

Land of Extremes

QUESTIONS? Contact Local Content Editor Richard Montenegro Brown at rbrown@ivpressonline.com or 760-337-3453.

EDITOR'S NOTE A series of stories on the history of man in our desert and the efforts of the Imperial Valley Desert museum to tell that story will run through October, replacing the Teen page until a new crop of interns return in the fall connected to the IVHigh journalism program.

'POTS HAVE LIVES'

CLAY a pivotal part of man's story



Map showing clay sources in Southern California designed by ASM Affiliates.



ABOVE: WE Exhibits design concept of the IVDM's visible storage exhibit.

LEFT: In February 1974, Stan Scott documented what has become the best example of a stuccoed vessel in Imperial County. PHOTO COURTESY OF STAN SCOTT

BOTTOM LEFT: Double-necked olla, an Imperial Valley Desert Museum piece.

BELOW: Ceramics expert Dr. Suzanne Griset reviewing the Desert Museum ceramics collection. PHOTOS COURTESY OF IMPERIAL VALLEY DESERT MUSEUM

BY NEAL V. HITCH

Special to this Newspaper/Imperial Valley

Ceramic vessels, as we are familiar with them today, came to the Imperial Valley about 1,000 years ago.

Depending on their size and shape, they were used for food storage, water, cooking or any other use requiring a container. They are commonly referred to as ollas.

Because of their large size and weight, ollas could be cached in caves or buried in the ground. Many of the vessels in museum collections or private collections were found in cache locations. In fact, it is the smaller everyday pot that is rare.

The Desert Museum is preparing its collection of ollas for display in the new permanent exhibit that will be opened in spring 2015. This past week, Dr. Suzanne Griset, a consultant with SWCA Environmental Consultants and an expert in Southern California ceramics, visited the museum in preparation of the exhibit.

The collection at the Desert Museum is small compared to other institutions such as the Museum of Man in San Diego or the Arizona State Museum, but the collection is very significant for the

ollas it contains.

Many of our larger ollas show original repair work, where pitch or resin was used to mend cracks or chips. Repairs were often preferable to throwing away a ceramic vessel. Even when an olla could not be directly repaired it was often reused for another purpose. "Pots have lives," Griset said. "And many of them have more than one life."

One olla Griset evaluated in the collection started as the bottom of a larger vessel, but after it has been broken in half, someone smoothed the edges and turned it into a bowl.

"A vessel could become many things over its life," she explained. "What started as a water container might become a cooking pot."

Among the Kumeyaay, women were the potters. The location of good clay sources was a secret passed down from mother to daughter among the Kumeyaay, as were certain pottery techniques. Clay was traded between peoples, used where it was found or carried from site to site. Griset says that clay from the Jacumba area, heavy in mica, was so famous for its quality for cooking pots that women would travel long distances to collect it.

Throughout Kumeyaay history, clay is one of the sources used to help adapt to the extreme landscape in which they lived.

The science of Southern California clay

According to geologists, clay is composed of minerals rich in alumina, silica and water. When wet, it becomes "plastic" and can be shaped. When fired, the water evaporates and the clay hardens.

Clay is found everywhere in the world and nearly all civili-



zations have used clay to make everything from bricks, to tablets, to pottery. Clay deposits are generally found where there are (or were in the case of ancient Lake Cahulla) large lakes or other water formations.

Clays are divided into two classes: "residual clay" and "sedimentary clay." In Southern California, residual clays are usually found in the mountains and coastal areas. Here, the clay forms from the weathering and breakup of granitic outcroppings in the Southern California batholith, a region of volcanic rock that runs from Orange County through Baja California. It is primarily used to manufacture brown wares and varies in color from brown to dark red.

Residual clays can be found along streambeds or former streambeds, and usually contain particles of quartz, feldspar and mica, which often shines when sunlight hits the finished vessel.

Sedimentary clay is created with water: fine particles are deposited in a protected place while coarse particles are carried away in the water. Usually used to manufacture buff ware, colors vary from pink, lavender, gray and light red. It is found in former lake bottoms and alluvial deposits of the Colorado Desert in Imperial County. The terms "Brown Ware" and "Buff Ware" are general categories that help archaeologists identify the general location of the clay source. In Southern California, brown wares are generally clay from the mountains while Buff wares usually come from the desert region.

Crowd-sourcing archaeology

At the Desert Museum, we have

almost none of the research, notes or field books from the early archaeology expeditions in Imperial County; none of Jay's, Michael Barker's or Morlin Childers' records.

Perhaps, much of this work was put into private care in the years while the museum was being built in order to protect it. We do have a lot of field notes books and pictures from students. It has been from these student notes that we have found the most information about the collections.

The museum's most significantly stuccoed olla was undocumented until just a few weeks ago. Stucco was often applied to buff wares. It helped disperse heat on the surface of cooking pots destined to spend more time in direct contact with fire. Presumably, the treatment extended the life of the pot.

The pot in question has an interesting story. There was no associated paperwork with this pot, but one day while looking through a set of slides, museum staff noticed the olla in a slide dated February 1974. The photographer, Stan Scott, did not remember taking the image, but he did remember the day he took the image. As a student at IVC, Scott was accompanying a field class with professor Michael Barker into one of the bombing ranges in the county.

The class came across this pot and because of the danger from live fire in the area, they collected the pot and brought it back to the college museum. Scott was not able, however, to remember the names of the people in the photograph with the pot.

If any reader knows someone in this picture, please contact the museum staff at ivdmuseum@gmail.com
Neal V. Hitch is director of the Imperial Valley Desert Museum.



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