

Sacred Receptacle and Sign of the Gods: Human Hand Imagery in the Art of the American Southwest

Julia Stephens May

Human hand images have been included in the artistic repertoire of the native peoples of the American Southwest since their earliest times. The Anasazi, for example, began to include human hands as elements in their rock art during the first four centuries of the first millennium AD and continued to do so without pause until they abandoned the area around AD 1300.¹ Though they seem benign when compared to other Anasazi rock art elements, human hand images were produced in almost infinite combinations of types, patterns and colors.² Human hands were created as single, isolated images (Figure 1) and in multi-layered compositions of over 100 (Figure 2). In most cases human hand images are juxtaposed with other motifs (Figure 3). Mutilated hands and hands that have more than five digits are also represented though they are rare.³ The placement of multiple human hand motifs ranges from ordered, symmetrical compositions to those that appear random and haphazard. Most hand images are often rendered as prints and stencils of an actual person's hand and are thus life-size and natural in appearance. Painted replicas of hands constitute a smaller percentage. These are abstracted, often very small or very large in size with details such as fingers and palms distorted and disproportionate. The colors of human hand images in pictographs span the spectrum and designs of those etched into rock surfaces are likewise varied.

The period of Anasazi culture commonly referred to as the Pueblo IV period, AD 1300-1700, was a time of profound change. Due to severe droughts in the late thirteenth century, the Anasazi established communities to the south, west and east

into Arizona and New Mexico in adobe compounds that the Spanish named *pueblos*.⁴ As they migrated south they came into contact with other groups, among them the Sinagua, Mogollon and the Hohokam.⁵ Many scholars believe that the Anasazi adopted religious practices, which led to the development of the kachina cult, and the tradition of using life forms in art from these cultures.⁶

Artistic production surged during the Pueblo IV period, which is perhaps best exemplified in painting.⁷ Kiva walls, previously painted with static geometric designs, were decorated with brightly colored, energetic murals depicting scenes from mythology.⁸ Pottery decoration underwent the most profound changes as it was transformed by the introduction of polychrome and glaze painting. Design elements inspired by the natural world such as animals, insects and the human figure were used in profusion.

Indicative of cultural and artistic continuity with their Anasazi forefathers and of influence from other groups, people of the new pueblo communities continued to use human hand imagery as a part of their symbolic expression. However, beginning in the fourteenth century, the tendency was to incorporate human hand imagery on other paintable objects in addition to lithic surfaces.

The Anasazi did not have a written language and did not tell us why they created hand images. Thus, concrete meaning has eluded researchers. However, ethnological data collected from the Pueblo descendants of the Anasazi as well as comparisons to the practices of other prehistoric groups have proven

I would like to thank Dr. James Farmer, Claire Black, Eric Drongowski and Wendy Kagey for their helpful insight.

¹ Anasazi culture is divided chronologically into the following periods according to the Pecos Classification of 1927:

Pueblo V	AD 1700-present
Pueblo IV	AD 1300-1700
Pueblo III	AD 1100-1300
Pueblo II	AD 900-1100
Pueblo I	AD 700-900
Basketmaker III	AD 400-700
Basketmaker II	AD 1-400

Polly Schaafsma, *Indian Rock Art of the Southwest* (Santa Fe: School of American Research, 1980) 107.

² For a hand image typology, see Campbell Grant, *Canyon de Chelly: Its People and Rock Art* (Tucson: U of Arizona P, 1978) 168.

³ A discussion of mutilated hand images in the rock art of the Southwest can be found in Klaus Wellmann, *A Survey of North American Indian*

Rock Art (Graz, Austria: Akademische Druck-u. Verlagsanstalt, 1979).

⁴ Wellmann 86.

⁵ Wellmann 79.

⁶ Wellmann 86 and Schaafsma 244.

⁷ J.J. Brody, *Anasazi and Pueblo Painting* (Albuquerque: U of New Mexico P, 1992).

