

Lucy Martin Lewis (c. 1902–1992)

Lucy Martin Lewis lived her life as a resident of the Acoma Pueblo in New Mexico. Acoma is located on a high plateau near Albuquerque. From the time Lewis was very young, pottery was a part of her everyday life. Historically among the Pueblo people, women have made and decorated pottery. Like many Pueblo women, Lewis learned her craft by watching and helping her female relatives (her mother and aunt) make and decorate pottery. She never took formal art classes.

Every step of making pottery requires dedication and hard work. Lewis gathered and prepared the clay for her pots. She made each pot by building up the form with coils of clay and then scraping and smoothing it. She covered the pot with slip (liquid clay) and polished it using water and a smooth stone. Lewis also gathered and ground pigment to decorate the pots, painted the complex designs free hand, and fired her pots outdoors. The high heat of firing hardens the clay and sets the decoration. Lewis became known for pots that feature fine, linear geometric patterns that she carefully fit to the shape of the vessel.

Originally, Pueblo pottery was used for ritual purposes or for practical needs, such as holding food or water. It was only within Lewis's lifetime that pottery came to be appreciated as art, and potters began to sign their pots to identify themselves as artists. Lewis began to sign her work in 1950, when she won her first award at the annual Gallup Intertribal Ceremonial. Because Acoma Pueblo potters traditionally did not sign their names, hers was an act of independence, and it generated controversy within the community.

Lewis's life was long and fruitful. Her remarkable energy enabled her to do household chores, help her husband with the farming, and raise nine children, in addition to creating art. In 1960, the artist was struck by lightning. Many thought that she would not be able to continue to work. Lewis gradually regained use of her muscles and limbs, however. She continued to pot well into her 80s. Some of her daughters and grandchildren also create pottery.

Selected Bibliography

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