

## Pottery

Pottery making is a tradition that has been practiced by people all over the world for thousands and thousands of years. Some of the oldest fired clay figurines date to approximately 25,000 years ago. The first fired clay containers were made roughly 19,000 years ago, in what is now China. In the US Southwest, pottery vessels are known from as far back as 200 CE.

Because of its durability, pottery lasts a long time and is a very important tool for archaeologists, providing clues about the behavior and daily life of past cultures. It also provides a timeline to determine how old artifacts found at an excavation are.



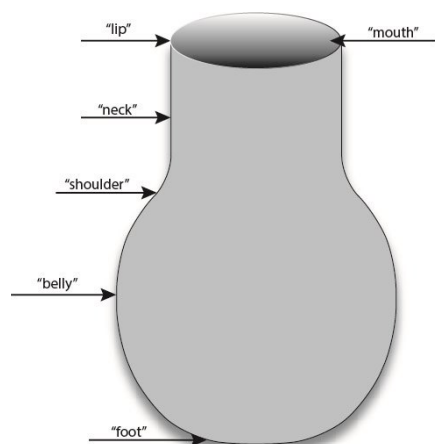
Maxwell Museum 70.60.9  
Wingate black-on-red bowl



Pottery comes in all sorts of shapes, sizes and designs. The shape of pottery can give clues to its use. Some pottery functions as bowls, cooking pots, storage containers, cups, pitchers and more. Can you guess what some of the pottery pictured here is used for?

Sometimes the designs or other markings on the pot will give a clue about its use. Ceremonial pots can have special designs on them and cooking pots may have scorch marks from a fire. Some pots have no designs on them at all and are thought to have been used for everyday tasks.

Making pottery is a multi-step process that involves collecting and processing materials, shaping the pot and finally decorating and firing the pot. See below for a story and worksheets about the pottery making process. Some potters consider their creations as children, naming the parts of the pot with terms from the human body. Can you name the parts of the pot on the right below?



Maxwell Museum 72.10.39  
Chaco black-on-white pitcher

## Make your own pottery!

1. Design a pot
  - a. Use one of the worksheets on the following pages to design your own pot. This video shows how you can use yucca paintbrushes to make your design.



- b. Visit our [website](#) or search online for other pottery designs for inspiration. See below for links to other pottery collections.
2. Clay pot making

- a. Use any clay you have and shape your own pot. Don't have any clay at home? Then make your own with this [recipe](#).
  - b. Check out this [video](#) to see how traditional pottery in the SW is made.
  - c. And here are [instructions](#) for making your own Pueblo inspired pot.



Maxwell Museum 72.43.140  
Ramos polychrome jar

## MAKUTRA FINDS THE CLAY

The little girl, Makutra, followed her mother. She liked to watch her mother's footprints in the damp sand of the wash. She looked back at her own smaller prints and smiled to herself. She and her mother were looking for clay, the earth that could be made into jugs, pots, and dishes. Makutra felt proud that her mother wanted her help. Her mother was looked up to in the village as a fine potter. Her mother was going to teach her how to make a pot; but first, there was a lot to do to get ready.

Makutra's village stood on the mesa above the wash. When it rained in the mountains, Makutra and the other children in the village liked to look over the rim of the mesa into the wash and watch water tumble through the small canyon. But now the wash was almost dry and the sky was bright blue. It was safe to walk up the wash today. Makutra's mother had seen a vein of clay along the high wall of the wash. She wanted to find it again and dig some out to try out before she asked the villagers to bring a large amount. Summer was almost over and it was time to bring in clay to prepare for making pots. During the cold days, the women could make the pots the village needed for use and perhaps, trade.

"My mother," Makutra said, "is that what we are looking for?" She pointed to a grayish-white place along the light brown walls of the small canyon. Makutra's mother smiled, "What sharp eyes you have, my daughter. I'm glad you are with me."

They stopped and looked around them to mark the spot and their distance from the village so they could bring the villagers back to collect the clay if it was good. Then they took the wooden paddles and rocks they had brought and dug out some of the clay. It was hard to get out. Makutra and her mother talked to the clay as they worked it. They told about what good things the clay would bring to the village and how much the clay was valued by them.

