The Hohokam
Artisans and Their Crafts in Hohokam Society

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In the desert soils of south-central Arizona, archaeologists unearth polished shell jewelry (fig. 9.1) and pottery painted with bold red designs, in craft styles unique to this part of the ancient Southwest. Harold Gladwin, Emil Haury, and other early-twentieth-century archaeologists found so many ornaments made from marine shells and so many red-on-buff ceramic vessels that they declared them—along with ball courts—the hallmarks of Hohokam culture. As evidence of the importance of crafts like these in Hohokam life, archaeologists find raw materials, by-products of manufacturing, and finished products almost everywhere they excavate, including house floors, storage pits, household garbage accumulations, agricultural fields, hunting stations, and ritual buildings such as platform mounds.

When archaeologists study a “craft tradition,” they investigate the materials and technologies used in manufacture, as well as the culture-specific sense of style that guided the crafting process. They are also interested in the social, economic, and political roles of crafts and in how the tradition developed through time. Determining how the Hohokam made, used, and thought about crafts is particularly challenging because their descendants were no longer making the same range of items when Spaniards first wrote down observations about them in the late seventeenth century. For example, post-contact O’odham potters went about making their vessels in the same basic manner as their Hohokam predecessors, but they did not paint their pottery with Hohokam designs and symbols. The O’odham no longer made or traded for objects such as figurines, palettes, censers, shell pendants set with turquoise, and copper bells that the Hohokam had used in their social, political, and ritual life.

Craft Traditions

The Hohokam made certain kinds of tools and pottery for everyday uses, and they fashioned other goods, especially the kinds we would characterize as artistic or ornamental, as symbols of status or affiliation and for use in rituals. Village artisans made implements such as stone axes (fig. 9.2) to fell trees and shape roof posts, as well as manos and metates to grind corn kernels and other seeds into flour. Hohokam artisans also made knives, scrapers, and arrow points from stone suited for chipping, such as chert and obsidian, in order to hunt game and process the meat and hides. They used other kinds of stone to fashion religious and ceremonial

Figure 9.2. Polished stone axe with groove for hafting.
Figure 9.1. Hohokam people of all ages wore bracelets made from marine shells.
objects. They sought stone that occurred naturally in thin plates to make palettes with flat, even surfaces. Relatively soft, easily carved types of stone served for making bowl-like censers for burning incense, pipes for smoking, human and animal figures, and small stone vessels with carved decorations (fig. 9.3).

Sometimes craft items appear to have served both everyday and special social purposes, as on the rare occasions when Hohokam mourners placed several thousand arrow points in a grave as an offering or indication of the deceased person's role in society. Similarly, Hohokam potters routinely fabricated ordinary clay vessels in varied shapes and sizes for cooking, serving, and storing food. Rarely, they also fashioned marvelous effigy pots in the shapes of creatures such as birds and bighorn sheep and of men and women complete with painted renderings of clothing, jewelry, and body paint or tattoos (plates 3 and 4).

The limits of preservation determine what we can know about any ancient craft tradition. Ceramic and stone items survive the passage of time much better than items such as carved wooden objects, baskets, cotton cloth and clothing, and feather cloaks and adornments. Archaeologists find items made of these less durable materials only when they have been preserved under unusual conditions. It can be particularly difficult to determine customary use when we have only a few examples of a particular artifact. For example, excavators found a fortuitously preserved set of elongated, sword-shaped or spatula-like wooden items at a large site with a platform mound. Were they calendar sticks, prayer sticks, scepters, or staffs of authority? Or were they battens, the implements that weavers use to guide threads on looms? We could better answer these questions if we routinely found such items, say, on top of platform mounds but seldom elsewhere. Then we would guess that the wooden rods served a ritual purpose. If we found them in ordinary people's houses, we might conclude that they had a more mundane use.

Besides trying to understand how the Hohokam used the artifacts they left behind, archaeologists have focused much of their research on understanding how they made them—their technology. They study craft production to investigate questions about economic organization as well as manufacturing processes. Who were these artisans? Were they residents of small settlements, large central villages, or both? Did the same artisans (or groups of artisans in a village) specialize in making marine shell ornaments, pottery, and other crafts? If some Hohokam producers specialized in making certain goods, did they work in small, factorylike workshops, by themselves, or with other members of their households? What social messages did palettes and pottery carry beyond their immediate use? Archaeologists have gained insights into all...
Artisans created a variety of shell ornaments that Hohokam men and women wore in daily life and for ritual gatherings and other special occasions: bracelets, rings, pendants, beads of many sizes and shapes, and small tinkler rattles sewn onto the hems of garments or other flexible materials (fig. 9.4). Archaeologists believe that shellworkers made whole conch shells into trumpets for political and ritual leaders to sound loudly when they summoned their followers or signaled announcements. Such trumpets appear at community center sites with ball courts or platform mounds and in unusually rich burials. Greatly lending credibility to this interpretation, pre-Hispanic Mesoamerican leaders blew shell trumpets, and certain Pueblo priests and village leaders have used them at public events in recent times.