⁸ Elegant examples of Pueblo IV kiva murals survive at the abandoned pueblos of Kawaika-a, Awatovi, Kuaua and Pottery Mound. For further information, see Watson Smith, *Kiva Mural Decorations of Awatovi and Kawaika-a: With a Survey of Other Wall Paintings in the Pueblo Southwest*. Papers of the Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology, Vol. 37 (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1952); Bertha Dutton, *Sun Father's Way: The Kiva Murals of Kuaua* (Albuquerque: U of New Mexico P, 1963); and Frank Hibben, *Kiva Art of the Anasazi at Pottery Mound* (Las Vegas: KC Publications, 1975).

useful in suggesting possible answers. Interpretations of hand imagery in rock art include hand images as prayer marks left by religious supplicants, hand images as components of adolescent initiation rituals, and, most frequently, the hand images as the signatures of the people who produced them.⁹

The marked shift in context of human hand imagery, in light of a “change in world-view” that began in the fourteenth century, leads to a supposition that the motivation to use human hand imagery is influenced by forces other than the impulse to record man’s presence or leave prayer marks in homage to the gods.¹⁰ I argue that the meaning of human hand images such as those that appear on the interiors of ceramic vessels, as elements of kachina regalia or in other contexts, have as their sources Pueblo mythology and traditional religious iconography. Besides being, as Campbell Grant argues, “the most important and valuable part of man’s anatomy,” the hand has a deep symbolic meaning in Pueblo thought—more significant than previous researchers have suggested.

A close reading of Zuni creation mythology reveals that the hand itself holds a special place deep within their cosmic belief structure. The hands are two of the four human body parts used by the gods in the creation of the universe. In this episode, the hands can be conceived of as “sacred receptacles,” used to hold the primal essence of the cosmos and without which there would be no heavenly bodies:

After the Supreme Being created the clouds and the great waters of the world, the rain god Shiwanni said to his partner Shiwankia, “I, too will make something beautiful which will give light at night when the moon mother sleeps.” Spitting into the palm of his left hand, he patted it with the fingers of his right hand and the spittle formed like yucca suds and then formed into bubbles of many colors which he blew upwards; and thus created the fixed stars and constellations. And Shiwanni was well pleased with his creation. Then Shiwankia said, “See what I can do.” And she expectorated into the palm of her left

hand and slapped the saliva with the fingers of her right and the spittle formed like yucca suds, running over her hand and flowing everywhere and thus she created Earth Mother.¹¹

Interestingly, the idea of the “sacred receptacle,” while not yet identified in pictorial imagery, can be traced to actual Pueblo rituals where expectorating into the hands and slapping the saliva is common practice, as is using the hands to retain information learned in sacred ceremonies.¹²

Human hands in painted form refer to a number of Pueblo deities and spirit intermediaries called kachina. The first indicated by hand imagery are the Zuni Twin War Gods who are called, in the Zuni language, the *Ahayuta*. Individually they are known as *Uyuweyi*, the elder twin, and *Maisailema*, the younger twin. Ethnographer Frank Hamilton Cushing documented through Zuni informants that the *Ahayuta* are the twin sons of the Sun and Laughing Water and are inextricably linked to warfare.¹³ Each is associated with a human hand, *Uyuweyi* with the right and *Maisailema* with the left.¹⁴

In their respective hand forms, the *Ahayuta* are represented on the Pueblo IV kiva murals of Kuaua, New Mexico.¹⁵ The elder, right-hand twin, *Uyuweyi*, is found alone on the interior of a Pueblo IV ceramic bowl from the ancient site of Puaray, north of Albuquerque.¹⁶ A collection of six vessels excavated from the Pueblo IV site of Pecos also bear the symbolic likenesses of the *Ahayuta*.¹⁷ I suggest this interpretation because of stylistic similarities to the vessel from Puaray as well as to the close cultural similarities between the Pecos Indians and the Tiwa people of Puaray.¹⁸

