

Negative Painting of Angel Site and Southeastern United States

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Negative painting is a technique in which a portion of the designing appears on the vessel in the original color of the pottery. The actual process by which this designing was executed is still a problem, however, several techniques have been suggested.

In one process, the portion of the vessel which is not to be colored is covered with wax; the vessel is then dyed and left to dry. After drying, the wax and the dye covering it, is removed thus leaving a portion of the vessel in its original color.

In a variation of this process; after the wax and dye have been applied the vessel is fired, setting the dye and burning off the wax. The final result is about the same as in the first process.

A third method has been suggested in that after a substance has been applied to the area not to be colored the vessel is fired without any dye being used. The process of firing, if controlled properly can change the color of the vessel which is exposed to the air and fire. Properties in the clay itself will help to determine the color change. That part covered would remain in the natural color.

One of the above processes was probably used at the Angel Site in decorating the negative painted pottery there.

With but few exceptions the decoration is confined to the rim of the vessel. On one large fragment the design goes over the entire inside of the vessel, both rim and base. In another instance where several sherds are probably from the same vessel the design is found on both the inside and the outside of the pieces. These examples, however, are rare.

In some instances a coating of red ocher has been placed over the negative design. This film often covers the entire inside of the vessel, even if the negative design doesn't. It is thin enough for the negative design to show through. In four or five cases the application of this direct paint has been controlled to the extent that a design of red ocher has been painted over the top of the negative pattern.

The shape of the negative painted vessels at Angel Site consist mostly of bowls and wide-rimmed plates. Three water bottles, one being an effigy of a woman, were found and enough sherds to represent perhaps a half dozen more bottles. The plates are often rather large; one reconstructed vessel measuring 12½" in diameter with a 3½" wide rim. This rim section is the portion which contains the designing.

The designs of the ware are quite diverse. In approximately 85 percent of the sherds they can be placed in three or four categories

with but slight variations. In the other 15 percent, however, the motifs are varied and often occur on just one or two vessels or on only a few sherds.

A large portion of the sherds have geometric designs. The most common of these is the diagonal lines which cover the entire rim of the vessel. There are three types of this pattern: a) diagonals forming chevrons in pyramid fashion going from the inner edge of the rim to the outer edge, b) the same pattern as above only the motif starts on the outer rim edge and builds up toward the inner edge, c) diagonal lines going clear across the rim forming alternately a V-chevron type motif around the vessel rim. In combination with these diagonal lines the so-called "sun-symbol" is sometimes found. This motif is an equal-arm-cross enclosed in a circle. There are about a dozen variations of this pattern; changes being found in the type of equal-arm-cross made and also in the circle which is sometimes double, sometimes radiating. The "sun-symbol" is also frequently found as the only design on a vessel, being placed more or less regularly around the rim.

Another large category of sherds carries a scallop design around the outer edge of the rim. This motif is generally independent of any other design that might be on the rest of the rim. Even when the sherds are covered with a film of red ocher, this outer scallop motif is not always covered.

Of the 15 percent of the sherds with such diversity in their designs some are so stylistic that the pattern cannot be determined. Also, some of the sherds are too small to get the complete design. There are a few, however, that deserve mention.

The owl face is a design which appears on a large plate in combination with a motif looking like the letter N. The plate was broken when found but has since been reconstructed, and it shows that the double motif appears four times on the rim. This is the only example of the owl face found so far at the Site.

The bi-lobed arrow appears on four different sherds. Three of the sherds are covered with a film of red ocher, while the fourth is not covered and the design is so faint that the exact outline is hard to follow.

The stylized bird is a motif which is found in several variations but in most cases there are not enough sherds of the same vessel to allow determination of the complete design. Those few that are fairly complete, however, depict only the head and neck of the bird.

Although this type of pottery decoration is an important item at the Angel Site the number of sherds compared to the total number of all pottery sherds taken from the site appears small. The total number of sherds excavated up to the end of 1948 was 1,719,164 pieces. This figure includes all plain ware, painted ware, rims, vessel lugs and handles. Of this figure 14,559 are painted—both direct and negative. 4054 of these sherds contain negative painted designs.

Negative painted ware is found over a large part of southeastern United States. A few vessels were found at two different sites in northwestern Florida. There are a number of sites scattered over south-

ern Georgia, Alabama and Mississippi which have produced examples of the ware. It appears as far north as Winnebago County, Wisconsin and as far west as a single site in eastern Texas. As far as I know, the greatest number of negative painted sherds has been taken from the Angel Site. This may be due, however, to the method of excavation. At many sites the main point of excavation was in the mounds while at the Angel Site only one mound has been dug, and the rest of the digging has been in the village area. If other sites were dug in the same manner, more negative painted material might be found.

The main area producing this type of pottery appears to be located along the Ohio River, on the Mississippi River below the mouth of the Ohio, and along the Tennessee and Cumberland Rivers. Outside of this area the sites have produced only one or two vessels and in a few cases merely a few sherds.

It is the general opinion of the authors who have reported on these outlying sites that the appearance of negative painted ware was due to trade. In at least one case (Crystal River, Florida) the ware seems to have been made differently from the rest of the pottery at the site.

Negative painting also occurs in parts of Mexico, Central and South America. Most archaeologists believe that the technique of negative painting was developed in either Central or South America and that it was carried in some manner to the southeastern part of the United States. How, when and by what route it reached the Southeast are questions which are still being studied.

Two routes were available, one via the Antilles and the other up through Mexico and across the southwestern part of the United States. Both routes produce gaps where negative painted ware is not found, or at least it has not been found yet.

There is a possibility that negative painting may have appeared in the Southeast as a part of a trait complex. During the Middle Mississippi period a strange cult, which seems to have had no relationship with anything already established in the area, appeared and spread rapidly over the whole Mississippi Valley. Many of the traits of this cult showed Mexican influence. Among these traits are designs such as have been described from the Angel Site—the bi-lobed arrow, owl face and the stylized bird motif, and the technique of negative painting itself.

If this Southern Cult, as it is called, first appeared in the Southeast during the Middle Mississippi period, and if negative painting is definitely a part of this cult then its appearance could be dated between 1300 and 1700 A.D. As yet no one feels free to say that these assumptions can be considered facts. Excavations in both the Southeast and Southwest United States as well as Mexico are still being carried on and another few years may give us more definite information.