During the Preclassic period (700-1150 CE), many Hohokam people imported a majority of their finished ornaments from shell crafters who lived in the southwesternmost part of Arizona, an area called Papagueria (see map 1), which is relatively near shell sources on the Gulf of California in Sonora, Mexico. Some Hohokam settlements in Papagueria are filled with fragments of shell left over from workers' cutting out rough shapes for jewelry and with shell powder from their smoothing and polishing the cut

Figure 9.4 Shell items from the Marana Mound site in Tucson include examples in all stages of manufacture.

these questions by examining the objects themselves, carefully noting where they were found, and considering their roles in descendants' cultures. Marine shell ornaments and stone arrow points, artifacts central in my own research, illustrate the study of Hohokam craft traditions.
edges. Although artisans in villages of the Phoenix and Tucson Basins also made marine shell ornaments, they imported more finished pieces than they made themselves during these years. In the subsequent Classic period (1150-1450 or 1500), jewelry manufacture in Papagueria declined, and artisans in the Phoenix and Tucson areas, where most of the consumers lived, came to dominate jewelry production.

Archaeologists do not know whether Phoenix and Tucson artisans obtained whole shells by traveling to the Gulf of California or by trading with middlemen in Papagueria who might have journeyed to the coast or, in turn, traded with coastal inhabitants. We think that Hohokam travelers sometimes did journey to distant shell-covered beaches on the gulf, because their nineteenth-century O’odham descendants continued this tradition with coastal expeditions to gather sea salt (see chapter 16).

Boulders along foot trails across Papagueria bear petroglyph images of shells, strong clues that Hohokam travelers once followed these paths. From about 700 CE onward, the Hohokam left plentiful signs of shell crafting, particularly in their houses and their trash dumps. This evidence includes unworked shells, tools for shellworking, partially shaped ornaments, and finished jewelry, which together represent all the stages of manufacture in home villages. To make a large Glycymeris shell bracelet, artisans first used a coarse stone abrader to cut around the perimeter of the shell. Then they used granular, cigar-shaped stones to polish the jagged edges of the bracelet (see fig. 7.7). Most bracelets were left undecorated, but makers sometimes incised geometric designs along the margins or carved images of animals such as bighorn sheep and toads on the thickest part of the rim. We find bracelets in many sizes, suggesting that everyone from young children to adults wore them.

**Stone Arrow Points**
Making arrow points was an important task for hunters who brought down game such as deer with bows and arrows. Some makers of chipped stone tools specialized in arrow points, using high-quality raw materials such as chert and obsidian that allowed them to control the shape and size of the flakes they struck from larger chunks, or “cores.” Hohokam artisans especially valued obsidian, a glassy, volcanic stone, because it produced well-shaped arrow points, extremely sharp edges, and superior cutting tools, but the stone was rare in most of the Hohokam homeland. Arrow point makers had to import much of it from distant sources. Steven Shackley, an expert in obsidian sourcing, has perfected methods of chemical analysis that enable him to match pieces from archaeological sites with known natural sources. His studies of chipped stone artifacts reveal that the Hohokam acquired obsidian from more than eight localities across the modern states of Arizona, New Mexico, and Sonora, Mexico.

Hohokam arrow point makers were very skillful, capable of producing intricately chipped points, often in uniform styles (fig. 9.5). They used round stone hammers to strike off smaller pieces of desired sizes and shapes from a larger stone core. They then used wood, bone, or antler tools to remove still smaller flakes, giving the arrow point its final shape. The arrow points recovered at
Snaketown, the large Preclassic site on the Gila River south of Phoenix, show an exceptionally high degree of skill. Snaketown residents placed several thousand of these stylized points around a few unusual cremation burials. In these cases the points apparently had a ritual function as well as a utilitarian one. The Hohokam also left large numbers of well-made miniature arrow points in and around the platform mounds and walled residential compounds of their Classic period settlements. Why people discarded so many of these unbroken points, even in trash dumps, is a mystery. The Classic period Hohokam likely used whole arrows and arrow points in ritual events, just as Southwestern peoples of more recent times have placed them on altars as offerings and included them as parts of ceremonial attire.

**Why Craft Specialization?**
Artisans in non-industrial societies may specialize in craft manufacture if they lack adequate farmland on which to live. They can trade the finished goods for basic supplies to support their families. Archaeologists suspect that at least some Hohokam craft specialists turned to craft production to supplement their crops. For example, the Preclassic shell specialists of Papagueria lived in a part of the Sonoran Desert that lacked the year-round rivers and other substantial water sources vital for reliable large-scale farming.

Archaeologists have discovered the largest quantities of valuable craft items, such as obsidian arrow points and shell ornaments, together with evidence for their manufacture, in Hohokam central villages with platform mounds dating to the Classic period. This concentration at community centers suggests that resident leaders might have played influential roles in producing and distributing these valuable goods among widespread consumers. At any rate, when visitors from surrounding settlements attended feasts, religious rituals, or other platform mound events, both craft producers and leaders would have benefited from opportunities for gifting and bartering high-value goods. Worldwide, members of traditional societies prize skilled-craft goods, exotic materials, and items from distant lands. It is probable that aspiring Hohokam leaders sought to increase their prestige and political power by stockpiling such goods and periodically giving them out to friends and allies.

