

# SHARON LEWIS

AN ACOMA ARTIST CREATES POTTERY THE TRADITIONAL WAY

BY DOTTIE INDYKE

Sixty-five miles west of Albuquerque, NM, Acoma Pueblo sits on a rocky mesa that towers 500 feet above the sprawling, adobe-colored landscape. Reputed to be the oldest continuously inhabited community in the United States, the pueblo has no running water or electricity. Most of its 4,000 or so residents live in nearby villages on the desert floor but return to their traditional houses at “Sky City” for religious ceremonies. For many years, the only access to this lofty aerie was a series of steps worn into the stone cliffs.

Sharon Lewis grew up playing on the stairways and trails that snaked up and down the mesa and collecting water for her grandmother from the pools that formed in the sandstone-ringed basins. Countless times throughout her childhood, she’d slide down a rock smoothed by years of weather and use and land, gleefully, in a sand dune.

Her parents, from Acoma and Santo Domingo pueblos, were devout Catholics; Lewis attended a parochial school through sixth grade and then set off for St. Catherine’s High School in Santa Fe. “In the beginning I missed my family, but I loved going to school there, and it taught me a lot of responsibility,”

Lewis recalls. “I still stay in touch

with some of my friends from high school. We were like a small family.”

Reading was a passion for Lewis, who remembers *Charlotte’s Web* as her favorite childhood book. In high school she was known to hide novels behind her textbooks, pretending to study. It wasn’t until she returned to the reservation after graduation that she began making art, teaching herself pottery while holding down day jobs as a receptionist in a dental clinic and a teacher’s aide.

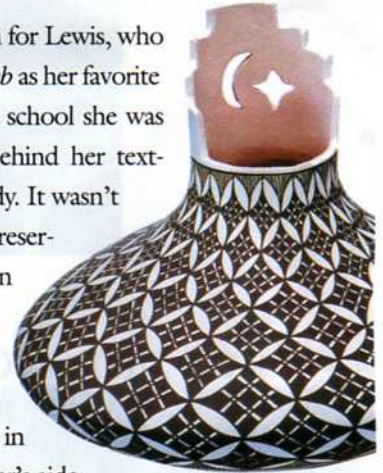
“My mother and grandmother both did a little bit of pottery,” she says. “I always admired their work. A large piece of pottery that my grandmother made sat on a shelf in our home. It was used for water storage, and I loved its shape and colors.”

Her early experiments were with pre-made clay forms, called greenware, which she painted with designs copied from books. At first, she said, she could not even paint a straight line. It took three years of painstaking self-training and a battle with self-doubt before she felt ready to make a pot from scratch.

Watching her mother and reviewing the basic steps, Lewis set out on her own to gather and process the clay: soaking it, laying it out to dry until it became brittle, grinding and sifting, and then, to stabilize the clay and as a way of acknowledging her ancestors, adding pottery shards that litter the ground around the pueblo.

This is the traditional method of pot-making that has been followed at Acoma for generations. Vessels are made of gray china clay mined from secret sources deep within the earth. When fired, the clay turns bone white. According to *Pottery by American Indian Women* by Susan Peterson, the clay begins as solid rock and must be ground into fine powder. It is then mixed with water to make it elastic.

Each pot is hand-coiled, coated with a white slip, and



burnished with a polishing stone. Lewis also performs the slow work of grinding black and red rocks against a larger "painting" rock to make pigment. Using charcoal pencil, the artist divides the piece into several sections so that the finished design will be symmetrical and paints the meticulously detailed designs for which Acoma is known. Her specialty is whimsical, Mimbres-inspired animals, such as lizards, ladybugs, turtles, and butterflies, as well as the corn maiden that reminds her of the Red Corn Clan from which she descends. "The painting is what I love most because you can become really creative. Sometimes I dream of designs," she says.

Since 1986, when she first exhibited at Santa Fe's *Indian Market*, Lewis has kept her pots small. Their shapes are traditional but often with contemporary variations. Only recently has she attempted to craft medium-size pots, teaching herself as she has throughout her career.

This year at *Indian Market*, Lewis' booth was overrun with people. The recipient of the 2002 Standards Pottery Award for Excellence in Utilitarian Vessels for a water canteen, Lewis basked in the attention of her loyal collectors. "I'm thankful just to go on and create," she says. "Receiving awards is always a good feeling, but it's so special when the people come back to me year after year and tell me how much they love my pottery." □