



Oneida Cultural Heritage Department

By: Judith L. Jourdan
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Iroquois Pottery

A brief History of Pottery: Early Discoveries

Pottery was developed to fill the need for storage and cooking. The corded design adorning all early discoveries of pottery, whether from the Middle East, China, or the Americas was the basis for the theory that early pottery occurred accidentally when clay lined baskets baked by hot coals became hard and suitable for repeated usage such as cooking and storage. It is also theorized that these discoveries occurred independently in many areas around the world.

All early pottery discoveries displayed similar characteristics. They were all black in color, the product of a low fire temperature such as a bonfire or kiln. They all had round bottoms, which implied the use of a gourd or round stone as a type of mold form. And most of the surviving partial pots or shards discovered among other artifacts found at burial sites.

While the earliest discovers of pottery were made in Egypt, Palestine and the Tigris-Euphrates area at an early date (c. 5000 B.C.), the first pottery discoveries in the Americas came much later. In South America discovers dated around 2500 B.C., and in North America from 800 A.D. to 1100, the high point of Pueblo culture.

Discoveries of Iroquois Pottery

The Dutch first settles at Schenectady (1661) in the Middle Mohawk Valley. The majority of the colonists that settled in the Mohawk Valley area were German farmers. Their main concern was to clear and cultivate

the lands to accommodate the farms for their subsistence, the extensive clearing of land, from the very beginning when they settled on the land for many years following, literally destroyed the ancient palisade ditches and sunken hollows over graves and storage pits, evidence of any earlier existence.

Ironically, it was the same plow action which destroyed evidence that also led to the discovery of most of the Mohawk, Seneca, and Oneida sites. As earth was turned, attention was drawn to the changes in the earths color and content, revealing fragments of shells, wood ash, and pottery shards. Fortunately for us, there were a few amateur archeologist and/ or collectors who actively sought these "Indian relics." As a result of these early collections, most of which were acquired over extended periods of time by accidental turns of the plow, the existence of Iroquois pottery has been recorded.

Biography of an Oneida Potter: Rose Kerstetter



Rose Kerstetter working on one of her pots.

Rose Kerstetter was born in Oneida, Wisconsin. She is a graduate of Flandreau Indian High School, Haskell Institute, and Institute of American Indian Arts. In 1972 she studied Pueblo Pottery making and outdoor firing techniques with Mrs. Geronima Abeyta, potter of San Juan Pueblo, then graduated at the age of 60 from the institute of American Indian Arts in 1979 with an Associate of Fine Arts Degree in three-dimensional design and ceramics. She received a fellowship in 1983 from the South Western Association of Indian Affairs, Santa Fe, New Mexico to initiate a survey of contemporary Iroquois potters in the U.S. and Canada in 1983.

Rose remembers her earliest experience working with clay when she was in the second grade. She made a robin and its nest with some eggs to go under the bird. She first started making Iroquois pottery in the 1960s.

After visiting the museums in New York State, she wondered how it would feel to actually hold a pot. "This is what really got me started." She made pots to be able to feel them without the glass barrier between her and the pots. "I look at books and pottery of all types to get inspiration for my pottery because I want to expand my style of pottery to incorporate my own original ideas with the traditional designs because pottery is so creative."

Rose uses commercial stoneware clays and an electric kiln and occasionally works with natural clays, rakes, and pit firing. Most of Rose's pottery is inspired by traditional forms and designs of Iroquois pottery.

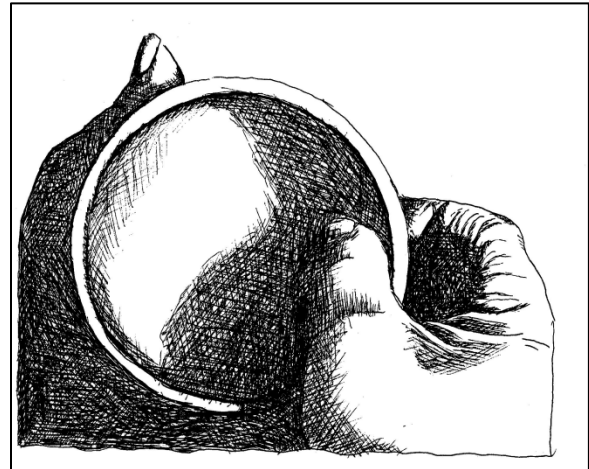
She came back to Oneida to try to revitalize the art of Iroquois pottery-making though classes with adults and children. "It looks like I will be able to do that here. People are really excited to come to classes. I don't have to search for people to fill the classes. I just have to find out when people can do it."

Rose is very happy to be back in Oneida. "I wake up early and think about all the possibilities here in Oneida and the desire here to do pottery. I get a lot of moral support and all kind of technical support that I never dreamed I would get. It's wonderful!"

Rose has been volunteering at the Oneida Nation Museum working with photo archives and utilizing the oral traditions by

teaching us about Iroquois pottery. She is currently working on her book, a survey of contemporary Iroquois potters and their work.

