Indigenous peoples of the Western Hemisphere have been making pottery for thousands of years, and for many Native people ceramics maintain a sense of profound meaning and purpose. The 301 remarkable pieces in this exhibition span 5,000 years and four distinct regions—the Andes, eastern North America, Mesoamerica, and the southwestern United States. These clay creations are explored as the products of ongoing, complex societies and individual artistry.

Born of Clay includes the ideas of eight potters from the four regions. These contemporary artists tell us that despite differences in the composition, form, and decoration of pottery, Native potters share respect for ancestral traditions, a belief in the sacredness of clay, and an appreciation for the changing use of ceramics. Their voices reveal stories of continuity and change across millennia.

Born of Clay: Ceramics from the National Museum of the American Indian is on view at the George Gustav Heye Center through spring 2007. Support for the exhibition has been generously provided by Barbara and James Block.

Visit NMAI’s website at www.americanindian.si.edu. © 2005 Smithsonian Institution

Born of Clay: Ceramics from the National Museum of the American Indian, 96 pages and featuring more than 225 illustrations, is available in NMAI shops and online at www.AmericanIndian.si.edu.

What we see here are bridges of space and time: I look at an Aztec or Inka piece and know that it could just as well be a contemporary Pueblo piece. What is tradition today was contemporary yesterday, and it can still be both contemporary and traditional.

Jody Folwell
(Santa Clara Pueblo)
The Andes: Embracing Tradition

Almost 4,400 years ago, the ancestors of today’s Andean Native people settled in Ecuador and Colombia. They began making pottery, and this technology spread. Similarities in early ceramics suggest that a large part of the region shared a common religious and ideology. Over time, though, communities developed unique traits based on region and population. Beginning around 1800 BC, as large urban centers developed, potters made significant technological advancements and introduced new vessel forms and decorative techniques. The Inka, the last Andean empire (AD 1400 –1532), standardized ceramic production. Over the 14th-century arrival of the Spanish, potters made pottery mainly for use in the home. Today’s potters continue to use many of the same techniques and motifs common 150 years ago—a testament to Andean cultural continuity.

The Aztec: Rivers of Interaction

In eastern North America—from the St. Lawrence Seaway south to Florida and west to Oklahoma—ceramics reflected the tremendous economic, political, and social changes that Mesoamerican peoples experienced. As Aztec society grew, pottery, and this technology spread. Similarities in early ceramics suggest that a large part of the region shared a common religious and ideology. Over time, though, communities developed unique traits based on region and population. Beginning around 1800 BC, as large urban centers developed, potters made significant technological advancements and introduced new vessel forms and decorative techniques. The Inka, the last Andean empire (AD 1400 –1532), standardized ceramic production. Over the 14th-century arrival of the Spanish, potters made pottery mainly for use in the home. Today’s potters continue to use many of the same techniques and motifs common 150 years ago—a testament to Andean cultural continuity.

About 2,180 years ago, eastern Native people built earthworks and mound complexes. Beginning around 1000 BC, as large urban centers developed, potters made significant technological advancements and introduced new vessel forms and decorative techniques. The Inka, the last Andean empire (AD 1400 –1532), standardized ceramic production. Over the 14th-century arrival of the Spanish, potters made pottery mainly for use in the home. Today’s potters continue to use many of the same techniques and motifs common 150 years ago—a testament to Andean cultural continuity.

Exhibitions at NMAI rely on the strength and authority of Native peoples’ contemporary perspectives, experiences, and knowledge—which the museum calls Native voice. The eight contemporary potters invited to partner with curators at NMAI spoke eloquently of their ceramic and artistic traditions. Together, they developed four themes to represent the relationships, connections, and philosophies that they share as Native potters:

Connections in Clay

The following potters contributed to this exhibition:

- Exaltación Mamani Amaro (Quechua)
- Rubén Aguirio Martínez Martínez (Nahua)
- Al Qöyawayma (Hopi)
- Irma Rodríguez Moroco (Quechua)
- Eleazar Navarrete Ramírez (Nahua)
- Jerredine Redcorn (Caddo/Potawatomi)
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- Naranjo-Morse (Santa Clara, b. 1953). Santa Clara, New Mexico. Photograph courtesy: NMAI
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Reflections of Our Lives: Constructing Narratives

“The clay allows us to transmit our knowledge and our desires. It also helps us recall our grandparents. . . . We can hear the messages our grandparents left for us, and when we use the same designs, we project them into the future”— Exaltación Mamani Amaro (Quechua)

Clay Is Our Life: Materials and Techniques

“Each of us is privileged to be a potter, to be working with the Creator’s materials. If you take care of the clay, it will take care of you. If you try to force the clay, it doesn’t work; it has its own mind.” (Caddo/Potawatomi)

All My Relations: Continuity, Change, and Creativity

“Our pottery is as dynamic as we are. . . . As pottery moves forward, it gains new uses, new buyers, and new artists. It changes and we change.” — Al Qöyawayma (Hopi)

Born of Mother Earth: Knowing Our Worlds

“All potters are born of Mother Earth, and . . . we are brothers and sisters in the clay. No matter where some of these pieces are from, we can identify with their common ideas of love and war, birth, and our humanity.” — Exaltación Mamani Amaro (Quechua)

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