

Andrea Fisher

Fine Pottery

Storytellers



Historically, clay figures have been present in the Pueblo pottery tradition for most of the last thousand years. However, figures and effigies were denounced as "works of the devil" by the Spanish missionaries in New Mexico between 1540 and 1820. Before and after that time the art of making figurative sculpture flourished, especially at Cochiti Pueblo. The forms of animals, birds and caricatures of outsiders and, more recently, of images of mothers and grandfathers telling stories and singing to children have multiplied.

The "storyteller" is an important role in the tribe as parents are often too busy working and raising kids to pass on their tribal histories and the Native American people did not have a written language to record anything for posterity. The closest thing they had to a written language was pottery and the designs that decorated that pottery. So the storyteller's role was to preserve and retell and pass down the oral history of his people. In most tribes that role was fulfilled by men.

The first real storyteller figure was created in 1964 by Cochiti Pueblo potter Helen Cordero in memory of her grandfather, Santiago Quintana. She gathered her clay from a secret sacred place on the lands of her pueblo. Then she hand-coiled, hand painted and fired that first storyteller figure the traditional way: in the ground. Helen never used any molds or kilns to make her pottery.

Helen's creation struck a chord throughout all the pueblos as the storyteller is a figure central to all their societies. Most tribes also have the figure of the Singing Maiden in their pantheon and in many cases, the mix of Singing Maiden and Storyteller has blurred some lines in the pottery world. Today, as many as three hundred potters in thirteen pueblos have created storytellers, and their storytellers are not only men and women, but also Santa's, mudheads, koshares, bears, owls and other animals, often encumbered with children numbering more than one hundred! Each potter has also customized their storyteller figures to more closely reflect the styles and dress of their own tribes, sometimes even of their own clans.

