

Jacqueline Lauren Stevens

a biography



Jacqueline "Jacquie" Lauren Stevens, a contemporary ceramic artist based in Santa Fe, New Mexico, was born on April 3, 1949, in Omaha, Nebraska. A member of the Winnebago Tribe of Nebraska, she grew up on the Winnebago Reservation in northeastern Nebraska. Stevens' childhood home was located near the Missouri River, where she would occasionally gather clay to make small objects, though she would not focus her artistic production on ceramics in earnest until later in her life. She spent her early years practicing traditional Ho-Chunk appliqué work (a kind of needlework in which ribbon or fabric strips are stitched into colorful symmetrical designs) as well as observing her grandmother's basket-weaving skills. At age 13, Stevens moved to South Dakota to attend the Flandreau Indian School, one of many federally supported boarding schools established in the late nineteenth century with the primary goal to "Americanize" Native youth. The school's programming changed throughout the twentieth century with the educational emphasis gradually shifting to support, rather than suppress, Native American cultures and languages.

Stevens enrolled at the University of Colorado Boulder in 1972 where she briefly studied anthropology and American history. Four years later, she entered the Institute of American Indian Arts (IAIA) in Santa Fe to pursue a degree in museum studies. After she took a class with Hopi potter Otellie Loloma (1921–1993), who was well known for her sculptural pots and experimentation with pottery techniques as well as her work in bronze, Stevens changed her focus to ceramics. In 1981, she received a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from the College of Santa Fe, an affiliate of IAIA. The artist quickly earned recognition for her work, winning a blue ribbon in the nontraditional pottery category at the 1983 Santa Fe Indian Market. From 1984 to 1986, she had a three-part solo exhibition, *The Clay Sings*, at the Wheelwright Museum in Santa Fe, which introduced her work to a broader audience. She has participated in a number of prominent exhibitions as well as solo shows at museums and galleries throughout the

country, including the IAIA Museum of Contemporary Native Arts, the Museum of Nebraska Art in Kearney, and the Museum of Art and Design in New York.

Stevens' vessels are characterized by their asymmetric appearance and decoration. Her techniques are informed by a variety of artistic traditions, including the longstanding Pueblo pottery methods that she learned from Loloma while at IAIA. Using both standard high fire stoneware clay as well as local clay harvested near her home, Stevens creates her pots through coil building, a technique in which long strips of wet clay are built up on a base to shape the pot. Using this method, she is able to create vessels with asymmetric forms that have an organic appearance compared to the uniform, symmetrical works produced on a potter's wheel. The artist fires her pots in an outdoor pit using wood chips and dung—a process that potters in the Southwest have used for centuries. She embellishes the fired pots with materials such as bones, shells, wood, deer fur, and leather, which she says are meant to give the object "a feeling of mystery belonging to a people of a culture gone by," leaving it up to the viewer to imagine who may have made and used the pot, were it an historical artifact. Furthermore, Stevens does not include narrative imagery on her pots as she prefers to draw the viewer's attention to the form and the textural contrast between the decorative materials and the ceramic surface as seen with Joslyn's *Vessel* (1986). The artist also experimented with



other techniques, such as making pots with scalloped surfaces, allowing "fire clouds" (dark smudges created by the smoke from the firing process) to appear on her pots, and using glazes on some objects, though most of her work is unglazed. Stevens says that "my work has been a process of constant transformation. I dare myself to try to create some new clay form, and that is what keeps me on my toes."

IMAGES (LEFT TO RIGHT): Jacquie Stevens, 1995. Photograph © Walter BigBee; Jacqueline Lauren Stevens (Winnebago, born 1949), *Vessel*, 1986, high fire stoneware with rawhide, beads, and dentalium shell, overall: 5 1/2 in. high; 5 1/2 in. diameter (13.97 cm; 13.97 cm), Joslyn Art Museum, Gift in memory of Wilmoth V. Carpenter, 1986.17

