

Falling Apart and Coming Together

Making pots whole doesn't necessarily mean filling holes.

BY PETER BG SHOEMAKER

Some pots want to be seen again.

—Larry Humetewa

This is a story of pots, in various stages of completeness and repair, which in turn could be a story about any museum and any pottery collection. But this one is different, because it's also a story of how the people who made those pots are transforming the way conservation is done, and the museum that's at the forefront of that transformation.

The conservation lab of the Museum Resources Division works with all state museums, but we're touching down amid its work with the Ancestral Pottery Conservation Project at the Museum of Indian Arts and Culture (MIAC) in Santa Fe. A visitor with even a smattering of insight into what goes on in museum basements won't be surprised at the high white tables that fill the center of the room, almost wall to wall, surrounded by purring vacuum systems, magnifying glasses, shelves filled with polychromatic tubes and spray bottles, partial pots nestled in Ethafoam, monitors, and high barstool chairs.

Pottery is a big deal at MIAC. There are nearly ten thousand complete pots in the collection, and many millions of sherds. Sometimes, to the casual observer, the difference between the two can be hard to discern. And that's where this story begins.

Southwestern Pueblo pottery is part of a tradition that reaches back over two thousand years, to the time even before the Ancestral Puebloans, and continues to this day. And beginning in the 1880s, people started seeking pots out and collecting them. Museums weren't far behind.

When the bulk of the archaeological collection was gathered in those halcyon days of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the preference among museums and collectors everywhere was for complete pots. They were, after all, prettier, easier to comprehend, and much easier to catalog. Of course, the result of this was that archaeologists—with an eye not only to finders' fees but also to future work—glued the pieces together in the field before sending the “whole” pots on to their patrons. And, those days being what

they were, archaeological practice and available adhesives left much to be desired. The result is “complete” pots falling apart in slow motion on museum shelves.

Somewhere around half of MIAC's collection was similarly reconstructed. So, when the museum's conservation lab got an Institute for Museum and Library Services (IMLS) grant six years ago to survey the entire collection before its move to the newly built Center for New Mexico Archaeology, scholars, archaeologists, and of course the lab's own conservators breathed a sigh of anticipatory relief. This latter group knew that they'd need help. A survey isn't just a passive counting and recording activity; it's also an opportunity to fix those things that need to be fixed.

At the forefront of this triage are two conservators: Landis Smith and Larry Humetewa. Smith is intense, and particularly once she gets going, vibrates with energy—and yet, her thirty years working in both conservation and cultural studies come through in careful, thoughtful, complete sentences. Humetewa, a member of Santa Domingo Pueblo, is a veritable upstart, having been in the business for only fifteen years. He leans in during conversation with a presence that testifies to his early dreams to be pro football player. Humble, despite his experience, he often deflects success to others. And yet five minutes in, it's clear his care and concern for the work is a powerful engine, one that manifests itself in a sort of parental watchfulness.

Together, they work with a group of Native potters and cultural leaders who represent the peoples and traditions that created the museum's collection. This group changes, but it has included artists like Ulysses Reid (Zia), whose work with Mesa Verde and Zia designs as well as those sketched by his grandfather, Andres Galvan, are well known; Eric Fender (San Ildefonso), who in addition to being an award-winning painter is at the forefront of revitalizing his pueblo's stone-



A look into the expansive collection in the Museum of Indian Arts and Culture's basement. Photograph by Dina Velarde.

polished polychrome pottery techniques; and Governor Joshua Madalena (Jemez), who is credited with revitalizing, after three hundred years, his pueblo's distinctively crafted black-on-white ware.

This collaborative approach didn't come out of the blue. Native peoples have had a formal voice in New Mexico's museum and conservation practices since the 1980s, when the first Indian Advisory Panel met to help plan what MIAC might look like and do. Now, Smith, among many others,

considers the panel essential in the museum's work of guiding important cultural decisions.

The work Humetewa and Smith do with the potters is of a different sort. This isn't conference-room, status-driven, rarified-air sort of policy work. This is lab work—hands-on, intense, exploratory—and has been going on, on and off, since the mid-1990s.

"We lay out pots, everywhere," says Smith, glancing around at a good three or four hundred square feet of tabletop.



“At first the potters may be understandably overwhelmed seeing so much of their ancestors’ work at once, but then their eyes settle on the individual pots. At that point, we’re all in our common element,” she says, “and things get going.”

Since the group of potters can change during the year, once the initial flurry of conversation and poking and prodding dies down, the conservators start with a brief orientation. “We have to make it clear first off,” says Humetewa, looking not exactly stricken, but like a man who’s been down this uncomfortable path before, “that the current condition of the pots isn’t due to our work.”

“The conversation,” as Smith calls it, is necessary because conservation—like most disciplines—has changed dramatically in the last twenty-five years. One of the biggest changes, at least in the world that Smith and Humetewa occupy, is the move from conservation as fine arts restoration to conservation as two parts science, one part art (recall, for instance, the bit above about whole pots and pretty displays). It’s a shift that allows for new perspectives and ways of both asking and answering questions.