In a similar fashion to their Zuni kin, the Hopi also used the human hand to symbolically represent powerful godhead. The god *Masaaw*, according to myth, is the deity who assisted the first people of the universe in their journey to this world and gave them the gift of fire. I believe that the human hand represents him, though this is not directly stated in the ethnographic literature.¹⁹ *Masaaw* is a deity recognized as having a dual character: benevolent and malevolent, grotesque and handsome, indicative of life and death. As god of death and guardian of the dead, he has the appearance of a rotting corpse and

⁹ For more information, see Victor Smith “The Human Hand in Primitive Art,” *Publications of the Texas Folklore Society* 4 (1925): 96; Edwin Wade, *America’s Great Lost Expedition: The Thomas Keam Collection of Hopi Pottery from the Second Hemenway Expedition, 1890-1894* (Phoenix: The Heard Museum, 1980) 35; and Grant 168.

¹⁰ E. Charles Adams and Deborah Hull, “The Prehistoric and Historic Occupation of the Hopi Mesas,” in *Hopi Kachina: Spirit of Life*, ed. Dorothy K. Washburn (N.P.: California Academy of Sciences, 1980) 16.

¹¹ Matilda Cox Stevenson, “The Zuni Indians: Their Mythology, Esoteric Fraternities and Ceremonies,” *Twenty-third Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology, 1901-02* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1904): 23-24.

¹² Ethnographer W.W. Hill witnessed one ceremony at Santa Clara Pueblo during which participants were admonished to hold sacred truths in the palms of their hands and other body cavities. W.W. Hill, *An Ethnography of Santa Clara Pueblo*, ed. Charles Lange (Albuquerque: U of New Mexico P, 1982).

¹³ Frank Hamilton Cushing, *Zuni Folk Tales* (New York: G.P. Putnam and Sons, 1901) 441.

¹⁴ Cushing, *Zuni Folk Tales* 441. The *Ahayuta* have half-brothers, also twins, called the Divine Ones who are also associated with the human hand image. See Cushing, “Outlines of Zuni Creation Myths,” *Thirteenth Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology, 1891-92* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1896): 381.

¹⁵ The best example of the twins appears on Layer A-8 of Kiva III at Kuaua. See Dutton 181, fig. 1 and 182, fig. 2.

¹⁶ Dutton 23, Plate 2, fig. C.

¹⁷ Alfred Kidder, *The Pottery of Pecos*, Vol. 2 (New Haven: Yale UP, 1936) 7, fig. D; 133, figs. C, D and E; and 180, figs. F and G.

¹⁸ For a discussion of the relationships of the various Rio Grande pueblos see Dutton 3-18.

lets off the foul stench of the grave.²⁰ His appearance and odor frighten people so terribly that they fall into an unconscious state as if dead.

Masaaw is set apart from other gods in the Hopi pantheon because his movements are orchestrated in a sinistral motion.²¹ When other gods move to the right, *Masaaw* moves to the left. Ethnographer Elsie Clews Parsons documented that the movement to the left is believed by many Pueblo groups to indicate death and is considered a sacred movement to the Hopi.²² In addition, *Masaaw* carries a club in his left hand with which to strike his victims and throws a shawl over his left shoulder.²³

Based upon *Masaaw*'s close affinity with the direction left, I propose that images of the left hand placed on Hopi vessels may signify him. Of the sixteen known Hopi bowls made during the Pueblo IV period that have hand imagery, nine are of the left hand (Figure 4, Figure 5, Figure 6 and Figure 7).²⁴

Kachinas play a significant role in both Hopi and Zuni mythology and ritual. Described by Barton Wright as "the spirit essence," kachinas act as intermediaries between the spiritual and earthly realms.²⁵ Most appeals to kachina involve the procurement of rain to quench the arid climate.²⁶ Male members of these religious societies don the regalia of the kachina not only to impersonate them, but also to become "invested by a specific kachina spirit."²⁷

At Zuni it is the *Anahoho* kachina who has hand imagery as a part of his ensemble (Figure 8). The *Anahoho* are messen-

ger-brothers who were lost during the migration of the first people to this world.²⁸ The *Anahoho* went back to the Middle Place to find their brethren, only to find the villages burned to the ground. The hand image on the mask of each *Anahoho* has been interpreted to symbolize the soot they wiped on their faces as they wandered, plaintively crying "Ana!" (Figure 9). During the initiation of adolescent boys into the kachina society, the *Anahoho* appear and whip the initiates in rites of purification.²⁹

