Arts and Culture of the Prehistoric Hohokam Indians

Corn, Canals, and Clay

by Allen Dart

The first Europeans to venture into south-central Arizona as far north as the Gila River were missionaries and soldiers traveling north from Mexico in the 1690s. Their journals contain the earliest written descriptions of the region’s Casa Grande Ruins and other impressive archaeological sites that were strewn with pottery, and that sometimes contained the ruins of massive, mud-walled buildings. The Pima Indians who lived along the Gila River at the time these explorers arrived called the ancient occupants of these ruined villages Hohokam (ho-ho-KOM), translated as ‘finished ones.’

Some 300 years later, archaeologists have confirmed that the Hohokam occupied the Sonoran Desert portion of central and southern Arizona between about A.D. 650 and 1450. At the peak of their population they held sway over an area about from Gila Bend on the west to Safford on the east, and from a few miles south of Green Valley north into the Salt and Verde River valleys.

Who Were The Hohokam? The Hohokam were farmers who grew corn, cotton, beans, squashes, agave, and other crops for food, building materials, and artifacts. They also made great use of wild desert foods such as rabbits, deer, mesquite beans, saguaro and other cactus fruits, and weedy plants.

Continued on page 2.
Living in widely dispersed settlements, the Hohokam inhabited partly subterranean dwellings called “pithouses” into the 1100s, and their largest pre-A.D. 1100 villages usually contained at least one big, oval, unroofed public structure with banked-up earthen sides and a depressed floor, interpreted by archaeologists as a ball-playing court.

After 1100 some Hohokam began building apartment-like residences with floors at ground level and walls of poured mud. Around that time the ballcourts fell into disuse and were replaced by “platform mounds,” a new form of public architecture constructed by building large earthen or rock walls and filling in the rooms with dirt and trash.

The Hohokam also built extensive irrigation canals and reservoirs, and usually cremated their dead. Their distinctive craft-arts, architectural forms, and subsistence and burial practices are attributes that allow archaeologists to identify the Hohokam as a people distinct from the Southwest’s better known Anasazi and Mogollon cultures.

**Hohokam Arts and Culture.** The ‘finished ones’ produced a variety of crafts, including carved seashell jewelry, finely carved stone objects, fired clay figurines, and well made textiles. They also produced a distinctive style of rock art. However, among the Hohokam arts and crafts that have survived 550 and more years for us to examine and appreciate, pottery and potsherds far surpass in quantity any other artifacts found at Hohokam sites. Pottery found on Hohokam sites is almost all buff- or brown-colored. A relatively small percentage of it is covered with red- or maroon-painted patterns.

**Hohokam Pottery Styles.** Most of us can tell about how old an American car is by its overall style. For instance, we know that small, boxy cars with skinny tires and wood-spoked wheels, like the Ford Model T and the Reo, were made in the early 1900s. And just about every adult American can identify autos made in the 1950s by the pronounced fins and chrome trim that were common during that era.

Like styles of American cars, Hohokam pottery styles also changed in recognizable ways in the several centuries of this culture’s residence in Arizona. What follows is an attempt to point out the most distinctive attributes of the painted pottery styles that the Hohokam manufactured during their tenure in the Southwest.

Plain brownware pottery that was not painted usually accounts for 90 percent or more of all the pottery one will find at a Hohokam archaeological site. However, their decorated ceramics, most of which exhibit dark red paint or maroon paint on a brown or buff background, are the most distinctive Hohokam artifacts.

Archaeologists have identified four main Hohokam cultural periods: the Pioneer period, which in the Tucson area dates between about A.D. 650 and 750; the Colonial (A.D. 750-950); the Sedentary (950-1100); and the Classic (1100-1450). These periods have been subdivided into shorter spans of time, called phases, based on the styles of ceramics, other artifacts, and architecture that were characteristic during particular eras.
Many decorated ceramic vessels made between about A.D. 650 and 850 (the Snaketown and Gila Butte Red-on-buff types made in the Phoenix area, and the Tucson area’s Cañada del Oro Red-on-brown) exhibit a coiled texture pattern on their exteriors, making them look like the simple corrugated ware of the Anasazi and Mogollon cultures. However, close examination reveals that the ‘coils’ were actually created by incising a design on the pot. Many of the incised vessels look a lot like coiled baskets, and have designs painted in red over the fake, carved coils.

