A water jar made about 1720 by a member of the Zuni people sums up the occasionally fraught history of archaeological research and the preservation movement in the American Southwest. Damaged at a 1922 dinner party convened by members of the Anglo elite, who long dominated northern New Mexico’s legacy cultural institutions, and then repaired, the jar that same year became the first artifact to enter the now more than twelve thousand–object collection of what became the Indian Arts Research Center (IARC) at the School for Advanced Research (SAR) in Santa Fe. Along with masterworks from the collection of the Vilcek Foundation, selections from SAR’s holdings form the bulk of Grounded in Clay: The Spirit of Pueblo Pottery, a traveling exhibition making its current stop in New York City.

Founded in 1907 as the School of American Archaeology, SAR is today a far more nimble and socially responsive place than it was a century ago, when Ivy League–educated men dominated the field. “Our elevator pitch needs a fifty-story building,” acknowledges SAR president Michael F. Brown, the cultural anthropologist presiding over the institution’s ambitious set of programs in the arts and social sciences, which range from residencies for artists and scholars to symposiums and an academic press.

Activities at SAR unfold on the grounds of what was once an estate known as El Delirio—the home of arts patrons Martha Root White and Amelia Monique-Grant (Colorado River Indian Tribes):

“The jar had previously passed through hands that believed its decoration was of a fish, an ‘abstract fish’ at that. Yet through talks with Acoma relatives and simple research, I found out that it is a thunderbird—a design its ancestors have been depicting and developing for centuries. Not a fish. I state again: Pueblo voices should always be prioritized when one talks about, interprets, and exhibits Pueblo pottery.”

An exhibition of Pueblo pottery seeks to reveal the soul that resides within the art.

Fig. 1. Cochiti storage jars. Left: Clay and paint, c. 1800–1820; height 18, diameter 20 inches. Right: Clay and paint, 1890–1900; height 18 ½, diameter 17 inches. Collection of the Vilcek Foundation, New York. Except as noted, photographs courtesy of the Vilcek Foundation.

Patricia Marroquin Norby (Purépecha): “Pictorially and materially, both pots embody growth and the renewal of life—gentle reminders of the beauty and fragility of the natural world on which we humans depend.”

Here and elsewhere, quotations are from the individual who selected the object under discussion for inclusion in the traveling exhibition Grounded in Clay: The Spirit of Pueblo Pottery.

Jason Garcia (Tewa, Santa Clara Pueblo): “Avanyu (serpent) is often portrayed on Santa Clara pottery, symbolizing water. Avanyu may represent heavy flooding after a torrential storm and also the gentle, soft flow of a river or stream.”

Erin Monique Grant (Colorado River Indian Tribes): “The jar had previously passed through hands that believed its decoration was of a fish, an ‘abstract fish’ at that. Yet through talks with Acoma relatives and simple research, I found out that it is a thunderbird—a design its ancestors have been depicting and developing for centuries. Not a fish. I state again: Pueblo voices should always be prioritized when one talks about, interprets, and exhibits Pueblo pottery.”
Fig. 6. Cochiti monochrome figure, c. 1900. Clay and paint; height 6 ¼, width 5 ¹/₈, depth 6 ¼ inches. School for Advanced Research collection.

Fig. 5. Jar by Lonnie Vigil (Acoma Pueblo) and Sylvia Chavez Lamar (San Felipe Pueblo/ Hopi/ Tewa/ Diné), the latter now director of the Smithsonian’s National Museum of the American Indian. The trio helped draft IARC’s Guidelines for Collaboration, which—along with the Standards for Museums with Native American Collections and the Indigenous Collections Care Guide, all detailed on the SAR website—have elevated SAR’s reputation as a leader in contemporary approaches to managing institutional collections of Native American art. “It’s a lesson in what a small institution can do by bringing people from big institutions together to formulate policies.” Brown says. IARC’s first traveling exhibition since its founding—a century ago, Grounded in Clay adheres to a foremost tenet of the guidelines: engage communities of origin as partners in project development and execution. Poon notes: “Developing relationships with descendant communities is not new. A good example of an early community-driven project is the evolving, semi-permanent installation Here, Now and Always, which first opened at Santa Fe’s Museum of Indian Arts and Culture (MIAC) in 1997. What is new is offering Pueblo voices as a group curatorial expression and raising awareness nationally by traveling Grounded in Clay to other museums and regions.”

The project’s exuberant heart is the sixty-eight-member Pueblo Pottery Collective. First convened in 2019 by Poon, the group includes potters and other artists, as well as writers, poets, educators, community leaders, and museum professionals. Most are from twenty-two Pueblo communities, nineteen of which are in New Mexico. Poon invited each participant to act as a curator and select one or two pieces of pottery for Grounded in Clay. Expressed in essay, verse, and video, the curators’ observations about the ceramics weave through the show, in accompanying catalogue, and a documentary film produced by New Mexico PBS.