Inviting potters and cultural leaders into the lab does both. At times, the results can seem surprising: like deciding not to do any conservation work at all. Smith offers as an example a collection of sherds that seem to be of a single pot. “Should we reconstruct?” she asks. “It’s more than a question of preference or ability. Of course we can, but should we? We know that pots often are broken for religious or cultural reasons, ones we cannot reliably know.” The potters, she says, “help us understand what we’re looking at, and help provide cultural rationale for conservation decisions.”

The potters aren’t in the lab day in and day out, but their influence is strongly felt. “More often than not, what we do is just stabilization,” says Humetewa, with a modest shrug of shoulders, “only what needs to be done to keep a pot from falling apart. But we pay a lot of attention to what’s going on with the pot.” The turn away from aesthetics has also meant more concern for preserving the stories that a pot’s structure, appearance, and wear can tell.

“We’re replacing old, bad adhesives with newer, more stable adhesives, but other than that we want to do as little as possible. Each of these pots has something to say, and some certainly want to be seen.” Such work improves on the status quo, leaving intact the scratches and other marks of the pot’s use for future investigation.

The work also inevitably means having to deal with parts of the pot that were never recovered: the holes in the whole. Typically, conservators will use fillers for added stability, mimicking the original structure of the pot. But of course fillers have also been used since the very early days for aesthetic reasons. In those days, they were often painted to match the pots. Now things are different.

Smith draws a pretty clear distinction between then and now. “That’s not our job,” she says. “Now, though the fill would be visually integrated with the original pot, we wouldn’t try to hide the fact that there is a fill, and we certainly wouldn’t presume to paint it in such a way that requires any guesswork on our part as to the original design. Who are we to decide that?” But just how far they do go, even within that fairly constrained framework, is one of those questions where the potters can help.

In a recent conversation with a Jemez potter, Smith recalls a question she and Humetewa had about whether a particular pot was a good candidate for restoration and display. “So, we asked right up front, ‘What do you want us to do?’ And after looking at what we had, he told us that he felt it was important to make the pot look as close as it could to what it looked like when it was first fired.” The reason? Smith says he felt it was really important for the younger generation to see how the pots were.

And then there are the plain nerdy things that potters and those that work with pots know and care about deeply, but aren’t necessarily known equally in both communities. Smith recalls a seminal moment when she and Humetewa were struggling to make sense of an oddly “funky” handle on a pot. Ulysses Reid took one look at it, picked up a pen and a piece of paper, and sketched the underlying structure of what they were seeing, and how the pieces were attached.

“It was an eye-opening moment,” Smith says. “Things like that help us avoid seeing something as wrong when what we’re seeing is just something we don’t understand.” Other examples are many, from the presence of unusual paints to the use of yucca fibers. Of course, this sort of rich and nuanced information also adds up to really good documentation for the museum, something that also sets it apart from many of its peers.

Sometimes, too, professional and personal interests overlap. “It’s amazing,” Humetewa says, less sanguine than usual, “really amazing, to walk along these shelves and shelves of pots with these potters, and have them tell you

stories about individual pieces. We’ll suddenly stop and I’ll hear, ‘I remember when my grandmother made that.’ It makes this work more real in a way, and establishes their place in the world. For a conservator, getting beyond the academic can be very useful.”

Although the conservators are quick to point out—gratefully—that they probably reap the most from this partnership between the two groups, it’s not entirely one way. Conservators do, after all, have access to useful things like black lights, excavation reports, and microscopes, all of which can and have helped the potters explore how the pots in the museum’s collections were made, and even occasionally have influenced their own work. Yet, nobody seems to be resting on his or her laurels.

Smith says a conference, planned for the near future, will bring together artists, conservators, cultural leaders, and scholars to talk about the museum’s collection going forward: how best to continue to care for it, and perhaps more importantly, how best to display it. And then, a little further out, something that is pretty exciting to almost everyone in the conservation world: digital restoration.

It’s easy to see why three-dimensional scans of pots would be powerful, opening up the possibility of experimentation and more learning. “Once we get the digital work going,” Smith says, the corners of her mouth twitching upwards, “we want to bring in a variety of potters to do their own restorations of missing areas of design on the same piece. The differing approaches and results can tell us more about what we’re seeing in the collection. We’re hoping to do better conservation, sure, but what we really want is a conversation, to build bridges.” Which, really, pretty much describes what the MIAC ceramics conservation program has always been about. ■

Peter BG Shoemaker writes about conservation for *El Palacio*, and elsewhere about art, culture, food, and the future.



Opposite: After reviewing ancestral Pueblo pottery with the conservators, renowned potter and MIAC Indian Advisory Panel member Ulysses Reid (Zia Pueblo), examines one of his own pots in the lab, where he learned from conservators how to consolidate cracks that can happen as a result of firing. **Left:** An area of loss in the bowl had been filled with white plaster decades ago. In this case, the old fill was re-surfaced and inpainted in a flat color to both visually integrate the fill with the original and to clearly distinguish the restored area from the original. This distinction is important in a research collection.