Among the Hopi, hands are included as a part of the regalia of the *Mastop*, the Death Fly Kachinas, who appear on the eighth day of the *Soyal* ceremony.³⁰ *Soyal* commences on the Winter Solstice (December 21) and signifies "the sun's arrival at his house."³¹ In addition to its solstitial importance, *Soyal* initiates the beginning of the kachina cycle. *Mastop* bodies are painted black, and white hand images are placed on their calves, torsos and upper arms. Their masks are decorated with the Big Dipper and the Pleiades, which, Frank Waters argues, symbolize the celestial realm from which the *Mastop* come.³² The rest of their regalia emphasize their role as the male aspect of fertility; the black body denotes earth and the grassy fringe around the neck is symbolic of vegetation.³³ The fertility connection is further enhanced as the *Mastop* simulate intercourse with female spectators as a part of their public performance.

I believe these white hand images serve as symbols of the sun, to which *Soyal* is primarily dedicated; though Waters feels that they "symbolize man's touch upon all."³⁴ According to Hopi

¹⁹ For a comprehensive study on *Masaaw*, see Ekkehart Malotki and Michael Lomatuway'ma, *Masaaw: Profile of a Hopi God* (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1987).

²⁰ Malotki and Lomatuway'ma 31.

²¹ Malotki and Lomatuway'ma 16.

²² Elsie Clews Parsons, *Pueblo Indian Religion*, 2 Vols. (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1939) 461-462.

²³ Malotki and Lomatuway'ma 33 and fig. 5.

²⁴ Of this collection, six have right hands only and two have both right and left hands. The significance of human hand imagery inside ceramic vessels made by the Hopi and people of the Rio Grande pueblos can be suggested by an examination of the structure of the Pueblo universe and the relationship of the *Ahayuta* and *Masaaw* to it. The Pueblo universe is conceived of as a basket, which represents the sky and a bowl, which represents the earth. Each half has four horizontal levels. Rina Swentzell argues that the plans of Pueblo communities are this universal plan in microcosm and that the kiva, the semi-subterranean chamber used for ritual, is the symbolic place of emergence to this level. Most Pueblo groups believe that before they lived in their present locations they occupied the bowels of the earth only to be summoned by the Sun Father. Among their other duties, the *Ahayuta* (in Zuni and Rio Grande myth) and *Masaaw* (in Hopi myth) led the people on their migration to this world. They wandered in a spiraling motion through the four levels of the earth to reach their destination. Thus, on a smaller microcosmic level, the bowl symbolizes the Pueblo universe, and specifically the domain of the *Ahayuta* and *Masaaw*. See Rina Swentzell, "Pueblo Space, Form and Mythology," in *Pueblo Style and Regional Architecture*, eds. Nicholas Marcovich, Wolfgang F.E. Preisner and Fred Sturm (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1992) 23-29.

²⁵ Barton Wright, *Hopi Kachinas: The Complete Guide to Collecting Kachina Dolls* (Flagstaff: Northland Press, 1977) 2.

²⁶ E. Charles Adams and Deborah Hull argue that the kachina cult, "which focused on environmental 'control'" was integrated in the fourteenth century in an effort to secure desperately needed rain after a series of droughts in the thirteenth century. Though it exists to some degree on all Pueblos, the kachina cult is most sophisticated among the Hopi and Zuni. See Adams and Hull 16.

²⁷ Wright *Hopi Kachinas* 4.

²⁸ Barton Wright, *Kachinas of the Zuni* (Flagstaff: Northland Press, 1985) 63-64 and Plate 18, A.

²⁹ Interpretation of the *Anahoho* and their associated hand images vary. According to Ruth Bunzel, the hand image is a lucky talisman said to ward off evil forces, specifically Navajo warriors. See Ruth Bunzel, "Zuni Kachinas: An Analytical Study," *Forty-seventh Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology, 1929-30*. (Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1932): 993-994 and Plate 29.