More importantly for distinguishing the pottery of this early era, though, are design motifs that include a lot of solid elements painted to resemble repeated series of animals or animals’ heads, and geometric hachure (fine parallel lines). The earliest Hohokam painted ceramic bowls and jars also were generally very thin-walled, and had gracefully outcurving rims, and their painted designs were tightly packed into the overall design field.

As one would expect, usually only the outside surfaces of Hohokam jars were painted. However, on bowls made before about 1150, the design field was primarily on the interior surfaces rather than the outsides, with the exceptions of vertical-sided bowls and of painted “trailing lines” on the outsides of some bowls that had convex exteriors.

Trailing lines are a distinctive attribute of many early Hohokam pottery bowls made before 1100. They are narrow lines that start at the bowl rim and trail or zigzag downward, usually diagonally, about halfway down a bowl’s outside surface. They most often are arranged into three or four sets around the circumference of the bowl, with 1 to 3 parallel lines in each set.

Beginning in the eighth century, Hohokam potters began incorporating more curving spirals and interlocking scroll designs into their ceramic creations. These motifs are hallmarks of the Phoenix area’s Santa Cruz and Sacaton Red-on-buff ceramic types, and the Tucson area’s Rillito, Early Rincon, and Middle Rincon red-on-browns.

More than any other elements, curving spirals and scrolls are characteristic of Hohokam painted pottery of the period from about 750 to 1100. Other common motifs of the pottery made during that period resemble stylized flying birds, zippers, saw edges, steps, and waves of water. Between about 900 and 1100 the Hohokam gradually stopped making vessels with the gracefully flaring rims of earlier times.

Some really noticeable changes occurred in Hohokam painted pottery designs after 1100. The potters stopped painting the smoothly curving scroll motif, replacing it with a squared scroll; and other curving and wavy lines gave way completely to straight lines.

Painted lines and solids on the pots began to be applied farther apart, leaving larger unpainted spaces, and the

Continued on page 4

During the Sedentary period, at least in the Tucson area, the line work on most Hohokam painted pottery became very thick and uneven, and more of the overall design field was left unpainted, as exemplified by this Middle Rincon Red-on-brown bowl. Photo by Helga Teiwes courtesy of the Arizona State Museum, University of Arizona.
Arts and Culture of the Prehistoric Hohokam Indians (continued from page 3)

overall designs became more regimented. This suggests to me that after 1100 there was more social discipline and control of the Hohokam society over its artists. These changes are first seen in the Late Rincon Red-on-brown pottery of the Tucson area and the latest varieties of Sacaton Red-on-buff from

Why no flat bottoms?

Except for some unusual forms mentioned in this article, virtually all Hohokam bowls and jars have rounded bottoms. Bernard Fontana, William Robinson, Charles Cormack, and Ernest Leavitt, Jr., reported in their 1962 book Papago Indian Pottery that nearly all Tohono O'odham (Papago) Indian pots also had convex bottoms. The reason why may have been the same for the prehistoric Hohokam as for their probable descendants, the Tohono O'odham:

We asked several potters why they made round bases on their pots, but the universal answer was laughter, as if doing it any other way would be ludicrously unthinkable. Here, then, is a case of Papago tradition in action. Papagos made convex-based pottery because that is the way their cultural dictates would have it. While this may seem to be an impractical shape to the non-Indian used to resting flat-bottomed pots and pans on the equally flat surfaces of gas or electric ranges, the Papagos do not find it so. We have seen at least three ways in which Papagos cook in these vessels while balancing them upright over flames: three rocks resting in the coals used as a stand; a triangular stand with three legs made from scrap metal, usually set into indoor fireplaces or over outdoor campfires; and the tops from non-Indian wood-burning stoves with the lids removed. The holes in such iron stove tops accommodate convex bases nicely.

