



Joshua Madalena uses traditional tools and materials to create his pots. Yucca fronds function as paintbrushes, cornhusks serve as sandpaper, and sherds from earlier efforts provide spiritual guidance (opposite).



Ancestral Inspiration

Voices from the past inspire a Jemez Pueblo artist to revive a lost tradition

The wind that whips through the red-rock canyons and across the high, flat mesas of Jemez Pueblo does more than stir the trees’ branches and animate their leaves. To those who know how to listen, it carries the voices of the spirits who have watched over this pueblo through centuries of strife and conflict, healing and rebirth. Pueblo resident Joshua Madalena welcomes these voices as his guides on a singular quest: to revive the ancient art of black-on-white pottery that his people were forced to abandon more than 300 years ago. “Jemez is a very traditional pueblo,” says Madalena. “Ninety-five percent of us speak Towa, the old language, and our connection to our culture is strong. The majority of the pottery made here is a fairly recent version, from the early 1900s. The black-on-white pottery of our ancestors was created between the 14th and late 17th centuries, but hasn’t been made since.” Madalena explains how the distinctive style of pottery arose at the time his predecessors came from the Four Corners area to occupy the Jemez region. The thin-walled vessels featured a white slip decorated with painted designs depicting key spiritual elements of daily

pueblo life, such as corn, feathers, and the steps of a kiva. “The ascending kiva steps, for example, symbolize the journey to the after-life, while those coming down pertain to rebirth and the reentry into this world,” he says. At the time of the Spanish reconquest of New Mexico in 1692, the people of Jemez made a conscious decision to end the production of black-on-white pottery to protect their precious spiritual expression from being desecrated by raiding soldiers who appropriated the pots, bowls, and jugs for their own use. Utilitarian pottery continued to be produced, but the decorative and symbolic black-on-white ware, which embodied the culture’s identity, was put on hold until such time as the Spanish left and the old ways could be resumed. “Of course, it turns out the Spanish didn’t leave,” continues Madalena. “So, eventually, the secrets of the production techniques were lost to memory.” Madalena’s interest in black-on-white pottery sprang from his deep connection to his culture and a desire to revitalize the pueblo way of life for future generations. He has served as both lieutenant war captain and lieutenant governor at Jemez Pueblo, and is currently an



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elected county commissioner. He also is working to restore the ancient kiva at the Jemez State Monument, which has been buried since the early 17th century. In 1999, Madalena coordinated the repatriation and reburial of his Pecos Pueblo ancestors—many of whom had relocated to Jemez Pueblo in 1838—in one of the largest repatriations in U.S. history. Evelyn Vigil, Madalena’s grandmother, is credited with rediscovering the Pecos-style pottery, so it was natural for Madalena to pursue a revival of his ancestors’ art on his home turf. “It was an insult to my culture for us to hear from archaeologists that Jemez had no living art,” he explains, “so I began my quest to prove them wrong and to find my identity.”

He started by mining his memory for details of locations that had been transmitted via his people’s oral tradition. “My grandmother was a fabulous storyteller,” he relates, “and I began to realize that her stories, which I recall vividly, contained clues that could lead me to the sacred sites where the clay and tuff were mined, and where the plants used for dyes grew.”

Madalena also consulted pueblo elders for their stories, then began searching the mountains and desert for the areas that would yield the ingredients used in the long-lost formula. “I’d visit the places my grandmother and others talked about and meditate there to connect with the spirits, asking for guidance. I started by looking for the appropriate clays and tuff—volcanic ash. To get the mixture just right, you not only need the exact ingredients, but you also have to know the proper proportions of each one. Those ancestors were highly intelligent people, and they had perfected the use of these elements in the appropriate measures. I spent years working on getting it right—mining the different clays, grinding them, sifting them, testing them. After determining which clay to use, I started working with the additive, the tuff. I’d break it down and grind it, and then work to achieve the right mix of tuff and clay.”

The next step was to recreate the slip that gives the pots their white color. Only a few, very rare, slip clays can hold the organic paint. “I searched for the mine where they found the material,” Madalena continues, “and then had to learn how to polish it to get the right surface. After that came the paints, which are derived from plant materials. Most pueblo potters use Rocky Mountain bee weed, and so do I—but I also use two other plants whose identities I won’t reveal.” The paint goes on brown, but in the firing process turns black because of the chemical constituents of the plants. The paint soaks into the vessel’s surface before firing, and the design’s black color is caused by carbon trapped within the white slip’s polished surface. “If the wrong plants are used, you won’t get the black color, and sometimes the paint will pop and crack.”

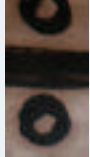
In crafting the pots, Madalena learned the traditional coil-and-scrape method of shaping the vessels by hand without the aid of a wheel or other tools. He ground the ingredients with the stone mortar and pestle of his ancestors and crafted paintbrushes out of yucca, whose own chemicals mix with those of the paint to enhance it. “It was important for me to honor my predecessors by following their procedures as exactly as possible,” he says. He then set about learning the proper techniques for firing the pots. “You need to assess the air temperature and the force of the wind to know whether it’s a good day for firing,” he explains. “I learned to listen to the wind, to hear the spirits, so I’d know when the moment was right.”

No kiln is involved in the process; an open fire is built, then allowed

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Design motifs symbolize key aspects of Pueblo culture—among them kiva steps, plants, and corn kernels.



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Madalena shapes his pots by hand using the coil-and-scrape method of his ancestors. He derives his paints from area plants and applies them with a yucca brush. Firing takes place only when the wind, air temperature, and the heat of the coals are all optimal.



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to die down to glowing embers so that the pots can be placed among them and covered with ash. “If the wind is right, it will keep the charcoal hot enough to fire them without burning,” explains Madalena. “After the firing, it takes about 12 hours for the pots to cool. If you take them out too soon, they can pop or crack. Firing is always a tricky business—you’re entering unknown territory. If the spirits allow it, it will happen the right way. You have to learn to live with the disappointment if they don’t come out perfectly. The spirits have their reasons.”

Madalena gestures to a large pot he’d worked on for three months, only to have it crack during firing. “It was a huge letdown, but I must accept it,” he shrugs. “I don’t ponder why a particular pot wasn’t allowed to be finished, I just carry on with the next. Anyway,” he adds, “imperfections are a part of the ancient ones’ pots, too. I’m not trying to be too perfect. It would be disrespectful to my ancestors to suggest that my work is better than theirs.”

Madalena’s mission to revive the lost art finally was realized in the summer of 2005, after he’d spent six years patiently researching through trial and error. According to Eric Blinman, an archaeologist with the Museum of New Mexico, Madalena’s is an achievement of major significance, similar to what Maria Martinez accomplished in the revival of Tewa polished black pottery.

“Joshua Madalena has succeeded in replicating the Jemez black-on-white techniques,” affirms Blinman. “His painstaking experimentation with clays, paints, and firing techniques has captured the essence of the ancestral pottery. His designs and forms are drawn from the ancient vessels, and his raw materials are true to the landscape of the Jemez Mountains. We are witness to a true revival, both of a technical process and of an essential historical element of Jemez culture.”

Madalena believes in the importance of integrating the past into the present as a means of establishing a sense of self, both for individuals and for the culture as a whole. “This pottery is my people’s identity, my personal identity,” he says. “Now I know who I am. And it’s time for the world to know that Jemez black-on-white is back!” ❁

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