

Santhony Pottery:
Into the Fire





Clay Energy:

An Interview with Santhony Pottery

The following includes excerpts from an interview with Santhony Pottery (Cindy Henhawk and Judi Henhawk Sault) that was conducted in September, 2021, by Glenhyrst Art Gallery curator Matthew Ryan Smith as part of Glenhyrst's ArTeach video series. Glenhyrst Art Gallery gratefully acknowledges the Canada Council for the Arts for their financial support of this project.

Cindy Henhawk (CH): My aunt Bun [Smith] was really curious as to how pots were made and why we don't have them anymore. There was a large chunk of time when there wasn't pottery. When aunt Bun found the sherds, that sparked an interest and she asked "where did it go?" That's what happened. That's what started it all. She said "I want to do this, I want to carry this on." That's when she was introduced to Tess [Kiddick] who showed her how to do the pottery, but she taught herself how to do the design.

Judi Henhawk Sault (JHS): It came to the point where the copper and metal pots were introduced, just as the guns replaced the arrows. It became a turning point. [The Mohawk people] probably still knew how to make [pottery] over time, but it was easier to make metal.

CH: At the time of trading, that's what they would trade—pots, pans, utensils. That was easier to make than pottery. They had it right there. I think [pottery] got lost in the shuffle in that way until it was stumbled upon.

CH: The colours go from white to grey to red, depending on where you get the clay. The clay near the river tends to be more brown. The clay around [Six Nations] tends to be grey, but after it's fired it's a different colour altogether. It's hard to say what colour it will be after it's fired.

JHS: Cindy does more of the history where I do more of the culture. When you ask a person what your clan is, it's actually asking what clay you are made from in the Mohawk language. That's how it comes about, from the clay. I explain it comes from Mother Earth. When [students] feel the piece of clay, I tell them to make it theirs, to get a good feel on it.

CH: Their energy.

JHS: It's amazing when you're with these kids—they're talking and everything. Once they get working on it, they're quiet and really zoned-in.



CH: Sometimes when I'm throwing [clay], I might have something in mind but the piece takes its own way so I just work with it. I might want to try and make a vase but it ends up being a bowl. I don't have a focus. As soon as I sit down I feel the clay and work with it. When I start throwing it sometimes becomes what it wants to be. I really love decorating. I'll sit there in my room and I'm able to do things symmetrically, like marking the pot and where I'm going to put it, so that everything is the same all the way around.

JHS: You're in your own zone, I think you can say.

CH: Judi works a lot with the kids and I work a lot with the adults. Just watching the looks on their faces when they work with the clay—you can tell when someone is getting frustrated or really enjoying it, or when things aren't working. I let them know "don't look for perfection. If you look for perfection you're never going to be happy. Just work with the clay and let it guide you." It seems to work.

JHS: I find that adults are too perfectionist. They want things a certain way whereas with kids they're not so much "I want to make it this way." The kids go with the flow.

CH: We still make tools out of anything. Toothpicks, toothbrushes, anything we can find we can make as a tool for pottery. Sticks, different kinds of sticks, and roll it on the clay to indent a pattern on it. A lot of pieces have their own stories. I'll put arrows on them to talk about how our people hunted and how they fixed their food. Also, the plants and the water. There's a [pot] that I make where there's a fire in the middle of the bowl, because everything is done around the fire. Along the inside there's teepees and the sun. The teepees represent the importance of family and community. The sun is there—it comes up in the east and goes down in the west. On the outside there's trees that give thanks to what the trees provide us and the homes for the animals. There's waves under that for the water. We give thanks to the water, for the fish, and the life in the water. I call that the Mother Earth bowl because it has everything in there of Mother Earth and it shows our appreciation. That's another story there. There's always some kind of story in the pottery.

JHS: I sometimes include little cards with mine, that's some that I usually do—the People of the Flint, the People of the Shirt, the People of the Standing Stone. There's six [nations]. Some of the other ones I do are just a turtle and I'll give them the Mohawk language for that with the card. We do teepees, too. They can say, "I bought this at the powwow and this is what the lady explained it to be," so that she can explain it to other people when she has visitors. It kind of ripples on.

JHS: This pottery represents my ancestors because they actually used the pottery for cooking and storing. It's just like any other artefacts that we have. The beadwork is kind of contemporary compared to what it used to be before. Same as our pottery, it's contemporary more than it was before. They used to make it by hand and put it in the firing and somehow they managed to get a good pot that lasted. When they would move from village to village, they would destroy them and make new pots when they went to a new one. I want to do it over again, to be able to do the inground firing.

CH: Iroquois pottery goes way back. Centuries.

JHS: There's sherds in the Smithsonian, the Woodland Cultural Centre in Brantford, the ROM (Royal Ontario Museum) has some.

CH: It was always adorned with something. Traditionally, it was geometric. That type of design. There was always something on it to make it look attractive.

JHS: After a piece has been thrown, I look at it and decide what details will go on there but I always focus on my Haudenosaunee culture. Whether it be clans or wampum belts, ceremonies, or something like that. Something that I can educate other people about. That's what I focus on when I'm making a piece.



CH: Because you could put anything on there—history on the pieces, the culture, the animals, the way you feel about other people, there's a way to do that, to put your feelings into the piece and it all works out. I was six years old when my mother started pottery, so it's been a part of my life for many years. It's a part of me now and I don't see me without pottery.

JHS: I find that it's very relaxing. I enjoy it because I can do it at six in the morning or twelve at night. I can do it anytime that I can find time to do it. Once I'm doing it, the world is gone, I'm focused on what I'm doing here. I really enjoy that. I enjoy it too when my pieces are said and done, and are out-and-about, and people say "wow, that's an awesome piece." It gives me an awesome feeling that my hard work is appreciated.

CH: Like Judi said, it's so relaxing. I just can't wait to get in there and start working on it again. It's so inviting.

For the full video interview, please visit: glenhyrst.ca/online-education

Artist Biography



Santhony Pottery is a family pottery studio based on Six Nations of the Grand River territory and managed by Cindy Henhawk and Judi Henhawk Sault. Their work resides in major public and private collections around in Canada and internationally, including the Royal Ontario Museum (CAN), the National Museum of the American Indian (US), The Iroquois Museum (US), and the Museum of Archeology in London (UK).



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