



Traditional Choctaw Pottery

Question: What Choctaw traditional artform has been developed and perfected by the hands of more than 200 generations of Choctaw people, has been recognized for centuries as one of the finest artistic achievements of Indigenous America, was nearly lost over the last century due to outside attempts to assimilate and destroy Choctaw culture, and is today being actively revitalized around Choctaw country?

Answer: Traditional Choctaw Pottery.

When visiting the Southwestern United States, people are often struck by the visibility of the Native communities in the area. Few items are more emblematic of these Peoples than their exquisite traditional pottery. Ceramics made by potters from Zuni, Hopi, and many of the Pueblos, fill art galleries, museums, and tourist spots, and are featured on logos and billboards. At shows, they sell for hundreds or thousands of dollars each, and at home they are used in traditional ceremonies and social gatherings.

The scene is drastically different here in Southeastern Oklahoma, where it is actually more common to see one of these vessels from the Southwest than it is to see a traditional clay pot made by a Choctaw potter living right here. Today's near-invisibility of Choctaw pottery could easily lead one to believe that pottery is not something that Choctaw people have traditionally made, or that Choctaw potters are somehow inferior to our relatives living in the west. In reality, both of these are far from the truth.

The development of pottery dates back over 5,000 years in the Southeastern United States. Through the millennia, the Indigenous people in this area, including the ancestors of today's Choctaw people created a plethora of ceramic shapes, techniques, and designs. As time passed, pottery became more numerous and important. Even today, pieces of broken ceramics still quite literally litter the ground at ancestral 1000-year-old Choctaw village sites in Mississippi and Alabama. The artistry of the ceramic vessels produced by ancestral Choctaw potters living at Moundville (visit www.moundville.ua.edu), and other sites, is regularly recognized as among the best ever made by Indigenous communities in the United States.

To our Choctaw ancestors 500 years ago, clay pots weren't just something to cook in and to eat out of. They were also used for storage, making glue, preparing medicines, processing fibers for cloth textiles, creating dyes, as items of gift and trade, offerings to Hvshtali, as protective coverings, incense-holders, musical instruments, and even to transport



Ampo: A traditional Choctaw eating bowl. This vessel was carried 500 miles over the Trail of Tears by a Choctaw person in the 1830s.

the fire to light flaming arrows to burn enemy villages. Our ancestors laughed over pottery, cried over pottery, and tripped over pottery nearly every day of their lives.

Rather than abandoning our pottery as soon as Europeans arrived with mass-produced goods, many Choctaw communities held tenaciously to the traditional art; it was in many ways better than the foreign goods. Into the 1800s in Natchitoches, Louisiana, Choctaw potters sold their wares to their less fortunate Anglo-American neighbors. Choctaw potters quite literally carried their art over the Trail of Tears (see the eating bowl featured above) and continued to produce it in Oklahoma. Using the same forms and designs that they had developed in the Homeland, Oklahoma potters clearly used pottery as a symbol of their unique and enduring Choctaw identity.

So, what happened to Choctaw pottery? Through the 1800s and early 1900s pottery's significance in Choctaw communities greatly diminished, as a direct result of outside attempts to assimilate and destroy Choctaw identity and culture. However, it has never been entirely lost, with a few dedicated Choctaw individuals maintaining a knowledge of it up through today, and new research bringing old knowledge to light.



Cooking **tanchi labbona** and **banaha** on a wood fire in Choctaw traditional clay pots.

Through a grant obtained from the National Parks Service, the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma will begin offering classes in traditional Choctaw pottery at different locations around Southeastern Oklahoma. The intent is to help revitalize the traditional Choctaw pottery as a living artform. Students will learn to dig their own clay, shape vessels out of it using the techniques and styles of our ancestors, and how to fire it traditionally. The classes will incorporate Choctaw language, traditional

foods, and interaction between all interested members of the community.

Possible benefits include:

- Strengthening our Indigenous connection with the land and ancestors,
- Restoring an important part of our traditional lifeway,
- Providing a creative outlet for youth,
- Supporting physical health, dexterity, and self-confidence,
- Providing an economic opportunity for Tribal artists, and
- Resisting assimilation