



Hohokam: Shell Artisans

Introduction

The Hohokam were notable artisans of pottery, ground stone, and shell. A common artifact found on many Hohokam sites is the carved shell bracelet (more probably armlets) made from a whole *Glycymeris* (a type of bivalve-clam) shell that came from the Gulf of California. Hohokam artisans used no fewer than 43 genera and 62



Hohokam carved shell pendant in the form of a long-necked bird. Note hole for suspension and incised detail.

species of marine shell to fabricate a rich variety of ornaments and goods.¹ Using stone tools, shell was cut, carved, abraded, and etched to create images of lizards, snakes, birds, and anthropomorphic figures. They created shell rings, bracelets/armlets, pendants, beads, tesserae for mosaic inlays and other ornaments. These marine shells were procured in remarkable quantities from the Gulf of California, and to a lesser extent, from the Pacific coast. Shell was not (just) worn for aesthetic affect, some archeologists believe shell bracelets functioned as material symbols of membership in Hohokam society¹

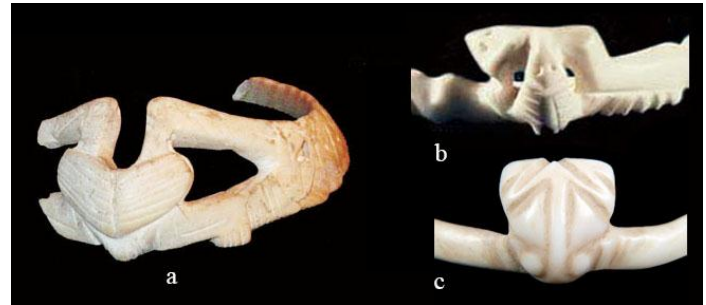
Types of Shell Artifacts

Shell bracelets. According to Dr. Jim Bayman *Glycymeris* bracelets, or more specifically armlets, were material symbols of group membership and identity, ritual performance paraphernalia, instruments of power, and insignia of office.¹ In other words: to wear shell bracelets was to be Hohokam.

Many different styles of bracelets were manufactured. Some were quite ornate, but undecorated shell bracelets were the most commonly manufactured style. Undecorated *Glycymeris* bracelets were most intensively manufactured in the Pre-Classical period (500 to 1150 CE) at settlements



Undecorated *Glycymeris* shell bracelet.



Examples of Hohokam Carved Shell bracelets. a: shell bracelet with two birds and snakes carved in the umbo (beak). b: shell bracelet with umbo carved into the form of a bird with a snake in its mouth.⁵ c: shell bracelet with umbo carved into the form of a frog.

relatively near the Gulf of California, in an area commonly referred to as the Papaguera (SW Arizona and NW Mexico).² Finished shell ornaments were widely used and discarded throughout the Hohokam regional system. Shelltown and the Hind Site are two examples of Hohokam village sites that were inhabited by specialized jewelry and ornament makers.³

The Hohokam had only stone tools with which to cut, carve, and polish the shell. To make bracelets Hohokam artisans first abraded a small hole near the center of the shell, then chipped its margins into a large opening which was then rounded and polished. The umbo (beak) of the shell was sometimes elaborately carved into birds with snakes or frogs. The Hohokam also added turquoise tesserae to the umbo, and even covered whole shells with turquoise and shell tesserae to create colorful mosaics.



Shell bracelet with turquoise mosaic on umbo.

Conus shell tinklers. Tinklers were created by removing the wide end of the *Conus* shell and drilling a hole for suspension through the opposite end. Tinklers were evidently used to emit distinctive and highly audible sounds (something akin to a bell).



Conus shell tinklers.

When numerous tinkers are affixed to an article of clothing, they grate against one another when a person wearing them moves. *Conus* shell tinklers were used to adorn ritual costumes in the early historic period of the Greater Southwest; shell tinklers worn by Hopi and Zuni performers, for example, generate noises reminiscent of a gourd rattle.¹

Shell beads. Beads for necklaces were made from either whole shells or flat shell discs. Disc beads were made from small cut pieces of shell; a hole was then drilled through the center and it was then ground to shape.



Shell disc beads.

Olivella was a common species of shell used for beads. The spiral ends of the whole *Olivella* shell were ground off creating an opening by which the shell could be strung. The result is a small, somewhat barrel-shaped bead.



Olivella shell beads.⁴

Etched shell. The Hohokam were etching shell hundreds of years before the techniques were used in Europe. Examples of etched shell have come from Hohokam sites dated from ca. 850 to 1200 CE (Current Era). The small number of etched shell or shell fragments found on archeology sites suggests the practice of etching shell was not very common. Whole *Laevicardium elatum* (a type of cockle) shells were used.

Shell etching was done by covering the shell with some sort of resistant material, such as tree sap or lac (a resinous material secreted by insects) and scratching away the area desired to be etched. The shell was then soaked in an acidic liquid, possibly fermented saguaro fruit juice, until the design was etched in the shell. The longer the shell was exposed to the acid the deeper the etching. Both zoomorphic and geometric designs were used, and some shell was painted after being etched.



A modern replica shell frog carved from whole *Glycymeris* shell



A modern replica of a Hohokam etched *Laevicardium* shell.

¹ James M. Bayman. Hohokam Craft Economies and the Materialization of Power. *Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory*, Vol. 9, No. 1. March 2002

² R.H. Maguire and A.V. Howard. The structure and organization of Hohokam shell exchange. *The Kiva*: 113-146. 1987

³ William S. Marmaduke and Richard J. Martynech. Shelltown and The Hind Site: A Study of Two Hohokam Craftsman Communities in Southwestern Arizona, Volume 1, Part 1. Flagstaff, Arizona: Northland Research, Inc.

⁴ http://swvirtualmuseum.nau.edu/gallery3/index.php/Artifacts/shell/Olivella/TUZI_060613_0472

⁵ image courtesy of the Arizona State Museum, Tucson, Arizona.

For more information contact:

Ronald Beckwith
Archeologist
Saguaro National Park
3693 S. Old Spanish Trail
Tucson, AZ 85730

ph: (520) 733-5160
email: ronald_beckwith@nps.gov