The convex bottoms on water vessels are equally of no hindrance to their use since they usually rest in the three-branched crotch of a cut tree or are carried on one’s head with the help of a yucca ring shaped to hold them. Otherwise, pots are simply partly buried in the sand or earth, or propped up against a rock or wall or anything that is handy.

The main Hohokam painted pottery types dating to the Classic period (twelfth through fifteenth centuries) are Tanque Verde Red-on-brown from the Tucson area and Casa Grande Red-on-buff from the Phoenix region. Nearly all line work on these late types is very straight, and large areas of their design fields were commonly left unpainted. Instead of using the interiors of bowls as the primary design area as their predecessors had done, Classic period potters began putting most of their painted decorations on the outsides of the bowls, leaving only bands of painted decoration near the rims on the insides. The five Tanque Verde Red-on-brown pots in this photo were found by Old Pueblo Archaeology Center in the 1995 excavations at the Continental site in Green Valley. Photo by Ken Matesich.

the Gila and Salt River valleys in and around Phoenix.

After 1150, pottery bowls, which theretofore had always been painted primarily on their interior surfaces, remarkably began to be painted mostly on the exteriors, with only a band of (usually geometric) decorative elements being painted around the rim on the bowl interiors. If you find a piece of a Hohokam pottery bowl with painted designs on what was originally the vessel’s outer surface, chances are it’s either Casa Grande Red-on-buff from the Phoenix Basin, or Tanque Verde Red-on-buff from the Tucson area. Both are Classic period types dating after 1150.

During the early fourteenth century, solid red-colored pots that lacked painted designs, as well as distinctive, colorful kinds of painted pottery began appearing in the Hohokam culture area. These types, especially the ones named Gila Red, Pinto Polychrome, Gila Polychrome, and Tonto Polychrome, may
have been adopted from the Hohokam Indians’ more famous contemporaries, the ancient Anasazi and Mogollon people, who are believed to be direct ancestors of the Hopi, Zuni, and other Pueblo Indian tribes now living in New Mexico and northern Arizona.

In some of their southern Arizona villages during the 1300s the Hohokam began making their own pottery in styles reminiscent of those other distant cultures. Some of the later Hohokam ceramics thus exhibit black paint on white backgrounds, and others are of polychrome pottery types that feature bold black and white designs painted onto burnished redware vessel surfaces.

Unusual Pottery Forms. Most Hohokam ceramic vessels were bowls and jars of at least one-quart in carrying capacity, but scoops, mugs, pitchers, and ladles are not all that uncommon. However, one also finds some more unusual forms in Hohokam pottery. Among these are miniature bowls and jars, which were probably children’s toys, and vessels in the shapes of animals, people, and plants.

Animals occasionally represented in Hohokam pottery shapes are mostly birds, especially forms with duck-like bodies but without heads, and effigies of baby birds with only tiny clay protrusions representing their undeveloped wings and tails. The baby bird jars are nearly always oriented with heads up and mouths open as if they’re waiting to get a snack from their moms. Effigy vessels depicting generic-looking four-footed creatures, fish, and turtles have also been discovered.


In the March 1997 issue of Old Pueblo Archaeology archaeologist Alan Ferg discussed and illustrated several Hohokam human effigy vessels, including one found by Old Pueblo Archaeology Center on a 1994 dig in Green Valley.

The shapes of some Hohokam containers have also immortalized plants, or at least their fruits. Probably the most common plant products depicted are pumpkins and other members of the squash family. One specimen from the 1930s excavations at the Snaketown site is shaped like a bottle-gourd and is completely covered with small holes, suggesting it was used as a colander or sieve. And several examples of small, nearly spherical jars have knobby protrusions all over their exteriors, reminiscent of the star-like Datura (Jimson-weed) fruit.

