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CERAMIC REVIVALS OF THE SOUTHWEST

By Ron Bridgemon, Associate Curator

The creation of pottery vessels, both decorative and utilitarian, has a very long history and prehistory in the United States Southwest. Every Native culture in the region has ceramic traditions dating back to ancient times. Often, these traditions die out as cultures change, come into contact with outsiders, or if they are supplanted with more modern items. There are numerous examples of certain types of ceramic traditions being revived, sometimes centuries after the last pot of that style was created, and not always by a descendant group. Below are very general introductions to some of the master artists that will be featured in our new Ceramic Revivals exhibit opening in March 2014.

Nampeyo

Perhaps the most well-known ceramic revival in the Southwest was started by the Hopi-Tewa potter Nampeyo. Her Sikyatki-revival style pottery is still much sought after, even over 70 years since her death in 1942. Sikyatki is the name of a large First Mesa Hopi village that has been abandoned since about the year 1500. In 1895 Smithsonian archaeologist Jesse Walter Fewkes excavated portions of the remains of Sikyatki. During the excavations Nampeyo visited the site. Though she was already an accomplished potter, the incredible ceramics unearthed at Sikyatki were a major influence on her and other potters of the time.



Nampeyo, circa 1900.

Maria Martinez

Not long after the turn of the twentieth century Pueblo pottery was seen as a dying art form by collectors, anthropologists, and leaders in Santa Fe, New Mexico. A concerted effort was made to preserve and cultivate Pueblo artisans. One product of this effort was the now famous Santa Fe Indian Market. Ethnographers Kenneth Chapman and Edgar Hewitt began to encourage potters to revive this declining art form by looking to the past. At the Pueblo of San Ildefonso in northern New Mexico, Maria Martinez and her husband Julian Martinez reinvented the black-on-black pottery that the ancients in the region produced up until the 1600s. Through much experimentation and trial and error, Maria perfected a fine art that she passed on to numerous potters in the region.



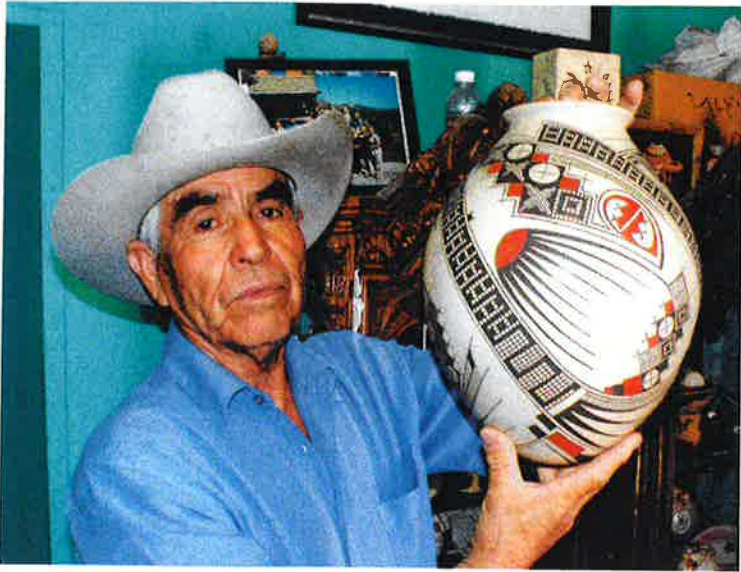
(left) Maria Martinez in 1948. (right) Maria Martinez black-on-black jar. Purchased from Maria by William S. Fulton, 1943.

Ida Redbird

Ida Redbird was a Maricopa potter who spent nearly the entirety of her life on the Gila River Reservation. She was instrumental in the revival of Maricopa pottery in the late 1930s by encouraging young potters, working with outsiders to market the ceramics, and increasing the price of the pieces. Without Ida Redbird traditional Maricopa pottery could well have been on its way out. In 1938 she was elected the first president of the Maricopa Pottery Makers Association by her fellow potters. Ida's pottery was sought after around the world and her work fostered generations of new artists.



Maricopa effigy vessel, acquired by the Fulton family, early twentieth century.



Juan Quezada in 2008. Photo by Susan Bridgemon.



Ramos Polychrome vessel circa 1300s-1400s.

Juan Quezada

Not all ceramic revivals are initiated by artists who are descendants of the group who originated the style of pottery. The northern Chihuahua, Mexico village of Mata Ortiz has seen a ceramic revolution of unprecedented scale that was started by a few ceramic artists following Amerind's excavations at Paquimé (also known as Casas Grandes). The spectacular Ramos Polychrome vessels that were unearthed at Paquimé and surrounding sites became much sought after. There was a small number of Mexican potters who attempted to create replicas (often advertised as the real deal) of these pots for sale.

It was not until Juan Quezada, later with the sponsorship of Spencer MacCallum in the mid 1970s, that this pottery was popularized and began to differentiate itself from the pre-Hispanic ceramics of the region. Juan was primarily inspired by the pot sherds he discovered in the hills and mountains surrounding Mata Ortiz while he collected firewood as a young man. He set off, through trial-and-error, to create pottery in the style of the ancients using only materials that those people had at hand. Today there are hundreds of potters in Mata Ortiz, many of whom produce museum-quality pieces sought the world over. Due to the work of Juan and now countless others, the village of Mata Ortiz now thrives and avoided the fate of many other small towns along the railroad in Mexico's northern frontier.

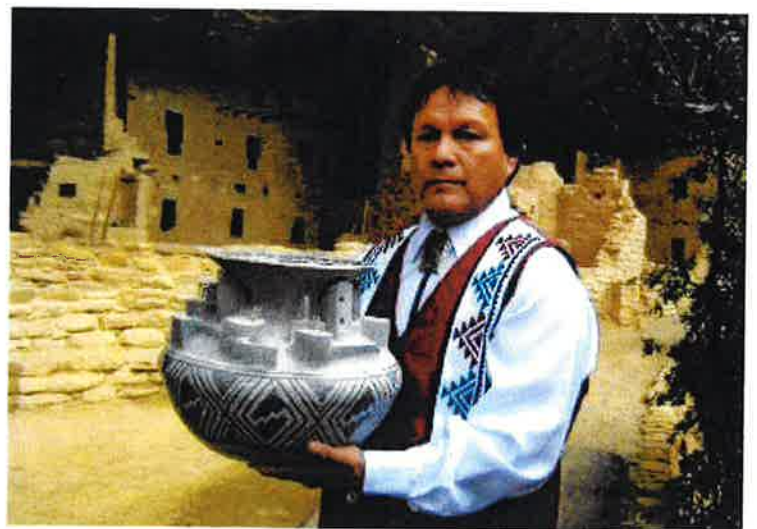


Mata Ortiz pot by Diego Valles.

Joshua Maladena

Ceramic revivals are not just a phenomenon that happened in the past. New revivals come about in the present as well. Only in hindsight can we appreciate their lasting impact. Not all revivals spread throughout a community. They are often limited to an individual, or family.

In the early eighteenth century nearly a millennium of ceramic knowledge of the Jemez people was abandoned over the course of several generations. The loss of this tradition is slowly being reversed by contemporary Jemez ceramic artist Joshua Maladena. Through much experimentation and some early failures, Maladena has successfully resurrected the Jemez Black-on-white style and technique that had been lost for three centuries.



Joshua Maladena displays his 'best of show' black-on-white pottery at Cliff Palace, Mesa Verde, Colorado.

