



Excerpted from

The Maxwell



Volume 56 No. 1 Spring 2026

A Publication of the Maxwell Museum of Anthropology & University of New Mexico

Creating Coiling Kin: The Life of Pueblo Pottery



*A Major Temporary Exhibition on an Under-utilized Collection
Results from Long-Term Relational Curation*

by Dr. Lea McChesney, Curator of Ethnology

In June 2026, a new exhibition at the Maxwell Museum of Anthropology, ***Coiling Kin: The Life of Pueblo Pottery***, will present a comprehensive, collaboratively-curated, look into the Museum's permanent collection of Pueblo pottery as viewed through Pueblo artists' perspectives. The exhibition is enlivened by the insights and lived experiences of 23 potters from 14 Pueblos who selected works from the collection. Two additional Pueblo artists who work with clay and write of Pueblo life also contributed. Seventy works from the Museum's collection, enhanced by photographs and loan items, will facilitate reflections on the deep significance of clay in Pueblo life. Through objects, text, photos, and video, the exhibit explores the guiding beliefs, communities, histories, and knowledge of the enduring art form of Pueblo pottery through the eyes of contemporary potters and artists. As Curator of Ethnology and lead exhibit curator, I facilitated the project and jointly authored exhibit text.

Project History and Process

Over three years, curators visited the Maxwell Museum to review the collection. They made preliminary selections, then refined them and discussed them in video recordings. Throughout, they interacted with each other and museum staff in small group and whole team meetings, convening collectively on the UNM campus to develop themes and content. Museum staff and a videographer recorded them at work in their communities and at markets. A final team meeting completed the exhibit's organization and content in preparation for its design by Curator of Exhibits Toni Gentilli. Frequent communication facilitated a remarkably smooth process and warm, respectful relationships.

The seed of the exhibition was planted with a spontaneous comment from Rachel Sahmie, a fifth generation Hopi'sinom (Hopi-Tewa) Nampeyo potter, on a visit to the Maxwell Museum in 2019. She brought some of her work to sell in our store, remarking that the Museum had been so important to her generation of potters. The 1974 *Seven Families in Pueblo Pottery* exhibit and catalogue brought attention to members of her family, from which she had benefited and for which she was grateful. Couldn't something be done in the museum now, she wondered, to reflect on the intervening years of Pueblo pottery's recognition as an art form?



L to R: Curators Karen Kahe Charley, Emmaline Naha, Lea McChesney and Claudia Mitchell at November 2023 meeting. Photo by Carla Sinopoli.

As we returned to a changed way of life after the Covid pandemic, there was much catching up to do. We hadn't known that Rachel was seeking funding for medical treatments when she visited. Sadly, they were unsuccessful, and she passed away in 2022. Soon enough, the 50th anniversary of *Seven Families* was upon us, and the question of how best to honor her sentiment became larger. What was the best way to address the last 50 years and the current state of Pueblo pottery?

Through my continuing work with Pueblo potters, I had developed broad contacts with artists, some of them members of the original seven (and later fourteen families included in the 1994 20th anniversary publication). Others were not featured in those publications, but are also committed to the continuity of Pueblo pottery. In ongoing visits and conversations, a guiding idea emerged: the exhibit would be a story that the 25 curators would narrate.



Tribute to Hopi'sinom (Hopi-Tewa) potter Nampeyo: (l to r): Polychrome Jar by Nampeyo's youngest child, Fannie Nampeyo (2022.35.21); Polychrome Jar by James Garcia, fourth-generation Nampeyo family potter (96.34.21); Polychrome Seed Jar by exhibit curator Melda Navasie, fourth-generation Nampeyo family potter (2024.23.1). Photo by Karen Price.

By 2023, with funding from the Henry Luce Foundation and from UNM's Center for Regional Studies and Museum Studies Program, the project was in motion. Over its three years of development a deep camaraderie developed among curators and the Museum as we worked together through exhibit preparation. Regrettably, through the course of our collaboration we lost two curators, Dominique Toya (Walatowa/Jemez Pueblo), and Rachel's cousin, Melda Navasie (Hopi-sinom/Hopi-Tewa). All three of these artists are honored in the exhibit. [Note: since this newsletter was published co-curator Marcellus Medina of Zia Pueblo passed away. He too will be honored in the exhibition. All of these artists are deeply missed.]

