

Making Pots the Native-American Way

Materials

For each student:

- air drying or baking clay
- soft paintbrush
- small cup of water
- smooth rock
- texturing tools:
sharp stick, deer antler,
oyster or scallop shell,
grass, paddle wrapped with
string, and loose string

Suggested grade levels: 2nd-6th

Louisiana GLEs

Social Studies

Grade 2: H 35, 46, 47, 51

Grade 3: G 20; H 49, 52

Grade 4: H 62

Grade 5: G 16; H 27

Grade 6: G 9

References

Louisiana Division of Archaeology
<http://crt.state.la.us/archaeology.htm>



Students learn the traditional Native-American coiling method for making pottery. They will make and decorate their own pots.

Background

Native-Americans have been living in Louisiana for ~13,000 years. During this time, they left many artifacts scattered around that state that tell archaeologists how they lived. In Louisiana, pottery, a commonly found artifact, began to appear at about 3,000 years ago. This Native Louisianan pottery is quite varied in form and decoration. There are generally 3 classes of pottery: plant tempered, shell tempered, and grog (old pottery/dried clay) tempered. Tempering involves the addition of outside materials to the clay prior to firing. This keeps the clay from shrinking and/or exploding during the firing process. There are also different colors of pottery, usually red, brown, or gray. These color changes occurred as a result of the firing process as the chemicals in the clay changed colors.

One of the most common methods of pottery making is the coiling method. This method consists of rolling out ropes of clay and then stacking them on-top of each other in a circular fashion. After the desired shape/height was achieved the coils were pressed together by smoothing and pressing the clay. Sometimes various tools, such as wooden paddles or deer antlers, were used to decorate the pot. Afterwards, the pots were fired in a ground kiln.

Procedure

1. Give each student a large lump of air drying or baking clay and tell them to separate the lump of clay into several smaller lumps.
2. Have each student mold part of the clay into a small ball about 1 inch in diameter. Ask each student to flatten the ball into a circular base, perhaps 1-2 inches in diameter and 1/4 of an inch thick. Use a small paintbrush to moisten the outside edge of the circular base.
3. Now, have each student roll a piece of clay between his/her hands or on the table to form a long narrow 'snake' of equal thickness and length.
4. Press the first 'snake' on the edge of the base to make the first row of coiling. Continue adding coils until you have a stack of 5 to 10 coils. Make sure to keep the

clay moist throughout the entire process.

5. Ask students to smooth together the areas where the coils touch each other. This is best done by holding one hand inside the pot to support the inside wall while shaping the outside wall with your fingers in the same spot. Try to keep the wall of the pot the same thickness all around.

6. Rub the surface smooth with a smooth rock. Allow students to choose a texturing tool to press into the moist clay to produce an interesting texture.

7. Allow the pots to air dry for several days, or bake them at medium temperature for 2 to 3 hours.

Post-activity discussion

Have students discuss what they learned about the process of making pottery. What impact does the activity have on daily life? Is it possible to make a variety of pottery shapes using this method? Why or why not? Why would Native-Americans take extra time to decorate their pottery?