

Andrea Fisher

Fine Pottery

Tony Da

San Ildefonso



Tony Da (1940-2008) was the son of Popovi Da and grandson of Maria Martinez. He grew up surrounded by some of the finest potters and painters at San Ildefonso Pueblo and his early education emphasized those traditional arts. He lived with his grandmother Maria while his father was in the Army during World War II and she felt great promise in him as an artist. When he started school, though, it was quickly felt that he was most likely dyslexic. After finishing his first eight years in the Pojoaque Valley schools, he moved on to St. Michael's High School in Santa Fe. He was unhappy there and transferred to Santa Fe High where he graduated in 1958. He then attended Western New Mexico College (in Silver City) for a year before joining the US Navy for four years. It was at Western New Mexico that he was exposed to Mimbres pottery and its imagery and that made a life-long impression on him. It was also at Western New Mexico that he was exposed to modern methods of painting and ceramics production.

When he returned to San Ildefonso in 1964 he became fascinated with the pottery that his grandmother and father were creating together. At that time he apprenticed himself to Maria and began learning to make pottery in earnest. His progress was such that three years later his works appeared alongside Maria's and Popovi's in the *Three Generations Show* at the US Department of the Interior in Washington, DC. In 1967 he also had his first booth at the Gallup InterTribal Ceremonials. He took eight pieces of his art to the show and earned four 1st Place ribbons and one 2nd Place ribbon for pottery, two more 1st Place ribbons in painting and one more in sculpture. One of his paintings and one of his pots also received "Excellent" ribbons.

Tony didn't produce a lot of pottery during his short career and he mainly produced redware, blackware and two-tone bowls, plates, jars, turtles and bears. His favorite designs seem to have been kokopelli, *avanyu* (water serpent), buffalo, bear and cloud, sometimes painted and sometimes etched (sgraffito).

Tony was able to build something new on the foundation of his family, who had built something new on the foundation of their predecessors. His work has been called inspired and innovative and it has made an enormous impact on modern pueblo ceramics, especially at San Ildefonso and Santa Clara. Tony was the first Pueblo potter to inlay strands of heishi, coral and turquoise beads, often in incised channels around the tall necks of vases. He also painted and incised designs found on ancient Mimbres pottery. In the late 1960's he was developing low relief sgraffito designs. He also became

famous for his two-tone pottery bear fetishes, often wrapped and inlaid with channel beading. He participated in the SWAIA Santa Fe Indian Market between 1967 and 1976, earning several 1st Place ribbons for his pottery.

In an interview in 1971 Tony said, "If my work is satisfactory to me then I am content. I do it mostly for my own pleasure." He also famously said, "I'm not really influenced by current trends. I do what I like. I learned pottery making from my grandmother but I have never had any lessons in painting. That is all self-taught. I use a lot of drafting in my paintings and the style is the same. A crooked line bothers me. I can't make a crooked line."

On April 15, 1982, Tony had a motorcycle accident on a gravel road that caused a severe brain injury. It didn't end his life but it ended his pottery-making career. He was able to continue painting but his creations were much simpler and didn't have the depth of field of his previous work. Like his father before him, he was a perfectionist and he'd felt he was about to make an extraordinary breakthrough in his work before the accident. Who knows what he might have achieved had he been wearing a helmet that fateful day.

Tony Da's influence has been such that *The Life and Art of Tony Da* was first published in 2011 and passed through ten printings very quickly. That same year the Museum of Indian Arts and Culture in Santa Fe opened *Creative Spark! The Life and Art of Tony Da*, the largest and most comprehensive showing ever of Tony Da paintings and pottery. Some of the works shown had never been seen in public before.

Tony's wife Lou died before he did. His son Jarrod Da is a renowned painter who is forging into new areas in Native American painting while Tony's daughter Royale Da is a news anchor with one of the network television stations in Albuquerque.

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