³⁰ Wright, *Hopi Kachinas* 30, fig. B. The *Matya* or Hand Kachina also has a hand image as a part of his regalia. He is a runner kachina who appears during spring festivities. His mask is found among Rio Grande petroglyphs of the Galisteo Basin, New Mexico. See Wright 74, fig. E and Wellmann, fig. 470.

³¹ Frank Waters, *Book of the Hopi* (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1963) 155-156.

³² Waters 155-156 and Parsons Vol. 2, 556-567.

³³ Waters 156.

³⁴ Waters 156.

color symbolism, white is associated with the east.³⁵ East holds particular significance to the Hopi for it is the direction faced while honoring the gods and the direction a corpse faces in the grave. Most significantly, the direction of the rising sun and the direction faced while making offerings to the sun is towards the east.³⁶ Though the *Mastop* simulation of intercourse and other details of their costumes underscore fertility, it is only because of the sun, whom the Hopi call *Taiowa*, that man exists at all and reaps the life sustaining benefits of the earth. Thus, in the shape of the white hand image, *Taiowa* is present during the *Soyal* solstice festivities.

Typically, human hand images do not inspire the viewer to think of the mysterious and supernatural. They are immediately understood to refer to man and no other creature and certainly, on one level, serve to indicate his presence. However, previous scholars have neglected to consider the multi-referentiality of human hand imagery.

The image of the human hand is a universally recognized form and it was widely utilized in the art of the Pueblo people. Based on those facts, it is inevitable that many levels and depths of meaning can and should be considered when reviewing the function of the image in culture, art and society. An examination of Pueblo religion and mythology reveals that human hand images enable humans, as intelligent creatures, to access the power and energies of the sacred moments of creation, the deities who took part in the development of the Pueblos and the very sun which brings life to all. Operating within a worldview where the boundaries between the spiritual and physical are "fluid and permeable," human hand images are an integral conduit between the meaning and life of man and the spiritual realm.³⁷

Virginia Commonwealth University

³⁵ Edward Dozier, *Pueblo Indians of North America* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1970) 204-208 and Table VII.

³⁶ The Zuni also use the color white to indicate the sun and incorporate it into kachina-related ritual. Refer to Parsons Vol. 2, 732.

³⁷ M. Jane Young, *Signs from the Ancestors: Zuni Cultural Symbolism and Perceptions of Rock Art* (Albuquerque: U of New Mexico P, 1988) 116.



Figure 1. Hand Petroglyph, Pueblo IV, Boca Negra Canyon, Petroglyph National Monument, Albuquerque, New Mexico. (Photo: Julia Stephens May)