Finally, they had enough to put in their yucca basket to try out at home. Smiling at each other, they took their tools, their basket with the clay and walked back to the village.

Makutra was proud that she had helped her mother find the clay. That night she fell asleep with a smile on her face as she dreamed of making her first small pot.

—Jean C. Brody

### **STEPS TAKEN TO MAKE A POT:**

1. **Find a source of clay** (knowing the trail from the village to the source).
2. **Gather the clay** (with the appropriate tools, prayers and people's power).
3. **Carry the clay back to the village** (clay can be very heavy—think of carrying a bucket of sand).
4. **Dry and clean the clay** (both men and women probably did this work).
5. **Store the clay**—keeping it dry for future use.
6. **Prepare the dry clay for making pottery** by grinding the clay and adding water and temper (sand or other material, like ground up old pots or sherds, added to the clay to prevent shrinkage and cracking).
7. **Make clay coils** by rolling clay between hands.
8. **Shape the pot** by stacking the coils (perhaps by deciding the pot's use).
9. **Prepare and apply slip** (very fine clay thinned with water and used to cover and smooth the pot to prepare for polishing and painting).
10. **Polish the pot** (once the slip dries) with smooth stones. Polishing stones are best when used for a long time, sometimes passed on in families for generations.
11. **Design and paint the pot** using paints made from minerals and plants. Paint brushes made from yucca is still a technique used to this day.
12. **Glaze the pot** (a fluid mixture made to allow for shine and durability).
13. **Fire the pot** in an open pit or oven (today kilns are used as well).
14. **Use the pot**—Depending on its design, the pot can be used in a variety of ways (storage, cooking, serving, ceremonial)—Can you think of other uses?

# POTTERY VOCABULARY

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Match the vocabulary word to the definition.

1. **Clay**\_\_\_\_\_

A. Earth with natural plastic qualities. It is this quality that allows the potter to form it. It comes in different colors depending on the minerals in the earth where it is found.

2. **Glaze**\_\_\_\_\_

B. A piece of broken pottery, also known as a potsherd. Many Pueblo potters use ground-up pieces in their clay.

3. **Mineral**\_\_\_\_\_

C. Coarse to fine sand, crushed rock or potsherds added to the clay to prevent shrinkage and cracking during drying and firing.

4. **Paint**\_\_\_\_\_

D. A substance that occurs naturally in rocks and in the ground and has its own special look and chemical make-up.

5. **Sherd**\_\_\_\_\_

E. An area which has removed the soil by the action of the flowing water.

6. **Slip**\_\_\_\_\_

F. Made from minerals and plants. Rocky Mountain Beeweed boiled down to a hard licorice-like ball makes black, for example. A paintbrush made from yucca was used by early potters. Many Pueblo potters still use yucca brushes.

7. **Temper**\_\_\_\_\_

G. A streak of different color or material in the sand.

8. **Vein**\_\_\_\_\_

H. Very fine clay, liquefied and applied to surface of pot to smooth the surface of the pot. Also provides an even base and texture for painting and polishing.

9. **Wash**\_\_\_\_\_

I. A fluid of durable mixture made to cover the pot for a beautiful shine and allows pot to be used daily and not wear out.

# POTTERY VOCABULARY

Name ANSWER KEY

1. Clay A

A. Earth with natural plastic qualities. It is this quality that allows the potter to form it. It comes in different colors depending on the minerals in the earth where it is found.

2. Glaze I

B. A piece of broken pottery, also known as a potsherd. Many Pueblo potters use ground-up pieces in their clay.

3. Mineral D

C. Coarse to fine sand, crushed rock or potsherds added to the clay to prevent shrinkage and cracking during drying and firing.

4. Paint F

D. A substance that occurs naturally in rocks and in the ground and has its own special look and chemical make-up.

5. Sherd B

E. An area which has removed the soil by the action of the flowing water.

6. Slip H

F. Made from minerals and plants. Rocky Mountain Beeweed boiled down to a hard licorice-like ball makes black, for example. A paintbrush made from yucca was used by early potters. Many Pueblo potters still use yucca brushes.

