

My Journey in Collecting American Indian Pottery

In the late 1980's I had the opportunity to travel extensively in the United States as part of my work as an HIV/AIDS educator. That travel led me to Sedona, Arizona, one of the most beautiful places on earth. On my first trip to Sedona I was awed by the red rock, the energy vortexes, and the diverse landscape of the region. While there I purchased *Arizona Highways* magazine and when I opened it I first set eyes on the beautiful pottery of Joy Navasie ("Frogwoman"). The photo of her sitting with many of her lovely pots around her was etched in my mind. The white ware pottery with the black and red designs really captured my eye but at the time I realized I could not afford these works of art. As time went on, and I became more financially secure, I decided to start collecting.

In the meantime I began teaching myself about Hopi pottery in particular, and the Prehistoric and Sityaki designs often found in the area of First Mesa, Arizona. First Mesa is where most of the Hopi potters live in the villages of Polacca, Hano, Walpi and Sichomovi. I became familiar with the original Frogwoman, Joy Navasie's mother Paqua, and the long lineage of potters who were taught this beautiful art of pottery making by their parents. There are two Hopi families that specialize in making white pottery. The Navasies are one of them and the Nahas are the other. My collection of pottery now includes several pieces by Joy Navasie, her daughter Mary Ann, her son Maynard and his wife Veronica as well as other family members who all typically use the frog hallmark along with other symbols that personalize their work. I also have pieces by the Naha family whose matriarch was Helen Naha "Featherwoman". Her hallmark was a plumed feather. Featherwoman passed away in 1993 and her sister-in-law Frogwoman in 2012. Their legacy continues through their sons and daughters and other relatives they taught to make the pottery, and through the wonderful pottery they themselves made that has survived the test of time.

The true beauty of the pottery to me is its spirit. The clay is dug from the sacred ground and the pottery is made by hand coiling, smoothing, and firing in outdoor fires rather than kilns. The pottery is painted with a tiny brush made from the yucca plant. The process is all natural and painting and carving is hand applied. Even the paint is made with natural dyes. Stones are used to polish the pottery and are often handed down from relatives. Some artists smooth the pottery with their fingernails and one famous potter (Rainey Naha) has been known to lick the pottery to smooth it. Designs are often copied from pottery shards from the Hopi ancestors found in the area. Designs are attached to various families, not to be used by others as an unwritten code of ethics. To me the pottery reflects a beautiful piece of American Indian culture, guided by the spirit and passed down through the generations. I am privileged to own many pieces now and I will treasure them for the rest of my life.

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