

# Telling Stories in Clay

by Betty Coody

1 In the evenings, as the desert sun sank out of sight and darkness surrounded the adobe homes, a voice would call, “Come children, it’s time.” Boys and girls came running from every direction to the courtyard, where their beloved storyteller sat on the smooth, packed earth.

2 They scrambled over and around him, each seeking a choice spot to sit. The best time of the day—story hour—was at hand. The children knew that Grandfather was about to weave his magic spell.<sup>1</sup>

One little girl who came each evening paid special attention to her grandfather’s wondrous tales. Helen imagined telling the same stories to her own grandchildren. She grew up to become a famous artist.

Helen Cordero began as a potter, making beautiful clay bowls and jars. Her most popular piece of artwork, however, was a small figure of a seated woman holding a baby in her arms. She called it *Singing Mother*.

3 People loved the Singing Mother figures. To buy them museum curators and collectors traveled to the Cochiti Pueblo in northern New Mexico where Mrs. Cordero lived. She could not make them fast enough to keep up with the demand.

One day, a pottery collector suggested that the artist add more children to her Singing Mother figures. She immediately thought of her grandfather, Santiago Quintana. She liked the idea because, as she said, “There were always lots of us grandchildren around him.” So, in 1964, the first Storyteller figure was born.

4 The first piece she made was a grandfather sitting, legs outstretched, with five children clinging to him. Each child had a different facial expression. The

grandfather’s mouth was wide open, as though spinning a yarn.<sup>2</sup>

5 That one small sculpture brought her fame. So many people wanted the figures that she gave up her other artwork to concentrate on the Storytellers.

6 To make her figures, Mrs. Cordero preferred the creamy brown clay of her own region, and often walked long distances to collect it. She considered the clay to be sacred, with a spirit of its own. She called it “Mother Clay.”

7 When she found clay she liked, she crushed it and sifted out the twigs, leaves, and other debris. The dry clay was then prepared for modeling.

8 Mrs. Cordero began a Storyteller figure by adding water to the dry clay. Next, she squeezed and patted it until it was soft and smooth. Carefully, she shaped the seated male figure with his arms and legs extended, ready to hold the children. She formed each child separately and then attached it to the adult.

9 Mrs. Cordero believed that each figure had a personality of its own. She talked to the tiny individuals in an effort to transfer her own “happy, special feeling” to every character she created.

10 Once all the children had been added to the figure, she put it aside to dry. Later she covered it with a thin white clay. She used paints made from plants and minerals she found near the pueblo. A green yucca leaf served as a paintbrush. The piece was now ready for firing.

11 Mrs. Cordero placed the Storyteller in a tin box and built a wood fire around it. Now she had deliberately made use of nature’s four traditional elements: fire, earth, air, and water. The fire was allowed

<sup>1</sup> **weave his magic spell:** to tell an interesting story

<sup>2</sup> **spinning a yarn:** telling a story

to burn down to ashes. When the Storyteller had cooled, she carefully removed it from the box and thanked it for coming through so well. "You are going to go far away and be famous," she would say.

12 Mrs. Cordero, who died recently, was always surprised that her Storytellers were so popular. "I don't know why people go for my work," she said. But her admirers know why her work is so well liked. She was a talented artist who refused to take shortcuts. She once said, "To make good potteries, you have to do it the right way, the old way."

13 If you see one of Helen Cordero's

trademarks. The piece will be a creamy clay color with touches of red, white, and black. The adult will have his head tilted back, eyes closed, "because he's thinking." His mouth will be round and open "because he's telling stories." The artist signed her name on the bottom of each piece in guaco (GWAH-ko), a greenish-black paint she made by boiling wild spinach.

14 Today we are grateful to both Helen Cordero and her grandfather for their legacy. The Storyteller figures remind us of the kindly people in our own lives who have told us stories to live by.

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