The composition of the locally available clay dictated certain construction methods and firing techniques, which were handed down from generation to generation.

As early as the 16th century, Spanish influence resulted in permanent changes in Southwest pottery. Equally profound changes appeared with the tourists—European and East Coast travelers in search of the western frontier experience—who began to arrive by railroad in the 1880s. At the same time, local trading posts provided durable substitutes, such as metal buckets and pans, for traditional wares. By the 20th century, the focus had shifted away from functional pottery and toward decorative objects (souvenirs).



"Seed Jar," 6½ inches (17 centimeters) in height, white clay, with black slip, by Dorothy Torivlo, Acoma.

During the past 80 years, Santa Fe's Indian Market has also been a major contributing factor to changes in production. SWAIA (Southwestern Association for Indian Arts), the organization that administers Indian Market, has encouraged Native American potters to reach new levels of artistic expression. Strict guidelines for entry help to maintain high levels of quality and ensure that all participants are of Native American descent. (An additional benefit is increased pride in and awareness of the culture and heritage of participating individuals and tribes.) Of last August's 1200 participating artists, 350 qualified in a variety of ceramics categories. An estimated 100,000 visitors attended the two-day event.

Art galleries in Santa Fe, Taos and, indeed, throughout the United States, also promote fine contemporary and antique Native American pottery, and may also be considered in part responsible for the changing attitudes of both buyers and artists. Although

it is still possible to buy quality pottery from roadside stands, more and more of this work is featured in galleries, museum shops and upscale stores. Even some of the pueblo shops resemble mainstream fashion boutiques.

Perhaps the most surprising influence today is the Internet. Whereas Native American pottery once was considered the product of remote regions, inaccessible to the majority of the world's population, now it is possible to meet the artist and view works from the privacy of one's own home via the World Wide Web. Many of today's Native American potters have their own websites.

Each region, each pueblo, each clay tradition brings with it finite realities of the past, which are often incorporated into contemporary modes of production. For example, clay from the immediate environs of the Santa Clara Pueblo is often best utilized when mixed with sand. This composition of clay/sand has

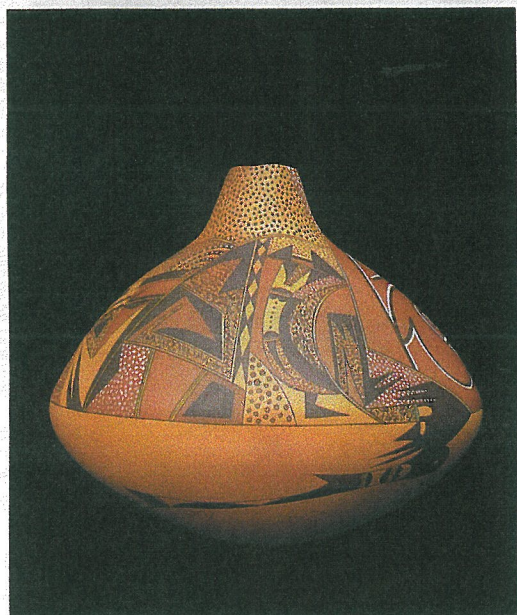
**"Illusive Wind," 5 inches (13 centimeters) in height,
by Autumn Borts, Santa Clara.**



become part of the tradition of Santa Clara Pueblo. The clay body lends itself best to thick-walled constructions that can be either left smooth and undecorated, or carved, then coated with slip, and burnished. Although Native American potters continue to use traditional smoke-firing techniques to produce blackwares, redwares are sometimes fired in electric kilns. This has more to do with practicality than with tradition. The kiln produces a slower and more stable environment for increasing heat and decreasing humidity, resulting in less breakage.

Similarly, clay in the vicinity of Acoma Pueblo is most often tempered with ground (crushed) shards that add body strength during construction and firing. By adhering to this tradition, the potter keeps a spiritual connection to the past and also utilizes the existing local clay to its best advantage. Some Acoma potters are also using electric kilns for early-stage drying and/or firing, with good results.

There are no rules about maintaining these traditions, but most Native American potters find that the spiritual nature of their art and their heritage cannot be ignored. In fact, Acoma potters are especially pleased to include ancestral shards in their work, as it is thought to bring luck to the firing. Because of the fragility of the clay during the prefiring



**Above: Bottle 8½ inches (22 centimeters) in height,
by Les Namingha, Hopi/Zuni.**

**Above right: "Stepped Rim Bowl," 7 inches
(18 centimeters) in height, micaceous clay,
by Lonnie and Larry Vigil, Nambé.**



stages, and the very nature of smoke-firing techniques, breakage continues to be a factor, and help from any source, physical or spiritual, is appreciated.

