

# Andrea Fisher

---

Fine Pottery

## Acoma Pueblo



*Sky City*

According to Acoma oral history, the sacred twins led the ancestors to "Ako," a magical mesa composed mostly of white rock, to be their home. Acoma Pueblo is called "Sky City" because of its position atop the mesa. Acoma lays claim to being the oldest continuously inhabited community in the U.S. It is located about 60 miles west of Albuquerque.

While the people of Acoma have an oral tradition that says they've been living in the same area for more than 2,000 years, archaeologists feel more that the present pueblo was established near the end of the major migrations in the 1300's. The location is essentially on the boundary between the Mogollon (Mimbres), Hohokam (Salado) and Anasazi (Ancestral Pueblo) cultures. Each of those cultures has had an impact on the styles and designs of Acoma pottery, especially since modern potters have been getting the inspiration for many of their designs from pot shards they have found while walking on pueblo lands.

Francisco Vasquez de Coronado ascended the cliff to visit Acoma in 1540. He afterward wrote that he "repented having gone up to the place." But the Spanish came back later and kept coming back. By 1598 relations between the Spanish and the Acoma had deteriorated to the point where a group of Acoma warriors attacked a group of Spanish soldiers, killing 11 of them. Don Juan de Oñate retaliated by attacking the pueblo, burning most of it and killing more than 600 people. Another 500 people were imprisoned by the Spanish, males between the ages of 12 and 25 were sold into slavery and 24 men over the age of 25 had their right foot amputated. Many of the women over the age of 12 were also forced into slavery and were parceled out among Catholic convents in Mexico City. Two Hopi men were also captured at Acoma and, after having one hand cut off, they were released and sent home to spread the word about Spain's resolve to subjugate the inhabitants of Nuevo Mexico.

When word of the massacre (and the punishments meted out after) got back to King Philip in Spain, he banished Don Juan de Oñate from Nuevo Mexico. Some Acomas were able to escape the Spanish attack and returned to the mesa top in 1599 to begin rebuilding.

In 1620 a Royal Decree was issued which established civil offices in each pueblo and Acoma had its first governor appointed. By 1680, the situation between the pueblos and the Spanish had deteriorated again to the point where the Acomas were extremely willing participants in the 1680 Pueblo Revolt.

After the Spanish had retreated back to Mexico, refugees from other pueblos began to arrive at Acoma, fearing the eventual Spanish return and probable reprisals. That strained the resources of Acoma until a few years later, most of those refugees relocated to found Laguna and make peace with the Spanish as soon as the Spanish reappear in the region.

Over the next 200 years, Acoma suffered from breakouts of smallpox and other European diseases to which they had no immunity. At times they would side with the Spanish against nomadic raiders from the Ute, Apache and Comanche tribes. Eventually New Mexico changed hands, then the railroads

arrived and Acoma became dependent on goods made in the outside world.

For many years the villagers were content on the mesa. Now most live in villages on the valley floor where water, electricity and other necessities are easily available while a few families still make their permanent home on the mesa top. The old pueblo is used almost exclusively these days for ceremonial celebrations.

Acoma's dense, slate-like clay, allows the pottery to be thin, lightweight and durable. After the pot is formed, it is painted with a slip of white clay. Black and red design motifs are added using mineral and plant derived paints. Fine lines, geometrics, parrots and old Mimbres designs are commonly seen motifs. The traditional paintbrush for Acoma potters is made from the yucca plant.

Historically Acoma was known for large, thin-walled "ollas", jars used for storage and water. With the arrival of the railroad and tourists in the 1880's, Acoma potters adapted the size, shapes and styles of their pots in order to appeal to the new buyers.

Acoma Pueblo is home to noted potters of the Lewis and Chino families, as well as many others. Acoma potters felt it was an inappropriate display of ego to put their signature on a pot up into the mid-1960's. The 1960's is also a time when the primary white clay vein mined by the Acomas passed through a layer of widely distributed impurities, impurities that passed through the pottery making process and appeared only in the firing. Or worse yet, sometimes well after firing. The clay problem was so bad it affected virtually every potter in the pueblo and every pot they made. So many pots spalled that even the best potters sold them anyway, often signed. Thankfully, by the late 1960's they had dug through that layer of clay and into a layer without the problem.



Acoma Pueblo c. 1923  
Courtesy Museum of New Mexico Neg. No. 57804



Acoma Pueblo c. 1932 Photo by T. Harmon Parkhurst Neg. No. 2049  
Courtesy Museum of New Mexico

**For more info:**

Acoma Pueblo at Wikipedia

Pueblo of Acoma official website

*Pueblos of the Rio Grande*, Daniel Gibson, ISBN-13:978-1-887896-26-9, Rio Nuevo Publishers, 2001

Upper photo courtesy of Marshall Henrie, Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported License

---

**100 West San Francisco Street, Santa Fe, New Mexico 87501 (505) 986-1234**  
**[www.andreafisherpottery.com](http://www.andreafisherpottery.com)**