

Maria Martinez, San Ildefonso Pueblo, 1886-1980

Julian Martinez, San Ildefonso Pueblo, 1879-1943

**Vessel**, 20th century

Ceramic

H.6 ¼ x W.8 x D.8 inches

Gift of Barbara L. Strom, 86.94.

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## Theme

Shaped by the celebrated potter Maria Martinez, this bowl exemplifies an art form that is integral to the lives and traditions of the Pueblo people.

## Background

The landscape in this part of the Southwest is quiet: blue-purple hills, pink sand, gray-green sage, and mesquite as far as you can see... White cloud billows in the cerulean sky and mesas of lavender give background to the solitary river path and the stony arroyos where water only sometimes flows. The shimmery green-white of cottonwood leaves and the occasional deep green of piñon pine punctuate the landscape.... Some distance behind the [San Ildefonso] pueblo looms the landmark of this area, Black Mesa, called Tunyo by the Indians. It rises like an ominous green-black table, mysterious above the low hills, visible for miles.<sup>1</sup>

The traditions of the native peoples of the Southwest are deeply rooted in the land where their ancestors have lived for tens of thousands of years. The vast region stretching from southern Utah and Colorado, throughout New Mexico and Arizona, and south into Mexico is the oldest known area of human habitation on the North American continent. In the Southwest, pottery has been made for well over 2,000 years, providing vessels for carrying water and for the preparation and storage of food. For centuries the people have decorated these vessels with images from their surroundings, including the sun that caused their crops to grow and the clouds that were the source of life-giving rain.

The Southwest is home to many different groups of native peoples. Some groups are known as Pueblo (PWEB-loh), from the Spanish word meaning "town." In the 17th century, the Spanish applied this term to the native people as well as to their multi-unit adobe (uh-DOH-bee) dwellings. Today, many Pueblo people live much as their ancestors did along the Rio Grande in New Mexico.

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<sup>1</sup> Susan Peterson, *The Living Tradition of Maria Martinez* (New York: Kodansha International, 1978), 71-72.

The Spanish were the first Europeans to occupy the Southwest in the 16th century, imposing their cultural practices on the native people and encroaching on their lands. The Pueblo revolted against the invaders and drove them out briefly, but the Spanish regained control in 1694. From that time on, the Southwest was under the control of first Spain, then Mexico, and eventually the United States. Although their culture was vastly disrupted by the arrival of the Europeans, Southwest peoples have retained many of their artistic traditions, such as those seen in Pueblo pottery.

San Ildefonso Pueblo lies about 20 miles northwest of Santa Fe in New Mexico's Rio Grande valley. It is situated on the eastern bank of the Rio Grande between the Jemez mountain range on the west and the Sangre de Cristo Mountains on the east. During the 19th and early 20th century, the manufacture of traditional Pueblo pottery at San Ildefonso was in serious decline. It was the work of Maria Martinez (who is best known by her first name, Maria) and her husband, Julian, that initiated a revival of pottery making at San Ildefonso. During an excavation of a prehistoric pottery site in 1907, the couple saw pieces of ancient pottery. This discovery stimulated Maria to begin making pots in the tradition of their ancestors and Julian to compile a notebook of prehistoric designs. In the traditional Pueblo manner, Maria formed the pots, while Julian painted them. Together they developed a variety of innovative pottery.<sup>2</sup> Maria and Julian's influence reached beyond San Ildefonso to neighboring pueblos, where others began to revive their own pottery traditions. Over time, the economic importance of pottery making became increasingly significant to the pueblos and their livelihood.

### ***Vessel (Bowl)***

This bowl is an example of the black-on-black ware for which Maria and her husband, Julian, are famous. The black-on-black style consists of a contrasting surface design of matte or dull black on polished, glossy black. Since the matte and glossy areas are close in color, the textural contrast reveals the painted designs with subtlety and elegance. Known for her high-gloss surfaces, Maria has painstakingly polished this bowl to a deep, rich luster. Also characteristic of her work is the bowl's refined appearance, with its graceful shape of perfect symmetry and fine proportions. The artist achieved all of this without the use of a potter's wheel!

