

History at Home: Native American Pottery Activity

Purpose:

With this activity we explore pottery techniques of Gulf Coast Native Americans.

Materials required:

Clay (modeling clay or play dough will work also), newspaper to cover the desks or tables, popsicle sticks or small wooden sticks, string, sponges, cups of water, paper towels, plastic aprons.



Background Information:

Native Americans lived in what is now the Mobile area, thousands of years before the first European settlers arrived. Artifacts that show the richness of their culture are highlighted in our permanent exhibit, *Old Ways, New Days: The Story of Mobile*. The main goal of this lesson is to help to familiarize your students with Native American culture, and to give your students some background information on the Native American artifacts that they will see on display in our exhibit.

The Lesson:

Discuss the information in *The First People* to students. (Please note that the dates of the cultural periods in the Alabama history book do not match the dates on this handout. This is due to the fact that Alabama archaeologists have changed the dates of the cultural periods in order to account for new information based on recent archaeological investigations.) Review the periods of Native American culture with your students.

Then tell the students to imagine that they were one of the first people who lived here. They had no electricity, TV's, cars, phones, or grocery stores. Tell them to think about why the Native Americans made pottery and what they used it for. Ask students to think about what kind of tools they would have used to decorate pottery if they were Native Americans living in this area before the arrival of the Europeans. Then hand out the *How to Make Clay Pottery* instruction worksheet. The students will select the construction method they are going to use, the type of vessel, and the type of design that they will use to decorate the pottery with. They will then construct their vessel.

The First People

Native Americans have been living in North America for over 10,000 years. Native Americans came to the lands around Mobile Bay over 8000 years ago. Most of what we know about the earliest Native Americans comes from the science of archaeology. Archaeologists are scientists who learn about people by looking at the things they leave behind. Archaeologists have uncovered prehistoric Indian artifacts dating back to the time when huge elephant-like creatures called mastodons and woolly mammoths roamed North America. Archaeologists have divided the prehistory of Native Americans into time periods grouped by culture. Culture is the way of life of a group of people.

The Paleo-Indian Period lasted from around 10,500– 8,200 B.C. Archaeologists are not sure if Native Americans lived along the Gulf Coast during this time period. The people who lived in other parts of North America during this time, were great hunters who followed large herds of mastodons, mammoth, and bison. They moved when the animals moved.

The Archaic Period lasted from around 8,200 B.C. to 1,600 B.C. We know that people lived in this area during this time period. The people that lived here collected clams, plants, and fish for their diet. The Archaic Indians even invented a new weapon called the atlatl. This was a spear thrower that helped them hunt better. The atlatl was more accurate than the crude spears used by earlier Indians. Archaic Indians also used bones, shells, stones, and animal teeth and claws to make necklaces, bracelets, beads, and other tools.

The Gulf Formational Period lasted from around 1600 B.C. to 400 B.C. The first pottery in the area around what is now Mobile, was developed during the Gulf Formational Period. People mixed clay with plant fiber, shaped it into pots, and then heated it until it dried and held its shape. Eventually, they learned to mix sand instead plant fiber with the clay to make a stronger, more durable pot.

The Woodland Period lasted from around 400 B.C. to 1,200 A.D. Instead of moving from place to place in search of food, the Woodland Indians lived most of year in permanent settlements. They still hunted and gathered much of their food but they also planted and harvested crops. They also started to hunt with the bow and arrow. As getting food became easier, they had more time to do other things. They began to make clay pottery and started to bury the dead in mounds.

The most advanced stage of Native American culture in this area was the Mississippian Period which lasted from around 1,200 A.D. to 1550 A.D. Mississippian Indians lived in villages and towns. They hunted, fished, and grew their own food. They traded with other tribes and villages. During this period that the Indians also began to build large mounds. The remains of large Native American mounds are located in the river delta north of Mobile at a site called Bottle Creek.

Some of the most beautiful Native American pottery found in this area was made during the Mississippian Period. The people in this area used seashells, sticks, and fingernails to make different designs. Native Americans threw away pieces of broken pottery at places where they lived. They also buried the dead with pottery. Today, archaeologists can tell how old a piece of pottery is by looking at its design and how it was made.



How to Make Clay Pottery

You are going to make pottery in the same way that the Native Americans did. There are two different methods that you can use to make your vessel. You can use either the pinch method or the coil method.

The Pinch Method

1. Knead or wedge the clay until the air bubbles have been removed.
2. Roll a ball of clay about the size of a golf ball between the palms of the hands to form a sphere.
3. Push your thumb into the center of the clay ball, then pinch up the walls.
4. Press the thumbs gently into the center of the sphere and at the same time press with the fingers on the outside while rotating the ball of clay. Turning the piece as you pinch will help you keep an even thickness in the walls.
5. Continue pressing with both the fingers and thumbs until the ball is hollowed into the shape you want and the walls are the same thickness (approximately $\frac{1}{2}$ inch).
6. Cracks may appear if the clay is too dry or if it is pressed too quickly or forcefully. Repair any cracks by rubbing with your dampened fingers until the crack disappears.
7. Gently tap the bottom of the pot on a flat surface, such as the tabletop, to create a flat spot on the bottom of the piece.
8. Press the end of a Popsicle stick, a stick or your fingernails, into the top edge of the pot, creating a simple yet interesting decoration. If you do not like a pattern you have made, smooth the clay with your finger and thumb and start over again.
9. If the pot is made with real clay or self-hardening clay, allow it to dry slowly at room temperature until bone dry. You may then paint it with acrylic or watercolor paint or stain it with shoe polish or glaze and fire it (with the help of an adult).

Pinch method Instructions courtesy of York County Culture and Heritage Commission, York County, South Carolina



The Coil Method

Procedures:

1. Knead or wedge the clay until the air bubbles have been removed. This is especially important if you are using commercial clay and not air-dry clay.
2. Pat a piece of clay into a round flat slab about as thick as a pencil.
3. Squeeze or roll the clay between your hands into coils about ½ inch in diameter (a little thicker than a pencil).
4. Using the bottom of the pot as the foundation, coil the strips on top of one another. This is the beginning of the walls of your pot.
5. Continue to add coils on top of one another. Remember to fit the coils together tightly. Gently press the coils together using your fingers.
6. Repeat and keep adding new coils until your pot is as tall as you want it to be. Stack the coils one on top of another or attach the end of one coil to another as you build up the walls. You can smooth the sides with your fingers if you don't want the coils to show.
7. By using your finger to push and scrape the clay coils together on the inside of the pot, you can make your pot stronger.
8. When smoothing the outside of the pot, hold your other hand on the inside so you do not damage what you have done already.
9. If you want the top straight, gently turn your pot upside down and lightly tap it on a smooth surface, like the tabletop.
10. Add any decorations you want. If it is real clay, allow it to dry slowly at room temperature. The grooves in the pot are weak spots and if it dries too quickly it will crack.
11. After it is bone dry, the vessel made with self-hardening clay or real clay can be painted with acrylic or watercolor paint or stained with shoe polish, or you can glaze and fire it (with the help of an adult).

Coil method Instructions courtesy of York County Culture and Heritage Commission, York County, South Carolina

