

# FINDING THE WAY BACK TO DISCOVER THE WAY FORWARD

*NEW WAYS OF HONORING OLD TRADITIONS*



**OKPAN COMMUNITY  
SPOTLIGHT:  
CHASE KAHWINHUT  
EARLES**

By Kate Newton  
(OKPAN)





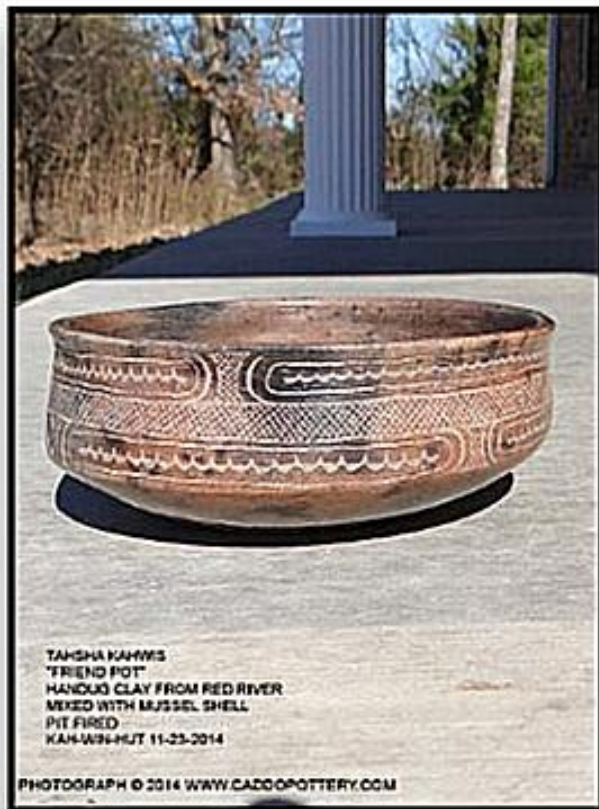
Pottery by Chase Kahwinhut Earles

Chase Kahwinhut Earles has always been an artist. Yet the process of defining and accepting himself as such was a drawn-out and painstaking one. As a young child growing up in Oklahoma he found himself inextricably drawn to the world of Southwestern art. Frequent family trips to Arizona and New Mexico fostered in him a calling that would remain steadfast in his mind. This calling needled him through years of work as a non-artist when inspiration seemed to have fled and creating art and an identity as an artist felt like a luxury not afforded to him. Indeed, there seemed always to be something in the way, something else to be put first; bills to pay, work to do. "Playing in the mud" as he puts it, just wasn't in the cards.

He got married, bought a house on two acres with a stream, and life moved on. Then, one day, inspiration returned. He found he was fascinated by Pueblo pottery and made extensive notes detailing vessels from Zuni, Acoma, and San Ildefonso Pueblos in New Mexico. He then researched methods for creating similar works of art. He asked questions, looked into how the clay was made and how the pots were formed. He gathered wood and bought supplies. Yet when it finally came time to create a space in which to do his work, he stopped. "Something plagued me. I could not bring myself to make a space for my pottery and actually start sculpting something, anything. It wasn't important to me ... I didn't know why."

The answer to this sudden failing of inspiration came in the form of a single sentence. "I am not a Pueblo Indian." It would not be enough to mimic their work. In fact, he felt that doing so would dishonor Pueblo pottery traditions, effectively co-opting a part of their cultural identity for his

"My journey into the world of Native American Art ... would also become my re-education and rediscovery of my culture, from it's earliest origins to it's modern history."



gain. "That was it. That was the problem. I realized I had no voice. I felt I had no reason to create art. I then felt that to create art you had to have a meaning and a voice."

Mr. Earles has always known he was of Caddo descent, but in a story familiar to many Native Americans today, he grew up without an intimate connection to his culture or heritage. In fact, he begins the auto-biography on his website by stating, "For the larger part of my life I was raised away from my Caddo heritage and culture, mostly because of the effectiveness of the allotment doctrine, assimilation, and racism that worked too well on my parents and their parents before them."

Yet as it turned out, a connection to this heritage, seemingly out of reach and intangible, was the very thing he unknowingly sought. His search for meaning and for a voice effectively ended upon posing a simple question to himself, "Did our Caddo tribe make pottery?" The answer, he soon discovered, was a resounding yes. However, the tradition had all but died out and existing Caddo pottery, largely relegated to the world of private collectors and museums. A once living and thriving craft now gathered dust on sterile shelves and in closets, cloistered away from the descendants of those who once practiced it. Yet, Earles discovered that there was a woman



*Jereldine Redcorn demonstrating how to close the neck of the vase.*

named Jereldine Redcorn, who was almost single-handedly keeping the Caddo pottery tradition alive. "Once I found her and was able to meet with her and learn of all the things she had done to revive the Caddo pottery tradition, I knew I had found my calling and my voice. I was a Caddo

Indian and I was going to help revive the traditions and history of Caddo pottery so that it could be carried on and not lost. For the first time in my life I felt like I really had a reason to create art, and a voice behind which to inspire it.”

Today Mr. Earles states his goals clearly, “(I want) to keep as close to

our old ways as possible when making these new contemporary pieces to show everyone how beautiful our artistic ceramic legacy was, and still is. I hope to bring our almost lost and forgotten pottery identity back into the forefront where it once was in pre- and post-Columbian times.” But he also makes an important distinction here, stating, “However, I also feel very deeply that our tribe’s representation and communication through the design and creation of pottery would have evolved over time with the introduction of new situations and environments. For that reason, I also strive to present a new ceramic and sculptural interpretation from my own experiences as an artist myself, but (also) as an ambassador to my Caddo tribe and its ancient cultural identity.”

After years of hard work, Mr. Earles is now a celebrated and award-winning Caddo artist. He is also a teacher and mentor, willingly sharing his knowledge and expertise through classes and community gatherings. In fact, if you visit his Facebook page you are likely to find posts like this, “Anyone interested in seeing or participating in a traditional pottery pit-fire today? If so, PM me, I will wait till ya get here.” ■

Chase Kahwinhut Earles currently serves on the OKPAN advisory board.

Please visit his website by clicking [here](#)  
Or visit his Facebook page by clicking [here](#).



*Traditional firing of pots*

*Left: Chase Kahwinhut Earles at work. Right: Pots after firing. All photos courtesy of [www.caddopottery.com](http://www.caddopottery.com)*

