



## Jar with feather motif

Maria Martinez

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**Not on display****Title/Description:** Jar with feather motif**Artist/Maker:** Maria Martinez**Born:** 1950 c. - 1950**Object Type:** Vessel**Materials:** Ceramic**Technique:** Coiling**Measurements:** h 10.5 x w 12 cm**Accession Number:** LSC 76**Historic Period:** 20th century**Production Place:** New Mexico, Rio Grande Valley, United States of America**Cultural Group:** San Ildefonso Pueblo**Credit Line:** Bequeathed by Lady Sainsbury, 2014

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Maria Martinez (1887-1980) became world-renowned for her black-on-black pottery and is one of the most important Native American ceramic artists of the 20th century. She was of Tewa heritage of the San Ildefonso Pueblo in the Rio Grande Valley of New Mexico. Many of Martinez's family members were involved in pottery and she learned to make pots by watching her aunt and grandmother. Martinez is recognized for the distinctive pottery that she developed with her husband, Julian (Pocano) Martinez (1879-1943), based on ancient ceramics made by her indigenous ancestors.

This beautiful jar was hand-built by Martinez using the coil technique. She gathered the clay and then mixed it with sand all found locally. She pinched together the snake-like coils of clay to create the basic shape of the pot. She then scraped and smoothed the coils with a gourd tool until the pot was the same thickness all the way around. When it was dry enough to handle, a thin layer of slip (watery clay) was applied over the pot, and then the surface was polished using a smooth, fine-grained stone. Once the jar had dried and hardened, she polished its surface with a small stone to create a burnished finish. Her daughter-in-law, Santana Roybal (1909-2002), then painted on the design with liquid clay, producing a matte surface that contrasts with the high polished areas. During the firing process, the oxygen supply was cut off, producing carbon smoke that turned the jar black. The design is a feather motif with ziggurat motif.

Maria Martinez learned the fundamentals of pottery making as a child from her maternal aunt,

Nicolasa Peña, and grandmother, Martina Montoya. By the age of thirteen, she was already celebrated within the family for her skill. Traditional Pueblo ceramics, like many world pottery traditions, was a family and community endeavour. Most often, each step in the process was carried out by a different family member, such as pottery building, polishing, painting, or firing. The making of ceramics was a collective endeavour rather than one of individual artistic expression. Before she married, she worked with her sisters, then with her husband, Julian. Maria built and shaped the pots and Julian painted the designs. He was the first acknowledged male artist of their Pueblo to do so. When he died, Maria worked with her daughter-in-law Santana Roybal, as in this fine example, and also with her son Popovi Da. [1] The Sainsbury Centre jar is signed 'Maria & Santana' and so would have been made between 1943 and 1953 [2]

Maria and Julian were responsible for reviving motifs and examples found on ancient pottery excavated in the region. In 1908, Dr. Edgar Hewett, archaeologist and director of the Laboratory of Anthropology in Santa Fe, New Mexico, had excavated some 17th century black pottery shards. He was interested in reviving this type of pottery, and so made contact with Maria. Hewett encouraged Maria and Julian to experiment with various firing and painting techniques in order to create contemporary versions of the artifacts he had found. This was in contrast to the all-red or polychrome ware that had dominated the pueblo's production for generations. During the early years of pottery making, Julian broke away from farming to become a caretaker at the Museum of New Mexico in Santa Fe. It was here that he and Maria studied the pottery in the display cases, observing form, motif and technique. By 1921, the couple had mastered their process for making pottery with a highly glossed finish and matte-black designs. They found that smothering a cool fire with dried cow manure trapped the smoke, and that by using a special type of paint on top of a burnished surface, in combination with trapping the smoke and the low temperature of the fire resulted in turning a red-clay-pot black.