Contemporary potters working with micaceous clay also have discovered, often by trial and error, slight adaptations that improve the ratio of success. Although some continue to use traditional techniques exclusively, others are changing the nature of the clay with which they work. By shaving additional slivers of mica into the already mica-rich clay, they may enhance the glittering visual effect, while the tempering effect of the mica allows thinner walls. The best of today's micaceous clay artists are producing pieces with im-

peccably uniform walls in forms that stretch the imagination as well as the strictures of the clay.

The three traditions mentioned above—those of Santa Clara Pueblo, the Acoma Pueblo, and the potters working with micaceous clay—were all seen in the exhibition “Indian Market: New Directions in Southwestern Native American Pottery” at the Peabody Essex Museum in Boston. Of the 26 pots shown, all but 6 had been recently acquired, building on the museum’s Native American collection, which dates back to the 18th century.

Santa Clara Clay Tradition

Contemporary versions of traditional black and red Santa Clara pots were represented in the exhibition by the pottery of Autumn Borts and Virginia Garcia. Borts produces coil-built pots that are carved with crisp patterns enveloping the surfaces. Because the work is so detailed, the number of pots she makes in a year is very limited.

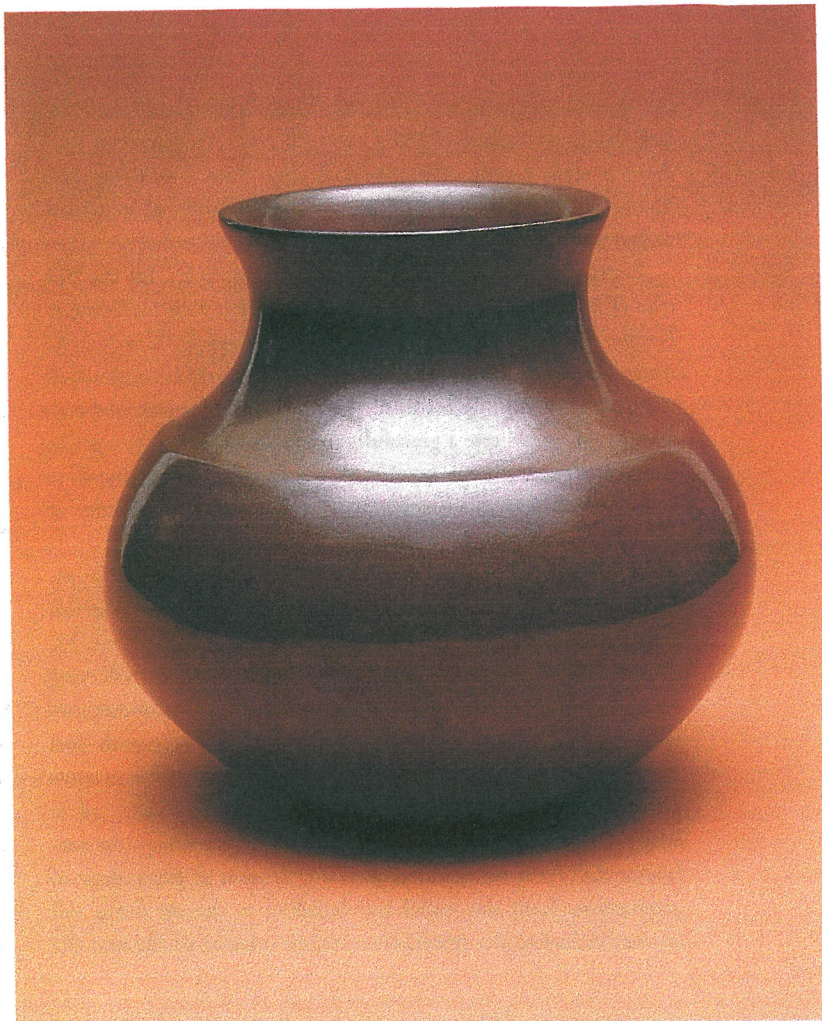
Virginia Garcia’s pottery uses the same traditional clay and slip techniques as Borts. The plum-colored storage jar shown in the exhibition was the result of her experiments with the pit-firing techniques of the past. It is commonly known that adding dried powdered manure at the end of the process produces blackware. She manages to stop the process somewhere in between the reds of an oxidation firing and the blacks of reduction to arrive at the lush plum or chocolate brown color seen on this jar.

