

A RIVER APART

BY VALERIE K. VERZUH

WATER IS A RARE AND essential element in America's arid Southwest. Through this starkly beautiful land flow two major rivers—the Colorado River and the Rio Grande—that shape the landscape and the distribution of indigenous villages. Just a river apart, Cochiti and Santo Domingo are neighboring New Mexico Pueblos on the banks of the northern Rio Grande between Albuquerque and Santa Fe. The two communities share a ceramic tradition extending back almost 1,500 years. For centuries, the women—and more recently the men of both Pueblos have made pottery for use in their homes and ceremonial spaces, and beginning in the late 1800s, as tourist curios or art for elite galleries.

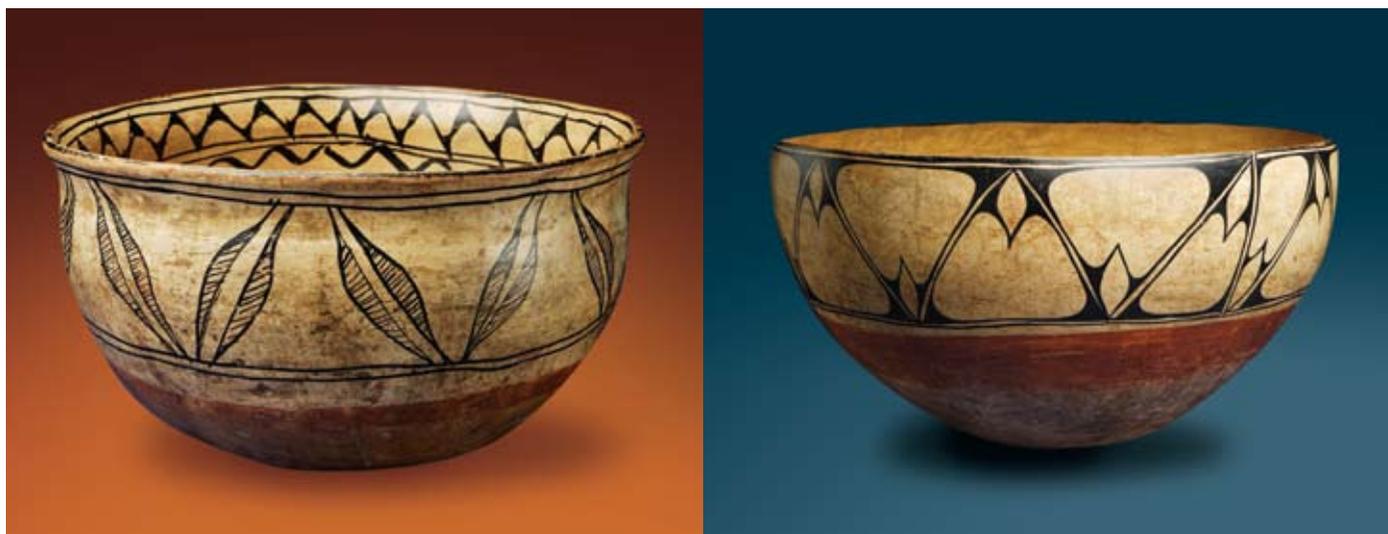
Contemporary Pueblo ceramic wares, the result of centuries of a fluid and adaptive tradition, reflect diverse influences. Continual migrations necessitated variation in materials; dietary and household changes required functional shifts in shape and size; and a variety of markets—other Pueblos, other Native communities, Hispanic and Euro/Anglo-American villagers, and more recently, tourists and prominent collectors—resulted in adaptations that would

appeal to these buyers. For two hundred years the Pueblo pottery market has contributed greatly to the continued vitality of village life by bringing needed income to communities and giving potters a way to support their families while living and working at home.

The materials, construction techniques, painted designs, and intended functions of each piece of pottery made in these two villages intimately reflect each community's social, religious, and institutional values as well as the land that supports and nourishes them. The river that marks the physical division between Cochiti and Santo Domingo also can be seen as shaping a metaphorical border between cultural insiders and outsiders and between the dissimilar responses of the two Pueblos to outside influences.

OF OUTSIDERS AND INSIDERS

Over the past two centuries, countless carefully constructed ceramic pots from the Pueblos, isolated from their original contexts, have become aesthetic and sociocultural specimens in art and anthropology museums



Far left: Cochiti dough bowl, ca. 1860, artist unknown. Museum purchase, 45138.
Near left: Santo Domingo dough bowl, artist unknown, ca. 1880–1900. Gift of Byron Harvey III, 35755. Photographs by Addison Doty.

throughout the Western world. Historically, Western museums have preserved the material culture of the “ethnographic other” as representative of dying cultures whose histories they recreated in exhibitions and publications. Over the past two decades, and notably since the passage of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA), third- and fourth-world communities, attempting to establish and maintain a sense of self and

other indigenous peoples as something out of the past and fixed in time. On the other hand, the Pueblos themselves preserve their histories through the dynamic processes of telling and retelling myths and legends and the ceremonial performance of ritual, song, and dance. They are actively recording their histories upon the landscape with the settlements and artifacts they have constructed and abandoned during generations of migration and change. These indig-