Hohokam potters also sometimes made extremely heavy-walled dishes in which the clay body of the vessel occupied more volume than the concavity that could be used as a container. Many archaeologists call these vessels censers, interpreting them as incense burners. They can be very elaborate, even modeled into realistic animal shapes.

Other unusual forms of Hohokam vessels include cylindrical jars; three- or four-legged bowls without heads (although at least one example has a fifth appendage on one side that resembles an animal’s tail); scoops with handles modeled into human head shapes; two- and three-lobed jars, and double-spouted pitchers.

Visit Old Pueblo Archaeology Center’s web site courtesy of Steve Stacey, our volunteer webmaster. The address is: www.azstarnet.com/nonprofit/oldpueblo
The First Archaeomagnetic Dates from the Sabino Canyon Ruin

In March 1998 the Arizona Archaeological and Historical Society (AAHS) awarded Old Pueblo Archaeology Center a $500 grant to help pay for collecting and analyzing two archaeomagnetic dating samples from pithouses at the Sabino Canyon Ruin. The results of the dating analysis were received from the University of Arizona’s Department of Geosciences on February 1, 1999.

The archaeomagnetic date from the fire pit inside pithouse Feature 1009, which was discovered underneath the surface structures of the ruin’s “Enclosure A” compound, indicates this house was abandoned between A.D. 1155 and 1270. The hearth in the “Torgerson House” (“House 14”) excavated in the 1970s in the southern part of the ruin was dated between 1180 and 1420.

Both of these archaeomagnetic date ranges are consistent with the Tanque Verde Red-on-brown and corrugated pottery found on the house floors. Old Pueblo Archaeology Center’s final report on our investigations of the Sabino Canyon Ruin will include the results and final interpretations of the 1998-1999 archaeomagnetic dating effort. Thank you AAHS!

Old Pueblo Archaeology Center to Hold Fundraising Raffle in 2000

Old Pueblo Archaeology Center’s second-ever fund-raising raffle is scheduled for January 22, 2000.

Like our first raffle held last September, the Grand Prize for the 2000 raffle will be a large quilt with eye-catching Mimbres pottery designs! The prizes will also include other southwestern collectible artifacts (no prehistoric ones, of course).

Tickets will again be $2 each or six for $10. You can get tickets at the Archaeology Expo on March 6-7 or by calling Old Pueblo at (520) 798-1201.

Archaeology for All!

Public Can Participate in Archaeology Tours & Field Programs

Archaeology Opportunities Members Go on Digs & Tours Free!

The Sabino Canyon Ruin was a vibrant village of the ancient Hohokam Indians between A.D. 1000 and 1350. Old Pueblo’s excavations have revealed pottery, stone, bone, and seashell artifacts and have revealed prehistoric “pit houses,” apartment-like housing compounds with adobe and rock walls, ancient canals, and a dog burial.

Old Pueblo offers guided tours and archaeological field school digs open to the public at the Sabino Canyon Ruin on selected Saturdays. During the tours and field schools, models of reconstructed Hohokam houses and samples of artifacts that have been recovered are shown and described, and interpretations of ancient Hohokam life in the Sabino Canyon area are offered.

The 2-hour Saturday public tours are fundraisers for Old Pueblo Archaeology Center’s nonprofit research and education programs. Each tour starts at 9 a.m. and costs $10 per adult or $2 for kids 12 and under. The next public tours are set for March 6, March 20, and April 17.

The Saturday archaeological field school sessions, which are each eight hours long, cost $50 for a two-day program or $35 for one day. Lunches are provided for dig session participants. The next two-day field schools will be on March 6 & 20, April 17 & May 1, and May 15 & 29.

The Sabino Canyon Ruin is on private land a mile away from the Sabino Canyon Visitor Center. Call 798-1201 for reservations and directions to the Sabino Canyon Ruin.