7. Temper C

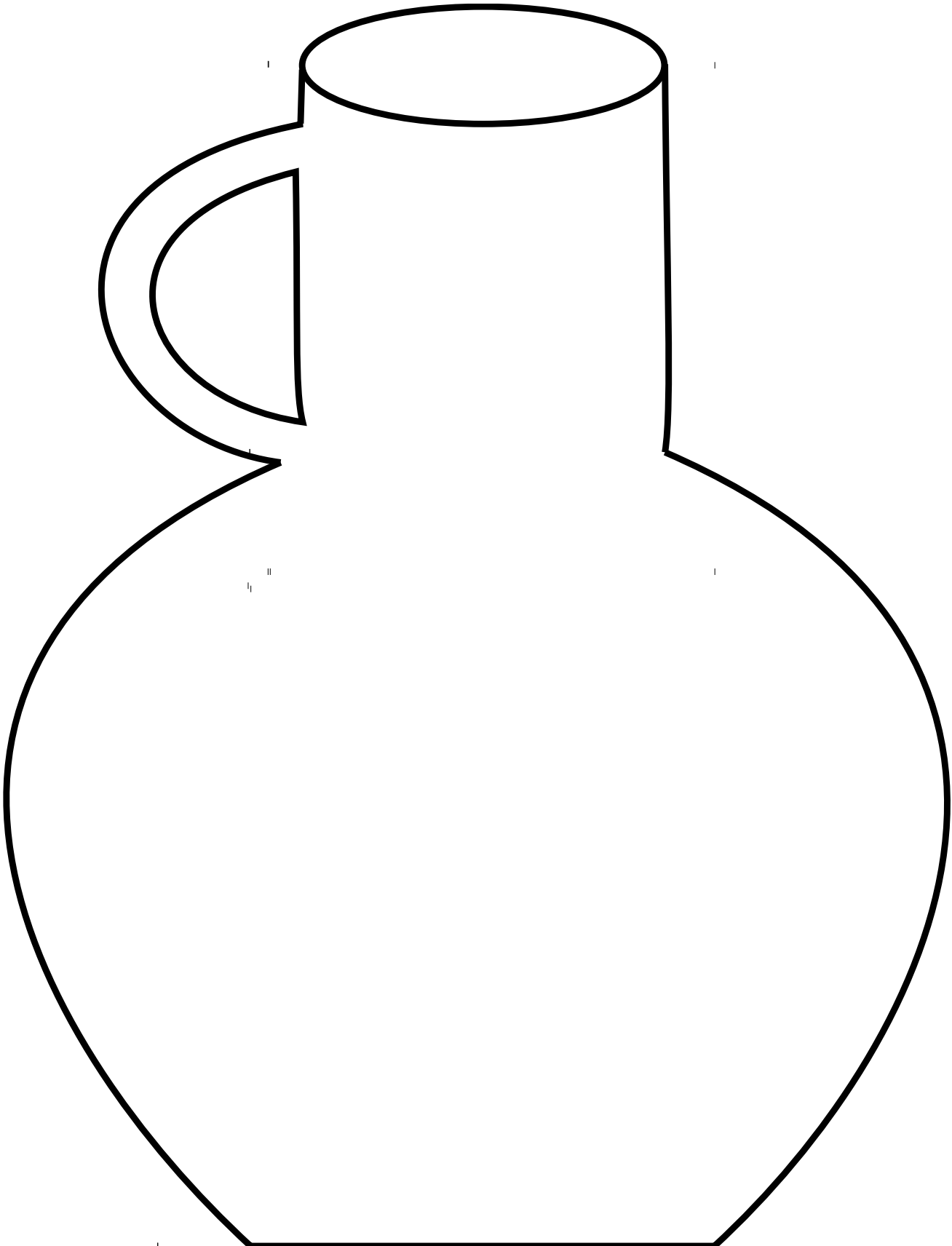
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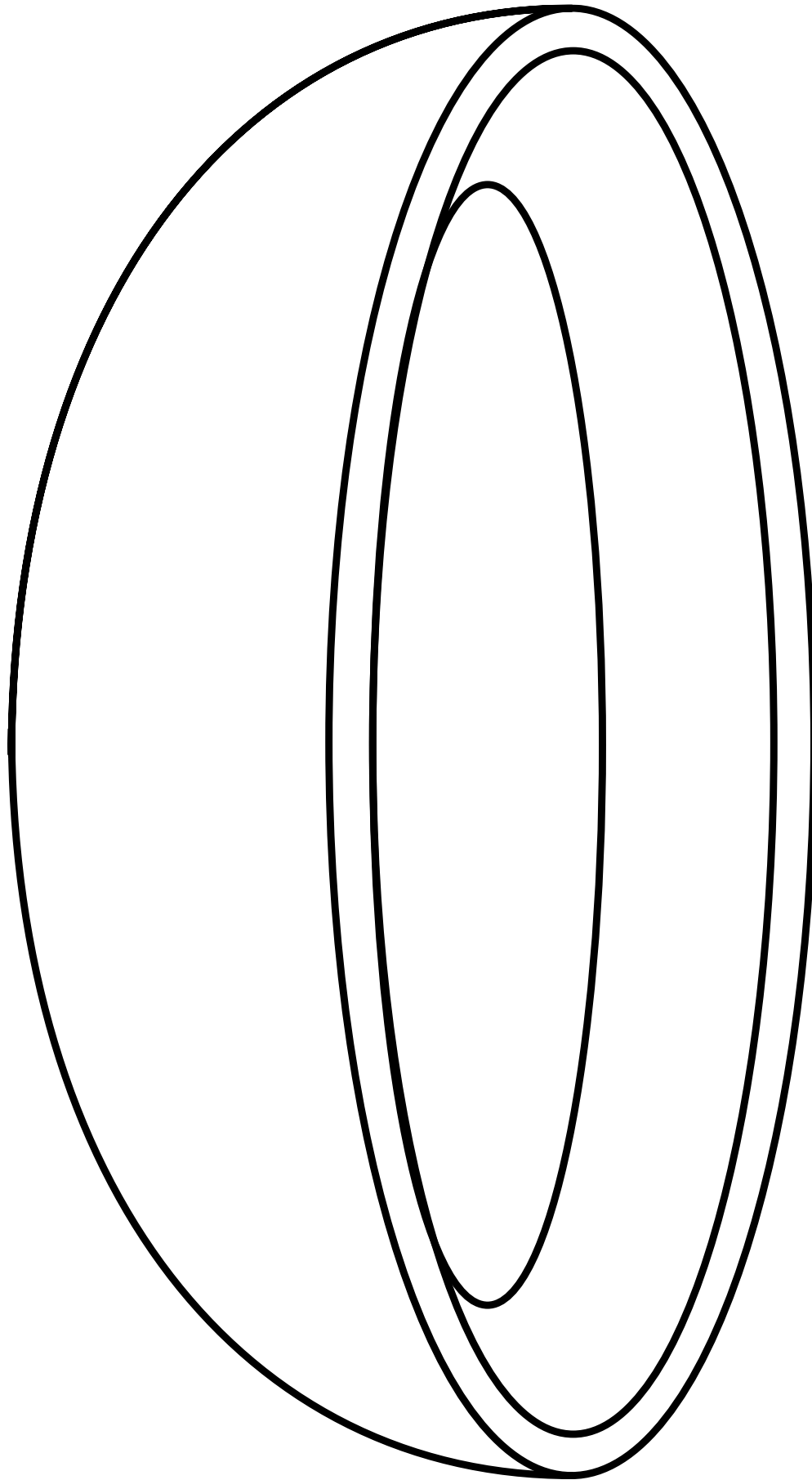
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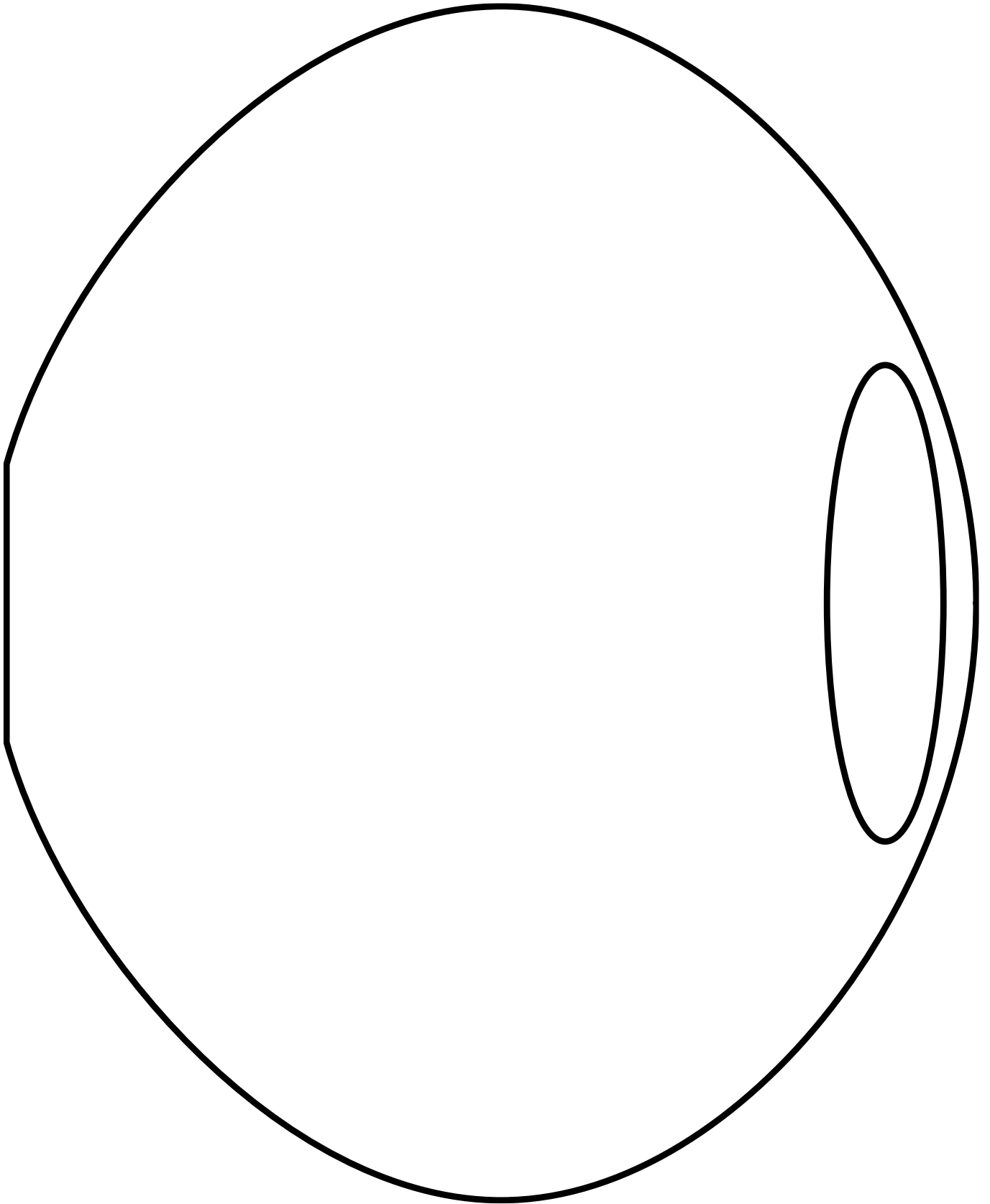
9. Wash E

I. A fluid of durable mixture made to cover the pot for a beautiful shine and allows pot to be used daily and not wear out.









## Web resources:

[https://www.crowcanyon.org/EducationProducts/pueblo\\_history\\_kids/pueblo\\_II\\_artifacts.asp](https://www.crowcanyon.org/EducationProducts/pueblo_history_kids/pueblo_II_artifacts.asp)

A guide to ancient pottery techniques and history from Crow Canyon Archaeological Center

<https://swvirtualmuseum.nau.edu/wp/index.php/artifacts/pottery/>

Pottery image gallery along with links to terminology and type sherds and interactive vessels from the American SW Virtual Museum, Northern Arizona University

[https://www.nps.gov/azru/planyourvisit/upload/Ceramics\\_Site\\_Bulletin.pdf](https://www.nps.gov/azru/planyourvisit/upload/Ceramics_Site_Bulletin.pdf)

Ceramics at Aztec Ruins park guide

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7AhX1MhvAG8>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1zrTO1KYhQs>

The Hands of Maria video parts 1 and 2

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mPJrFz8j2KQ>

Acoma Potter Lucy Lewis video from NMPBS ¡COLORES!



Lulu enjoying pottery from North America