Acoma Clay Tradition

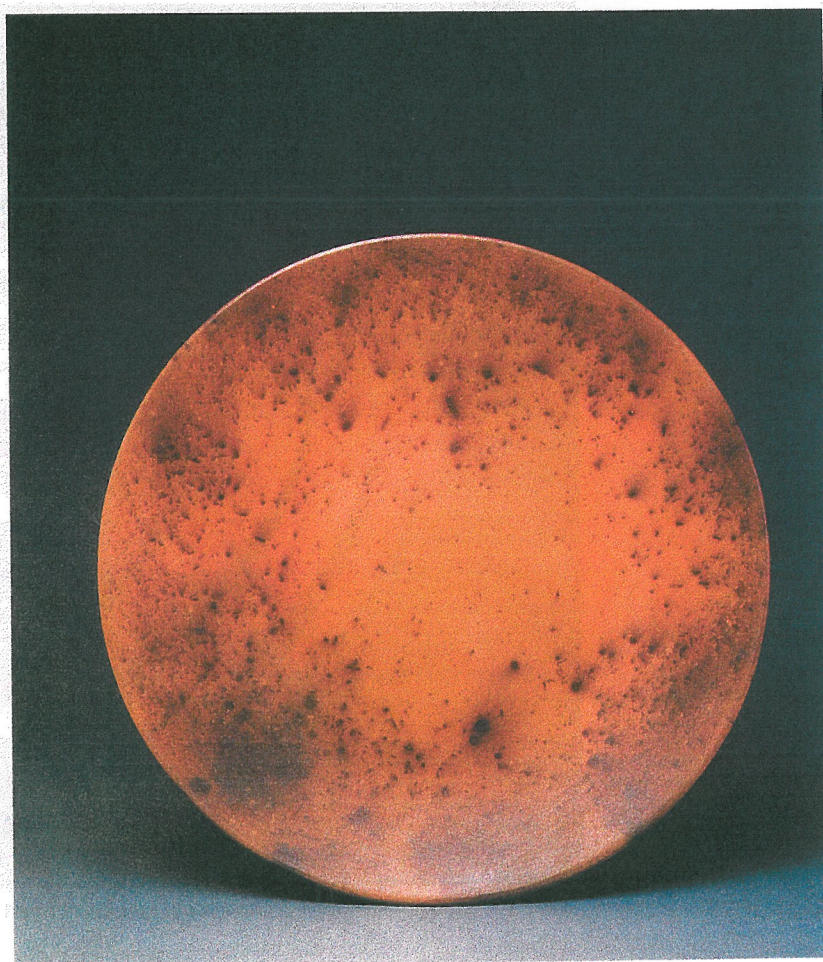
One of the color palettes found on traditional Acoma Pueblo pottery calls for black pigment on a thin-walled white clay form. Perhaps the best example of an artist transforming traditional pottery of the past into artwork for the 21st century could be seen in the electric design of Dorothy Torivio’s seed jar. The repetitive pattern conforms with computerlike precision to the curve and rotation of the three-dimensional “canvas,” giving the impression of perpetual motion. The painstakingly detailed design was accomplished by her ability to reduce the surface into manageable quadrants, then shrink the space in her mind into ever-smaller pieces. This would be quite a remarkable undertaking in any format, but is even more demanding on a three-dimensional curved surface.

Micaceous Clay Tradition

Three potters in “Indian Market” use micaceous clay in their work, but there the similarity ends. Each of the three comes from a different tradition, and each experiments with



Above right: Plum-colored jar, 7½ inches (19 centimeters) in height, by Virginia Garcia, Santa Clara.



Right: Platter, 19½ inches (50 centimeters) in diameter, micaceous clay, by Joel McHorse, Navajo/Taos.

the clay in different ways. Lonnie Vigil, from Nambé, creates large bowls and jars; Joel McHorse, of Navajo/Taos descent, produces a wide variety of shapes including platters and jars; and Hubert Candelario, of San Felipe, tests the limits of structural design with deeply carved melon jars.

Lonnie Vigil was working in Washington, D.C., for the Bureau of Indian Affairs when he decided to return to his home at Nambé Pueblo. Without a family tradition to build upon, he started with the basics: looking for clay. Since 1990, micaceous clay has been his only medium. Two of Lonnie's micaceous pots were in the show: one a gracefully proportioned large storage jar, and the second a large bowl with a stepped rim, produced in collaboration with his brother Larry, who carved the border of clouds and mountains.

While most Native American artists choose one or two forms, motifs or concepts as a basis for elaboration, a few choose to test their abilities in many areas. Joel McHorse is one of the latter. He actively experiments with different forms, sometimes reflecting his background as a sculptor and architecture student, sometimes reflecting his artistic birthright as the son of silversmith Joel Patrick McHorse and potter Christine McHorse. For the massive platter in the "Indian Market" exhibition, Joel McHorse had to adapt standard fabrication techniques. The large, almost-flat surface of this form necessitated special treatment at every stage of production, from the initial coil building to the pit firing. All factors, including the micaceous clay, the coating of slip and the

combustibles used for the firing, combine to produce a luxurious surface flecked with black fire clouds.

