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Rose B. Simpson: "Relationships Carved From Clay Bring New Partners to Museums"

By Patricia Leigh Brown

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Brian Vallo, a former governor of Acoma Pueblo and a museum consultant, at the Indian Arts Research Center of the School for Advanced Research in Santa Fe. It was there that the idea for "Grounded in Clay: The Spirit of Pueblo Pottery," now at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, originated. Credit...Adria Malcolm for The New York Times

In a sea change, artisans and leaders from Native communities were invited to be curators, offering a window onto the intangible and personal dimensions of Pueblo pottery.

Claudia Mitchell, a potter from Acoma Pueblo in New Mexico, gathers clay on a mesa between two sandstone rock formations, hammer and pick at the ready. First she gives thanks to the Clay Mother — the Earth — in prayers and offerings that include a sprinkling of cornmeal, a small piece of turquoise and, always, water — the high desert's most precious gift. She also thanks the women who came before her, especially her grandmother Lucy M. Lewis, a much-acclaimed potter who worked well into her 80s and whose hands, smooth and soft from years of clay, never lost their strong grip.

**JESSICA
SILVERMAN**

621 Grant Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94108
jessicasilvermangallery.com +1 415 255 9508

In her own work, Mitchell, 59, incorporates shards of pottery from previous generations that she finds along the road, grinding them into a powder to give her pots extra strength before firing. Through her vessels, "the spirit of all those people is brought back to life," she said. "Our past and present become the future in the pottery."

Now she is helping to broaden the understanding of American art. In a radical sea change for museums, Mitchell is one of 68 Pueblo potters, artists and cultural leaders invited to largely organize "Grounded in Clay: The Spirit of Pueblo Pottery" at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the first Native American exhibition there that has been community curated. The objects were all selected by members of the Pueblo Pottery Collective and the labels highlight Pueblo peoples' voices and perspectives, rather than the traditional museum label style. (The show, through June 2024, continues by appointment in a more intimate setting at the Vilcek Foundation in Manhattan, before traveling to the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, and the Saint Louis Art Museum.)



Claudia Mitchell at her home in McCartys, N.M. She incorporates shards of pottery from previous generations that she finds along the road. Through her vessels, "the spirit of all those people is brought back to life," she said. Credit...Adria Malcolm for The New York Times

The idea for the group exhibition originated at the School for Advanced Research (known as SAR) in Santa Fe, N.M., a scholarly resource center, academic press and artist residency program housed in a historic adobe compound. Its immense collection of Pueblo pottery, dating to 1050-1300, is the backbone of "Grounded in Clay," which had its debut at the Museum of Indian Arts and Culture in Santa Fe last summer. "We thought it was very important for our people to see the exhibit first," said Brian D. Vallo, a museum consultant and the former governor of Acoma Pueblo, near Albuquerque, who is a curator in the Vilcek exhibit.

The goal was to identify at least one curator from each Native community, said Elysia Poon, director of SAR's Indian Arts Research Center. She approached Vilcek Foundation, which has its own extensive pottery collection, about partnering with multiple organizers. "I don't think they expected to wind up with over 60," she said. (Six curators are not from Pueblo communities; two of them are Native).

**JESSICA
SILVERMAN**

621 Grant Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94108
jessicasilvermangallery.com +1 415 255 9508



The School for Advanced Research's immense collection of Pueblo pottery, dating to 1050-1300, is the backbone of "Grounded in Clay." People from the Pueblos interpreted the works. Credit...Adria Malcolm for The New York Times

To reach potential participants, Poon and her staff visited Pueblo communities, distributing fliers during feast days and other cultural events. Each curator was invited to select one or two clay-works to be interpreted as they saw fit, through a handwritten essay, a poem or a voice recording. "Traditionally you come up with big themes and then choose pieces," Poon said. "We did it backward."

In this way, the exhibition offers an alternative model to Euro-American business-as-usual, which often excluded source communities from interpreting their own material culture, leaving that to scholars who tend to view works through a dispassionate art historical lens.