Jacquie Stevens primarily creates work for aesthetic purposes despite some of their resemblances to functional pottery used for storage or cooking. For Joslyn's *Vessel* (1997), the artist used clay, wicker withes (flexible branches of a willow), and even small glass beads to create contrasts of texture and shape. In this example, the smooth ceramic surface is juxtaposed with the fibrous woven wicker on the vessel's upper portion. The artist created this object using her preferred method of coil building the ceramic portion and scraping its surface smooth. While many of the artist's works are asymmetrical, this pot has a rounded, almost perfectly symmetrical design, a testament to the skill with which Stevens is able to manipulate the coil-built form without using a potter's wheel. The artist added a micaceous clay slip over the finished surface before firing the vessel. This type of slip (a liquid slurry of clay particles suspended in water used to coat the surface of an unfired clay object) contains mica, a mineral which produces small, shiny, silver flecks on the surface of the pot once it is fired. Her use of coil building and micaceous clay slip reflects the Pueblo pottery techniques Hopi potter Otellie Loloma (1921–1993) taught her. Stevens also drew on her knowledge of Ho-Chunk (Winnebago) art to create this vessel's woven portion as their art historically includes appliqué work on textiles, basket weaving using wood and tree bark, and beaded embroidery on bags and moccasins. She innovatively adapts and combines these various materials and methods in her pottery to create objects with organic shapes, textures, and visual effects.

Discussion Questions

Why do you think Jacquie Stevens created nonfunctional vessels instead of functional pottery?



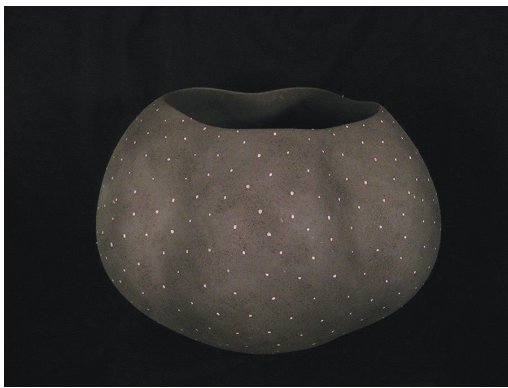
Why does Stevens include non-clay materials in her work?



Do you think *Vessel* (1997) belongs in the "traditional" or "nontraditional" pottery category at the Santa Fe Indian Market? Share your rationale.

Teachers: go to www.joslyn.org/education for this poster's related academic standards and lesson plans.

Challenging Assumptions about Native Art



and materials rooted in Indigenous art-making practices and worldviews, while also experimenting with forms, colors, and media consistent with the methods and values of contemporary art.

Stevens' work reflects the major role two Native arts organizations, the Institute of American Indian Arts (IAIA) and the Santa Fe Indian Market, played during her development as an artist. Both shaped and defined contemporary Native art differently. IAIA began offering college-level classes in the 1970s as a federally-administered, higher education institution for young Native American artists. In its early years, the institute's educational philosophy focused on teaching students a mainstream modernist approach to art, with a secondary emphasis on Indigenous thinking about artistic production. At this time, the various "modernist" movements in the United States art scene shared several important features, including experimentation with materials and methods, an emphasis on abstraction, and the belief that an artist's work should express their individual concerns and ideals. Many Native students and faculty at IAIA took these ideas to heart, working in painting and sculpture—the dominant media of the Euro-American art world—to create art in an abstract or highly stylized fashion. While their art included references to their individual tribal cultures both in subject matter and imagery, they often placed a greater emphasis on experimentation in terms of style and subject matter. For example, Fritz Scholder (1937–2005), one of the prominent early faculty members at the institute, used bright colors and expressive brushstrokes to paint portraits of Native Americans in a style influenced by Abstract Expressionism and modernists such as artist Francis Bacon (1909–1992). Scholder often dealt with the conflict of identity which Native people in the United States faced in his time or, according to the artist, he painted the "torment resulting from the impositions on them [Native people] of contemporary American society." In this modernist-inflected environment, a young Stevens and her peers were able to consider what it meant to be a contemporary Native artist, experimenting with technique and subject matter while maintaining a uniquely Indigenous perspective.