Painted around the neck of the bowl is a horned water serpent known as Avanyu (ah-VON-yu). This figure is related to an ancient Mesoamerican deity who was thought to have brought the knowledge of art, science, and agriculture to humans. The zigzag shape that protrudes from the serpent's mouth represents lightning. Julian adapted this design from ancient pottery shards and interpreted it as a symbol of thanksgiving for water and rain. Variations on this design have been incorporated into the pottery of many surrounding pueblos.

The painted design works in harmony with the bowl's shape. The serpent, whose contours are delineated in matte color, is stylized with simple lines that describe its eye, teeth, lightning tongue and horns or plumes. The undulating form of the serpent's body suggests the waves of water with which it is identified. The snake's dynamic force and

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<sup>2</sup> Although traditionally Pueblo women did the potting and men often painted the decoration on the pots, in modern times, pottery making is no longer restricted to women.

movement are suggested by the repetition of its rhythmic curves, which wind around the bowl, as well as by the pairs of fin-like appendages underneath its body, the sharp angles of the lightning bolt, and the fork-like horns that extend from its head. The glossy horizontal band around the bowl's center echoes the format of the serpent and adds balance and gracefulness to the overall design.

## Technique

Like other Pueblo artists, Maria thought of clay as a living substance and a gift of Mother Earth. She began her pottery making process with prayers and offerings of cornmeal, which she spread over the ground before gathering the clay. After she mixed the clay with sand and water—taking great care to find just the right consistency—Maria was ready to shape the clay.

Maria built this bowl using the traditional Pueblo method of coiling and smoothing ropes of clay. In this method, the bottom of the pot is formed and placed on a base (puki), which is often the bottom of an older, broken pot. Coils of clay are then built up in succession to form the sides. The coils are pinched together and smoothed with a tool such as a piece of gourd or a potsherd. Slip (clay thinned with water) is painted on the surface of the newly formed, dried pot. It is then polished smooth with a special polishing stone in preparation for the painting of the design.

The distinctive black-on-black designs of the Martinezes were achieved by creating contrasting areas of matte and gloss. This was done by painting a red clay slip (clay thinned with water) on portions of a polished pot, usually with a brush made from a dried yucca (YOO-ka) leaf that was chewed to shape the fibers extending from the tip. The matte designs were painted on the polished surface before firing.

The firing was done in an open fire outdoors, with the clay pots placed on metal grates. Dried manure was stacked around them and ignited to create the high temperatures required. During the firing process, the clay pot turned black due to a reduction in the oxygen supply, which brought carbon to the surface. When the firing was finished, the polished areas of the pot were a glossy black, but the area painted with slip (around the figure) was dull.

## Artist

Born around 1886 (the exact date is unknown), Maria was a Tewa Indian from San Ildefonso Pueblo. As a child, she was taught how to make polychrome (several colors) pottery by her aunt. Maria first demonstrated her pottery making in public at the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair. In 1907 archaeologists under the direction of Edgar Hewett were excavating ruins at Bandelier National Monument, near San Ildefonso. They asked Maria, who was known as the most skilled potter of her pueblo, to reproduce vessels styled after broken pots they had found. The scientists' encouragement led to Maria and Julian's rapid development in ceramic arts. In 1919, they developed the black-on-black style that would bring them international fame, and by 1921 they had perfected the process. Maria began to share their working methods with other potters, and, while Maria and Julian remained the masters, by 1925 most San Ildefonso potters emulated their work. In the 1930s, Maria taught pottery making at the Indian School in Santa Fe.

In 1934, Maria and Julian were invited to exhibit at the Chicago World's Fair, where they received several bronze medals, one awarded by the Indian Fire Council, the only national recognition given to Indians at that time. Maria continued making pottery with Julian until his death in 1943. Then she worked with her daughter-in-law, Santana, and later with her son Popovi Da, who, like his parents, was known for his striking innovations. Mother and son worked together until Popovi Da's death in 1971. In her later years, Maria continued to be a role model and matriarch to her large family consisting of five generations of potters.

