

## Materials and Tools of Native American Artists and Technicians

Adapted from Nativetech.org

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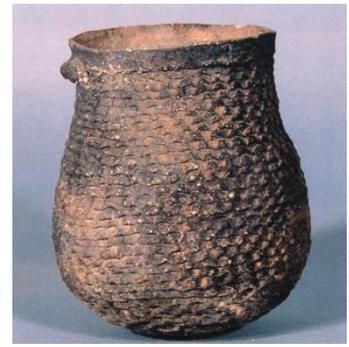


Figure 1: Pre-historic Pueblo pottery  
([www.cla.perdue.edu](http://www.cla.perdue.edu))

- 1 A comprehensive knowledge of the natural world is evident in Native American art of the prehistoric and early historic periods. Traditionally, the raw materials used for craft were also important sources for food, medicine or their preparation. Before European contact, some of the materials available to Natives across the continent were metals & minerals of the earth - stone & clay, the fiber and juice from wild plants, the wood, bark & roots from innumerable trees and plants, the fur, hair, quills, feathers, teeth, bones, antlers, fur & animal hides, and literally anything else found in the natural environment of pre-17th century America. With the invasion of Europeans also came a wave of new raw materials: glass beads & other products, ceramic glazes, metal alloys & tools, imported textiles, and by-products associated with animal domestication such as cloth, looms, & commercial dyes and pigments. With the inundation of European people came foreign animals and plants - often so invasive and adaptable to the new environment that indigenous colonies were forced into extinction.
- 2 European contact caused many traditional Native American crafts to diminish in production - sometimes because Natives could no longer obtain the right raw materials, and sometimes because people had to put their energies elsewhere to survive. But since European contact, Native Americans have developed new art forms, many of which build upon older traditions, using modified materials or techniques taken from Europeans. Incorporation of post-contact materials, such as metal, glass, commercial dyes and cloth, as well as acquisition of new European craft techniques, inspired new or more modern touches to art, such as metal work, updated basketry, faster weaving methods, etc.
- 3 Recently, European markets for Native American art have developed into huge international industries, jewelry, sculpture, pottery, splint basketry -- but it seems with each generation there are fewer and fewer children interested in the knowledge of their parents - some types of traditional forms of art are disappearing.
- 4 About 1650 a Native elder in New England complained that "a long time ago, they [the Indians] had wise men, which in a grave manner taught the people knowledge; but they are dead, and their wisdom is buried with them, and now men live a giddy life, in ignorance, till they are white headed, and though ripe in years, yet then they go without wisdom to their graves. (Handbook of North American Indians, vol.15, 1978).
- 5 Prehistoric Native American art was produced from materials of the natural environment, often expressed as the embellishment of utilitarian items. Although made from materials of the earth, this art was much more than a mere product of nature. The artisans consciously intended to arrange something that did not naturally-occur in their environment. In some cases, the introduction of European tools and materials facilitated the production of traditional art forms, but at the same time transformed traditional meanings.

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- 6 To be more than utilitarian, an item is invested with meaning that goes beyond its everyday use. Embellished objects provide information about the artist or the society to which he belongs. Many so-called 'utilitarian' objects such as ball-headed war clubs inlaid with wampum, are invested with so much symbolic meaning such as political prestige or power, that the object becomes less utilitarian to a Native American. An item may be embellished to this point no longer functions in its original or traditional context.

Original article found at <http://www.nativetech.org/art/artmater.html>