

Maria & Modernism

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Articulated through traditional Tewa continuities in clay and pronounced technical refinement in form, the career of San Ildefonso Pueblo artist Maria Montoya Martinez (1887-1980) amassed widespread national and international acclaim. Her pottery was sought by collectors throughout the U.S. and Europe, and she became so well known that she was often referred to by the mononym “Maria.”

Maria hand-coiled her pottery, and her husband Julian Martinez slip-painted the vessels in matte relief. Though the couple initially made pottery with a cream-colored background and designs in red and black, when they created their black-on-black wares, their innovations dramatically changed Pueblo ceramics. It is evident through the evolution of her vessels that Maria strived for technical refinement. Maria’s partnership with Julian reveals an inexplicable artistic synergy; Julian’s painterly designs move and respond to Maria’s vessels. Reflected light and movement animate swimming Avanyus depicted on the surface of black-on-black pots. Maria’s vessels are masterworks of minimalism: sleek, graceful and sensuous.

Maria not only reinvented, reinvigorated and disrupted Pueblo pottery-making, but she also boldly transformed the art form—a tenet of American Modernism. Despite her artistic contributions and the decades of research, exhibitions and scholarship focused on a career that spanned more than seven decades, Maria has yet to be recognized as a prominent American Modernist. To reconcile this oversight in American art history, the Heard Museum opened the exhibition *Maria and Modernism* in February 2024. *Maria and Modernism* features more than 60 works by Maria and includes pottery from the Heard Museum collection, national museums and significant private collections.

The exhibition will contextualize American Modernism through fine art, industrial design and architecture to explore visual affinities between Maria’s pottery and the 20th century cultural movement. Visual associations of Maria’s pottery with design concepts evident in the Empire State Building, Eileen Gray’s furniture and the streamlined 1940 Ford concept car illustrate how effortlessly her pottery fit in with Modernist designs.

The masterworks in blackware and black-on-black, highlighting her remarkable ability to form large-scale vessels that appear to be perfectly shaped, come from institutions including the Museum of Indian Arts and Culture in Santa Fe, the Philbrook Museum, the Toledo Museum of Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art and private collections. A 1917 blackware jar with a fluted rim and one of the earliest black-on-black jars from 1919-20 depicting the Avanyu exemplify Maria and Julian’s 10-year experimentation in firing, which

began in 1908.

Through their many travels, Maria and Julian had the opportunity to see and experience American Modernism as it unfolded. Their first trip away from San Ildefonso was in 1904 to demonstrate pottery making at the Louisiana Purchase Exposition, also called the St. Louis World's Fair. In her lifetime, Maria participated in at least four world's fairs and several regional fairs. In this exhibition, for the first time, the Heard will reunite a set of 17 jars and a portrait plate that Maria and Julian made after a 1934 trip to Washington, D.C. The collection, originally given to Chester Faris, a federal Indian administrator and director of the Santa Fe Indian School, was divided among his family members following his passing. One-half of the set was donated to the Heard in the 1990s, and the museum purchased the remaining half just a few years ago. The set will be shown in its entirety for the first time since 1948, when it was displayed during a book-signing for Alice Marriott's book *María: The Potter of San Ildefonso*.

After Julian passed away in 1943, Maria worked with eldest son Adam Martinez and his wife Santana Martinez, middle son Popovi Da, and grandson Tony Da—her passion to create was unrelenting. Her enduring influence is evident through her fierce assertion of Pueblo aesthetic sensibilities. *Maria and Modernism* seeks to provide a fresh perspective on a radical matriarch whose rightful place within American Modernism has remained unacknowledged for far too long.