
Title of Object

Bowl

Photo of Object (optional)



Object Information

Artist: Unknown

Country: United States (New Mexico)

Date of Object: c. 1000-1150

File Created: 5/12/2016

Accession Number: 2014.97.1

Author of File: Terry Keir

Material/Medium: Clay, pigments

Reviewer of File: Kara ZumBahlen

Department: Art of the Americas

Last Updated/Reviewed: 7/6/2016

Culture: Mimbres

Tour Topics

Group 6 tour, ancient culture, animals, ceramics, food and drink, funerary/afterlife, mythology, symbolism, spirituality/sacred, ritual/ceremony

Questions and Activities (list 3 to 4 sample questions here):

What do you notice when looking at the Mimbres bowls?

Describe the images on the bowls.

The Mimbres culture did not use potter's wheels. How does this influence how we view Mimbres pottery?

How do these bowls compare to bowls from other cultures?

Key Points (Form: subject matter, medium and techniques of manufacture, style, etc.)

Mimbres ceramics are primarily simple bowls with painted geometric and pictorial designs.

Pots were made using a coil technique and smoothed while still damp with stones. When dry the pots were covered with a slip of kaolin clay to give the pot a white appearance.

Pots were usually painted using ground iron ore mixed with water and a plant –derived binder, and applied using a yucca brush.

After thoroughly drying the pots were fired. The final color depended on the degree of oxidation, which is dependent on the amount of air in the kiln. An oxidizing atmosphere with a lot of air created brick-red paint on a pink slip. A reducing atmosphere where air is not allowed to circulate created black paint on a white slip.

Mimbres pottery is referred to as “Mimbres black and white” pottery although there are color variations.

In addition to mastering the use of positive and negative space to create their designs and figures, Mimbres artists used the curve of the bowl and the positions of the figures depicted to lend a real-world perspective to their work.

A wide variety of animals, including many religiously symbolic animals is depicted in Classic Black-on-White pottery including fish, birds, bats, lizards, frogs, rabbits, and turtles. While the images of animals, fish, birds, and human figures are highly stylized, details are often emphasized. Images of animal and fish species provide insight into Mimbres life.

Many animal bowls depicted rabbits which were a food source for the Mimbres. Rabbits are also common symbols of the moon in the Southwest and the Mimbres observed and recorded celestial occurrences. Fish comprise about 8% of figurative depictions on Mimbres pottery. Comparisons of fish imagery indicate that many species represented are saltwater fish from the Gulf of California, over 500 kilometers away.

Images of birds are plentiful, comprising about 22% of figurative imagery, including eagles, turkeys, quail, and cranes, as well as macaws and parrots. Images of macaws and parrots support the theory that the Mimbres were seasonal travelers.

Here on this bowl, we have a quadruped depicted, perhaps a mountain sheep.

Key Points (Context: use, history, cultural information, artist bio, etc.)

The Mimbres culture was part of a larger group known as Mogollon. Mogollon is one of the three major cultures of ancient American southwest along with the Ancient Puebloan (Anasazi) and the Hohokam. The Mimbres culture was concentrated around the Mimbres River in southern New Mexico. The river was named by Spanish settlers for the Mimbres or small willows along its bank. The name “Mimbres” was applied to the people who lived in the river valley and made pottery but their actual name is unknown.

The people grew corn and beans, and were also hunters and gatherers. Villages consisted of small pithouse or pueblo groupings, and usually had a small rectangular ceremonial structure known as a kiva. The most common burial practices intramural inhumation. Unlike the Mogollon, who often buried numerous vessels with their dead, the Mimbres usually provided only a single bowl, ritually "killed" by punching a hole in the bottom to release the spirit.

The Mimbres culture led a subsistence existence, cultivating crops such as corn, beans, squash and sunflowers using irrigation, while supplementing the crops with wild plants and hunting. The total population may have reached 6,000 in the Mimbres River valley. Archaeological evidence indicates that by 1150 the population exceeded the food supply in the river valley and the people migrated.

The Mimbres culture existed from approximately 100-1150. Between 1000 and 1150 was the culture's apex and is called the Mimbres Classic period. It was during this time period that the best pottery was produced. Mimbres pottery is known as 'Mimbres black-on-white' with designs painted in bowls that are generally about ten inches in diameter and less than five inches high. There are also small seed jars, small effigy jars, and large jars.

Female burial sites were found with pottery-making tools which has led to the belief that the artists responsible for making the pottery were women.

Initially the designs were simple and geometric but became more complex in the last 150 years. About two-thirds of the bowls found have geometric designs while one-third have figures which include animals, feathered serpents and other mythological creatures, and ceremonial and everyday human scenes.

Although Mimbres pottery was commonly used for eating and serving, much of the painted pottery was excavated from gravesites. The Mimbres buried their dead in pit tombs located under their living quarters, which lends religious significance to Mimbres pottery and its imagery. Many of the images depicted on the bowls were religiously symbolic animals. Before being placed in the burial pit, a pointed tool was used to symbolically "kill" a bowl by punching a hole through its base. The bowl was then placed upside down on top of the body's head, possibly to allow the spirit freedom.

Mimbres pottery was a crucial element of the Mogollon death ritual. Custom dictated that Mogollons be buried under their homes, curled in a fetal position. Prior to burial, a bowl to be placed on the head of the deceased was ceremonially and symbolically killed, the hole in the center of the bowl representing the fatal wound. The killing of the bowl freed the spirit of the pottery to accompany the dead person into the afterlife. In this way the Mogollons are not considered disappeared, but are believed to live on in their contemporary descendants.

Mimbres pottery was discovered in the early part of the twentieth century. It was initially ignored but as more of the pottery was unearthed, it was appreciated for the quality of the pottery and imagery. As the market grew for the pottery, looters used bulldozers to strip-mine burial sites for objects. Many owners of sites on private property have worked to protect the sites and encourage archaeological excavations.

Current Mia Label Information (optional)

The Mimbres, a group of people within the Mogollon tradition, lived in southwestern New Mexico from A.D. 1000 to 1150. The majority of Mimbres ceramics are simple, white bowls with black painted, geometric and pictorial designs. Some Mimbres bowls, however, have red designs, as in this example. The color of the designs depended upon how the bowls were fired. A kiln with freely circulating air would cause the iron ore in the paint to oxidize, rendering a red color, but if the oxygen supply was reduced, the paint would fire black. The Mimbres depicted a wide range of creatures, including fish, frogs, rabbits, turtles, bats, birds and humans. Bowls were not only utilitarian but were also ceremonial

and accompanied the deceased. When buried with the dead, a hole was punched through the center, and the bowl was then placed over the face.

Sources of Information and/or Prop Ideas (photos/videos)

Mimbres culture, Beloit College, with examples of pottery types:

https://www.beloit.edu/logan_online/exhibitions/virtual_exhibitions/north_america/southwest/mimbres/mimbres.php

Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History; <http://anthropology.si.edu/cm/mimbres.htm>

Isabella, Jude; Archaeology- On the Trail of the Mimbres, in *Archeology*, April 8, 2013;

<http://www.archaeology.org/issues/89-1305/features/738-mimbres-bowls-southwest-collapse-reorganization>

Mimbres Bowl, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/sisterwendy/works/mim.html>

Mia; <http://collections.artsmia.org/search/2014.97.1>

Information on the Mimbres, Maine Center for the Arts (William P. Palmer III Collection):

<http://www.library.umaine.edu/hudson/palmer/Mimbres/pimagery.asp>

Mimbres bowls:



Mimbres burial pit (from ancestral.com):



