



SALADO CRAFT ARTS

During the centuries the Salado lived in the Tonto Basin, their culture expanded and diversified. Their beautifully decorated pottery and elaborate textiles show us a people well versed in handicrafts, and with a highly developed artistic sense. Sufficient discretionary time to transform functional household goods into works of art is one indication of a thriving culture.

Ceramics

Clay, temper, and water are the ingredients needed for making pottery. Temper is coarse material added to the clay to give it body and keep the pot from cracking when fired. Common tempers include crushed pottery sherds, sand, quartz, and crushed rock.

Once clay and temper were thoroughly mixed, sufficient water was added to achieve the desired consistency. Pottery wheels were unknown to prehistoric Southwestern peoples; instead, Salado women built up their pots with round rolls of clay that were coiled on each other, either as a series of concentric rings or a continuous spiral. With her hand on the inside of the vessel and a small even-edged tool on the outside, the potter smoothed and shaped the walls of the pot into the desired form. The vessel could then be polished with a smooth stone, covered with a thin clay wash called a slip, and painted with elaborate designs. Finally, the vessel was fired over a bed of wood coals, probably inverting the vessel, and then carefully piling more wood around it, leaving room for the air to circulate.

Oxygen, mixed with the heat, created an oxidizing atmosphere. Varying percentages of iron, naturally present in the clay, oxidized and emerged from the firing as red, orange, or yellow. White was derived from a type of kaolin clay, and black was produced from plant material that carbonized during the firing process.

Like other pueblo cultures, the Salado made plain red utility wares for everyday use. Their decorative wares consisted of three styles of beautifully painted polychromes that were reserved for ceremonial use and burial offerings. These Salado polychromes form one of the most popular pottery types ever produced in the Southwest and are often called the hallmark of the Salado tradition.

Pinto polychrome, the earliest of the styles, first appeared around AD 1200. These bowls have red slipped exteriors, and white slipped interiors that are painted with black designs. The designs involve mixed geometric and curvilinear motifs in broad line, fine line, and hatchur, which cover the entire interior of the bowl.

Gila polychrome, developed from the earlier Pinto polychrome style, also has a red-slipped exterior and black-on-white interior. These bowls are decorated with bolder, more variable designs that usually cover the entire interior, but are separated from the rim by a broad encircling band. This band, or "life line", usually has a short gap, possibly to allow the spirit of the bowl to escape.

Tonto polychrome is distinguished from Gila polychrome only by the addition of red design elements on the white slip between the black painted elements. Tonto Polychrome is primarily confined to jars and may be simply a variety of Gila Polychrome.

Textiles

The textiles excavated form one of the finest collections of prehistoric fabrics in the Southwest. The Salado evolved a weaving technology and artistry that rivaled any contemporary southwestern culture.

Cotton was grown in the irrigated fields near the river. When the cotton matured, the bolls were brought to the village and the fibers were separated from the bolls and seeds. The fibers were spun into thread with a slender spindle stick that was weighted below the center with a flat disk called a whorl. Some skeins were dyed; others were left natural. There were various shades of brown, red, black, dark blue, dark blue-green, light blue, and yellow. The colors of the textiles we see today have been discolored to varying tones of gray, yellow, brown, or black by charring or age.

Weaving tools have been discovered in male burials, suggesting that men did the weaving in pueblo cultures of the past, just as they do among the Hopi today.

It appears that nearly all the Tonto textiles were woven on a loom by fastening vertical warp threads between two stationary bars, placed parallel to the ground and a few inches above it, and interlacing horizontal weft threads back and forth across the warps.

The variety of weaves is astonishing. Some were basic plain weaves in a simple over one, under one pattern that was used for large utilitarian items such as blankets and kilts. Others were complicated in technique and produced elaborate designs.

Only two pieces of plaid have been found in the Southwest; one is a brown and white fragment found in the Tonto dwellings.

The most popular decorative technique was weft-wrap openwork. This cloth was a plain weave, in which decorative holes were made by wrapping the weft threads around certain groups of warp threads, pulling them apart to form small holes. The distribution of these holes created a design on the cloth.

Embroidery also seems to have been a popular decorative technique. Several complex designs are found on textile fragments in the Tonto collection.

The finest example of Salado textile art in existence was found in the Tonto cliff dwellings. It is a man's shirt, manufactured by an elaborate open work technique called twine plaiting. This lace-like fabric is constructed of pairs of yarns that twine around each other, and then separate to twine around yarns from adjoining pairs. This process creates diamond and hexagonal-shaped holes that are distributed to form decorative patterns.

Prehistoric textile collections contain many examples of darned and patched cloth, suggesting that cotton fabrics were valuable and were preserved for use as long as possible. When a fabric was beyond repair, it was torn into narrow strips that were used as weft threads for weaving heavy blankets.

These two major art forms, along with turquoise jewelry, baskets and cradleboards, bone awls, arrows, and other tools and implements for daily living, reflect the ever-present human desire for creativity and artistic expression. These pieces of the past, found throughout the Tonto Basin, are helping archeologists to reconstruct the daily lives of the Salado and show us a culture emerging from the mists of prehistoric time.