While IAIA encouraged experimentation in contemporary art-making, Santa Fe Indian Market, one of the largest retail venues for Native American art in the United States, supported historical Indigenous art practices. Founded in 1922, the Santa Fe Indian Market helps the careers of many Native artists, including Stevens, in the Southwest. National and international collectors travel to view and purchase art. Before the Market opens to the public, a panel of judges award best-in-show ribbons to works in a variety of categories based on media. The general pottery division is one of the largest at the Market and judges recognized Stevens with awards in the past. It is split into "traditional" and "nontraditional" categories, with the pottery further subdivided according to shape, decoration, and tribal affiliation (such as Zuni, Acoma, and Hopi). Many artists prefer to enter their works in the traditional group because this category usually commands higher prices from the Market's predominantly non-Indigenous buyers, and the nontraditional section does not subdivide into tribal affiliation groups. This practice begs the question: what makes a pot traditional? Judges consider materials, firing techniques, and other technical aspects in making this determination while consumers may have certain expectations of a traditional pot's design, and the artists themselves often have opinions about the degree to which their work is *traditional*. Whether formal or technical qualities, aesthetics, or artists' intentions, among other things, should be given priority in determining whether or not a pot is traditional remains an ongoing dilemma. Nonetheless, it is evident that



IMAGES (TOP TO BOTTOM): Jacqueline Lauren Stevens (Winnebago, b. 1949), *Untitled (black with pink dots)*, 2005, ceramic, Museum of Nebraska Art, Kearney, Museum Purchase made possible by MONA Guild, 2007.13; Jacqueline Lauren Stevens (Winnebago, b. 1949), *Floor Vase*, ca. 1985, clay and leather, overall: 27 in. high; 20 in. diameter (68.6 cm; 50.8 cm), Private Collection; Jacqueline Lauren Stevens (Winnebago, b. 1949), *Large Asymmetrical Green Jar*, ca. 1990s, earthenware with green clay slip and mica, overall: 10 in. high; 10 in. diameter (25.4 cm; 25.4 cm), King Galleries, Scottsdale, AZ; Jacqueline Lauren Stevens (Winnebago, b. 1949), *Asymmetrical Jar*, 1990, overall: 16 5/8 in. high; 16 7/8 in. diameter (42.23 cm; 42.86 cm), The Mint Museum, Charlotte, NC, PG2003.63.79

various market forces come together to create an environment which is favorable to artists working in a traditional, as opposed to modern, style at the Market.

Both IAIA and the Santa Fe Indian Market provided paths for Stevens and other Native artists to enter the art world. As an educational institution, the former encouraged these young Indigenous artists to explore their role in contemporary Native American society through modernist-inspired experimentation. The latter, with its emphasis on buying and selling, helped these artists meet the market demand for traditional art. In short, Native artists balanced developing an artistic identity with finding success in these environments. As the diverse output of IAIA students and faculty and the acknowledgement of a nontraditional category at the Santa Fe Indian Market demonstrate, the alleged boundary between traditional and modern art was never black and white, yet this underscores one of the main concerns that Native artists of Stevens' generation had to navigate. She achieved prosperity in balancing her use of historical Pueblo pottery methods with a modernist-influenced style that emphasizes formal qualities such as shape and texture over specific cultural associations.

Today, both IAIA and the Santa Fe Indian Market encourage greater participation in their leadership by people of Indigenous descent. They support many different kinds of Native artistic expression as the binary of tradition and modernism becomes less prominent in the discourse of Native art.



Timeline

1940

1949 Jacqueline Lauren Stevens was born on April 3 in Omaha, NE

1972 Enrolls at the University of Colorado Boulder; leaves after a year

1976 Enters the Institute of American Indian Arts (IAIA)

1981 Receives her BFA from the College of Santa Fe

1983 Wins a blue ribbon in the nontraditional pottery category at the Santa Fe Indian Market

2020



IMAGES (TOP TO BOTTOM): Jacquie Stevens, ca. 1970s, Photo courtesy of Institute of American Indian Arts; Jacqueline Lauren Stevens (Winnebago, b. 1949), *Vessel*, 1987, earthenware with slip paint and mica powder, overall: 18 1/2 in. high; 18 in. diameter (47 cm; 45.7 cm), Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Gift of Stephen and Betty Jane Andrus, 1993.545



uses clay from the same pit. Potters may experiment with different varieties of clay in order to find one that suits their needs. Stevens, for example, uses both commercial stoneware clay as it can be found in most pottery workshops and clay that she harvests from the area around her home in New Mexico. Once the material is gathered, it is left to dry then soaked in water. The artist sieves the saturated clay to sift out impurities such as stones and roots. Then the potter adds a temper—such

Jacquie Stevens' ceramic art draws on the methods that Pueblo potters in the southwestern United States have used for generations. These techniques can be broken down into three broad areas: gathering and preparing the clay, forming the clay, and firing the clay.

