

## BOOK REVIEW



*Prehistoric Southwest Pottery Types and Wares* by Norman “Ted” Oppelt. 149 pp., 86 illustrations, References Cited, Glossary. Self-published. 2007. \$50.00 (Paper).

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Norman “Ted” Oppelt has undertaken an ambitious task: to present ware and type descriptions for a great variety of Southwestern ceramics and to illustrate them with color photographs. The rationale for this, Oppelt tells us, is that he discovered that “written descriptions were inadequate to understand what a pottery type looked like” (p. i). Although compiling such a reference library is certainly a laudable and worthwhile goal, Oppelt’s effort is marred by his reliance on Harold S. Colton’s (1965) *Checklist of Southwestern Pottery Types* as the basic framework for the presentation. Southwestern archaeologists have long known that this work is highly flawed, created as it was at a time when Colton’s personal life distracted him from his professional endeavors (Mangum and Mangum 1997). Colton’s 1965 checklist is internally inconsistent and also differs from previous checklists and, in some cases, from Colton’s previously published ware and type descriptions.

In addition, Colton’s work was written long before the explosion of archaeology mandated by heritage legislation. The basic framework of Colorado Plateau ceramics has remained relatively stable, but it has been augmented and refined over the last forty-five years, and these updates have not been included. Therefore, Oppelt’s work repeats many of the errors in Colton’s framework that have since been corrected. Hohokam ceramics and those of central Arizona are much better known now than in Colton’s day, for instance. Just in the last decade, virtually all the Pueblo IV period ceramics, from Rio Grande Glaze Wares to Jeddito Yellow Wares, have received intense scrutiny from style and iconography to chemical sourcing. These are just two of many examples of recent research that have not been taken into account.

One of the more pervasive problems includes the date ranges for ceramic types—an extremely important issue for all Southwestern archaeologists who

must rely on ceramic cross dates. Because Oppelt does not include citations for the dates he presents, the source of errors cannot be evaluated. Many of the date ranges he provides are incorrect, and others can be disputed. He employs the long count for the Hohokam chronology, for example, which has been discredited since the 1980s. The chronology of Tusayan White Ware types has been refined by reanalysis of tree-ring dated structures and their associated ceramics (reported in this journal by Christensen [1994] and Sullivan et al. [1995]). Importantly, given the rationale for presenting this book, many of the illustrations depict sherds that were typed incorrectly and do not illustrate the types they were intended to show. Moreover, as ceramicists know, the range of variability in a particular ceramic type can rarely be illustrated with one or two photographs.

Having made these points, it is important to note that today's ceramicists have inadvertently added to the problems of Southwestern classificatory systems. Only some archaeologists use Colton's original ware and type labels, for example, and rename wares and types without providing formal descriptions and in the absence of consensus. The use of "Salado Polychrome" in place of "Roosevelt Red Ware" is a good example of this practice. These ceramics were not only representative of archaeological cultures other than Salado, not all of them are polychrome—bichrome and monochrome slipped types are also Roosevelt Red Ware. The recent widespread use of "Middle Gila Buff Ware" is another example. In addition, ceramicists rarely use the Colton rules for nomenclature and description, and the violation of these rules sometimes makes for rather hilarious non sequiturs—such as "Rincon Polychrome, bichrome variant."

Although it is tempting to simply provide a list of sections in Oppelt's volume that we suspect might produce useful and reliable classifications along with those that are puzzling, misleading, and outdated, the problems are much deeper than occasional inconsistencies and misunderstandings. One of the most troubling pervasive problems is the removal of pottery categories from their cultural and historical contexts. Although he was not uniformly successful, Colton intended for his classification system to answer two basic questions: "how old is it?" and "who made it?" The latter is partly a question of cultural classification, and Colton's understanding of archaeological culture is not the one under which most archaeologists currently labor. Most of those working in the Southwest today would argue that the cultural classifications used in Colton's day (Anasazi, Mogollon, etc.) are no longer useful for anything more than the broadest of generalizations.

If we take as our goal the assignment of specimens to ceramic traditions based on technological styles that developed in particular geological and historical contexts, the assignment of pottery wares to such traditions should depend on a great deal more than one or two formal attributes. For example, crushed-sherd temper was available to any potter who lived in the vicinity of former habitation sites, quartz sand makes up a rather startling proportion of the earth's crust, and

nearly any clay can fire to a gray color with the right firing conditions. If the goal of ceramic classification is to consistently characterize the age, origins, technological style, and, to some extent, cultural affiliation of archaeological ceramics, then an understanding of the geology and cultural geography of the Southwest should come first. It makes no sense to us (with more than fifty years combined experience in ceramic analysis in academic and cultural resource management contexts) to place material from northern New Mexico, such as Gallina Black-on-white, into Tusayan Gray Ware, which has been long accepted as the dominant utility ware of the Kayenta area of northern Arizona. Tusayan Gray Ware is made from clays and sandstones of the Cretaceous deposits of Black Mesa. There is no cultural relationship between the Kayenta and Gallina areas, much less any geographic contiguity, yet in this volume, Oppelt proposes including Gallina and Arboles types in Tusayan Gray Ware.

The answer to these pervasive problems is not continued compilation of problematic and incomplete type descriptions and photographs. What we need is periodic and systematic overhaul of the pottery classification's component parts. Rather than discarding Colton's framework, as some critics have advocated, we should attempt to update it with the wealth of new ceramic data that have accumulated since the 1960s. In short, there is no need for reification of Colton's checklist, but there is a great need for revival of Colton's tradition of consensus-building discussions and workshops. We should discuss classificatory issues in a common venue, instead of working in isolation. For example, Colton's Museum of Northern Arizona ceramic conference series is alive and well, if infrequent. The museum has published a field manual resulting from the 1995 conference on ceramics of the Rio Puerco of the West (Hays-Gilpin and Van Hartesveldt 1998). Updated type descriptions resulting from the Prescott Ceramic Conference appear on a website (<http://jan.ucc.nau.edu/swpottery>), and results of the 2007 conference, "Pottery North and West of the Colorado River," together with many updates on the pottery of diverse areas, appear in the online journal *Pottery Southwest* (<http://www.unm.edu/~psw/>). Although such conferences can be characterized by heated debate and much dispute, they usually result in consensus ware and type labels, descriptions, and presentations of new wares and types, to the benefit of all.

Revival of published, consensus-based field manuals is constrained only by time, money, and leadership (anyone is welcome to convene a ceramic conference at the Museum of Northern Arizona). Web-based publications also take time and cost money, but they are certainly less expensive than print publications. With periodic updates, web-based publications can escape the fate of fossilization, à la Colton 1965. Further, we disagree with Oppelt's statement that type collections are a "luxury." To the contrary, type collections are indispensable at any level of training or analysis. If type collections are not available to all, then they certainly should be, via loan or travel. We agree that more resources should be

created to promote useful, consistent, and accurate classifications of prehistoric pottery in the Southwest, but we urge that our creative efforts be directed to consensus-based, analytical, critical, and multidimensional approaches.

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