Guidelines developed by SAR, now embodied at the Met, represent an ambitious shift in practice in which museum professionals work side-by-side with Native communities to document objects, conceptualize their narratives and expand Indigenous peoples' access to collections. It's a strategy that is increasingly adopted by institutions like the Colby Museum of Art at Colby College in Maine, which worked with Native community partners on the current show, "Painted: Our Bodies, Hearts and Village," offering Pueblo perspectives on the Taos Society of Artists, an Anglo-American group.

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SILVERMAN**

621 Grant Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94108
jessicasilvermangallery.com +1 415 255 9508



This storage jar, c. 1870–80, is by Arroh-a-och, a Laguna Pueblo potter in New Mexico, and was chosen by Max Early, a Laguna community curator. The painted designs on clay show spiraling clouds, flowers and deer.
Credit...via School for Advanced Research

"It's exciting to have more voices in exhibition spaces," said Tom Eccles, executive director of the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College, which trains young curators. "We often think of curators as having exceptional knowledge, but today knowledge is also about experience. The more experiences we bring to these objects, the better."

He added, "Curators today aren't just in dialogue with artworks, they're also in dialogue and engaged with communities. That's a fundamental change."

"Grounded in Clay" features Native curators from New Mexico's 19 Pueblo communities but also from Arizona (Hopi) and Texas (Ysleta del Sur Pueblo). "We are excited about the opportunity to put these guidelines into practice," said Dr. Patricia Marroquin Norby, the Metropolitan Museum's associate curator of Native American art (Purépecha), who has collaborated with source communities since assuming her role in 2020, offering native perspectives in the American Wing's Diker collection and in exhibitions like "Water Memories."

But the scale of the collaboration in "Grounded in Clay" is unprecedented, including many potters carrying on ancestral traditions. The exhibition provides a window for non-Natives onto the intangible, personal and emotional dimensions of Pueblo pottery, "the literal vessel by which our people sustain themselves, psychically, culturally and spiritually," Dr. Joseph Aguilar, the deputy tribal preservation officer of San Ildefonso Pueblo, writes in the catalog.

**JESSICA
SILVERMAN**

621 Grant Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94108
jessicasilvermangallery.com +1 415 255 9508



Installation view of "Grounded In Clay: The Spirit of Pueblo Pottery," at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Museum professionals worked with curators from Native communities, who chose objects and lent their voices and analysis. Credit...Richard Lee/The Metropolitan Museum of Art

More than 50 pieces strong, the water jars, storage jars, bowls and bean pots are as distinctive as human faces. Born from earth, fire and water, many recall the oranges, reds and tans of the Southwest's mesas, cliffs and arroyos. Some have intricate black and white zigzag patterns inspired by clouds or lightning streaking across the sky, bringing the blessing of rain. Others celebrate turkeys, parrots or turtles in vibrant paint. Centuries-old vessels show their age and wear — the scrapes, fissures, bumps, cracks and indentations reveal just how well-used and loved they were, as much as an oil-splotted family cookbook.

"The beauty created in clay is as imperfect as we are, but soars with meaning and purpose," writes Anthony R. Chavarria (Kha'p'o Owingeh/Santa Clara), curator of ethnography at the Museum of Indian Arts and Culture.

Chavarria recalled by phone a sparkling micaceous bowl with a piecrust rim made by his grandmother and the squabbles that would erupt over who would get to commandeer it for morning cereal. For the show, he found himself drawn to a stone-polished blackware water jar with a high neck and a flared rim. "I see the collar and high neck in this jar, in the way its rim flares out," he writes. "I see my grandma in the beauty from the earth."

Blackware is typically achieved by a reduction firing process, using cow or sheep dung to modulate the flame — the lack of oxygen, mixed with smoke, will turn the warm red clay bowl a rich black.

**JESSICA
SILVERMAN**

621 Grant Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94108
jessicasilvermangallery.com +1 415 255 9508



When people ask Lonnie Vigil how he creates such a perfect monumental pot, he says he goes into "a dream space."
Credit...From left, via School for Advanced Research; via The Vilcek Foundation

One spectacular example greeting visitors at the Met is a monumental "grandfather" vessel with an iridescent ebony skin by Lonnie Vigil (Nambe Pueblo), an accomplished potter. He started building it coil by coil on his red 1950s Formica kitchen table — an "architectural feat made more poignant by the fact that it is balanced by hand and *feel* — not by machine," writes Nora Naranjo Morse, an artist and poet who is another curator.