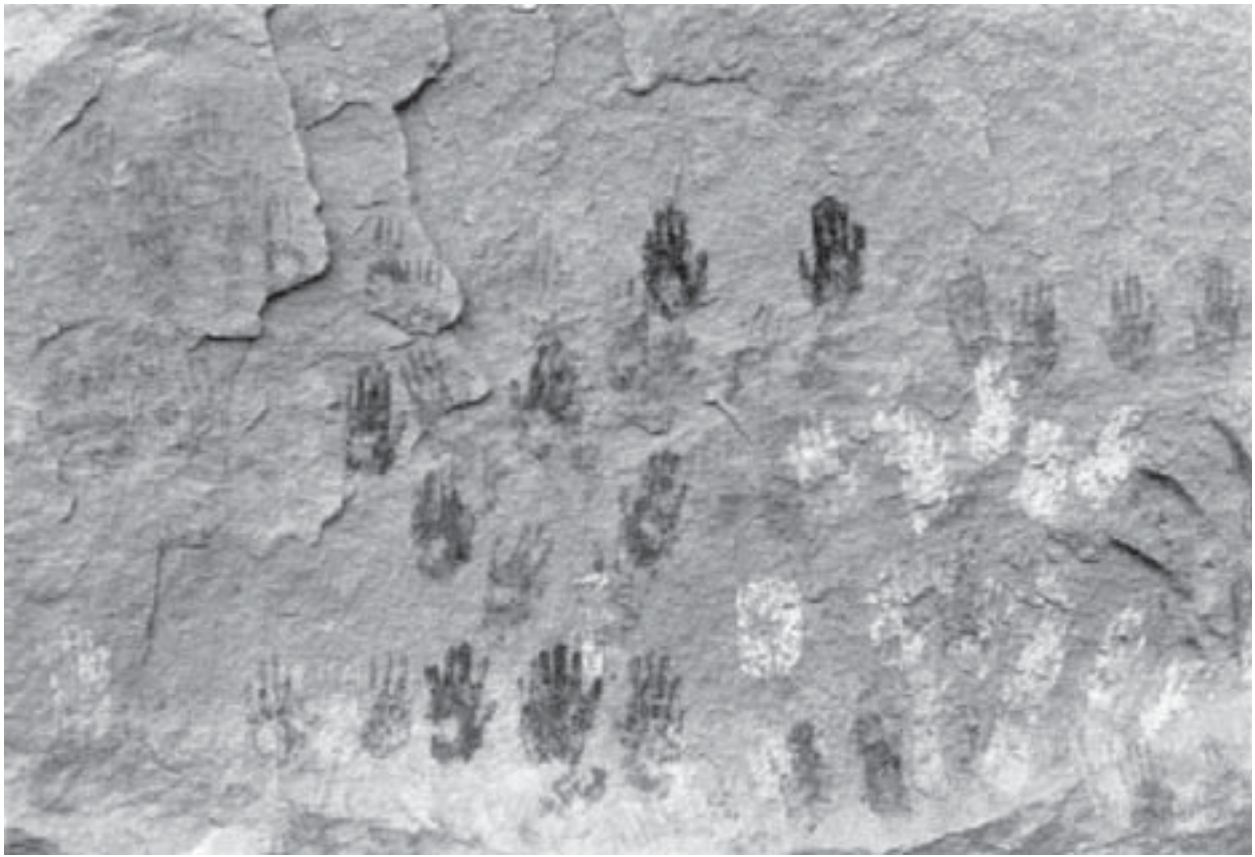


Figure 2. Hand Pictographs, Basketmaker II and Pueblo III, Painted Cave, Buttriss Canyon, Arizona. (Photo: Julia Stephens May)

