

## **Masterpiece: *Hopi Pottery, ca. 1880* by Iris Nampeyo**

**Pronounced:** NUM PAY YO  
**Keywords:** Cultural Values, traditional design, structure  
**Grade:** 4<sup>th</sup> Grade  
**Month:** December/January  
**Activity:** Clay Vessel  
**Time:** This activity coincides with the AZ Core Curriculum for Arizona History and will take two lessons to complete: 1-hour for the lesson on artist and Hopi Pottery, and creation of the Clay Vessel; and 1-hour for lesson on cultural brushwork and interpretation, and painting the vessel in a traditional Hopi manner.



### **Meet the Artist:**

- Iris Nampeyo was born at Hano Pueblo (now known as the Hopi Reservation in Northern Arizona) in 1860. She received the English name "Iris" as an infant, but was known by her Tewa name, Num-pa-yu, meaning, "snake that does not bite."
- Her mother was Tewa and her father was a Hopi from the nearby Walpi Pueblo. Nampeyo learned to make pottery from her mother who known as White Corn, of the Tewa Corn Clan.
- Throughout the 1870s, she made a steady income by selling her work at a local trading post operated by Thomas Keam. She married Lesou (or Lessou) of the Cedarwood Clan from the Walpi Pueblo, in 1878, and they had five children.
- Through the 1890's Lesou was employed by the archaeologist J. Walter Fewkes of the Smithsonian Institution, at the excavation of the prehistoric ruin of Sikyátki, inhabited from 1400 to 1600 A.D. Lesou helped Nampeyo find potsherds showing the old pottery forms and Fewkes produced detailed illustrations of the reconstructed pots. The excavation of the Sikyátki ruin fed the creativity of Nampeyo and other Hopi potters. Nampeyo incorporated elements of the ancients' Sikyátki polychrome pottery style, ancient firing and painting techniques and infused them with her own ingenious artistic brushwork and interpretation.

- Nampeyo was one of the first American Indian women to achieve personal recognition for her pottery. She demonstrated pottery making at the United States Land and Irrigation Exposition in Chicago in 1910. Both museum experts and business owners were awed by her work. Through photographs distributed by the Fred Harvey Company, along with her live pottery demonstrations and sales at the Watchtower and Hopi House at the Grand Canyon, Nampeyo and her pottery became famous. (*Taken from the "An Official Arizona Centennial Legacy Project"*)
- Nampeyo began to lose her sight when she was in her 60s. Unable to paint her fine designs as her condition worsened, she asked her daughters to paint them. She never learned to read or write and did not sign her work; Harvey Company employees sometimes identified it with a sticker. At the end of Nampeyo's career, her daughters signed a few of her pieces which are now in major museums. (*Taken from the "An Official Arizona Centennial Legacy Project"*)
- Nampeyo died in 1942.

### **History of Hopi Pottery (*taken from hopipottery.net*)**

The Hopi pottery today is the culmination of various clans all contributing designs and/or methods from their ancestors. Traditional Hopi pottery is generally divided into three phases:

#### Phase I: 800-1300 A.D.

This was a purely functional phase that was brought about by a shift from a migratory people to a cultivation society. As they cultivated the three sisters (corn, squash, and beans), they migrated less. Whereas before they used baskets woven of vegetal matter for its light weight and durability, the permanence afforded the Hopi ancestors the luxury of heavier and more durable containers made of pottery. Anasazi pottery is characterized by rough vessels with rudimentary designs (perhaps to indicate family/use?). Though there was monochrome (black on white, yellow, or orange slip) decoration occurring, it was not until the 1400's that polychrome became prevalent.

#### Phase II: 1400-1600 A.D.

The Sikyatki period, with its polychrome decoration on white slip, was the height of the art. Interrupted by the Pueblo revolts and inquisitions of the 1600's, it would be two hundred years before the beautiful designs and colors of this period would be seen again.

#### Phase III: The Revival 1870 - Now

In the late 1800's, when there was a great interest in studying 'indigenous' ways, Alexander Stephen recorded some of the earliest information about Hopi pottery.

However it was Jesse Walter Fewkes that unearthed beautiful Sikyatki polychrome pots and shards that started the 'revival.' It is said that the beautiful 'ancient' pottery inspired Nampeyo to bring back the style that is so popular today.

### **Creating Hopi Pottery (hopipottery.net)**

Creating Hopi pottery is a time consuming and risky venture. Especially today, as the migration patterns change and the Hopi youth leave the reservation to pursue a career or employment elsewhere. The reality is that there are fewer artists creating fewer vessels, an international market with greater access because of the internet, and constant pressure on artists to pursue other means of employment. This results in higher prices for Hopi Pottery.