**How Were Craft Goods Circulated?**
How exactly did Hohokam artisans benefit economically from their crafts? In one scenario, Hohokam artisans and traders operated within a market system in which supply and demand influenced the relative value of goods. Yet the scarcity of archaeological evidence for market stalls, warehouses, or other tangible remains of markets in Hohokam sites challenges the idea that most goods were exchanged this way (see chapter 10 for an alternative view).

In another scenario, the Hohokam resembled many other non-industrial societies by emphasizing valued crafts in gift giving, paying marriage dowries, gambling, and making ritual offerings. Individuals, families, and villages exchanged gifts to confirm their friendship and loyalty to one another. When a person died, he or she might be buried with high-value goods as a sign of respect or in proportion to his or her social importance and power. Although we cannot document gift giving in the archaeological record, we do have evidence of burial practices. Archaeologists have found differing quantities of high-value offerings in Hohokam burials (see chapter 3). In some traditional societies, a politically powerful person such as a chief or village elder orchestrated the circulation of valuable goods. Archaeologists have as yet found little direct evidence to confirm this kind of craft management among the Hohokam.

**Badges of Membership and Symbolic Ornaments**
As highly visible and personal objects, ornaments of stone, shell, and bone provide an effective means of communicating social information about people. Particular ornaments could advertise identity and status to close neighbors and people from distant communities alike. Religious and political leaders undoubtedly used objects such as shell trumpets in public rituals to symbolize their power and authority. The ancient Hohokam might also have adorned themselves with recognized kinds of
Figure 9.6. Varied styles of Preclassic period arrow points from Snaketown.
ornaments to signify their economic condition, religious affiliation, or political position.

I believe that Hohokam people, regardless of their age, gender, occupation, and social status, wore marine shell bracelets to advertise their membership in Hohokam culture and society. By doing so, they contrasted themselves with neighboring groups in the southwestern United States, if not with bracelet-wearing peoples to the south in Mexico. Although bracelets also appear among Ancestral Pueblos, the Mogollon, and other peoples of the Southwest, they were scattered and few. Among the Hohokam, they appear regularly in the personal possessions burned during cremations, and they often adorned persons buried in graves. Everywhere we find bracelets made for wearers of all ages. We find higher concentrations of them in centers with platform mounds, lending support to the idea that Hohokam society became more stratified during the Classic period, when mound building flourished. In effect, shell bracelets served as badges of membership, as a tangible and visible way for Hohokam people to assure their contemporaries that they shared values and beliefs.

Shell bracelets were not the only badges of membership in Hohokam society. Hohokam hunters and warriors made distinctive tools and weapons. During the Preclassic period, Hohokam craftsmen shaped arrow points in a variety of distinctive styles (fig. 9.6). Arrow point styles from sites near the city of Gila Bend in west-central Arizona, for example, differ from those at sites in the Phoenix area. The hundreds of arrow points in uniform styles that Snaketown mourners placed beside a few cremated persons must have had widely recognized meanings.

If commonly found craft items can tell us much about Hohokam society, what about rare or special-use forms? Unlike plain shell bracelets, shell pendants carved into stylized toads or frogs, for example, are quite rare. In only a few instances have archaeologists found turquoise mosaic-on-shell pendants (plate 2). During a brief part of the Preclassic period, Hohokam artisans used an acidic substance made from cactus to etch designs on whole Glycymeris shells (plate 1). The highly ornate turquoise and shell pendants and etched objects come only from large villages with ball courts and platform mounds.

Archaeologists can only speculate what shell pendants of frogs or toads, creatures associated with rainy seasons and water, might have symbolized. David Wilcox and Todd Bostwick propose that religious practitioners used frog pendants in agricultural fertility rites designed to bring rain. We can imagine strong incentives for the Hohokam to perform rain-making rites in the desert, where adequate rainfall was a life-and-death matter.

Hohokam artisans also fashioned pointed and polished bone objects, but archaeologists are often uncertain about their function. When we find them placed near the head in a burial, we speculate that they were hairpins (see fig. 3.8) and might have communicated social information about the wearer such as gender, marital status, or membership in a particular organization. Alternatively, the archaeologist Gary Feinman proposes that the Hohokam used these needle-like bone objects in bloodletting rituals, as did the Mayas of southern Mexico.

Crafted goods offer a fascinating portal through which archaeologists can explore many aspects of Hohokam culture and cosmology. We can hope to answer questions about the meaning of Hohokam crafts by carefully testing ideas that begin with archaeological patterns, practices among descendant peoples, or tendencies among producing societies worldwide. After more than a century of research on crafts and craft making, it is truer than ever that much remains to be learned.

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