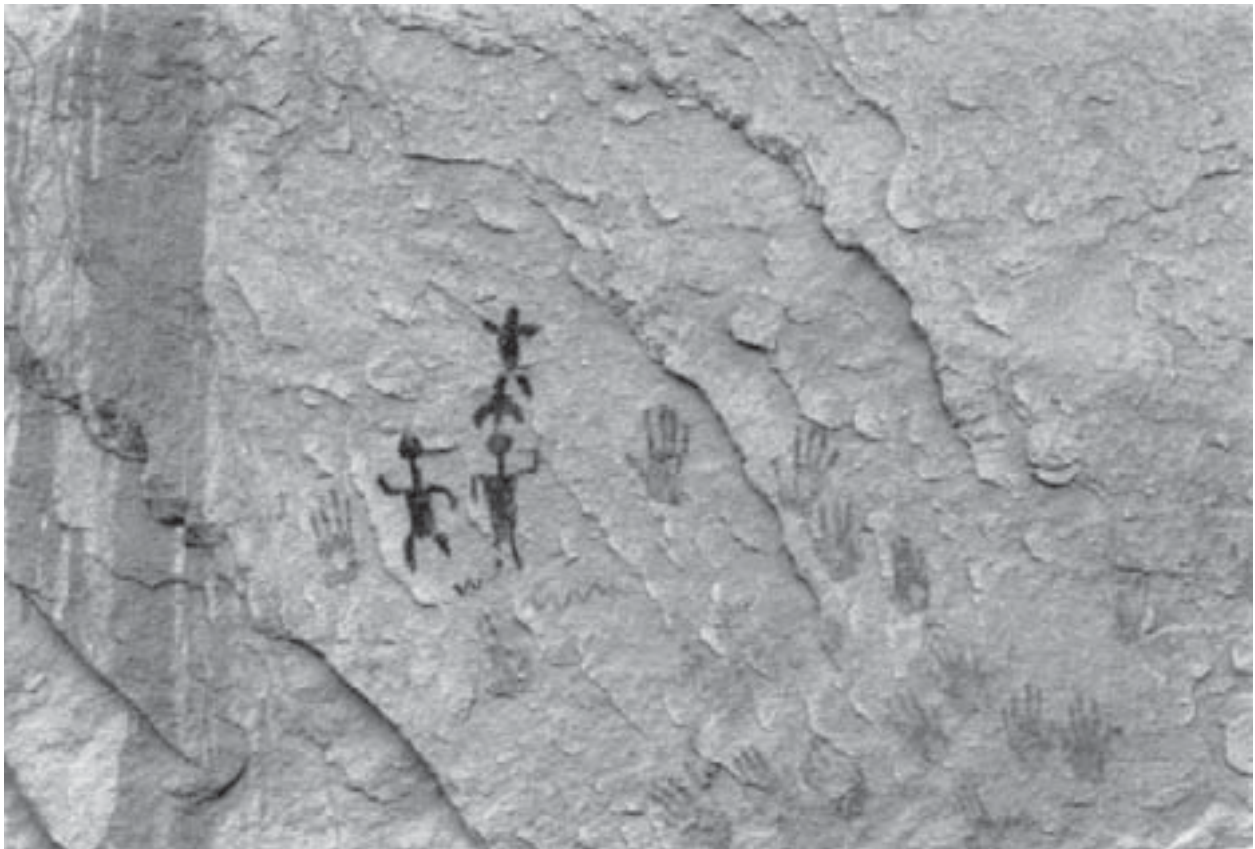


Figure 3. Hand Pictographs, Basketmaker II and Pueblo III, Painted Cave, Buttriss Canyon, Arizona. (Photo: Julia Stephens May)



Figure 4. Sikyatki Polychrome Bowl, Hopi, Pueblo IV. Courtesy of the Department of Anthropology, Smithsonian Institution. Catalogue Number 155468. (Photo: Julia Stephens May)



Figure 5. Sikyatki Polychrome Bowl, Hopi, Pueblo IV. Courtesy of the Department of Anthropology, Smithsonian Institution. Catalogue Number 155470. (Photo: Julia Stephens May)

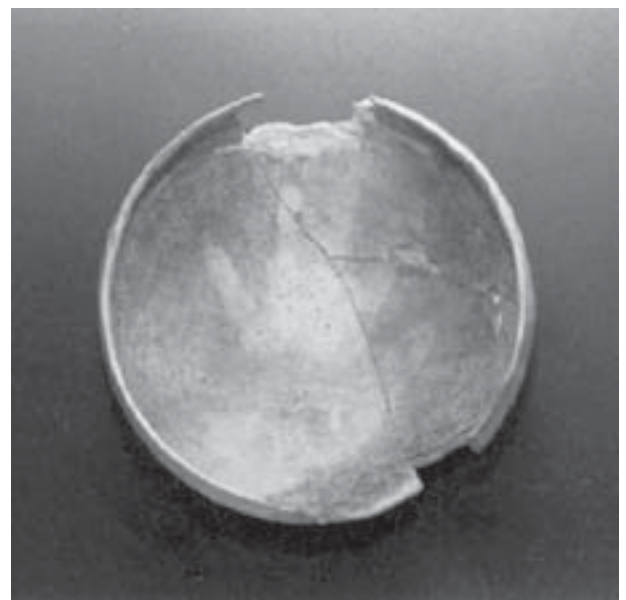


Figure 6. Sikyatki Polychrome Bowl, Hopi, Pueblo IV. Courtesy of the Department of Anthropology, Smithsonian Institution. Catalogue Number 155471. (Photo: Julia Stephens May)

