
Title of Object

Vessel (Underwater Panther)

Photo of Object (optional)



Object Information

Artist: Unknown

Country: United States

Date of Object: c. 1500

File Created: 5/9/2016

Accession Number: 2004.33

Author of File: Josie Owens and Angela Seutter

Material/Medium: clay, pigments

Reviewer of File: Kara ZumBahlen

Department: Art of the Americas

Last Updated/Reviewed: 7/6/2016

Culture: Quapaw (Mississippian)

Tour Topics

Group 1 tour, animals/birds, ceramics, mythology, nature, power, ritual/ceremony, spirituality/sacred, stories/storytelling, symbolism

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

From Josie:

1. As you look at this vessel, what makes you think about water?
2. What animal features do you see on this vessel?
3. We are near the Mississippi. Have you walked near the river? What did you notice?

From Angela:

1. What animal or animals do you see when you look at this piece?
2. Let's talk a little bit about the underwater panther and the Mimbres bowls. How are they similar? How are they different?

3. Many cultures believe that animals have special instincts and characteristics. What traits do we associate with these animals? Why might a hero have animal features?
4. How do you think we still venerate animals in today's culture?

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

The central Mississippi Valley, where this vessel was made, was home to highly developed ceramic traditions in which artists were often inspired by natural forms to create animated, vividly colored red, white, and black vessels featuring keenly observed, sometimes caricature-like representations of animals and people. Most objects we still have today were probably grave objects to assist person in the afterlife.

Ceramics of the Late Mississippian/Protohistoric era (ca. 1350– 1700) are known mostly from vessels found in graves. The utilitarian vessels of this period were plain jars, bowls, bottles, and large pans, sometimes with a narrow band of incising or punctuations around the rim. In eastern Arkansas around 1350, a profusion of decorated types appeared, often with complex designs covering much of the vessel. Buried with the dead were bowls and bottles, often modeled into effigy figures such as fish, birds, bats, shells, and humans. Painting, using red or a combination of red and white, was common.

The way pottery is decorated can tell archaeologists much about the people who made or used it. With Native American pottery, different decorative styles can help identify different cultural groups or tribes, as well as pinpoint the time period when a site was in use. Pots modeled in the shapes of birds, animals, or fish—called effigy pots—suggest what animals might have been important to a group, either for food or in their religious beliefs.

The Quapaw produced some of the finest pottery of prehistoric North America. They produced pottery of great durability and high artistic merit. Women were probably the pottery makers. They had no wheel or modern kilns. They used crushed mussel shells, crushed dry clay, bone, and sand to give their pottery mixture greater strength after firing. They used clay rolls to coil and smoothed freehand. After drying in the air, the pottery was put in front of the fire. It would dry to gray, brown, black, and tan. To make it more aesthetically pleasing, they would add natural red, tan, black, and white paints to the pottery surfaces prior to firing. Many exhibited painted swirls (the Quapaw swirl), crosses, and geometric pattern that perhaps carry a cultural or religious meaning.

This vessel is an effigy pot as it portrays the Underwater Panther, a mythological beast that was very important to the Quapaw and resided in the underworld.

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

Originally part of the Dhegihan people from the Ohio River region, the Quapaw left in 1500 after attacks by the Iroquois and traveled to the Mississippi River Valley. There they divided into two groups. The Omaha went north, and the Quapaw went south and settled in the area between the Arkansas and Mississippi Rivers. Quapaw means downwater people. They were encountered by De Soto in 1541.

The Quapaw had an established culture with towns and agriculture. They lived in longhouses. The women did the farming and childrearing. The men hunted and even traveled to the west to hunt buffalo.

They had an elaborate trading network. They were a warring people, and the captives could be killed or adopted to replace a male relative. They held large ceremonies.

The Quapaw believed in a lifeforce – Wah-kon-tah – which existed in every material object in the world. They had a tripartite belief of the world – sky world, underwater world, and earth. The Wapinam were the special class of holy men who communicated with the deities. They believed in an afterlife of perpetual joy or torment. They buried the dead in or just outside the family dwelling and set fires to keep the corpses warm. They sometimes used burial mounds and would hang offerings on stakes.

The culture was patrilineal. There were 21 clans who each possessed a guardian spirit. Clans were either Sky People or Earth People and could only marry one from the other group.

The Quapaw eventually became dependent on traded European goods and lost their self-sustainability. They were moved to Louisiana and then to Oklahoma in 1824. Their population was down to 900 from a high of possibly 10,000.

This figure is thought to represent the underwater panther. The Underwater Panther usually was a combination of several creatures. It has the antlers of a deer, the teeth and claws of a feline, and a long bird plume hanging from its back. Sometimes they could change into a serpent. The Underwater Panther is associated with the dangerous but potentially beneficial powers of rivers, waterfalls, pools and underground watery caverns. Throughout North America many art traditions customarily represent the powers of nature in terms of various composite creatures, like the underwater panther.

The Underwater Panther was the god of the underworld. He fought with the Thunderbird and caused big storms. The Underwater Panther also caused rough water and currents. His hissing was the falls and rapids. He needed to be appeased before travel on the water. If one drowned, then the panther had the soul. As noted, they were an amalgam of many animals and sometimes had scales, feathers, horns, and a long tail.

Many North American cultures had a shared belief in the spiritual powers embodied in animals. Spiritual communication with the world of animals was, and still is, an important aspect of religious life in Native American cultures. This vessel and many other effigy vessels attest to the spiritual bonds between people and animals who, with powers and instincts that people do not have, and by virtue of their close association with the earth, the sky, and the waters, act as intermediaries between the less powerful human community and the all-powerful, remote, sacred forces and phenomena of the natural environment.

Current Mia Label Information (optional)

The prominent colored swirls and eye motifs mark this animal as an Underwater Panther, one of the primary beings in the ancient Mississippian belief system and that of their descendants. The swirling pattern on its sides signifies water, while the eye markings allude to the animal's unusually keen vision. Red and white were symbolically significant colors that represented fundamental oppositions such as peace and war, light and dark and the on-going struggle between the celestial and subterranean realms. Underwater Panthers belonged to the subterranean and possessed great supernatural power. Their significance led Mississippian and subsequent artists to depict them frequently in many forms and media, including three-dimensional sculptures like this vessel.

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

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Baird, W. David. *The Quapaws*. Chelsea House: New York, 1989. Print.

Clark, Blue. *Indian Tribes of Oklahoma: A Guide*. University of Oklahoma Press: Norman, 2009. Online.

http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/citi/resources/Rsrc_001118.pdf Adapted from Victor Barnouw, 1977, Wisconsin Chippewa Myths and Tales and Their Relation to Chippewa Life, Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press.)

“The Mound Builders” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yg9ZXvulMQE> Video.

Arkansas Archaeological Survey: <http://archeology.uark.edu>

Mary L. Kwas (Arkansas Archeological Survey) *Made from Clay: Cooking & Craftsmanship*
<http://archeology.uark.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Made-from-Clay.pdf>

Mississippian culture, information from Museum Link, Illinois (Illinois State Museum):
http://www.museum.state.il.us/muslink/nat_amer/pre/htmls/miss.html

The Art Institute of Chicago: http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/citi/resources/Rsrc_001118.pdf