Hubert Candelario was also an architecture student. His work reflects his fascination with design and structure, with topography and texture, symmetry and precision in three dimensions.

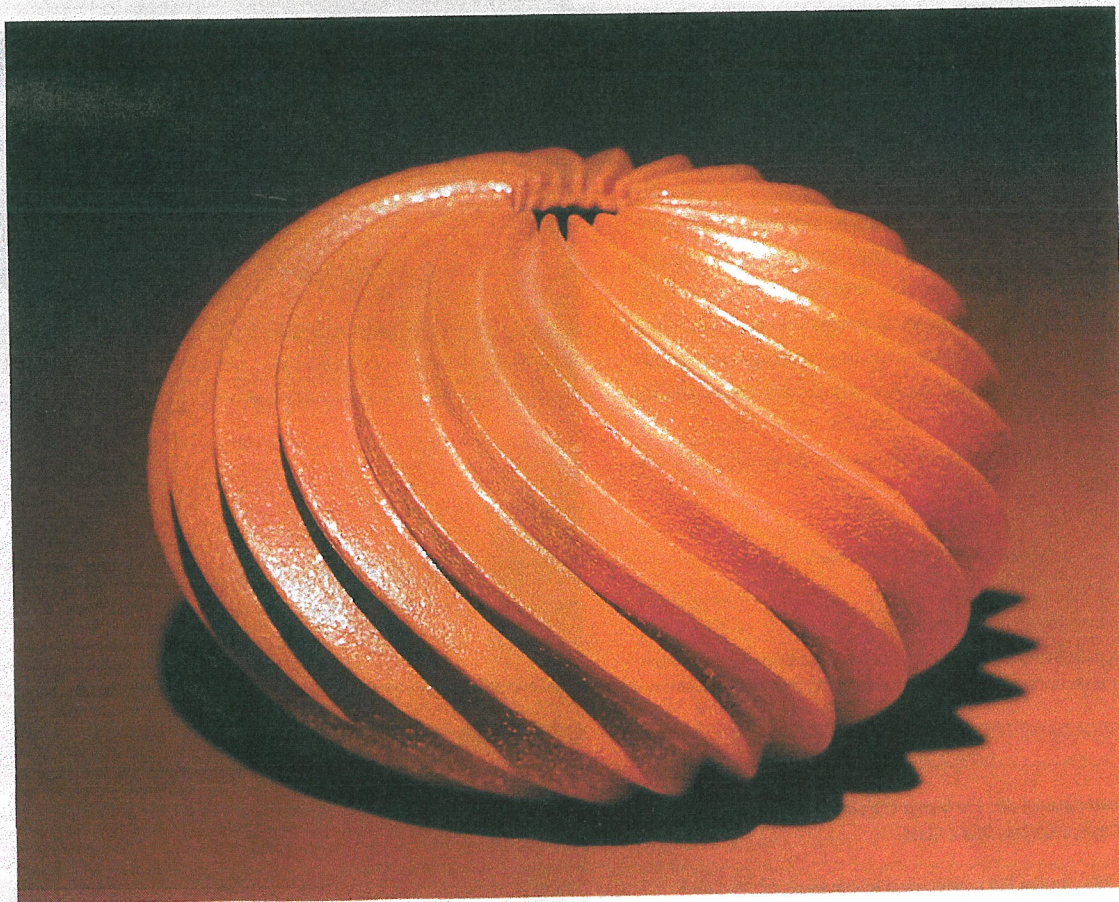
Other Clay Traditions

Other clay traditions were also represented in the "Indian Market" exhibition. Alice Cling uses Navajo piñon pitch smoothed over the freshly fired warm surface of her pots to create a variably colored subtle pigmentation.

Nathan Begaye's maverick sense of form, texture, color and design are evidenced by his large jar, "Snow Cloud"; the connections between his work and a particular tradition are often more tenuous than those of the other contemporary Native American artists highlighted here.

While Les Namingha, a descendant of the famous potter Nampeyo, conforms to tradition in his use of building techniques, his method of painting and use of clay slips are very much of the present. His abstract expressionist surface treatments hint at messages that might have been, had they an audience capable of deciphering the iconography.

To be sure, the potters of the past would be surprised by the accomplishments of their contemporary counterparts, but they would also be proud of the legacy they left, as well as of the splendid creations by today's talented Native American potters.



"Seed Pot," approximately 4 inches (10 centimeters) in height, by Hubert Candelario, San Felipe.