Dorothy Dunn Studio students at the Santa Fe Indian School copying pottery designs in ceramic storage at the Laboratory of Anthropology, ca. 1940. Courtesy of the Laboratory of Anthropology Archives. (MNM/DCA), 70.1/2276..

assert their social, religious, political, and economic rights from within the dominant Western culture, have challenged the right of established institutions to control the presentation of their cultural artifacts and community identities. Such challenges by indigenous people, or cultural “others,” have created a new dialogic paradigm that today influences the presentation and interpretation of cultural diversity in museums.

Many contemporary museums have begun to explore the challenge to their authority through an interpretive theory known as “multivocality,” which employs a multiplicity of voices to construct interpretive narratives. In conventional museum exhibitions, Western cultural points of view take on a universal significance: historically, European and American museums have presented the authoritative view of the “expert” outsider looking in and “explaining” indigenous cultures. Typically, this approach portrays Pueblos and

enous “museums” of the Southwest were and are part of a living landscape subject to time and environment, as well as to the movements and interpretations of contemporary Puebloans. Pueblo life in the historic period, as seen and reported by outsiders, can be a series of facts, figures, and dates; when related by insiders, the history of the Pueblos contains their fears, hopes, and memories superimposed on events and landscapes by their oral histories.

Multivocality’s impact on anthropological theory—and thus anthropology museums—began in the 1980s following the postmodern movement of the 1970s. Postmodern theorists advocated bridging the gap between anthropologists and their subjects by acknowledging the authority of the perspectives of those they studied. Hypothesizing that each of us interprets the world in a unique way—concordant with our cultural background, the language we speak, and our personal experiences—they disputed the anthropologist’s

ability to have objective and neutral knowledge of another culture. Multivocality, as applied to museum anthropology, promotes a plurality of voices in the presentation of knowledge and provides a theoretical framework within which anthropologists and their subjects—and museums and the cultures they represent—participate in an exchange of perspectives and beliefs. Within this framework, multiple theoretical perspectives or narratives replace the anthropological metanarrative—an abstract story or theory that purports to explain all knowledge and experience. Because multivocality emphasizes that there is no single “correct” viewpoint, it is an avenue to recognizing and reconciling the contested meanings that result from the convergence of indigenous and Western humanities scholars, including anthropologists, historians, art historians, and museum curators.

Anthropological scholars who disagree with this approach argue that it abandons empirical data and scientific method in favor of a humanist empathy with third- and fourth-world peoples, the effect being a far too relativistic interpretation of other cultures. In anthropological discourse the efficacy of postmodernism and its offshoot, multivocality, in understanding human culture are part of an ongoing debate apropos the designation of anthropology as a social science or humanities discipline.

OF CONTACT AND COMPETITION

At first contact with the Spaniards in 1540, the Pueblos, living within the familiar landscapes of one culture, crossed a river to an alien, unfamiliar culture. For more than four hundred years since then, pressures from Euro/Anglo-American colonist communities have had a profound effect on Pueblo life. Although scholars can identify substantial outside influence on Pueblo material culture from 1540 to American rule in 1848, the lack of whole vessels available for study in museums and at universities precludes a definitive scholarly representation of Pueblo pottery during this period. Because almost all of the pueblos occupied since the Spanish reconquest of the 1690s are alive and vibrant villages today, archaeological examples of whole pots from the period are uncommon—pots would have been used until no longer serviceable and then discarded in the village trash heap. Consequently, even fragmentary vessels made between the conquest and 1879, when museums began to collect and preserve them, are rare. One lasting document of this change commonly found in museum collections is the dough bowl. These large bowls, used to mix and knead dough, were added to the Pueblo potter’s repertoire with the early Spanish colonist’s introduction of wheat farming to the Southwest Indians. (Dough bowls from Cochiti and Santo Domingo are shown on the opening page.)

American rule in 1848 accelerated the pace of social,



Male figurine by Virgil Ortiz, Cochiti, 1989. Rick Dillingham Collection, 54269. Photograph by Addison Doty.

political, and economic change. Competition for land between the Pueblos, Hispanic communities, and new Euro/Anglo-American immigrants put increasing pressure on the indigenous populations; greater intrusions were made on the Puebloans’ land base and water rights; and disastrous disease epidemics that began with the first contact with outsiders continued to cause population decline.