What are the risks? As you read through this portion of the site detailing how Hopi pottery is made remember that at any point the vessel could be dropped, the paint can be tainted or -last but not least- the pot could explode during the firing stage thus destroying the piece and many hours of work.

### Gathering the clay

Hopi families gather their clay from the ground. Usually from sources highly coveted and guarded, the clay is dug from the earth. The clay is cleaned of impurities (one blade of grass or other impurity could cause an explosion during the firing phase), mixed with shards of older pottery to give it the 'bonding', and finally mixed with water to create clay.

### Forming the vessel

Whether the artist is creating a cup, a bowl, or a vase, the vessels all start at the bottom. Using a tabipi (sometimes called a puki) the artist does not use a potter's wheel. Instead, the clay is rolled into long strings of clay and 'coiled' up to create the vessel's shape. Obviously, the thinner the strings of clay mean a thinner and more fragile pot. With large vessels this is very difficult as the clay is heavy. As the clay is coiled up, the bottom must be able to support the heavy top. A scraping tool is used to smooth out the coils until they become one solid wall.

### Smoothing and drying

The vessel is smoothed and polished with smooth river stones. It is then left to dry (usually 3-7 days) and harden for the next phase. A white wash is applied to the piece.

### Painting

Using yucca leaves and pigments from plants (mustard) and minerals (iron) the potter applies designs and/or patterns to the vessel. This may be the point of separation for

masters from the rest. The ability to 'see' how a pattern will develop and look (they rarely use outlines or stencils) before color is applied is perhaps only exceeded by the use of space of Chinese artists. Creating a balanced and symmetrical pattern by hand is extremely difficult and engaging.

### Polishing

Using a tool (typically of stone) that has sometimes been handed down through the generations, the artist creates a highly polished sheen to the vessel.

### Firing

After investing all of their time and resources, the day of firing arrives. Perhaps the most dreaded day, the pottery will be fired at very high temperatures to harden. Typically, cow or sheep dung is used (very porous and highly combustible) to create temperatures sufficient enough to harden the pottery. Old cracked pottery is used to insulate the piece from direct flame and also used to segment one piece from the other (in case one breaks, its pieces do not fly off and break another piece). The risks include smudges (where smoke comes into contact with the piece) and breakage. Days when there is little wind, typically in the morning, are especially waited upon.

### **Possible Questions:**

### **Activity: Clay Vessel**

**Note to Art Guide:** It is recommended that you demonstrate a simple pinch pot making technique to the students. Therefore, prior to your lesson, please familiarize yourself with how to do this. If you are unsure, please contact the School's Art Masterpiece Coordinator and she will gladly meet with you.

**Materials Needed:** White air-drying clay; spray water bottles; paper plates; smooth river stones; black, red orange, white tempera paints; yucca stems cut into 3" pieces; ceramic tiles; paint palettes.

**Explain Activity:** This activity will be completed in two- one hour sessions: in the first session, students will gain knowledge about the artist and her work and create a clay vessel with a slight nod to the Hopi style. For the second session, students will polish and paint the dried vessel using painting techniques and interpretation of Hopi design.

### **Activity - Day 1:**

1. Hand each student a paper plate and a 2"x2"x2" piece of the clay. Place a spray bottle between every other student so they can share. If a student needs more clay, have

them work with what they got and wait until every student has a piece of clay. If you have extra clay, you may decide to discreetly distribute extra clay to those students who clearly need more clay. Please make sure to completely cover the clay with the plastic after use.....it dries out quickly.

2. Demonstrate the pinch pot making technique\*\* See above. Have students think of the type of pot design and begin constructing their pot. Remind them to work fairly fast but if their clay begins to dry out, they can lightly spray it with water to make it more pliable.
3. When they are finished with their pot, write names on bottom with a pencil.
4. Store in a safe area of the classroom on the paper plate until Day 2.

### **Activity - Day 2:**

1. Review a few of the Hopi designs that are still seen on the pottery today.
2. Have students collect their pot and sit at their desk. Hand each student a river stone, a ceramic tile, and a three pieces of the yucca stem.
3. Using the stone, have them gently pound the end of the yucca stem on the tile until it forms a brush. Set brushes aside but tell them that each brush will be used in each paint color.
4. Using the stone again, have students gently rub it on their dried clay piece until the clay is smooth and polished. Remind them to be very gentle as the pot will break under too much pressure.
5. Place a paint palette between every other student and fill a couple of the wells each with the white, black, and red orange tempera paint.
6. Have students plan their design for their vessel in the Hopi tradition and begin painting with their yucca brushes.