By the mid-1920s, Martinez's black-ware had become extremely popular outside the pueblo, thanks to a book published by the director of the Museum of New Mexico. Martinez was encouraged to sign her pots, the first Pueblo potter to do so. They were beginning to be regarded as works of art rather than household or ritual vessels. This coincided with the rise of the modernist aesthetic and the Eurocentric interest in the authentic indigenous artist. Her work was celebrated at art shows, expositions, and fairs nationwide. Despite achieving great prominence, Maria Martinez eschewed the European notion of the isolated artistic genius, stating:

'I just thank God because [my work is] not only for me; it's for all the people. I said to my God, the Great Spirit, Mother Earth gave me this luck. So I'm not going to keep it.' [3]

In 1952 Bernard Leach and Shoji Hamada visited Maria in San Ildefonso. Leach wrote, 'The effect was powerful - matt on shiny black, and the final red colour of the clay was due to carbonisation during the firing in a clamp of pots raised on broken shards and burned for two to three hours using thin sticks and dried cow dung' [4] Hamada said that Maria herself has been part of a living tradition, and he was pleased that he was able to see with his own eyes how she made and fired her own pottery at her pueblo. Maria also wrote of the meeting,

'Hamada came with Bernard Leach, and they asked me if they could watch me work on pottery. So I said, "Yes sure", her son Popovi Da agreed and said, "Well you come tomorrow. Today we are busy, but you come tomorrow. And they came and we took them to the place where we get the clay, and

then brought them home and I made some, and I made pottery.' [5]

Maria was deeply connected with her pueblo of San Ildefonso and its traditional way of life and its ceremonies and religious activities. Even when internationally celebrated, she preferred to remain in her ancestral home. Martinez's works exemplify a collaborative approach to art. She learned how to make pottery from female family members, worked alongside her sisters (who often painted designs on her earliest pieces of pottery), She passed on the tradition of teaching pottery to members of her family and others in her community. She is recognized as a master artist, and her work is found in many major art museums.

Adam Martinez (1903-2000) was the eldest son of Maria and Julian. He married Santana Roybal (1909-2002). Following Julian's death in 1943, Adam and Santana helped Maria with the design and firing of her pottery. Pieces during this collaboration were made between 1943 and 1954, and are signed "Maria + Santana." Popovi Da was another son of Maria and Julian. Following his service in the Army during World War II, Popovi Da studied art at the Indian School in Santa Fe in the 1950s, focusing on pottery making. Popovi Da was involved in pottery making with Maria in the 1940s and 50s as he assisted her in the gathering of clay and paints and in the firing of the pots. [6] In 1948 Popovi Da and his wife Anita Da opened a gallery. The Popovi Da Studio of Indian Art at San Ildefonso Pueblo promoted and sold Native American arts and crafts and displayed Maria's pottery.

Calvin Winner, October 2021

[1] Douglas Patinka and John A. Torre, *The Art, Life, And Legacy of Maria Martinez* <https://www.incollect.com/articles/the-art-life-and-legacy-of-maria-martinez>, accessed October 2021

[2] Matt Wood, <https://www.mariamartinezpottery.com/>, accessed October 2021

[3] <https://nmwa.org/art/collection/martinez-jar/>

[4] Bernard Leach, *Beyond East and West*, p.247

[5] Spivey, Richard L. Maria. Northland Press, 1979, quoted in *Modern Pots*, p.181-2

[6] Matt Wood, <https://www.mariamartinezpottery.com/>, accessed October 2021

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## Further Reading

Hazel Hyde, *Maria Making Pottery: The Story of Famous American Indian Potter Maria Martinez* (Sunstone Press, 1992).

Alice Marriott, *Maria: The Potter of San Ildefonso* (University of Oklahoma Press, 1987).

Susan Peterson and Francis H. Harlow, *The Living Tradition of Maria Martinez* (Kodansha, 1992).

*Pottery by American Indian Women: The Legacy of Generations* (Abbeville Press, 1997).

Richard Spivey, *The Legacy of Maria Poveka Martinez* (Museum of New Mexico Press, 2003).

Stephen Trimble, *Talking with the Clay: The Art of Pueblo Pottery in the 21st Century* (School of American Research Press, 2007).

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