jacob koopee

HOPI POTTER HOTTER AND HOTTER

BY PATTY TALAHONGVA (HOPI)

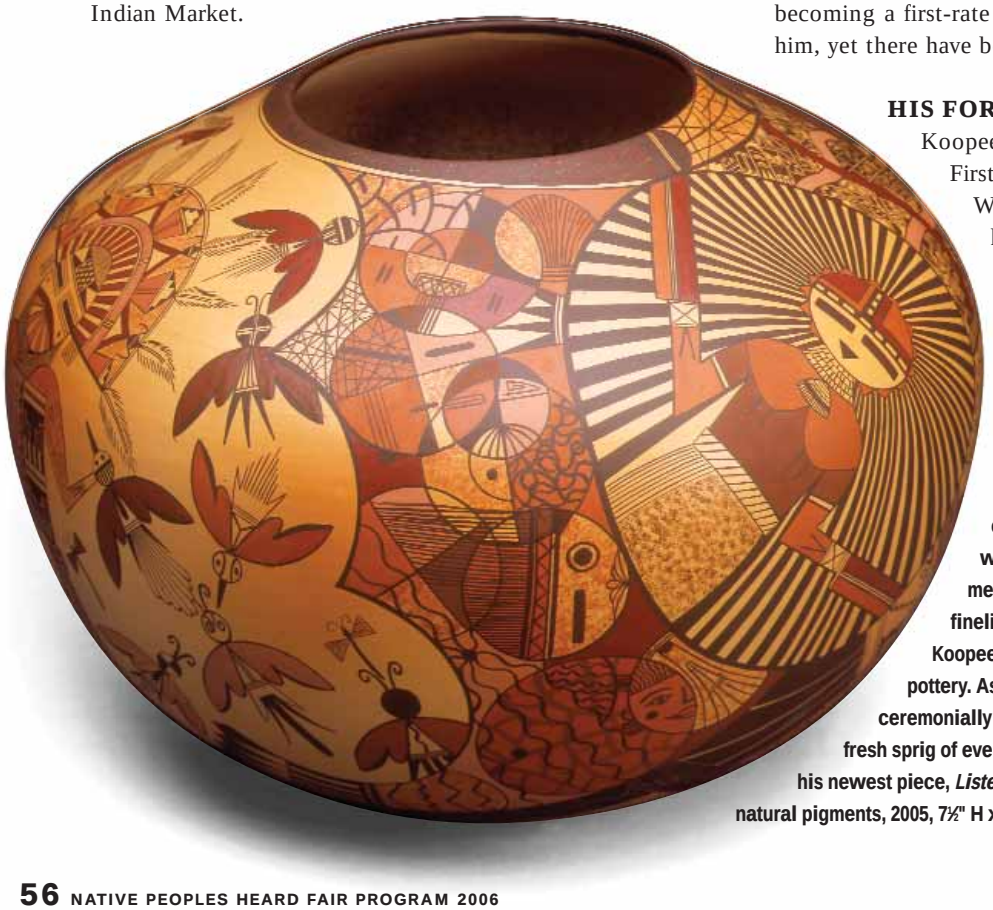
It seems everywhere he turns, Jacob Koopee has some sort of responsibility he's accepted. As a member of the Deer and Flute clans of the Hopi tribe of northeastern Arizona, he knows his place when it comes to ceremonial priorities. As an older brother, he relishes his role as caretaker and motivator to his younger brothers and sister. Now as a Hopi potter, Koopee has a new responsibility to his craft and his collectors. At the age of 35, Koopee has done what some might call the impossible. He has won back-to-back "Best of Show" awards at the country's two largest and most prestigious Indian art markets. In March 2005, he took the top prize at the annual Heard Museum Guild Indian Fair & Market, and less than six months later he picked up the same coveted prize at the Santa Fe Indian Market.

Koopee didn't make it to the reception honoring the award winners at Santa Fe. His niece, who wanted to join him in Santa Fe, had become ill. A trip to the local clinic, to make sure she was okay to travel, set his departure time back several hours. But for Koopee, family comes first. As it turned out, he learned of his amazing feat as he was traveling in a part of New Mexico that had cell phone service. Poor reception had prevented relatives at the artists' reception from giving him the good news earlier. So, outside of Grants, in the dark of night with stars twinkling overhead, Koopee says he, and his family in a second car, pulled over to the side of the road and cheered, cried and celebrated.

The roadside celebration is symbolic of Koopee's road to becoming a first-rate potter. His family has always supported him, yet there have been challenges along his path.