The practice of collecting and processing clay is one of the most time-consuming aspects of ceramic work. Potters must search for a deposit of clay that is suitable for creating pottery. Once an artist finds a source, they must harvest it by hand. Some potters will say a prayer and make an offering of cornmeal to pay respect to the Earth before taking any material from the ground. If they think their clay source is particularly valuable, the artist may keep it a secret, while in some Indigenous communities, everyone

as sand or ground rock or potsherds—to the pure clay in order to stabilize it and ensure even drying later in the process, as pure clay tends to dry unevenly, which leads to cracks and disintegration. Now the clay is prepared and ready to create a pot.

Most Pueblo potters form their objects using coil building, rather than using a potter's wheel. This process begins with a base, called a *puki* in the Hopi language, used to support the coils as the pot grows. It can be anything from the bottom of a broken pot to a pie tin or cereal bowl. They knead the clay to remove air bubbles and divide it into long strips. Using the *puki* to hold the first few coils, the potter creates the vessel by building up coils of wet clay while shaping them into their desired form. Once the pot is complete, the artist uses a scraper to smooth the inside



and outside surfaces, removing all evidence of the coils. Sometimes the potter will leave coils visible and accent them with scallops made by pressing their fingers into the

Ceramic Methods



clay in order to create a unique and varied surface. Once the pot dries, the potter carefully sands its surface to refine the shape and sometimes sculpts it slightly to tweak its form. At this stage, some potters add a polished slip to the pot or paint designs onto its surface as well.

The final step in the process of creating a pot is to fire it, making it hard and durable. Pueblo potters fire their work outdoors in single-use pits, utilizing wood and dung as fuel. This kind of firing presents a variety of challenges, and there is always a risk that these labor-intensive objects could be ruined. For example, firing outdoors comes with several potential hazards, as fluctuations in air temperature or gusts of wind can change the temperature of the kiln, causing the pots to crack. At Acoma Pueblo, the unique slip that potters apply will turn blue instead of white if the fuel used for the fire is damp. If pots break, some artists will grind them up to use as temper, reinserting them into the preparation part ceramic process. Despite these challenges, potters are able to control



much of the firing. For example, to get the distinct black-on-black surface of San Ildefonso pots like those of Maria Martinez (1887–1980), the potter will put the fire into reduction—a state of oxygen deprivation—during the last part of the firing process. Without oxygen, the iron oxide (a substance similar to rust) used in the slip on the pots turns black instead of the usual red, giving the objects their distinctive color.

While many Pueblo potters continue to use these methods, some have embraced the techniques of contemporary Euro-American studio pottery, including the use of the potter's wheel, commercial paints and slips, and electric kilns for firing. Conversely, non-Pueblo people, including Stevens here, adopted Pueblo pottery-making methods.



Jacqueline Lauren Stevens (Winnebago, b. 1949), *Large Native American Style "Olla" Pottery Vessel*, 1981, earthenware and leather, overall: 17 3/8 in. high; 18 1/2 in. diameter (44.13 cm; 46.99 cm), Private Collection, Photographs courtesy of Simpson Galleries, Houston, TX; Maria Martinez (San Ildefonso Pueblo, 1887–1980), Joslyn Art Museum No Known Copyright



JACQUELINE LAUREN STEVENS
Winnebago, b. 1949

VESSEL
1997, micaceous clay, wicker withes, and glass beads
overall: 10 1/4 in. high; 17 1/2 in. diameter (26.04 cm; 44.45 cm)

JOSLYN ART MUSEUM OMAHA, NEBRASKA
Commissioned and given in memory of Shirley Warden
by her fellow docents, 1998.19