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Why decorate a pot? Midwestern household pottery, 200 B.C.-A.D.600

David P. Braun

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Abstract

The middle centuries (200 B.C.-A.D.600) of the Woodland period in the central riverine region of North America witnessed significant changes in the amount of decorative effort that people invested in their household pottery. Such historical phenomena raise the usually unasked question, why do people decorate their utilitarian household goods at all? More specifically, why might people in a particular historical setting decorate their utilitarian household objects at one time but not at another? This paper argues that the answer to such questions must always be different for each historical setting, and not predictable from any cross-cultural regularities. The Woodland case also illustrates a need to take into account relationships minimally among (a) construction practices, (b) decorative practices, (c) the physical uses of utilitarian objects, and (d) household-scale social relations in any social analysis of decoration on household objects.



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