



Zuni Jar

Unknown Zuni artist

ca. 1900

Diam.: 12.75 in; H: 10.25 in

T0455

<https://collections.fenimoreart.org/objects/1091/jar?ctx=69d24fd4bedaa0e114c8925045103348c2dcfb99&idx=0>

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This is a Zuni olla, used to carry and store water. The unglazed ceramic body allows the water to slowly evaporate, cooling the water within [1]. In Shiwi'ma, the Zuni language, a water jar of this shape is called *kāh'-wi-nā-kä-tehl-le*, based on reports from anthropologists working at Zuni contemporary to this jar's creation [2]. The jar is made of coiled clay, likely tempered with old pottery sherds, consistent with Zuni pottery techniques [3]. The clay is covered with a white slip and then painted with black and red designs, using a yucca brush and paints made from hematite, clay, and plant material [4].

The decoration of the jar is in the “deer in feather house” style, one common to Zuni pottery [5]. However, the deer on this jar are spotted, a rare occurrence. This may be meant to represent young fawns, who have spotted fur until they mature [6]. The artist has also varied the deer, giving each one a unique personality through differently shaped ears and varied construction of the hindquarters. This differentiation demonstrates the artist's familiarity with the animal, understanding the deer's growth and variety through careful observation.

In 1879, a Smithsonian expedition to the Southwest collected more than six thousand objects, including more than a thousand Zuni pots. Subsequent expeditions over the following decade, intent on developing a comprehensive array of pottery for study and display in Washington D.C., collected over four thousand more works of Zuni pottery [7]. This and subsequent expeditions wiped out the community's supply of pottery, driving up the market for Zuni pottery and creating variations in colors and patterns, as Zuni potters had few samples left to learn from [8]. As Zuni pottery became more valuable and sought after, many dealers and collectors began to worry about a perceived decline in technique. They believed that the rising availability of consumers, including the tourist market and curio trade, both brought to Zuni via the newly installed railroads, created a huge volume of production that could not sustain previous levels of quality [9]. These dealers' beliefs, justified or not, may account for the shop label on the bottom of this jar, which identifies it as an “old Navajo jar” sold in 1902 in Albuquerque, New Mexico. The jar is quintessentially Zuni and certainly not Navajo, and was likely created between 1880 and 1900, based on the designs. By misrepresenting the jar's origins and age, the seller would avoid questions about the perceived decline in Zuni pottery, making the jar much more salable.

The jar faced several changes in use throughout its life. The shape is utilitarian, designed to be used in the home to nourish the family with water, an important resource in the dry climate of the Zuni homeland. However, the jar was sold to a dealer – perhaps the maker intended this when the jar was made, but perhaps not. Either way, the jar changed from an essential household object to a commodity, part of a growing tourism market. The object passed through unknown hands, sold and resold, before ending up in the possession of Eugene Thaw, a major collector of Native American art. There, its use changed, from a commodity to a masterwork, an exemplar of Zuni pottery in a collection that sought to record a wide breadth of Indigenous art forms. Despite these changes, the jar has retained its essential function as a container, now holding memories of Zuni history and artistic practice to be tapped by scholars and museum visitors, rather than the water that jars of this shape once held.

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Endnotes:

[1] Dwight P. Lanmon, Lorraine Welling Lanmon, and Dominique Coulet du Gard, *Josephine Foard and the Glazed Pottery of Laguna Pueblo* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2007), 76.

[2] Edward A. Chappell, "Pride Flared Up: Zuni (A:Shiwi) Pottery and the Nahohai Family," *Ceramics in America*, 2015.

[3] Dwight P. Lanmon and Francis H. Harlow, *The Pottery of Zuni Pueblo* (Santa Fe: Museum of New Mexico Press, 2008), 51–52.

[4] *Ibid.*, 53.

[5] *Ibid.*, 257.

[6] Identification of the fawn courtesy of Mia McKie, a fellow participant in Otsego 2019. These fawns are similar in pattern but distinct in facial structure from those identified in Dwight P. Lanmon and Francis H. Harlow, *The Pottery of Zuni Pueblo* (Santa Fe: Museum of New Mexico Press, 2008), 262-265

[7] Nancy J. Parezo, "Cushing as Part of the Team: The Collecting Activities of the Smithsonian Institution," *American Ethnologist* 12, no. 4 (1985): 765, and Jonathan Batkin, comment to the author, August 2, 2019.

[8] Jonathan Batkin, *Pottery of the Pueblos of New Mexico, 1700-1940* (Colorado Springs, Colorado: The Taylor Museum of the Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center, 1987), 30.

[9] Jonathan Batkin, *The Native American Curio Trade in New Mexico* (Santa Fe: Wheelwright Museum of the American Indian, 2008), vii–viii, and Richard O. Clemmer, "The Leisure Class versus the Tourists: The Hidden Struggle in the Collecting of Pueblo Pottery at the Turn of the Twentieth Century Richard," *History and Anthropology* 19, no. 3 (2008): 187–88.

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