

## Pueblo potters express themselves with clay art

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Made of dirt and ingenuity, pottery has served as a functional necessity and a beautiful art form for thousands of years. Clay is part of the earth itself, being one of many forms of eroded rock, the mother of all earth. Just as sand is dry and porous with all the grains remaining separate, clay holds moisture and tends to stick together.



Pueblo potters take great pride in their skill, learning where to gather the best clay, how to filter it removing impurities, and tempering it with volcanic ash or ground pottery shards to make it hold together.

The pot is formed using the traditional coiling method, smoothing and shaping as the piece takes form. It is then sanded and left to dry. Polishing is accomplished by applying a layer of wet clay, called a slip, and then rubbing it with a smooth stone to create a high luster. This time-consuming effort results in a high shine after firing. The pot may be decorated by painting a pattern or image, or by carving or incising a design. It is then ready for firing.

Traditional firing takes place outdoors in a roaring fire. This step takes experience and great judgment. Many pots are lost at this point because of cracking or exploding. Firing must be done when the wind is calm, usually in the very early morning, as a sudden breeze will cool the pot and interfere with the process. As with any totally handmade item, no two pieces are alike. The designs are all drawn from the culture and the artist's perceptions; there are no written patterns.

Pottery may be made in other ways. Clay can be purchased, saving much time and effort. A pottery wheel may be used, also saving time. Firing may be done in a kiln where the temperature is controlled and the artist need not worry about wind or weather. Many beautiful pieces are made using this method and also can be considered handmade, because they take skill and experience to create a unique piece.

Commercial pottery, called greenware, is made by pouring a liquid mixture of clay into a plaster mold making hundreds of the same shaped and sized pieces. These pieces may be purchased in a craft store ready to paint and fire in a kiln. Remember when collecting, the more time and talent that goes into the piece, the higher the price.