Deep, soulful, and celebratory, Grounded in Clay is a listening tour—Pueblo community curators listen...
Patricia Marnoan Norby, the museum’s associate curator of Native American art, uses for imaginative explorations of issues and themes suggested by the adjacent long-term installation of Art of Native America. The Charlie and Valerie Diker Collection, Norby sees the two temporary exhibitions as a continuum. The elements—earth, wind, fire, and water—are intrinsic to Pueblo art and belief. As community curator Toby R. Chavarria (Santa Clara Pueblo) remarks, “Through humble elements of the earth, gifts of the Clay Mother, we are connected.”

Norby has made the space a welcome spot for contemporary Native expression, newly vibrant on the international stage thanks to institutions such as Santa Fe’s Institute of American Indian Arts (IAIA), a fulcrum for Native arts education since 1962, and an array of exhibitions, among them the Whitney Museum of American Art’s Jaune Quick-to-See Smith: Memory Map, a retrospective look at the work of another lauded New Mexican artist of Indigenous descent, on view in New York through August 13.

In the Met’s iteration of Grounded in Clay, Norby introduces the work of four contemporary Pueblo artists known for mediums other than clay. By doing so, she

Changing Minds, One Pot at a Time

Today I met Brian D. Vallo at Downtown Subscription, a coffee bar and collective near Canyon Road in Santa Fe’s historic art district, the former Acosta Pueblo—governor and current trustee of the Smithsonian’s National Museum of the American Indian, who was in celebratory mood. Cooper had earlier praised the Smithsonian’s American Art and Architecture initiative, a resource for museums seeking partnerships with the Native communities that are the sources of artworks. A joyful integration of SAR principles, Grounded in Clay evolved from parallel conversations that Vallo—a community advisor to the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s installation America from A to Z—had with Yveline Young, the curator in charge of the Met’s American Wing, and with Vilcek Foundation president Rick Kossell. In 1996, young, with help from collectors Jonathan and Berenice Wolk, had acquired their Pueblo holdings from the Wolk Foundation—five Acoma pieces for the exhibition. He first met Kossell in 1997 and returned with twenty-two consecutive summers. The foundation’s exceptional trove now numbers more than twelve thousand historic pieces of Pueblo pottery from the collection of the Clay Mother, we are connected.”

Through its support of the exhibition, catalogue, and associated efforts, the Vilcek Foundation amplified Pueblo voices for a dramatically expanded audience nationwide. “The Vilcek Foundation recognizes the challenges that indigenous communities in the United States and around the globe have experienced as a result of colonization and imperialism,” Kossell says. “With Grounded in Clay, we wanted to create an exhibition that not only showcases historically rare pieces of Pueblo pottery from the Vilcek Foundation’s collection but celebrates the living cultures and artistic traditions of Native American people and communities in the United States.”

T

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Cheryl photo, courtesy of the Vilcek Foundation. Photograph by Terrance Clifford, courtesy of the Vilcek Foundation. The Future Arts Research Center at the School for Advanced Research, however, shares thousands of examples of contemporary Native American art in two open-storage rooms open to the public by appointment. Photograph courtesy of the School for Advanced Research. Acosta Pueblo’s Sky City Buffalo Rain Dance performed during the Santa Fe opening of Grounded in Clay. Clifford photograph, courtesy of the Vilcek Foundation.
creates tension between the traditionalism of Pueblo pottery, remarkably constant over the last millennium, and new art that moves assertively between past and present.

Muralas by De Haven Solimon Chaffins (Laguna/Tewa) and Mallory Quetsawé (Zuni) are the first things visitors to the Met see. Environmental themes, especially the toxic toll of uranium mining on or near Native land, interest both artists, who deftly manipulate Pueblo motifs and patterns across irregular forms push the limits of two-dimensional design. I introduce myself to my ancestors, following their footsteps, feeling their presence, seeing pottery, and studying drawings."

Farther along in the Met show, a community table set with pottery suggests the medium’s ubiquity in Pueblo life, where it is used for storing, cooking, and serving food and water. “Even today, when people visit, we offer them a dipper, a glass, or a bottle of water. By keeping this custom and the knowledge behind it alive, we honor the water and all our ancestors and grandmothers,” writes community curator Diane Bird (Kewa/Santo Domingo Domingo)."

Mark Mitchell (Tohono O’odham): "My grandmother, Lorentina Pino, worked with this orange clay and often incorporated faces and animals into her designs. The handles on this vessel are faces, but they have stripes on their tails like chipmunks; animals that live in our communities are a part of everyday life and prayer.”

The gallery’s largest wall is reserved for a newly commissioned dipper by Michael Namingha (Hopi/Chokai Owevgeh) and Mario Romero (Cochin Pueblo). Working in contrasting styles but joined by a shared keynote of color, the two award-winning artists—both members of the Pueblo Pottery Collective—contemplate the meanings of landscape for Pueblo people.

