

**A Primer for Mimbres Decorated Pottery**  
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Chronology:

Category	Georgetown (A.D. 550-650)	San Francisco (A.D. 650-800)	Three Circle (A.D. 800-950)	Classic Mimbres (A.D. 1000-1130)
Plain	X	X	X	X
San Francisco Red	X	X	X	
Miscellaneous Red	X	X	X	
Neck Banded		X	X	
Neck Corrugated			X	
Corrugated			X	X
Textured		X	X	X
Mogollon R/Br		X		
Three Circle R/w			X	
B/w Style I (Boldface)			X	
B/w Style II			X	X
B/w Style III				X
Mimbres				X
Polychrome				

**Phases in which significant production probably occurred for locally produced ceramics (adapted from Anyon and LeBlanc 1984:150, Table 9.1; dates follow Woosley and MacIntyre 1996).**

Technology:

- Mogollon ceramics are brownwares. Mimbres Black-on-white is a white-slipped *brownware*; it is NOT a true whiteware and should not be classified or referred to as such.
- Vessels are somewhat crudely formed, with thick walls or imperfectly shaped sides; the decoration was the important thing about the pottery.
- Temper tends to be sand or crushed quartz. **Petrographic studies have produced equivocal results. Gilman (Gilman et al. 1994:698) reviews petrographic studies, some of which suggest different production locales for Mimbres pottery (samples from Upper Gila and Tularosa Basin areas) and some which failed to identify substantial differences in temper (samples from Mimbres Valley sites. She argues that the use of broadly similar stream sands resulting from multiple complex geologic processes as tempering material has thwarted identification of petrographically-based compositional groups.).**
- **Chemical analysis (INAA) of Mimbres Black-on-white has resulted in the identification of distinct compositional groups that indicate the pottery production**

occurred in different areas of the Mimbres region, not just in the Mimbres Valley (the “core” of the Mimbres tradition (Gilman et al. 1994).

- Slip on Mimbres B/w tends to be thin, chalky, and dimpled; it is white not creamy. Slip on Three Circle Red-on-white is thick and creamy to white in color.
- Mineral paint: iron oxide used on all white-slipped pottery in the Mimbres sequence.
- Three Circle Red-on-white was fired in a non-reducing atmosphere; Black-on-whites were fired in reducing atmospheres.
- Control of firing temperature was variable; a single vessel often has some areas that are black and others that are red. Classification should consider decorative characteristics as well as paint color.

#### Vessel Forms:

- *Bowls*: Usually hemispherical in shape. Oval and “triangular” forms occur but are not common. Triangular forms have had the vessel sides and rims manipulated so one or more that pouring spouts are present. Bowls and bowl sherds comprise 70-95% of Mimbres pottery assemblages. Some later examples have everted (flared) rims.
- *Jars*: Much less common than bowls and not as widely studied. Decoration tends to occur between the rim and the widest part of the vessel. Geometric elements are the same as those identified on bowls and jars can generally be assigned to Style categories using the same criteria
- *Effigy Jars*: Often made in the form of birds or quadrupeds. Their irregular shapes don’t necessarily lend themselves to the repetition of geometric design elements seen in bowls or jars.
- *Other*: Ladles and miniature vessels do occur but are not common.

#### Uses:

- Mimbres Black-on-white bowls are widely known as mortuary offerings. Most bowls in museum and private collections come from burial contexts.
  - They were included with both cremations and inhumations.
  - They were included with all kinds of people: male, female, infants, children, adolescents, and adults.
  - One bowl per burial is the most common mortuary treatment but the inclusion of two or three is not uncommon. One burial from Galaz Ruin contained 15 bowls!
- Use-wear analysis (Bray 1982) indicates that bowls were used in domestic activities. Their role in feasting is not understood as feasting is a difficult topic to address in the Mimbres region because middens are scarce! **It’s generally thought that the ancient Mimbresños threw trash over the edge of the terraces. Unlike occupations in the Zuni area, where absence of middens is inferred to indicate a short site life, Mimbres occupations are long-lived. Archaeological evidence for long site life includes a settlement pattern wherein large above-ground pueblos were often built over pit house occupations and the presence of large numbers of burials at large sites.**

### Design and Decoration:

There are two main classes of Mimbres decorative design: **geometric** and **representational** or **figurative** (formerly called “naturalistic”) designs.

Archaeological attention has been focused on the identification of animal species depicted on bowls. Such studies commonly address a sample of bowls from a particular museum collection or a particular class or species of animal rather than a culturally meaningful unit of analysis such as a site or a roomblock. Thus, we have much to learn about the distribution of representational images and their salient characteristics.

Possibilities include

- Artist specialization in one or more kinds of representation because they tend to be good at drawing a sheep or a fish, with competition among artists. This scenario is favored by Steve LeBlanc.
- Animal depictions as proxy for some other kind of cosmological or social message. I don't think that the answer is as simple as each animal being a clan symbol but I do think that animals might be associated with elements of the landscape (including seasonality) that are also relevant to social associations and ceremonial responsibilities.

Geometric motifs have received less attention and we do not have any systematic archaeological study of design that considers what the design elements are, how they co-occur, or how they are distributed throughout the Mimbres region. Guess what my dissertation is!

*So what do we know?*

Brody has done an excellent job of identifying Mimbres Black-on-white design layouts (see attached). Hegmon and Kulow (2005) identified several additional layouts (also attached).

The Mimbres Pottery Digital Archive is a project aimed at building a searchable database of Mimbres pottery images using many criteria. The database will include provenience, design, and chemical analysis information along with high-quality photos of each vessel for which photos exist. A pilot study has made a good start at identifying basic geometric design elements (see attached) that are common on Mimbres bowls; the list is not exhaustive.

*So how do I identify Mimbres sherds and classify them?* Well, I'm glad you asked! **If you are working at a Mimbres site, you will not usually need to identify other kinds of black-on-white pottery. Identification and classification of Mimbres pottery is geared toward classifying it into the correct temporally significant Style group.** Refer to the attached documentation from the EMAP 2001/2002 Fields School.