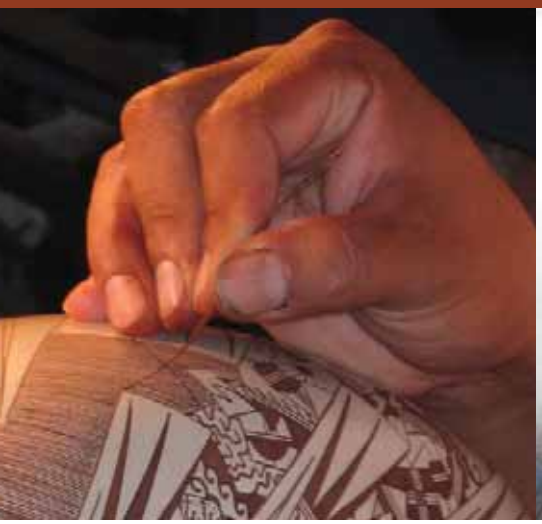
HIS FORMATIVE YEARS

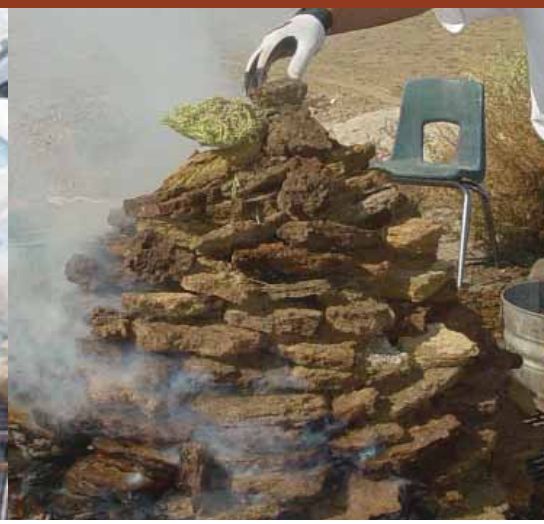
Koopee grew up in the village of Sitsom'ovi on First Mesa, about 70 miles northeast of Winslow, Arizona. At birth he was given his Hopi name, Paato; he says it describes corn that's about to burst. He's fluent in his language, participates in Hopi religious ceremonies and takes care of his cultural commitments. While he



LEFT: **Best of Show winner—*Awakening*—at last year's Heard Museum Guild Indian Fair and Market.** FACING PAGE, TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT: **Using only fine strands of yucca as his brush together with natural pigments, Jacob Koopee meticulously applies thousands of intricate fineline designs. Near his home on First Mesa, Koopee stacks blocks of sheep manure around the pottery. As fire begins to leap from the stack, Jacob ceremonially finishes off the tower of sheep manure with a fresh sprig of evergreen as an offering.** BELOW: **A birds eye view of his newest piece, *Listen—A Migration Masterpiece*, native clay with natural pigments, 2005, 7½" H x 13½".**

PHOTO: CRAIG SMITH/COURTESY OF THE HEARD MUSEUM

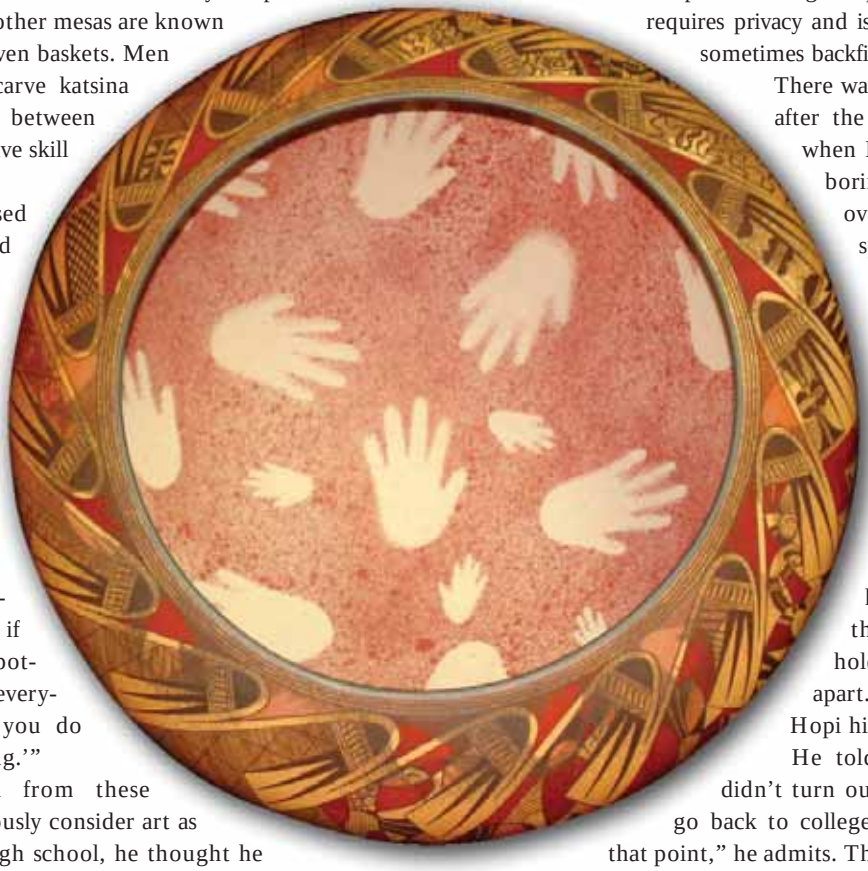




PHOTOS: BRANDON BOSWORTH/COURTESY MCGEE'S INDIAN ART

has no children of his own, he does have five godchildren in the Hopi ceremonial way.