A descendant of the great Hopi potter Nampeyo (c. 1860–1942), Namingha has in recent years experimented with photographs of distant landscapes, sometimes captured via drone or from a Google Earth and mounted on shaped acrylic. These irregular forms push the limits of two-dimensional perspective and, in the abstract, suggest pottery fragments collaged together—a faint echo of an approach to patternmaking employed by Namingha’s grandmother Debra Tsosie Nampeyo (Tewa/Hopi) (1928–2019), whose 1980 jar he chose for Geometric in Clay."

Cool and remote, Namingha’s meditative images are as much about art-making as about landscape. For the Met, he created a photo silkscreen on a shaped, wooden panel, seeking advice from master printer Luther Davis on printing with a combination of ink and sand, the latter gathered from clay beds visited by his forebears. The work incorporates a double-printed view of Fajada Butte in Chaco Culture National Historical Park, a place of profound spiritual importance for Hopi people, but one lately menaced by environmental degradation. Namingha says, “Geometric in Clay is about looking at our heritage—our design heritage, our family heritage—and the vessels our ancestors created. In my case, it’s also about looking for clues within my own artistic practice and how they link me to my past. Chaco is a place where we all come from.”

Pueblo people are sublimated in the landscape, not apart from it, as observers of a natural sublime, says Romero, whose loose, expressionistic landscapes are sometimes inhabited by enigmatic figures. “The Tewa have a word for it, p’oh-bah, which means breath of life. I’m trying to capture a piece of that connection to the landscape—the energy, the movement. My landscapes are not apart from it, as observers of a natural sublime.”

I use preexisting indigenous names for places and spaces. Language creates meaning.”

If one notion describes Geometric in Clay it is the extent to which Pueblo pottery is the collective artistic expression of people who care for one another and are joined by traditions that, against the odds, have survived history’s adverse currents. Only spiritual conviction can explain such durability. As Albert Alvizé (Yalda del Sur Pueblo), one of the exhibition’s curators, tells us: “Our journey teaches us to be patient, that we must rest and let time travel, but when we emerge, we go forward with enthusiasm, grace, and focus. Today, I join my clay brothers and sisters gathered to reflect on our journey, share our song, and sow seeds of hope and encouragement for all those who encounter us. Our pottery voices remain resilient and continue to be heard.”


Fig. 11. Bean pot with lid by Lorentina Pino (1899–1986); Tonopah, 1965. Clay and miaca; height 12 ½, width 13 ½ and mica; height 5 ½ inches. School for Advanced Research collection.

Max Early (Laguna Pueblo): “There are several ollas attributed to Arroh-a-och in museums across the country. I use the gender pronouns ‘she,’ ‘her,’ and ‘hers’ when referring to Arroh-a-och. She was a two spirit. This is an alternative gender in various Native American cultures. At Laguna, a transgender female, or ‘lekés-mu, wore women’s attire and performed tasks traditionally assumed by women, such as grinding corn and making pottery. . . . The excellence of her work distinguishes Arroh-a-och as one of the most talented potters at Laguna Pueblo.”

Lorraine Gala Lewis (Laguna, Taos, Hopi Pueblos): “I love walking the same paths as those walked by my ancestors, following their footsteps, feeling their presence, seeing pottery, and studying drawings. I introduce myself to my ancestors, tell them of my intentions, hence my offering, and thank the ancestor ones for watching me and showing me their home. I experience a place of gathering for our people, and feel and understand the environment and its elements. In these surroundings, I always feel a sense of renewal and balance. This is reflected in my re-creations of ancestral pottery.”

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Felicia García (Santa Ynez Band of Chumash Indians: Sumula Chumash): “The artist was just twelve years old when he created this pot. . . . We rarely see children’s artwork in museum collections, but it is evidence of the ongoing cultural and artistic traditions of our communities.”

Muralas by De Haven Solimon Chaffins (Laguna/Tewa) and Mallory Quetsawé (Zuni) are the first things visitors to the Met see. Environmental themes, especially the toxic toll of uranium mining on or near Native land, interest both artists, who deftly manipulate Pueblo motifs and patterns across fields of luminous color. Trained in science and the arts and keenly aware of her role as a communicator, Maria Romero (a two-spirit female, or ‘lekés-mu, wore women’s attire and performed tasks traditionally assumed by women, such as grinding corn and making pottery. . . . The excellence of her work distinguishes Arroh-a-och as one of the most talented potters at Laguna Pueblo.”

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Fig. 12. Storage jar by Arroh-a-och, Laguna, c. 1870–1880. Clay and paint; height 20 ¾, diameter 24 ½ inches. School for Advanced Research collection.

Fig. 13. Mesa Verde mug, c. 1150–1300, and lidded, c. 1500–1300. Clay and paint; height (of cup) 4 ½ inches; height (of lid) 2 ⅜, diameter 11 ⅞, length 11 ⅞, depth 5 ⅜ inches. School for Advanced Research collection.