With the Spanish and early Euro/Anglo-American settlers, the Pueblos continued a traditional economic system of subsistence, barter, and exchange, trading pottery types specifically developed for settler households—including pitchers, cups and saucers, and candlesticks traded for the new consumer goods. With American rule came dependence on a new cash economy and manufactured goods, and Pueblo

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people became consumers instead of producers for the first time in their long history. American rule also brought the railroad, then automobile travel, and with them a booming tourist industry. Potters rethought the forms of their utilitarian wares and developed new styles, such as figurines and miniatures, for the burgeoning tourist market. Beginning in the 1920s, Santa Fe museum personnel—most significantly the Museum of New Mexico’s Edgar L. Hewett and his colleague at the Laboratory of Anthropology Kenneth Chapman—began developing initiatives to “improve” the craft they saw as degraded by the introduction of tourist wares. Today we find their influence in the judging of pottery at Santa Fe’s

annual summer events, including the Southwest Association for Indian Art's Indian Market, the Eight Northern Pueblos Arts and Crafts Show, and the Native Treasure Indian Arts Festival at the Museum of Indian Arts & Culture/Laboratory of Anthropology. While these events promote "high-quality" pieces, contemporary potters throughout the Southwest continue to produce a wide variety of wares, from pieces for use in Pueblo homes and for community ceremonial events to wares ranging from inexpensive tourist pieces to fine art.

OF CURATORS, COLLECTORS, AND CATALOGS

If asked to describe museum collections in general, I would use words like "isolated," "esoteric," or "inaccessible." In hushed galleries and the rarefied atmosphere of storage vaults, among secreted rows of artifacts, we curators dwell somewhere beyond time and place, sheltered by our notions and nourished by abstractions. Within the museum, in the collections, our connection to the communities we study are artifacts, and we look to them for a connection to the cultures and people we yearn to understand. Over time, however, curators, collectors, and the constraints of cataloging systems have removed Pueblo pottery from its original contexts, all too frequently losing sight of their indigenous identities in the process. Because of this, today we cast an analytical eye on the circumstances of collecting, the assumptions and motivations of curators and collectors, and the changing meanings and values attached to Pueblo pottery in museum collections over time and space. As a tool, theory helps us put a name to what we observe and record the process and results of our discoveries, and within the museum's walls it is theory that presides over the rows of artifacts. Those of us who work in Southwestern regional museums find ourselves in a strange and sometimes disturbing position as we live, work, and socialize on a daily basis with the people we "study." This constant interaction requires that we rely not on our theories and concepts alone but also engage with Pueblo points of view.

The Laboratory of Anthropology, which opened its doors

in 1931, was established as a field station that ethnologists and archaeologists could use as a home base when working in the Southwest, as well as a permanent facility that would house their research field notes and collections. The Lab and later its sister institution, the Museum of Indian Arts & Culture, were conceived as places of learning where the collections could be accessed for research by Euro/Anglo-American and indigenous scholars and artists.

Curator Kenneth Chapman is primarily responsible for building the foundation for the nearly 4,500 pieces in the museum's historic-period pottery collection. He used the 450 pieces in the Indian Arts Fund (IAF) pottery collection as a base upon which to build a more comprehensive collection (now at the School for Advanced Research, Santa Fe). The IAF consisted of a group of Santa Fe individuals, including Chapman, who banded together in 1922 to improve Pueblo pottery by creating a collection of excellent examples.

Over time the Lab's collections grew in depth and breadth through archaeological excavation and directed purchases by museum curators from Pueblo community members and traders or dealers, and through individual donations. The greater percentage has been donated by Santa Fe or New Mexico community members with a personal interest in Pueblo domestic and fine arts, or with an interest in the preservation of traditional indigenous communities. In the decades following "Chap's" tenure, a succession of directors and curators at the Museum of Indian Arts & Culture/Laboratory of Anthropology has added artifacts and layers of meaning to the founding collections.

The exhibition and catalog titled *A River Apart* are results of that continued research and careful approach to collecting; they feature the growing Cochiti and Santo Domingo pottery collections, 473 pots divided almost equally between the two Pueblos. Of that total, 311 are designated "artist unknown"; 165 have known makers, and these are the work of only 75 potters. The vessels date from the mid-nineteenth century to the present, mostly from 1900 through 1950. The collections consist almost exclusively of polychrome painted pottery with few examples of utilitarian plain wares—a curatorial predilection that does not represent the percentage of painted and plain wares actually in use at the Pueblos.

The exhibition and the catalog intend to explore what one museum's collection, with all its idiosyncrasies and limitations, can tell us about Pueblo pottery; to explore the differences between the pottery of two Pueblos; and to provide ways for people of all backgrounds to cross the river between cultures. ■

Jar by Santana and Crucita Melchor,
Santo Domingo, ca. 1976.
Rick Dillingham Collection, 54254.
Photograph by Addison Doty.



Valerie K. Verzuh, curator of Individually Cataloged Collections at the Museum of Indian Arts & Culture/Laboratory of Anthropology, is the exhibition curator and editor of *A River Apart: The Pottery of Cochiti & Santo Domingo Pueblos*, with essays by Verzuh, Bruce Bernstein, J. J. Brody, Antonio Chavarria, Chip Colwell-Chanthaphonh, and Mateo Romero. The exhibition continues at the Museum of Indian Arts & Culture through June 6.