

Andrea Fisher

Fine Pottery

Navajo Nation



A view in Monument Valley

Historical and archaeological evidence points to the Navajo people entering the Southwest around 1400 AD. Their oral history still contains stories of that migration as the journey began in eastern Alaska and northwestern Canada centuries after their ancestors made the journey across the Bering Land Bridge from central Asia about 10,000 years ago. They were primarily hunter-gatherers until they came into contact with the Pueblo peoples and learned the basics of survival in this drier climate. Navajo oral history points to a long relationship between the Navajo and the Puebloans as they learned from and traded with each other.

When the Spanish first arrived, the Navajo occupied much of the area between the San Francisco Peaks (in Arizona), Hesperus Mountain and Blanca Peak (in Colorado) and Mount Taylor (in New Mexico). Spanish records indicate the Navajo traded bison meat, hides and stone to the Puebloans in exchange for maize and woven cotton goods. It was the Spanish who brought sheep to the New World and the Navajo took to sheep-herding quickly with sheep becoming a form of currency and sign of wealth.

When the Americans arrived in 1846, things began to change. The first fifteen years were marked by broken treaties and increasing raids and animosities on both sides. Finally, Brigadier General James H. Carleton ordered Colonel Kit Carson to round up the Navajo and transport them to Bosque Redondo in eastern New Mexico for internment. Carson succeeded only by engaging in a scorched earth campaign in which his troops swept through Navajo country killing anyone carrying a weapon and destroying any crops, livestock and dwellings they found. Facing starvation and death, the last band of Navajo surrendered at Canyon de Chelly.

Carson's campaign then led straight into "the Long Walk" to Bosque Redondo, a 300-mile trek during which at least 10% of the people died along the way. At Bosque Redondo they discovered the government had not allocated an adequate supply of water, livestock, provisions or firewood to support the 4,000-5,000 people interned there. The Army also did little to protect the Navajo from raids by other tribes or by Anglo citizens. The failure was such that the Federal government and the Navajo negotiated a treaty that allowed the people to return to a reservation that was only a shadow of their former territory little more than a couple years after they had left. However, succeeding years have seen additions to the reservation until today it is the largest Native American Reservation in the 48 contiguous states.

Large deposits of uranium were discovered on the Navajo Nation after World War II but the mining that followed ignored basic environmental protection for the workers, waterways and land. The Navajo have made claims of high rates of cancer and lung disease from the environmental contamination but the Federal government has yet to offer comprehensive compensation.

As a semi-nomadic tribe, the Navajo never made much pottery, preferring to use baskets for most storage purposes. They did produce a small amount of pottery for ceremonial uses. Once they were settled on a reservation, pottery began to make more sense. After 1950 Cow Springs brownware began to appear on the market. A trader named Bill Beaver was in Shonto back then, encouraging local potters to "make something different" and the market in the outside world responded positively to those different creations.

Rose Williams is considered the matriarch of modern Navajo pottery. She learned from Grace Barlow (her aunt) and passed her knowledge and experience on to her daughters and many others. Today, most Navajo pottery is heavy, thick-walled and coated with pine pitch (a sealer they also use on many of their baskets). Most Navajo pottery has little in the way of decoration but many pieces have a *biyo'* (a traditional decorative fillet) around the rim. Unlike Puebloan potters Navajo potters do not grind up old pot shards and use them for temper in creating new pottery. Their religion says those pot shards are filled with the spirits of their ancestors and forbids the reuse of the material. Similarly, Navajo religion limits Navajo potters to using primarily Navajo carpet designs in the decoration of their pots.

Navajo potters have also created a panoply of folk art, including unfired clay creations called "mud toys." Other Navajo potters, like Christine McHorse, have graduated into the mainstream of American Ceramic Art and easily compete among the finest ceramic artists on Earth.

For more info:

[Navajo Nation at Wikipedia](#)

[Navajo people at Wikipedia](#)

[Navajo Nation Government official website](#)

100 West San Francisco Street, Santa Fe, New Mexico 87501 (505) 986-1234
www.andreafisherpottery.com