

# A STORY to Remember

## SOUTHWEST INDIAN STORYTELLERS

by Marcia Gibson



Bear by Rachel Knopfler.

The legends of the Southwest Indians are rich in tradition. Songs and stories are important in the Pueblo world. Grandmothers and grandfathers bring the past alive for the new generation through their tales. Until recently, these Indians did not have a written language, which made storytelling the only means of passing on information.

The Pueblo-Indian potters have made clay figures representing storytellers for many years. These clay figures depict a grandparent or parent figure with lots of little ones clamoring about to hear the elder's words. The cheerful figures honor the significance of the storyteller and artistic customs of the Southwest Indians.

I wanted to enrich the experience of my middle-school ceramics students by leading them on a journey through the Pueblo-Indians' world. By reading books about their lives and their pottery, we learned about their culture through their legends, lifestyle and artwork.

Our exploration of their clay figures helped us to identify the traditions that were important to the Pueblo Indians. To these people, clay is a treasured gift from the earth, requiring offerings of thanks. The clay storyteller figures may be depicted as humans or legendary desert creatures. Their potters usually employ only three naturally derived colors in their work: terra-cotta, black and white. Also, the patterns painted on their pottery are often culturally meaningful.



Owl by Emily Kelley.

After our research, we had enough information to begin our project. The project required each student to make a clay storytelling figure with several baby figures. They could create either a human or a desert animal as their storyteller. The figures would be bisque-fired and then painted with acrylic paint using only the three traditional colors and patterns. Finally, the students were to write a story that was significant to their own family that would accompany their figure.

The students made a rough sketch of their idea along with many potential patterns for decoration. We reviewed the fundamental concepts about working with clay and then they started transforming their ideas into reality. We worked on building the figure and babies for three, one-hour sessions (keeping the project wrapped in plastic until we were ready to let it dry).

We spent a lot of time making sure the babies were securely attached to the storyteller figure (score/slip method) and smoothing the surface of the clay. While the figures dried, the students wrote their personal storyteller

## MATERIALS

- Clay
- Tools for clay
- Plastic bags (to keep clay projects moist)
- Acrylic paint (white, black, terra-cotta)
- Paintbrushes for acrylics
- Sealer

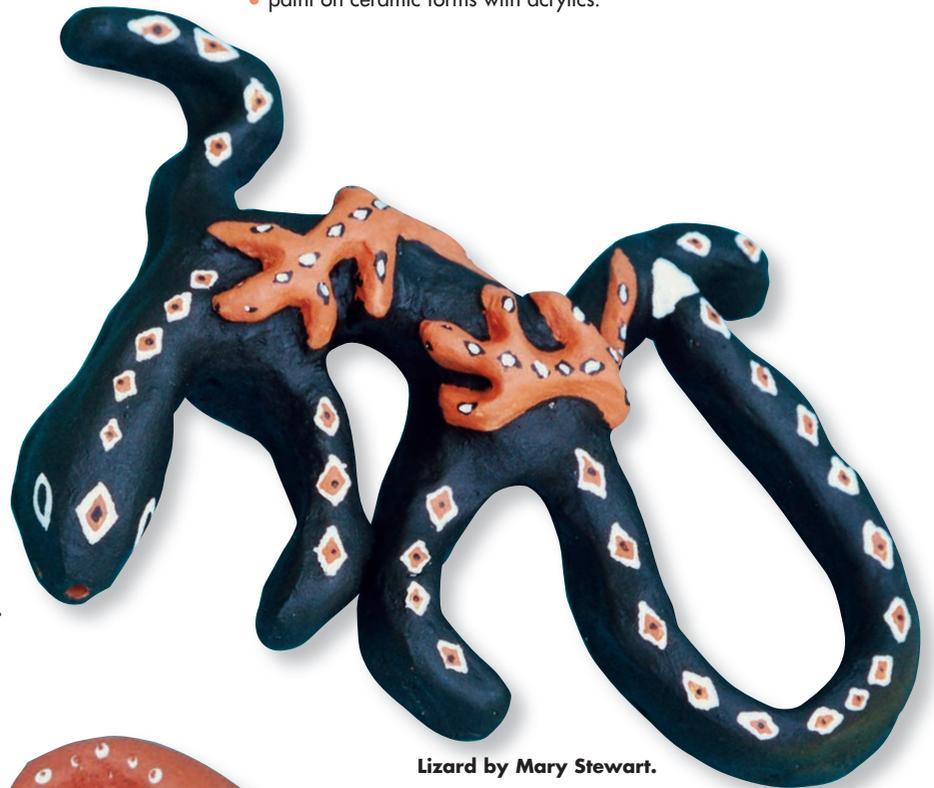
## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Students will ...

- learn the significance of storyteller figures of the Pueblo Indians.
- learn about color and design traditionally used by the Southwest Indians.
- form figures from clay.
- paint on ceramic forms with acrylics.



Turtle by Chelsea Arganbright.



Lizard by Mary Stewart.

## REFERENCES

- Howard, Nancy Shroyer. *Helen Cordero and the Storytellers of Cochiti Pueblo*. Davis Publications, 1995.
- Hoyt-Goldsmith, Diane. *Pueblo Storyteller*. Holiday House, 1991.
- Hayes, A. and Blom, J. *Collections of Southwestern Pottery: Candle sticks to Canteens, Frogs to Figurines*. Northland Publishing, 1998.



Snake by Morgan Brown.

legends. After the projects were bone dry, they were fired and ready to paint.

We used Delta's Ceramcoat acrylic paint in white, black and terra-cotta. I chose this method instead of the traditional one of using slip for easier handling (bisqueware vs. greenware) and ease of application (ability to paint right over mistakes). Initially, the students resisted the idea of using only the traditional colors of the Pueblo Indians. However, they soon discovered the challenge of creating unique works of art

while adhering to cultural customs and appreciated the cohesive results. Each project took about three hours to paint.

The students presented their finished work and written stories with great pride. Their projects reflected the traditions of form, color and pattern used by the Southwest Indians. The personal stories written by the students were quite entertaining and enhanced their creative venture. Maybe someday, these students would reminisce about this experience with their children. ■

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