Methods for Making Pottery

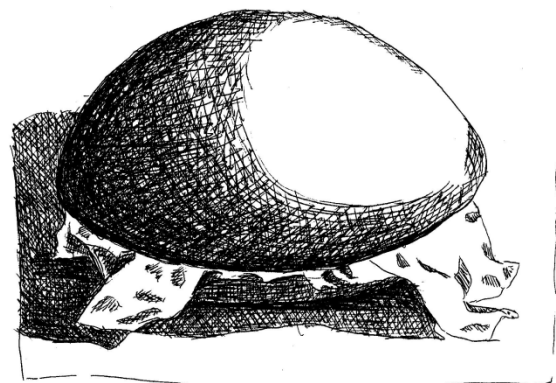


The Pinch Pot Method: The easiest method for creating pottery

The Pinch Pot

The easiest method for creating pottery is the pinch method. It requires no special skills or tools. A small ball of clay is formed. With the thumb a hollow is made and with careful pressure between the thumb and fingers, the wall is gradually thinned and the bowl is developed.

The clay should not be too wet or too dry; too moist will cause the piece to sag, while a dry clay will crack very easily. By smoothing and gentle pressure with the fingers, small cracks can be repaired. It is not a good idea to use water directly on the surface of dry clay to attempt to seal. Instead, soak the clay, knead it into a ball, and begin again. A coiled foot can be added when the piece is leather hard.



The Hump Mold Method: objects such as gourds or plastic mold are used as a form for these pots.

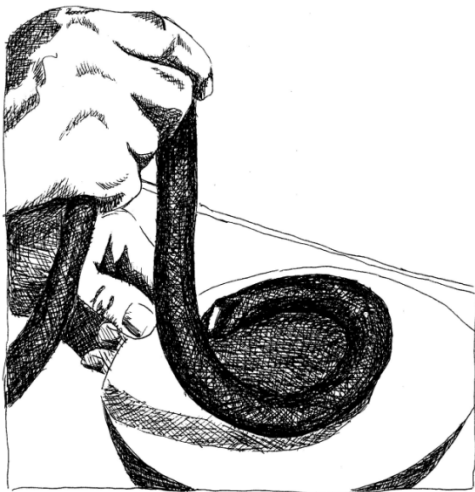
The Hump Mold

Various objects such as gourds or round stones can be used as molds or solid plaster- of-Paris molds can be used to form a pit, soft clay is rolled with a rolling pin to the desired thickness on a piece of light canvas. Lathes can be used under each end of the rolling pin to keep the slab a uniform thickness throughout. The slab is draped over the mold and pressed to conform to it. The excess clay is then trimmed away.

The form is allowed to dry slightly, and then carefully removed. A moistened paper towel or piece of plastic wrap can be shaped smoothly over the mold to prevent the clay from sticking.

This process is a particularly good beginning project for anyone who needs a bit of early success to maintain their interest.

Experimentation with other articles as sources of varied and interesting forms is recommended when working with hump molds.



The coil Method: The coil method has been employed for thousands of years, coiling can also be used as a means of adding height to a pinch or thrown pot or to create additions to a contemporary sculptural piece.

The Coiled Pot

The coiling method has been employed for thousands of years and continued in use by many cultures until the present. Many Contemporary ceramists have either combined the wheel and coil method because of the freedom it allows. Very large pieces have

usually been coiled and later refined on a slow turning wheel.

The technique is simple. A round slab of soft clay is formed to the desired size and thickness to form a base and then is placed on a turning wheel with a plaster bat. A lump of soft clay is rolled out on a level surface into a coil dorm with the flat of the hand.

Again, the clay should not be too wet or too dry. Slip (a thinned out clay base the consistency of soft pudding) can be used to join the coils, but it is a messy and time consuming procedure; if the clay is a proper consistency, no slip is needed.

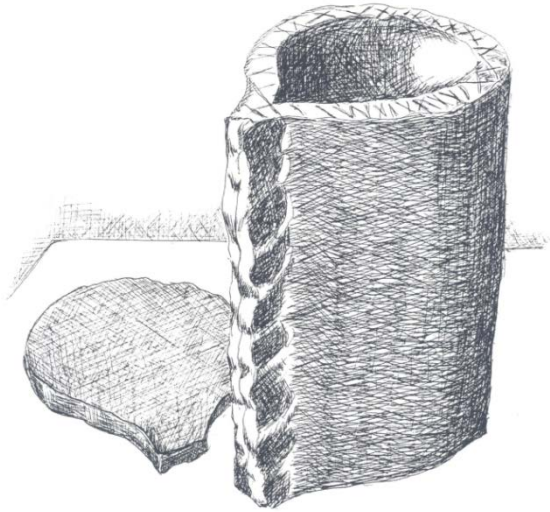


The Modified Coil Method: is a variation of the coil method

Modified Coil

A variation on the coil method is the modified coil or paddle method. In this technique the coils are much thicker. The heavy coil shape should be tall and narrow. A curved block of wood is held against the inside of the pot for support, while the outside is paddled or stuck repeatedly with a wooden mallet to thin and shape the coils.

