CLAY
a pivotal part of man’s story

Many of our larger ollas show original repair work, where pinch or roots are used to mend cracks or chips. Repairs were often preferred 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 catalog started as a 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 Kumeya’ay, women were the potters. The location of good clay sources was a secret passed down from mother to daughter among the Kumeya’ay, 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 fine that it was famous for its quality for cooking pottery that women traveled long distances to collect it. Throughout Kumeya’ay 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 Griset, clay is composed of minerals rich in alumina, silica and water. This makes it "plastic" and can be shaped. When fired, the water evaporates and the clay hardens. Clay is found everywhere in the world and nearly all civilizations have used clay to make everything from bricks, to tableware, to pottery. Clay deposits are generally found where there are (or were in the case of ancient Lake Cahuilla) 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 breaking of granite 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 new 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 applied to buff wares, it 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 some field notes, museum staff noticed the olla in a photo dated February 1974. The photographer, Neal V. Hitch, did not remember taking the image, but he did remember the day he took the image. As a student at IVC, Scott was not able, however, to remember taking the image, but he did remember the day he took the image. As a student at IVC, Scott was not able, however, to remember the day he took the image. As a student at IVC, Scott was not able, however, to remember the day he took the image. As a student at IVC, Scott was not able, however, to remember the day he took the image. As a student at IVC, Scott was not able, however, to remember the day he took the image. As a student at IVC, Scott was not able, however, to remember the day he took the image.

Ceramic vessels, as we are familar 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, or any other use requiring a container. They are commonly referred to as ollas. Because of their large size and weight, ollas could be carried 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 open by spring 2013. This past winter, Dr. Suzanne Griset, a consultant with SWCA Environmental Consultants and an expert in Southern California ceramics, assisted 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

Almost all of the research, not only from those who research ancient history, but also those who do not, find the ancient history fascinating. These ancient history enthusiasts will surely enjoy the new exhibit at the Desert Museum.

ABOUT US: Exhibits design concept of the DVMM’s visible storage exhibit. In 2000, Stan Scott documented what has become the best example of a stuccoed vessel in Imperial County. This piece was found in the Angaza area in the early 1970’s by Peter Scott, a student of Dr. Peter Childers’.

BOTTOM LEFT: Double-necked ollas, an Imperial Valley Desert Museum piece. BELOW: Ceramic expert Dr. Suzanne Griset reviewing the Desert Museum ceramics collection. PHOTO COURTESY OF IMPERIAL VALLEY DESERT MUSEUM.

Neal V. Hitch is director of the Imperial Valley Desert Museum.