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7-2006

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Koepp, Tina, "Women in History--Maria Poveka Martinez" (2006). *Journal of Women in Educational Leadership*. 197.
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Women in History

Maria Poveka Martinez

Tina Koeppe

Native American artisan Maria Poveka Martinez played a vital role in the revival of pottery making throughout the Southwest United States. Born in 1887 in the San Ildefonso region of New Mexico, Maria first made pottery as a child and received encouragement from her aunt, who was an excellent potter. 1907 is the year that Maria began her pottery career in earnest. During this year, Maria's husband Julian worked as a digger at an archeological site near their pueblo. Maria was at the* excavation site when the diggers uncovered shards of decorated black on cream pottery. She took great interest in the pottery shards and was asked by some of the archeologists if she could recreate some of the vessels and prehistoric decorative patterns. Excited by the project, Maria carefully studied the patterns and then created some historically inspired pottery for the archeologists. Impressed with Maria's pottery, the archeologists placed more orders for her work and she began to earn an income by selling her pots. Prior to this point in history, the ancient tradition of Native American pottery making had begun to wane, possibly due a lack of interest by Anglo society.

By 1915 Maria had mastered the art of making larger vessels and attained a level of skill that surpassed all other San Ildefonso potters. Her pottery was characterized by relatively thin walls, hard firing, careful forming, smooth and clear finishes, carefully applied and well-executed designs, and, in the case of Black ware, a highly lustrous surface polish. Her pottery utilizes traditional techniques and demonstrates a preoccupation with form and balance. To create her famous Black ware, Maria utilized an ancient process of painting matte designs on the pottery with a red clay slip. When firing; this created a black on black effect.

San Ildefonso became known as the most progressive arts and crafts center in the Southwestern United States and Maria was acknowledged as the master potter of the community. Maria believed that her pottery making skills were a gift to be shared and she gladly taught others in her pueblo how to make pottery. The black-on-black ware in particular, brought prestige and a new source of revenue to their village. Because of the success in making and marketing high quality artisan pottery, the San Ildefonso pueblo began to

About the Author

Tina Koeppe is a master's student of textile history specializing in quilts and costume at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. She has a BA in English from UNL. Her areas of research include clothing of the 1930's and 40's, issues of gender and craft, social history, pop culture, art, and ethnography and their relation to textiles. She works as a research assistant at the Department of Clothing and Textile Design at UNL, assisting with the care of the school's historical textile collection. Email: tinakoeppe@yahoo.com

achieve a higher level of economic viability. Community members were able to improve their lives through better housing and sanitation. Maria taught generations of people how to make and appreciate Indian pottery and introduced innovations that significantly impacted the style of contemporary pottery. Maria ran her pottery workshop while raising four sons, taking care of her home and actively participating in her community. Julian eventually learned painting techniques and began decorating Maria's pottery and the husband and wife duo forged a successful business partnership that lasted more than 40 years.

Maria collaborated with her family (husband Julian, son Popovi Da, daughter-in-law Santana). In 1934 President and Mrs. Roosevelt invited Maria and Julian to the White House. Although she had a career that spanned most of the 20th century and received national and international recognition during her lifetime, Maria never had a major retrospective exhibition in her native state, New Mexico, until after her death in 1980.

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