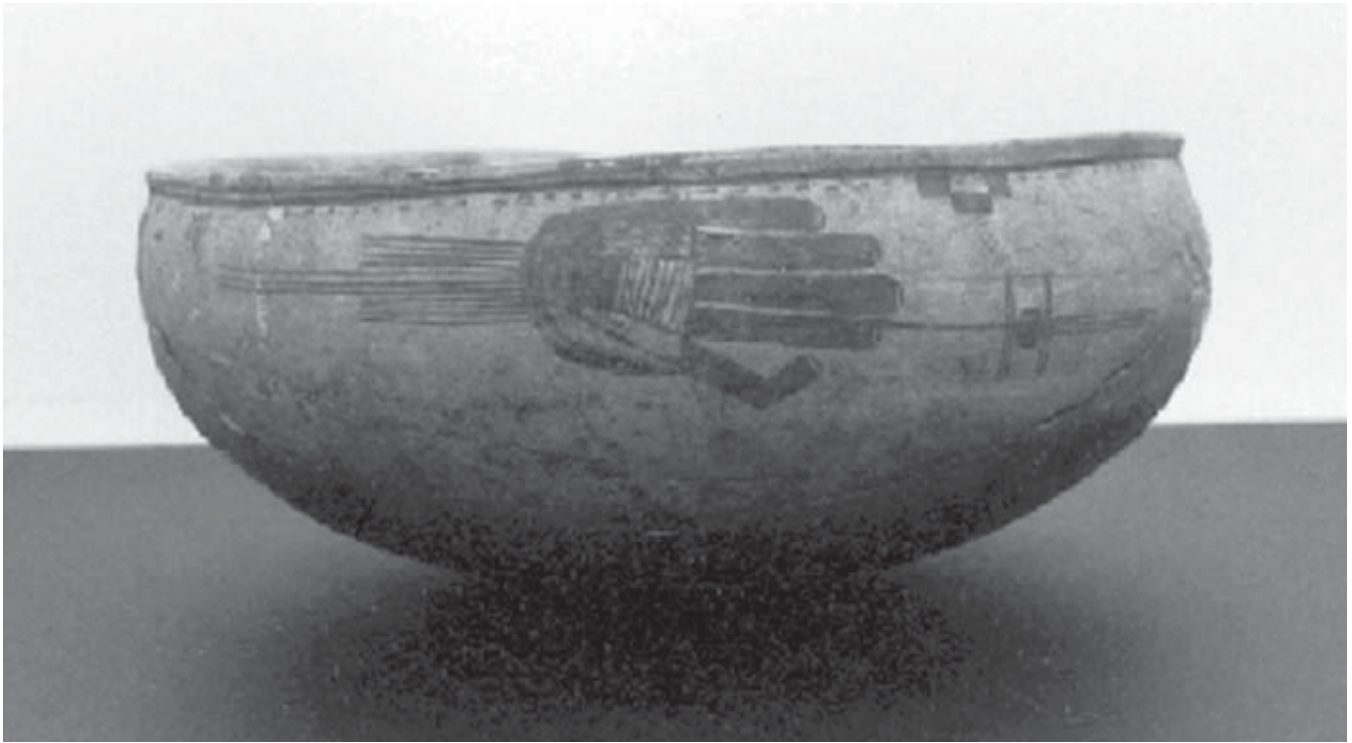


Figure 7. Sikyatki Polychrome Bowl, Hopi, Pueblo IV. Courtesy of the Department of Anthropology, Smithsonian Institution. Catalogue Number 155472. (Photo: Julia Stephens May)



Figure 8. Salamoepa Anahoho Kachina Doll, Zuni, Brooklyn Museum of Art, Museum Exhibition 1903, Museum Collection Fund. 03.269. (Photo: Brooklyn Museum of Art)



Figure 9. Anahoho Kachina Mask, Zuni, Brooklyn Museum of Art, Museum Expedition 1904, Museum Collection Fund. 04.297.5388. (Photo: Brooklyn Museum of Art)