

# PO'WOH GEH OWINGEH

*"Where The Water Cuts Through"*

by Evelyne Schoenmann



Imagine it is a cloudless day and you are flying from Denver, Colorado, along the Rio Grande southwest towards New Mexico. First you see beneath you a white patchy landscape. On the right, to the west, there is a lot of snow, reaching as far as the Rocky Mountains. The further south you go, the more distinctly the whiteness makes way to the reddish or ochre-coloured fields. Then, when descending into Albuquerque, surrounded by mountain ranges, mainly dried out grassy plains, low juniper shrubs and an explosion of earth tones – red, brown or brownish black, ochre, sand, umbra, vermilion. The houses are almost all adobe style: air-dried mud bricks, hardened and compacted by the sun, which usually shines from a cloudless sky. There is no doubt about it, you have arrived in the Black Mesa.

After the NCECA congress in Kansas

City, in spring of the year 2016, I took exactly this journey to study the ceramic art of the Pueblo peoples. I have been attracted for years to the famous black-on-black ceramics, which is why I did not want to pass up the opportunity to get in touch with the Pueblo potters.

The best overview of the nineteen Pueb-

los in New Mexico, their culture and their crafts can be obtained at the IPCC, the Indian Pueblo Cultural Center in Albuquerque. On a guided tour, Travis Suazo, the Cultural & Community Engagement Officer, and Andrew Thomas, the Native American Art Expert, gave me an extensive introduction to the life and work of the Pueblo peoples



of New Mexico. The Center, which was founded jointly by the nineteen pueblos in 1976, is the gateway to a better understanding of these native Americans and their turbulent history, their culture and their traditions, which survive to this day, not to mention the region as their habitat. In the remarkable collection, there are over 2,500 exquisite artworks of ceramics, basket weaving, carpet weaving, painting, jewellery and photography. In the interior of the IPCC, larger-than-life murals painted by legendary Pueblo artists adorn the walls of a spacious patio. As sales of articles made in the Pueblos is frequently the only source of income for the inhabitants and village communities, who continue to live in the traditional manner, the IPCC houses a well-stocked shop, named Shumak'olowa after the Zuni word for dragonfly or water creatures. Dragonflies are considered by the Pueblo dwellers to be messengers who speak to the thunder and the clouds to bring moisture for the dry landscape and blessings for the people. For outsiders it is also very impressive to be allowed to attend the performances of the Pueblo people's rituals. From time immemorial, they have celebrated seasonal cycles with prayers, songs and dances. These impressive, moving dances are a bridge between the living pueblo peoples and their ancestors – they are a supplication for water and, at the same time, expressions of gratitude to the creator. On the artwork of the Pueblo dwellers, we see accordingly motifs with a profound meaning. Thus animal motifs with a heart line are to be found, representing life's breath or the soul, feathers, lightning flashes, or water, represented as waves, which is so precious as the rainfall often fails. A richly decorated ceramic vessel can show a connected narrative if you know how to read the signs!

I learned this and very much more at a private meeting with Eric (Than Tsidéh-sunbird) Fender. Accompanied by Ira Wilson (IPCC Native Arts Manager), I travelled to San

The photos show Eric handbuilding his ceramic objects and painting traditional motifs on them.



Ildefonso Pueblo reservation near Santa Fé to spend several hours with Eric and his ceramics. The first thing I noticed was that Eric had prepared meticulously for our meeting and had very kindly spread out on a table everything he needed for his explanations and demonstrations: raw materials, stones, bowls with ground, screened clay as well as prepared vegetable paints and pieces in various stages of completion and drying, etc. Firstly he told me how the clay is dug – it is considered a gift from Mother Earth and is correspondingly highly valued.

This is why potters thank the “clay mother” when they are looking for clay by throwing grains of corn on the ground as a gift. The location of clay deposits is often passed on from generation to generation and kept secret within the extended family. When it has been dug, the clay is then dried and pounded and screened to form a fine-grained powder. Then, depending on Pueblo, potter and tradition, it is mixed with volcanic ash, basalt, sand or clay shards, water is added and then it is kneaded to form plastic body. Eric mixes the clay and the shortening in equal parts before he wraps it and leaves it for three months before he works with it.

To form his objects, Eric uses an unglazed bowl, known as a puki, as the starting point. He begins every bowl by beating a piece of clay between his hands until it is as flat as a tortilla and then lays it in the base of the puki. Then, with rhythmic hand gestures, he forms clay coils and builds up the walls of the bowl in his own special kneading and pinching technique. He smooths the outer surface with the repeated use of a kitchen knife. In fact, I see no exotic tools on his table. Everything has either been homemade or is found in nature, such as the many pebbles smoothed in a stream, which he uses to burnish the bowls. When he shows me these pebbles, he speaks with great reverence of his great-great-aunt, the



famous potter Maria Martinez from San Ildefonso. His grandmother learned the potter's craft from Maria Martinez, who, with her husband Julian, invented the black-on-black technique, and passed her skills on to her descendents. Eric learned his



photos - IPCC, Albuquerque, Evelyn Schoenmann and Stefan Schmidlin, Basel

trade from his mother, Martha Appleleaf and his grandmother Carmelita Dunlap. He works exclusively in the San Ildefonso style, in black-on-black as well as the almost-forgotten polychrome technique. For this he first sands the objects and then rubs in a reddish slip, which he burnishes with smooth pebbles, before he paints the surface using brushes he has made himself. When I asked him what kind of hair he uses for the brushes, he pointed at his hip-length plait with a mischievous grin.

Each of Eric's designs is unique and flows spontaneously from his heart. To

find a suitable paint, he searched for a long time before deciding on the Rocky Mountain bee plant (cleome serrulata), which first has to be boiled to thicken it. The paint dries very quickly on the pot so it is essential to work carefully. The designs on his bowls are often mythological beings such as water snakes as a supplication for water and rain, but also clouds (water), lightning (water), feathers (sun) or eyes (reincarnation). He fires his work in exactly the same way as his great-great-aunt Maria Martinez and is traditional

in San Ildefonso. The fuel, which achieves and maintains these high temperatures is cow dung. He also uses juniper wood. For red ware, the cow dung is removed as soon as the correct temperature has been reached and the ware is then allowed to cool. If Eric

wants to make black-on-black ceramics, he tips tubs full of horse manure on the firing until no smoke can be seen. It is important that no reduction material like the horse manure comes into direct contact with the ware. After about an hour, the horse manure is shovelled away and the black-fired ceramics are fished out of the heap of dung and allowed to cool. It is very important to Eric to maintain tradition and to pass it on to his children. What particularly impressed me was his calm, contemplative, rhythmic

way of working, his modesty and the relaxed way he made his explanations, his steady hand when he was painting and the profound rootedness in the traditions of his home. For me, potters like the Pueblo people of San Ildefonso and Eric Than Tsidéh Fender are the true masters of our craft.

[www.saniPueblo.org](http://www.saniPueblo.org) | [www.indianPueblo.org](http://www.indianPueblo.org)  
[www.shumakolowa.com](http://www.shumakolowa.com)

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