"People ask, 'How did you make such a perfect pot?'" Vigil told me. He doesn't have an answer. He said he went into "a dream space."

In an interview at the Vilcek Foundation, Brian Vallo said his paternal grandmother, Juana Vallo, painted her pots with ground black hematite, a mineral, with wild spinach paste as a binder. It was a full day's journey to gather clay. "My granddad would say that if you go in with a very pure mind, the clay will be easier to remove," said Vallo. For the show, he chose an Acoma water jar painted with Zuni-inspired birds that his grandmother would call "Zuni Fat Tails." At Acoma, women would collect rainwater from naturally-formed cisterns on the mesa top and then balance the bulbous jars on their heads — "basically carrying a cloud," he said.

In Pueblo culture, pots mark important life events. They welcome babies and commemorate a loss. "It's good to have plenty on hand," Mitchell, the potter, observes, "because you never know when someone is going to journey on."

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SILVERMAN**

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jessicasilvermangallery.com +1 415 255 9508



From left, at the Met: Mateo Romero's "Tsi Ping Owingeh #9 (Tewa for the Village of Flint Mountain)" and Michael Namingha's "Yupkoyvi (The Place Beyond the Horizon)," with hand-gathered sand, both show two sacred mountains. The artists contemplate how Indigenous spaces have been altered permanently by tourists and industrial exploitation.

Credit...Richard Lee/The Metropolitan Museum of Art

For "Grounded in Clay" Norby also commissioned four contemporary Pueblo artists in other mediums; these works question the industrial and environmental exploitation of sacred Indigenous sites. "Yupkoyvi," by the photographer Michael Namingha, for example, is an eerily pink composition in silk-screen and enamel with hand-applied sand. It addresses ancient sandstone slabs on Fajada Butte at Chaco Canyon, a locus of ancestral Puebloan culture, erected to measure solstices and equinoxes, which has been irrevocably altered by foot traffic from tourists and archaeologists and to industrial exploitation.

Community curators can provide guidance to museums by discovering objects in their collections that are culturally sensitive, or protected by federal repatriation laws. Vallo said that at the Vilcek he spotted a ceremonial bowl. He asked the group to consider returning it to the Tesuque Pueblo, which the foundation did. "I understand that it is now back in use," Vallo said.

Repatriation is not always desired by Pueblos, he added. Some communities "won't repatriate items that never should have left," he said. "They would say that they have lost the essence of what made them sacred." Once "Grounded in Clay" ends its tour, source communities will participate in coming up with "a robust plan for the stewardship of these items."

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SILVERMAN**

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jessicasilvermangallery.com +1 415 255 9508



Rose B. Simpson comes from a long matrilineal line of clay artists. Indigenous people and their stories have been "belittled and objectified," she said, adding that an exhibition like this one can give an object "its life and identity back."

Credit...via the Vilcek Foundation

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SILVERMAN**

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Until then, the infusion of Pueblo voices and life experiences in the show has been profound for artists like Rose B. Simpson (Kha'p'o Owingeh/Santa Clara), the celebrated sculptor who works in a variety of media and comes from a long matrilineal line of clay artists (her exhibition "Counterculture" is currently at the Whitney Museum of American Art).

Indigenous peoples and their stories have been "belittled and objectified," she said, adding that an exhibition like this one can give an object "its life and identity back. We switch from extracting to respecting. This show is incredibly important because it begins that process."

As a curator, she chose a black Santa Clara water jar (c. 1880-1900) with a broken rim. "I felt we had a lot in common," she said. "Living in a post colonial-genocidal context, we still have broken parts of a complicated story."

In Santa Fe, at the School for Advanced Research, Simpson sat alone in a silent room with the pots. "It snaps you into the awareness that these pots are watching you," she said. "It was really cool to meet and get to know them — and now we're giving other people the opportunity to meet them. Those pots will see the visitors as much as the visitors see the pots."

Grounded in Clay: The Spirit of Pueblo Pottery

Through June 4, 2024, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1000 Fifth Ave., (212) 535-7710; metmuseum.org. It runs by appointment through June 2, 2024, at the Vilcek Foundation, 21 East 70th Street in Manhattan; (212) 472-2500; vilcek.org.

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