The OPENI mock archaeological dig is a realistic full-size model of a prehistoric Indian pit-house village ruin. Kids ages 7 and up as well as adults can dig to discover and learn about pottery and other artifacts buried inOPENI during our archaeological excavation, and also participate in Native American craft activities. Fee per participant is $6 00 ($4.80 for Old Pueblo Archaeology Center members). The next OPENI Saturday sessions for individual sign-ups will be at Old Pueblo Archaeology Center on March 15 and March 27.

Advance reservations are required for all scheduled sessions, and group dates and rates are available for all programs. Call (520) 798-1201 for more information or reservations.

Silent Sycamores

Natural terrace, flood plain, mesquite pods, pottery shards, pithouse, mano and metate, desert home to ancient Hohokam, how you speak to me!

Walking rocky paths, past great white Sycamore sycamores, stepping across gentle stream stones, in and out of mesquite shadows -- I feel spirit faces quietly gathering to watch as we pass.

Painted fragments of past lives somehow connect to mine

Our paths cross, then diverge

The intersection somehow leaves me peaceful

Is it your silent gift?

What, oh quiet one, of myself do I leave with you?

"Silent Sycamores" poem © by Ellen Kovac Sabino Canyon Ruin Tucson, AZ 1-16-99

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Things Coming Up

April 3 Tour to Picture Rock, Topawa & Baboquivari Parks

As an alternative cultural prelude to Easter, Old Pueblo Archaeology Center will offer another opportunity to visit Picture Rock, Baboquivari Park, and traditional Native American structures on the Tohono O’odham Indian Reservation southwest of Tucson on Saturday, April 3. This archaeologist-guided tour will start in the reservation village of Topawa, where tribal members have reconstructed a traditional Tohono O’odham “round house.” Then it’s on to Picture Rock, one of the most interesting and intriguing rock art sites in southern Arizona, to see petroglyphs, pictographs, bedrock mortars, artifacts, and modern Tohono O’odham devotional offerings.

For lunch we’ll picnic in Baboquivari Park, a campground in the oak woodland just below the famous Baboquivari Peak. And after lunch there will be an optional trail hike up a mountain trail to see a Tohono O’odham devotional site and a spectacular view of the Baboquivari Valley -- homeland of the Tohono O’odham deity I’itoi. The tour will start at the Baboquivari District Office in Topawa at 9:30 a.m., and if you stay for the afternoon hike it will end around 4 p.m. It’s a 2-hour drive from Tucson to Topawa, so plan to leave Tucson by 7:30 a.m. on Saturday or camp in Baboquivari Park the night before. Campers need to bring their own food and water as there aren’t any convenience stores or fast food nearby.

A trip fee of $20 (members of Old Pueblo Archaeology Center’s Archaeology Opportunities organization can go for free!) will support Old Pueblo’s education programs and the Baboquivari District’s effort to maintain Baboquivari Park and its nearby traditional culture sites.

Reservations are required! Call Old Pueblo Archaeology Center to sign up and get directions to the meeting place. (520) 798-1201.

Arrowhead & Flintknapping Classes

Old Pueblo Archaeology Center’s most popular program is the Arrowhead & Flintknapping Workshop for ages 9 to adult, taught by archaeologist Allen Denoyer. This issue’s pull-out calendar of Archaeology Awareness Month events lists beginning and advanced level classes offered this month, and there will be a weekday workshop on Tuesday, April 6 at Old Pueblo. Call 798-1201 for details and reservations.

Tucked-Away Mission Tours

Guided tours are now offered to Guevavi and Calabasas, two lesser-known Santa Cruz River valley mission sites of the 1700s. Though both of them are crumbling adobe heaps of their former proselytizing glory, they remain important, tangible connections to our Spanish past. The free, 4-hour tours start at Tumacacori National Historic Park at 1 p.m. each Wednesday through April 28. For reservations you can call 398-2341, extension 0, in Tumacacori.

Pottery Reconstruction Opportunity

Statistical Research, Inc. (SRI), is seeking volunteers to put together pottery from a Tucson Basin prehistoric pithouse village site. Most of the pots are plainware and will only be partially restored so patience and good dispositions are required from those taking this challenge. SRI may also have other pot reconstruction opportunities after this project is completed. If interested call Barbara Montgomery at 721-4309 or e-mail her at SRILithCer@aol.com.

