

Telling Stories in Clay

by Betty Coody

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.

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.¹

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*.

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.

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.²

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.

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."

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.

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.

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.

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.

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

¹weave his magic spell: to tell an interesting story

²spinning 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.

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."

If you see one of Helen Cordero's Storytellers in a museum, look for her

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.

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.

"Telling Stories in Clay" by Betty Coody from *Highlights for Children*, March 1998. Copyright © 1998 by Highlights for Children, Inc., Columbus, Ohio.

1. What is the purpose of describing the setting of Cochiti Pueblo?
 - A to give reasons for Cordero's fame
 - B to provide details about the artist's background
 - C to show why people enjoy Helen Cordero's works
 - D to explain how adults at Cochiti Pueblo treat children

2. What was the first element Mrs. Cordero used in making a Storyteller?
 - A air
 - B earth
 - C fire
 - D water

3. Why does Mrs. Cordero talk to the characters created through her pottery?
- A because she wants to transfer her positive emotions onto them
 - B because she thinks they talk to her
 - C because she wants to tell them about her family's customs
 - D because she feels sorry for them
4. Which was the **most important** contrast between *Singing Mother* and *Storyteller*?
- A *Storyteller* was created earlier in Cordero's career than *Singing Mother*.
 - B *Storyteller* was based on a real person, while *Singing Mother* was not.
 - C *Storyteller* depicted a man with children, while *Singing Mother* did not include children.
 - D *Storyteller* reflected childish feelings, while *Singing Mother* reflected an older woman's thoughts.
5. In the last paragraph, what does *legacy* mean?
- A gift to the museum
 - B donation to charity
 - C reminder of the past
 - D expression of thanks
6. Why is Mrs. Cordero's work so well liked?
- A Her signature is on each piece.
 - B Her pottery is large and colorful.
 - C Her Storytellers are often expensive.
 - D Her work reflects traditional practices.
7. Which statement about Helen Cordero is **best** supported by the selection?
- A She owned a museum.
 - B She saved natural resources.
 - C She gave away her work.
 - D She respected her heritage.

8. According to the selection, what can be inferred about life in the Cochiti Pueblo?
- A Family was very important.
 - B Older people had little work to do.
 - C Children relied on each other for stories.
 - D A storyteller's tales were only for children.
9. What would be an accurate statement about Helen Cordero's sculptures?
- A They show loving relationships.
 - B They were made quickly.
 - C They can be found easily in department stores.
 - D They emphasize fire, water, and air.
10. What relationship is **most similar** to the one below?
- sculptor : clay
- A writer : library
 - B zookeeper : lions
 - C floral designer : flowers
 - D news reporter : television
11. How does the author explain the emotional connection Helen Cordero has with her work?
- A by highlighting the demand for her figures
 - B by emphasizing how she uses storytelling as an educational activity
 - C by beginning the selection with a description of listening to her grandfather's tales
 - D by informing readers about a tradition in the Cochiti Pueblo that her grandfather taught her

12. Which person obtains materials in a way **most similar** to Helen Cordero's clay collecting?
- A a person who buys metal beads for handmade jewelry
 - B a person who gathers straw, grass, and wood to make baskets
 - C a person who selects the best quality oil paints to paint pictures
 - D a person who chooses black and white film to take photographs

13. Helen Cordero's rise to fame was **most** like that of which other creative artist?
- A a poet who started publishing poems at age nine
 - B a painter who used art to promote political ideas
 - C an author who gained fame for one beloved novel
 - D an author who wrote about Native American beginnings

End of Set

In compliance with federal law, including the provisions of Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, the Department of Public Instruction does not discriminate on the basis of race, sex, religion, color, national or ethnic origin, age, disability, or military service in its policies, programs, activities, admissions or employment.