

Traditional Cherokee Pottery

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Recently, some Cherokee potters have revived the art of stamped pottery in a style that was used in the southern Appalachian Mountains more than 1,900 years ago. Fragments of old American Indian pottery in museum or other collections have even inspired some new pieces. Traditional pots are made using native clay dug up by the artists and handbuilding techniques, adding coils of clay to a base. Artists “paddle” clay, which can be tempered with mica or crushed shells. They carve paddles, made of wood such as pine or cherry, with ancient or modern designs. The paddles can shape the clay and drive out air bubbles and water, as well as impress designs. Pots—textured or patterned on the outside and smooth on the inside—are double-fired, or baked, in an open fire. Differences in temperature and smoke (oxygen and carbon levels), as well as in firing time, lead to different colors. Round pots originally were used for cooking, while traditional Cherokee “effigy” pots are shaped like people or fish, birds, and other animals. Early uses for such pottery also included making hominy, carrying water, and storing seeds.

Give it a try

The earliest American Indians in what is now North Carolina decorated many things: clothes and jewelry, pottery, and even their bodies. They attached beads of shell and wampum to clothing and accessories such as shoes. They carved designs on shell pendants, or gorgets. They sometimes painted their bodies and clothing. Trade with new European colonists brought more choices and changes. American Indians started to use glass beads, copper and brass gorgets, and even metal pots, but they still decorated many of them.

As long ago as 4,000 years, Indians in North Carolina began making pottery. They would make the vessels from clay, using the hand-coiling method. Carved wooden paddles could press designs into the clay. Sticks or other natural objects could create patterns. Sometimes people used different designs to tell their pottery apart. They fired, or baked, pottery in a pit with wood.

Today, archaeologists can use the decorations on such objects (or pieces of them) to determine when Indians lived at a place or tell which cultural group made the objects.

If you want to experiment with some of the early American Indians' techniques for decorating pots, first roll a piece of clay, polymer clay, or Playdough into a ball. Flatten it using your hand, a rolling pin, or a similar object. Smooth the top of the clay, and then try different ways to decorate it:

- Incising— Cut lines into the surface with a pencil, stick, or even your fingernails.
- Cord Marking—Wrap string or cord around a spoon, stick, or dowel, and press it into the clay.
- Impressing—Press a dried corncob, peach pit, or similar item into the clay.
- Fabric or Net Imprinting—Wrap fabric (burlap, cotton, or anything with texture) or net (such as the kind that fruit sometimes comes in) around a spoon, stick, or dowel, and press it into the clay.
- Stamping—Press designs into the clay using a fork or something similar.

To retain the design, let the clay dry.

You can also try creating your own pottery.