The mallet may be textured or wrapped with fabric or cord to prevent sticking and to create a particular type of surface design. The coils should be of slightly stiffer clay than is normally used for coiling. Smaller coils can be used to complete the form. Applied or carved decoration can be added later. This may have been the method used by the early Woodland potters.



The Slab Pot Method: The clay is pounded flat with the heel of the hand or rolled out like pie dough.

The Slab Pot

Many other pottery shapes and forms can be made by the slab method. The slab is rolled to the desired thickness with a common kitchen rolling pin. Lathes are used under each end of the rolling pin to keep the slab a uniform thickness throughout; the slabs are then cut into strips of uniform width and used much the same as coils.

A piece of canvas can be used as the rolling surface to prevent the clay from sticking. This also allows for easy transfer of the slab. A dry plaster slab will serve the same purpose. If the proposed form is flat, the clay pieces must be leather hard before assembly begins. The joints are scored and covered with clay slip.

Clay partitions or support walls are inserted to prevent sagging of larger horizontal slabs. These must have cut-out openings to allow even drying.



Throwing on the wheel: The most difficult of all methods of pottery formation.

Throwing on the Wheel

The most difficult of all the methods of pottery formation is throwing on the wheel because it requires speed, experience and a steady hand. Throwing, even when done by an experienced potter, looks deceptively easy. To develop skill at throwing on the wheel demands much practice.

Every form begins with a cylinder, but the proportions of the cylinder will depend upon the final shape desired, the simple cylinder shape, as tall and as uniform as possible should be the main goal for the beginner since the cylinder is the basis for all pottery forms, it is pointless to attempt everything else until this first step has been master.

The first task is to learn to throw the largest piece possible from the ball of clay on hand. The ball is literally thrown onto the wheel, and then centered evenly before the form building begins. The potter should have in mind a rough idea of the form he wishes to achieve. Each change in shape should be directed toward this end. The potter's wheel is somewhat limiting, however, in the sense that it produces only symmetrical forms.

Contemporary Sculptural Forms

Interest in pottery and pottery techniques has expanded greatly over the past fifty years. Many of the contemporary ceramists today have drifted into pottery as another means of self-expression. This accounts for the vast variety and strength of contemporary ceramics. Variations in contemporary ceramics are vast. In many instances it is difficult to categorize the ceramists of today, but there are some similarities in form and function that exist.

The largest group of contemporary potters works in a style that is referred to as *traditional*. These works are functional but go to a step beyond the old pottery form in individuality and sophistication. Examples of this style are teapots, dinnerware, mugs, etc.

The second group can be called *decorative*. While their works are derived from functional form, they are also not practical from the standpoint of size, shape, or decoration. Their emphasis is not on function but on shape or form.

A third group can be referred to as the *non-pot* group. These forms generally originate in pot like form but then take on an abstract form which stresses the textural quality of the clay itself or develops into sculptural forms.

Contemporary pottery is in a state of constant experimentation in terms of form and content. Innovations in ceramic style have had a dramatic influence on American ceramics from assemblage of objects for shock value to the use of acrylic paint and cemented fabrics in a collage technique. There is no hard and fast rule that dictates what direction a potter will take.

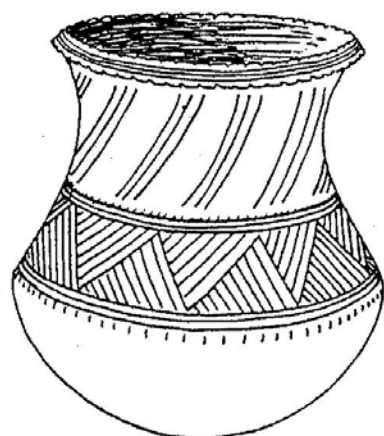


Contemporary Sculptural Form: By Artist, Rose Kerstetter.

Characteristics of Iroquois Pottery

The Woodland tribes are by far the most notable potters in the Great Lakes area. One of the predominant characteristics of the Woodland pottery is the texture, which is coarse and gritty. The surface has a cord-roughened finish produced with mallets or paddles to produce the pot with a wrapped mallet called a modified coil method.

The upper portion of the either round-bottomed or elongated vessel has a pronounced shoulder neck and collar or lip. The decorative finish is repeated geometric pattern of incised lines or twisted cords on the upper rim and lip and sometimes on the shoulder of the vessel.



Thick Lipped Vessel: With incised geometric shoulder and lip designs.

The pottery vessels can be loosely divided into two categories: the thickened lip vessels and the collared vessels. The collared vessels are the apparent result of elaboration of the earlier lip or rim, are. Castellations, the raised points along the upper edge of the collar, appear late and were usually low and gently rounded and vary in number from one to four equally spaced. A later innovation was the use of raised effigy figures (animals, bird, or occasionally human) not shown.