As a young boy, he watched his mother make pottery. His great-grandmother Nellie Duma also encouraged him to create with clay. Koopee remembers her holding his hands and telling him he would be an artist one day. Among the Hopi, the women from First Mesa are traditionally the potters. Women from the other mesas are known for their coiled and woven baskets. Men from all the villages carve katsina dolls. Today the lines between those gender and creative skill sets are blurred.



"Men aren't supposed to make pottery and women aren't supposed to carve. And it's just another world that you go deep into," says Koopee. "But a lot of the women potters that I know, like how my character is, that's how I've known them. Even my grandmother told me, 'Well, if you're gonna make pottery, you gotta know everything behind it, and you do know what you're doing.'"

While he learned from these women, he didn't seriously consider art as a career. Fresh from high school, he thought he wanted to be a dentist. He studied that for a short time and received high marks and awards for his ability to mold and shape teeth. But his heart wasn't in dentures. He packed up and headed back home to Arizona.

Support for his venture into pottery came from all his family members. Like all serious traditional potters, Koopee makes his clay from scratch. Today he uses the paint stone his great-grandmother gave him years ago.

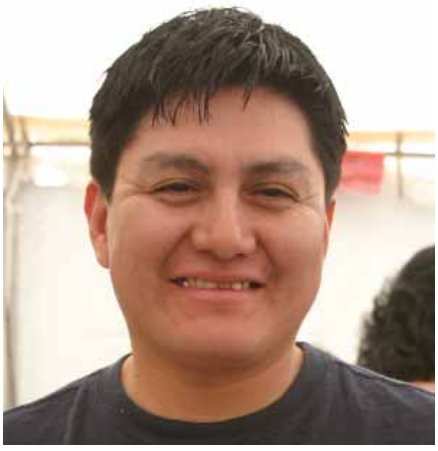
HIS PROCESS

He likes the company of friends and family when he starts his works, yet they know better than to think he's paying them much attention. It's their presence that he relishes. If live people aren't available, he'll turn the television on for background noise. Music isn't played because that would be a distraction. When he gets to the final steps in making his pots is when Koopee requires privacy and isolation. But that can sometimes backfire on him.

There was a time in his career, after the death of his father, when Koopee was still harboring anger and grief over his loss. That grief spilled over into his art. He watched as pot after pot broke during the delicate firing process. The Heard Fair was his testing point. Koopee set out to make a large piece with an intricate migration design. "I had a big pot that was this huge," he says, holding his hands feet apart. "The biggest pot in Hopi history!" he jokes.

He told himself if the pot didn't turn out he would quit and go back to college. "It was getting to that point," he admits. The day he fired his pot he sent his family away. "That's the first time in my whole life I told my family not to be here. I didn't know what kind of emotions I was going to have."

As he sat alone all day as the clay baked, thoughts ran through his head of his father's early encouragement, his lessons on not giving up on life. Finally, he gave himself a pep talk to not be too disappointed if the pot didn't survive. At dusk his waiting was over. "I took it and uncovered it. I was inspect-



ing it and inspecting it," he says, "and it was so perfect! I just started crying out there. I was happy, then here I felt kinda stupid, because I told everybody to go and I was here all by myself celebrating because it came out!" The fact that it did come out was a sign to him, and when the pot won Best of Show at the Heard Fair and Market, Koopee felt elated and he dedicated the award to his father.

Koopee has a lot of ideas in mind when it comes to new designs. He's perfected his paint and eagerly shares his not-so-secret ingredient for making his paint thicker and more permanent: He says fresh beets make all the difference. Koopee isn't stingy when it comes to his art. He's quite willing to give other potters pointers on what he's learned through trial and error. "It [the art] doesn't belong to us anyway, so why should we be stingy with it?" he asks.

With two major wins under his belt, he now has the luxury to let his mind wander and come up with new ideas for pots and designs. In a sense he's living up to his Hopi name. "That's what I'm doing right now! I'm really 'paato-ing.' I'm bursting all over the place!"

Jacob Koopee's works can be seen, among other places, at McGee's Indian Art Gallery in Keams Canyon, Arizona, Andrea Fisher Fine Pottery in Santa Fe, Agape Southwest Pueblo Pottery in Albuquerque, and King Galleries and Faust Gallery in Scottsdale. He is also a regular participant at the annual Heard Museum Guild Indian Fair and Market.

Patty Talahongva (Hopi) has been a journalist for more than 20 years. She is the managing editor and host of "Native America Calling," a national daily live radio call-in talk show. She is also a frequent contributor to Native Peoples.