World's Largest Southwest Indian Pottery Collection Highlighted at ASM

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The Arizona State Museum is home to the largest collection of Southwest Indian pottery in the world and on May 10 the museum will open its newest exhibition, "The Pottery Project," to show it off.

With some 20,000 whole vessels, the museum's collection is not only the world's largest but the most comprehensively documented as well.

The exhibit will feature a Virtual Vault, a three-dimensional, interactive database of signature pieces from within the museum's Agnese and Emil Haury Southwest Native Nations Pottery Vault.

"For curatorial reasons, the museum cannot allow visitors into the real storage vault, which must stay at a constant 72 degrees Fahrenheit and 32 percent humidity," said Diane Dittemore, an ASM collections curator. "So this is an excellent way for us to share the collection with visitors and with the world."

The Virtual Vault will enable visitors to access pieces of their choice virtually. Visitors can remove a pot from the shelf, rotate it and learn more about the archaeological site where it was found. Additionally, the Virtual Vault allows visitors to watch a potter demonstrate how a pot was made, hear the stories it embodies, hear a curator discuss its cultural significance and peruse its catalog data. Interpretive components will situate the development of ceramics in the American Southwest within the broader context of current archaeological and ethnographic research.

So far, 140 pots have been digitized for the vault. The database has capabilities for continuous additions and upgrades.

"This visual database conveys a wealth of interpretive and contextual information not delivered by traditional exhibition mechanisms," said Davison Koenig, an exhibits curator at ASM. "This globally accessible, three-dimensional database will be as informationally relevant for the hard-core researcher as it will be intellectually stimulating for the casual visitor. For both, visually stunning."

A professional collaboration between the museum and the Center for Desert Archaeology is at the core of the Virtual Vault project.

Doug Gann from the Center for Desert Archaeology has been investigating applications of profile modeling, an innovative technique enabling rapid, low-cost digitization of three-dimensional objects. This revolutionary method quickly creates photorealistic digital models of objects using photography rather than costly laser scans. Already a pioneer in 3-D modeling of archaeological sites, Gann views the nexus between these two techniques as an ideal
means of creating past worlds where virtual explorers can view pottery and artifacts "in situ."

"I see this project as a prototype for finally unlocking the potential of the virtual museum," Gann said. "Rather than simply displaying pictures of interesting objects, the State Museum is going to be able to share both detailed three-dimensional models and interpretive information on some of the most amazing examples of ancient, historic and modern Native American ceramic arts."

The project is supported by ASM and the Center for Desert Archaeology. A $25,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities will allow the museum's virtual vault to be shared with a global audience via the Internet. The award will fund completion of an alpha-level version of the Virtual Vault for testing and evaluation.

The museum's free public celebration for "The Pottery Project" will be held May 10 from 1 p.m.-4 p.m. In addition to guided tours through the exhibit and conservation laboratory, there will be hands-on pottery-making activities and demonstrations by Native potters.

The museum is located just inside the UA's main gate at Park Avenue and University Boulevard. ASM is open seven days a week, Monday-Saturday 10 a.m.-5 p.m. and Sunday noon-5 p.m. Admission is a requested donation.

For more information about the museum and the exhibit, visit http://www.statemuseum.arizona.edu [1].

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