

DOLORES CURRAN

Dolores Curran is thinking big these days. After nearly a decade of being one of the premiere Indian potters working in miniature, the Santa Clara Pueblo artist has set her sights on larger pieces.

"I've been doing miniatures since I first started working with clay when I was nine. You always do miniatures when you first start and then some move to bigger pieces. But the really tiny miniatures, I just can't handle them anymore. My hands cramp," she said, stretching out her hand and flexing long narrow fingers.

If the Best of Classification blue ribbon she won at the 1993 Indian Market is any indication, her new, larger pots will be as much coveted as her trademark, intricate miniatures. "I have eight commissions I have to fill right now," she said. "People were surprised to see me working larger when I showed at last year's Indian Market, but I think they like them."

Curran and her husband Alvin, a potter from San Juan Pueblo, returned late the previous night from a trip to Washington, D.C., where both had shown their work.

She reached into a soft leather backpack, pulling out pots that had been carefully wrapped in swatches of soft flannel. "I gave up pottery for six or seven years, until after my daughter was born," she said, adding that she credits Richard Spivey, a former SWAIA president, with whetting her appetite to reach deep into her creative reservoirs and come up with the motifs and designs for which she is noted.

"He would show me all these traditional designs and then encourage me to come up with my own. I still always try for different designs, different shapes."

She paused to unwrap a miniature jar. Its red

color has been embellished with meticulous designs using such traditional motifs as feathers and serpents coiling around the top or a certain triangular shape indicative to Santa Clara pots.

"I work at night with just a lamp. I like the silence and like to keep everything dark around me so that I can concentrate only on the piece I'm working on," Curran said. "Alvin works right next to me on his own pots. People ask how we can be together for 24 hours a day, but every day is totally different; always creating something different. We've been married for 17 years and have two children. We do our firing together; we're always learning from one another."

Curran said one of her favorite parts of the creative process is painting. "I love to paint (she uses a traditional white slip applied to the red pottery). It's very relaxing. Each stroke takes about four or five layers. I find it gives my mind time to wander. Sometimes, when I finish, I can't believe I painted the whole piece. It looks different with each step."

While the pots are fired in the traditional way using cedar and pine and an outdoor firebox made of tin, one the trickiest parts of the process is the wind that howls through the Espanola Valley, often having the last say. "Sometimes the wind takes the temperature out of control causing the smoke to blacken the pot. We never know what we're going to get until we pull the top off (the firing box).

"Even before you try it (the firing), it sort of puts a fear in you because by this time you've gone through so many stages in making the pot. Then there's that point when you find out. Alvin looks at me and says, 'Do you think we should look at it now?' And I tell him, 'Just give me a little more time to think about this.' It's at that point when you know what you have."

And with eight commissions and a number of invitational shows waiting, Dolores Curran already knows what she has.

— SEGUE SMITH

INDIAN MARKET ARTISTS



INDIAN MARKET ARTIST PORTRAITS BY MURRAE HAYNES