Traditionally, pottery making was a communal or family enterprise among the Pueblo, and the individuality of the artist was a foreign concept. Maria thought of her work as a family collaboration and considered herself simply one of many San Ildefonso potters. Because of the great demand for her work by collectors, tourists and museums, however, Maria was encouraged to sign her pots to identify them. She began doing so in 1923, and was the first Pueblo Indian potter to use her signature as a regular practice. In the course of her 70-year career, Maria used seven different signatures on her pottery, reflecting the various people with whom she worked.<sup>3</sup>

During her long life, Maria was the recipient of numerous honors and awards, including the Craftsmanship Medal from the American Institute of Architects in 1954, the American Ceramic Society's Presidential Citation, an honorary doctorate from New Mexico State University, and New Mexico's First Annual Governor's Award for bringing "artistic distinction and great economic benefits to her pueblo."<sup>4</sup> Maria Martinez is considered one of the world's great potters, and her work is represented in museums nationally and internationally. As with Elizabeth Catlett, Maria's artistic profession helped to preserve the cultural heritage of her people and advance their cause within American society.

## Suggested Questions

1. What do you see painted on this container? What kind of animal is this? What is coming out of its mouth? Why do you think the animal is pictured with lightning coming from its mouth? Does this look like a real animal? Why or why not?
2. If the serpent pictured on this pot could move, what kind of movements do you think it would make? How do the lines on the bowl help create this feeling? Why do you say that?
3. The designs on this container are not symmetrical yet they appear balanced. How have the shapes and lines been used to make the design appear balanced?
4. What do you think this pot would feel like if you could touch it? Would it be rough or smooth? What makes you say that? From what kind of material do you think it is made? How can you tell?

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<sup>3</sup> Richard L. Spivey, *Maria* (Flagstaff: Northland Publishing, 1989), 63-64.

<sup>4</sup> Spivey, 73.

5. This whole pot has been painted black, yet the decorations painted on it are easy to see. How has the artist achieved this effect? In what way do the textures on the pot help define the design of the serpent?
6. This pot is made from clay. Do you think it looks like a clay pot? Why or why not? This pot was made from long coils of clay rather than on a potter's wheel. How do you think Maria made it look so smooth? What tools might she have used?
7. In order to make her pots, Maria collected the clay from the earth, then mixed it with sand and water. Why do you think Maria added sand and water to the clay she found? Why do you think she preferred to find her own clay instead of buying it from a store?
8. Maria polished parts of this bowl with a special polishing stone. Which areas look as if they have been polished?
9. The design on this container was inspired by ancient pottery designs and was meant as a symbol of thanksgiving for water. What about this bowl reminds you of water? Why do you think Maria and her husband would want to create the feeling of water on their pottery?
10. It is common in the Southwest for potters to refer to the various sections of bowls as parts of the human body. Where do you think the mouth is on this container? The lips? The neck? The stomach? The foot?
11. In what ways does this pot reflect the natural surroundings of the Pueblo people? What does the decoration on the pot tell you about the importance of rain and water? In what ways does this pot reflect harmony with the natural world?
12. Maria and her husband, Julian, were asked by a group of archaeologists to recreate the pottery and images of the ancient Pueblos. Why do you think this ancient pottery was important to the archaeologists? Why do you think it was important to Maria and Julian?
13. Traditionally Pueblo pottery was something families or communities made together. Maria thought of herself as simply one of many San Ildefonso potters, but she was encouraged to sign her work by collectors, tourists, and museums. Why do you think they wanted her to sign her work? Why do you think she signed it?
14. Compare this pot to the Cadzi Cody elk hide. In what way does each work reflect the environment of the people who made it? What do the materials and decoration tell you about the culture from which the work came? How does each work help preserve ancient traditions?
15. In what ways have both Elizabeth Catlett and Maria Martinez represented part of American history in their artwork? In what way has each artist represented and preserved her own cultural heritage? How have both artists worked to advance their causes within American society?

