

# American Indians

## Exploring Traditional Worldviews

**Overview:** After completing this lesson, students will be able to articulate how some modern Navajo artists integrate traditional worldviews and modern modes of expression into their work.

**Subject Area:** Language Arts, Visual Arts

**Age Group/Grade Level:** 11-13 years, grades 6-8

**Duration:** approximately 60 min.

### Background

Navajo (Diné) potter Christine McHorse grew up outside the reservation, separate from some traditional lifeways. She was introduced to the pottery craft by Lena Archuleta, her husband's grandmother. Archuleta is a Pueblo Indian from New Mexico's Taos Pueblo, and she taught McHorse to make pots in that community's traditional style. McHorse soon learned the Navajo (Diné) tradition of pottery making. Eventually she integrated and expanded upon both styles to develop her own distinctive approach.

### Discussion

Explain that the Mountain Chant is a Navajo ceremony for healing and help from the gods. Chants, songs, and sacred paintings are part of the Mountain Chant, and the "Twelfth Song of Thunder" is one of thirteen sets of songs used during the ceremony, with each song being sung in a particular order.

Read the "Twelfth Song of Thunder" aloud, then ask:

- Who or what "speaks" in this song? What is the effect of this speaking?
- What words refer to physical places or things? Spiritual elements?
- How do the spiritual and physical worlds interact here?

Explain that in Navajo tradition, the spiritual and physical worlds are interwoven like cloth.

- How are the physical and spiritual worlds interwoven in the "Twelfth Song of Thunder"?
- In some Euro-American poetry and song, nonhuman forms can take on human qualities to make a point. How is this approach different from the "Twelfth Song of Thunder"?
- How might expressing the links between the physical and spiritual worlds be different in artwork than in song?

For a full-size image of Christine McHorse's *Crow Pot*, visit:  
[http://americanart.si.edu/images/1997/1997.124.159\\_1a.jpg](http://americanart.si.edu/images/1997/1997.124.159_1a.jpg)



Christine McHorse, *Crow Pot*, 1991, kiln-fired and pit-fired micaceous clay with piñon pitch, 16 1/4 x 12 5/8 in. diam., Gift of Chuck and Jan Rosenak and museum purchase made possible by Mrs. Gibson Fahnstock, 1997.124.159.

### Activity I

Display an image of Christine McHorse's *Crow Pot*. Explain that the artist blends Navajo and Pueblo traditions to make a style all her own.

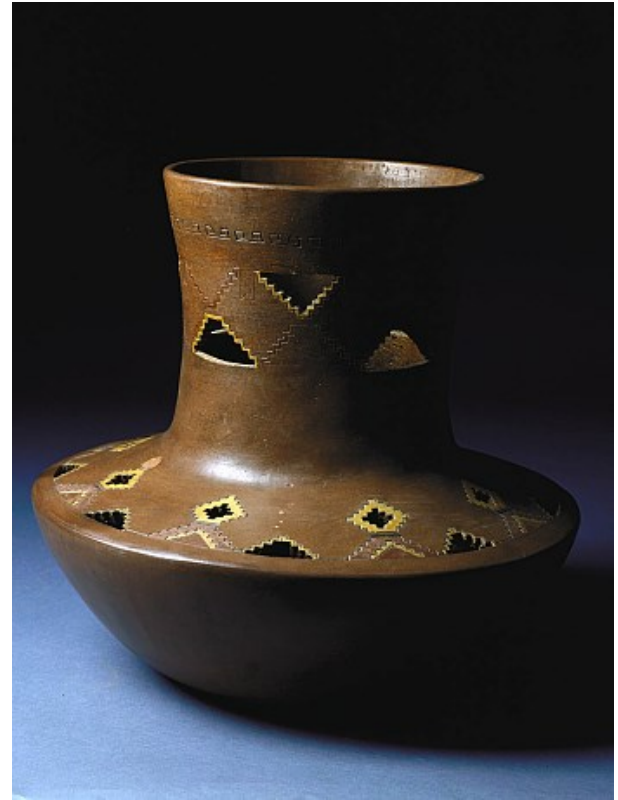
- Begin by looking at the bottom half of this pot. What plant does it make you think of?
- Next, focus on the top half of this pot. What plants/animals do you recognize here? What's going on in this scene? What do you see that makes you say that?
- Is it easier or harder to explore the physical world using this pot as opposed to the "Twelfth Song of Thunder"? Why?

#### Twelfth Song of Thunder

The voice that beautifies the land!  
The voice above,  
The voice of the thunder  
Within the dark cloud  
Again and again it sounds,  
The voice that beautifies the land.

The voice that beautifies the land!  
The voice below,  
The voice of the grasshopper  
Among the plants  
Again and again it sounds,  
The voice that beautifies the land.

<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/246774>



Lorraine Williams, *Pot with Incised and Cut-out Decoration*, ca. 1992, fired clay with piñon pitch and slip, 13 3/8 x 14 3/4 in. diam., Gift of Chuck and Jan Rosenak and museum purchase made possible by Ralph Cross Johnson, 1997.124.182.

Looking at *Crow Pot*, explain that in Navajo agriculture corn, squash (like pumpkins), and beans are staple foods. Corn is also part of the Navajo origin myth. White corn represents males and yellow corn represents females. Birds, like the crow depicted here, are part of the Creation Narrative and were part of the second, or Blue World.

- What new meanings does this information add to your understanding of the artwork?
- How do the spiritual and physical interact here?

Explain that Navajo potters traditionally use geometric shapes and patterns or symbols on their work, as seen on *Pot with Incised and Cut-out Decoration*.

- How has McHorse incorporated tradition? Broken away from tradition?
- Why might she include traditional mythology in her work, even though she's creating pottery in a style all her own?

Have students read the writing of contemporary Navajo authors such as Shonto Begay, Kay Bennett, Vee F. Browne, Jennifer Denetdale, Roberta John, Monte Roessel, Luci Tapahonso, Veronica Tsinajinnie, Evangeline Parsons Yazzie, Seraphine G. Yazzie, or Baje Whitethorne. Encourage them to look for evidence of the writer's incorporation of his or her tribal worldview into the work. How has the writer created something in a style all his/her own?

## Activity II

Display an image of *Pot with Incised and Cut-out Decoration*. Navajo potter Lorraine Williams carves traditional symbols into the surface of her clay pots. The geometric pattern on this pot may have been inspired by traditional basket designs, which often include zigzags and triangles. Williams originally applied plant dyes to the surface of her clay pieces. However, her father disapproved because these were the same dyes used in ceremonial face painting, so she now uses commercial pigments.

Have students research the stepped-cloud and mountain designs used by Pueblo and Zuni (A:shiwí) weavers and potters and compare them to Williams's work.

- What evidence can you find of the sharing of ideas among tribes?
- What meanings do these shapes hold? Do those meanings differ for Pueblo and Zuni peoples?

Challenge students to research a symbol representing their own cultural identity. How did that symbol develop? What was its traditional use? How is it used today?

For a full-size image of Lorraine Williams's *Pot with Incised and Cut-out Decoration*, visit: [http://americanart.si.edu/images/1997/1997.124.182\\_1a.jpg](http://americanart.si.edu/images/1997/1997.124.182_1a.jpg)