The Old Pueblo Archaeology Center Honor Roll: Recent Supporters

Donors & Grantors, Dec.-Jan.: Alphabetically (sort of): Werner & Lisel Zimm donated a beautiful display hatch that we are now using for artifact display and office supply storage. Patty & Bert Whalley gave us a Christmas present of 5 dish tubs, 10 clipboards, 6 wooden rulers, 5 painting trowels, 300 sheets of colored construction paper, and 1 "Claxton fruit cake" box filled with 12 line levels (That's okay, we didn't need the fruitcake!). Jim Trimbell gave $1,000 worth of cash and materials to provide us with a new outdoor sign and help pay for some plumbing work. Curt Edgerton donated an Apple Powerbook 500 Series laptop computer. Carolyn Davis and JoAnn Cowgill paid for a luncheon to recruit a new Fundraising Committee to get to work on Old Pueblo’s resource development program, and JoAnn & Herb Cowgill donated a pickup load of used lumber and other construction materials for our use. Betty Marshall also donated a ruler & a line level. And Canyon Ranch Spa, Michael Magnan, Robert Nairne, Gray Phillips, John & Helen Schaefer, Steve Stacey, Edward Steinhoff, and Lyle Stone provided cash donations in addition to donations received from persons taking the Sabino Canyon Ruin tours.


Volunteers: Special thanks go to Ashley & Wilson Batz for helping give tours, and to Ashley for her help in writing grant proposals; and to Carol Richardson, Bess Parry and Cell McPherson for mailing the December bulletin. Other volunteers who logged hours from Dec. 1- Feb. 20 were Rebecca & Peggy Bommeschbach, Karen Bright, Isabel Broome, Trudy Cabrera, Lisa Chopp, Joan Clark, Cynthia Cobb, Carol Collins, Joanne Costilich, Della & Ivan Cummins, Carolyn Davis, Jane Delaney, Sheila Ellerson, Jane Evans, Sam & Emily Greenleaf, Susan Hartwood, Doug Lindsey, Scott Palazzo, Carol Proctor, Gail Roper, Seth Rosenberg, Robin Rutherford, Steve Stacey, Tom Todd, Jr., Jim Trimbell, Andrew Tuohy, and Werner Zimm.
Broaden your perspective on Easter by visiting this reconstructed Tohono O'odham round house and other Native American traditional culture sites on the Saturday of Easter weekend (see inside). Photo by Marc Severson.

TIME TO RENEW?
If you received this issue in one of our mass-mailings, the 8-digit number on the top line of your address label indicates the year, month, and day your Old Pueblo Archaeology subscription will expire. If your label month is the same as or earlier than the month of this bulletin issue, you need to renew your subscription or membership in order to receive more issues.

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IN THIS ISSUE:
Arts and Culture of the Prehistoric Hohokam Indians: Corn, Canals, and Clay, by Allen Dart 1
Old Pueblo’s Wish List 5
The First Archaeomagnetic Dates from the Sabino Canyon Ruin 6
Old Pueblo Archaeology Center to Hold Fundraising Raffle in 2000 6
Archaeology for All! / Archaeology Opportunities Members Go on Digs & Tours Free 6
“Silent Sycamores” poem, by Ellen Kovac 6
Things Coming Up: April 3 Tour to Picture Rock Site, Arrowhead & Flinstropping Classes, & more 7
Plus removable insert: THE ANNUAL ARIZONA STATE PARKS LISTING OF ARIZONA ARCHAEOLOGY AWARENESS MONTH EVENTS FOR MARCH 1999

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The Old Pueblo Archaeology Center Home Page (www.azstorm.com/nonprofit/oldpueblo) is posted for free by The Arizona Daily Star newspaper and is maintained by volunteer J. Steven Stacey (e-mail JSSStacey@aol.com).