Several considerations came into play as the curators worked together over the three years. Factors including the need to meet new government regulations and mishaps in firing played a role in final exhibit content. curators wanted the exhibit to explain how the exhibit came to be as well as how and why pottery and clay are so central to their lives. A year after curators selected the pots for the exhibit, updated federal regulations were implemented as part of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA). The new Duty of Care requirement necessitates formal tribal approval for access, exhibition, or research of cultural belongings that are sacred or understood by tribal knowledge holders as objects of cultural patrimony. This process of requesting permission for access to and exhibition of Indigenous cultural heritage stewarded by museums applies to all U.S. institutions that receive federal funding. It is an important development in museum practice that guarantees community involvement at the tribal level. Through our consultations with Tribal Historic Preservation Officers and NAGPRA representatives, a few of the selected pots were determined to fall under NAGPRA and not appropriate to display. We are grateful to have received approvals from all fourteen Pueblos represented in this exhibit, and for their support of our collective work.

Special Exhibit Features

Presented in the round and with extensive use of audio-visual materials, the exhibit introduces the curators and explores four primary themes: clay and its broader purpose in Pueblo Life; pottery's kin connections through time and across generations in the Southwest; pottery making knowledge and processes; and the contemporary context and future possibilities for pottery. The exhibit provides an opportunity for visitors to experience the embodied language of Pueblo pottery in all its complexity. On view for two years, we are planning a robust schedule of public and educational programs to extend its reach. So stay tuned for more information!

Please join us on **Saturday, June 6, 2026, from 2 pm to 4 pm** for the opening reception. A panel of curators will discuss their roles in the exhibit, while others will provide small group tours of each of the exhibit themes. Over the two years the exhibition will be on view, public and educational programs will extend its reach. And on **Tuesday March 17, 2026**, Dr. McChesney and co-curators Dolores Lewis Garcia (Acoma Pueblo), Deborah Jojola (Isleta Pueblo), Lorraine Gala Lewis (Laguna/Hopi/Taos Pueblos), Marita Hinds (Tesuque Pueblo), Claudia Mitchell (Acoma Pueblo), and Judy Tafoya (Santa Clara Pueblo) will participate in a roundtable discussion about the exhibition, and the process of collaborative curation that led to its creation, at the [Annual Meeting of the Society for Applied Anthropology](#) (Hotel Albuquerque, Room Alvarado A, 11:15 am to 1 pm). This panel is free and open to the public and we hope you will join us for an insider's view of the exhibit.

Cover photo: Jars with bird designs (l to r): Polychrome Jar, P'owhoge Owingeh (San Ildefonso Pueblo) (72.10.51); Polychrome Jar with "Zia bird" design and double rainbow, Tsiya (Zia Pueblo) (79.82.1); Polychrome Seed Jar with bird design, Hopi'sinom (Hopi Tribe) (78.59.15); Polychrome Jar with turkey design, Tsiya (Zia Pueblo) (73.4.1). Photo by Karen Price.

Coiling Kin Curators

Albert Alvidrez, Tigua (Ysleta del Sur Pueblo)
Hubert Candelario, Katishtya (San Felipe Pueblo)
Karen Kahe Charley, Hopi'sinom (Hopi Tribe)
Clarence Cruz, Ohkay Owingeh (San Juan Pueblo)
Jerry Dunbar, Tigua (Ysleta del Sur Pueblo)
Max Early, K'awaika (Laguna Pueblo)
Erik "Than Tsideh" Fender, P'owhoge Owingeh (San Ildefonso Pueblo)
Mary Dolores Lewis Garcia, Haak'u (Acoma Pueblo)
Marita Hinds, Tay tsu'geh Owingeh (Tesuque Pueblo)
Darlene James, Hopi'sinom (Hopi-Tewa)
Deborah Jojola, Shiwif' Twei (Isleta Pueblo)
Lorraine Gala Lewis, Hopi'sinom, Thaawi', K'awaika (Hopi, Taos, Laguna pueblos)
Lea McChesney, Maxwell Museum of Anthropology
Elizabeth Medina, Ts'iya (Zia Pueblo)
Marcellus Medina, Ts'iya (Zia Pueblo)
Claudia Mitchell, Haak'u (Acoma Pueblo)
Martina Montoya, Tamaya (Santa Ana Pueblo)
Emmaline Naha, Hopi'sinom (Hopi Tribe)
Melda Navasie, Hopi'sinom (Hopi-Tewa)
Donna Pino, Tamaya (Santa Ana Pueblo)
Ryan Roller, Kha'p'o Owingeh (Santa Clara Pueblo)
Jeff Suina, Ko-tyit (Cochiti Pueblo)
Judy Tafoya, Kha'p'o Owingeh (Santa Clara Pueblo)
Dominique Toya, Walatowa (Jemez Pueblo)
Maxine Toya, Walatowa (Jemez Pueblo)
Cassandra Tsalate, A:shiwi (Zuni Pueblo)