



# CHEROKEE PINCH POTS



Written by **Alica Murphy Wildcatt**, Eastern Band of Cherokee, in collaboration with the Native Resonance Cohort sponsored by the Native American Indian Association and the Tennessee Arts Commission.



## CONTENT SCOPE

Students will engage with Cherokee culture and art through the Cherokee pottery story of “Didanisisgi”, the Cherokee word for mud dauber, and creating their own pinch pot. This hands-on activity not only teaches students about pottery but also incorporates lessons in history, culture, and art technique.

## FOR TEACHERS

Subject & Topic: Social Studies (Native American History) and Art

Grade Level: K-12

Lesson Time: 1 Hour Class Period

Group Size: Regular Class Size (18 - 25 students)

## MATERIALS

- Clay
- Water
- Pencil
- Stamps (optional)

## OBJECTIVES

STUDENTS WILL:

- Learn about the Cherokee people, focusing on their history, culture, and pottery art.
- Understand the significance of pottery in Cherokee society, including its uses and symbolic meanings.
- Develop pottery skills by creating their own pinch pots using traditional Cherokee techniques.





## CHEROKEE POTTERY LEGEND

“Didanisisgi” is the Cherokee word for mud dauber, a wasp that builds its nest from mud. According to Cherokee legend, the mud dauber was responsible for bringing pottery to the Cherokee people.

One day a little girl was carrying a bark bucket to fill with water when she noticed a mud dauber stuck in the mud. The kind hearted girl was afraid of getting stung but used a stick to help the mud dauber get out safely. As she continued on her journey, she tripped and the bark bucket smashed into pieces on the ground. She became upset when she realized that the bark bucket that had taken so long to make had been destroyed. The mud dauber then stopped to help her, “Don’t feel so badly. I will teach you something useful. I will teach you to make pottery so you can teach your people.” He then gathered enough clay from the bank to make a small pot. He molded and shaped the clay and taught the girl how to make, stamp, and fire pottery so it could hold water. The girl rushed home to teach her people, and according to the legend, the Cherokee have been making pottery ever since.



## WHO ARE THE CHEROKEE

Cherokee (pronounced CHAIR-Oh-key). The name comes from the Creek word chelokee, which means “people of a different speech.” The Cherokee refer to themselves as Ani’-Yun’wiya’, meaning “the principal people,” or Tsalagi, which comes from a Choctaw word for “people living in a land of many caves.”

The Cherokee are one of the indigenous peoples of the southeastern United States. Before the 18th century, the lands of the Cherokee encompassed what are now the states of North Carolina, Tennessee, South Carolina, Georgia, Kentucky, and Alabama.

Today, the Eastern Band of Cherokee live on 57,000 acres in the North Carolina Mountains known as the Qualla Boundary, and on smaller tracts of land to the west near Murphy and Robbinsville, NC.

For centuries, Cherokee’s have passed traditional art work from generation to generation. These artists have turned natural materials such as river cane, clay, wood, and stone into beautiful works of art. Basketry, pottery, stone carving, wood carving, bead working, finger weaving, and traditional masks are a few of the timeless forms of Cherokee art that still exist today.

## CHEROKEE POTTERY

The Eastern Band of Cherokee have the longest continuing pottery tradition of any tribe in the country, going back thousands of years.

Traditional Cherokee pottery is hand built, thin-walled, waterproof, and stamped with wooden paddles that create rectilinear and curvilinear designs. It is not glazed, but sometimes burnished or covered with slip. Pots are fired in an open fire that imparts mottled smoke patterns. Shapes include large and small cooking pots, serving bowls, water bottles, and effigy pots.

Over time, Cherokee pottery has undergone many changes, and during the 20th century many Cherokee potters were making pots in styles that were preferred by tourists. These pots were shiny and black on the outside and mostly decorative.

Around 2003, many Cherokee potters became interested in reviving much older Cherokee styles, and the Cherokee Potters Guild was formed. Its mission is to research, teach, and preserve the traditional Cherokee pottery methods.

## INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

Begin the lesson with a brief overview of the Cherokee people's connection to Tennessee lands. Highlight key historical points, including their forced removal, resilience, and how they have continued to thrive, particularly in North Carolina. Explain the origin and meaning of the word "Cherokee," delving into its significance and how it reflects the identity of the Cherokee people today. In connection with their long history, the teacher will bring in the Cherokee pottery story of the "Didanisisgi", the Cherokee word for mud dauber. The teacher is encouraged to ask comprehension questions pertaining to the story to ensure student engagement. Upon understanding the significance pottery plays in Cherokee culture and history, students will replicate their own Cherokee pinch pot following instructions.



### ACTIVITY

A good size pinch pot is made from a ball of clay about the size of a tennis ball.

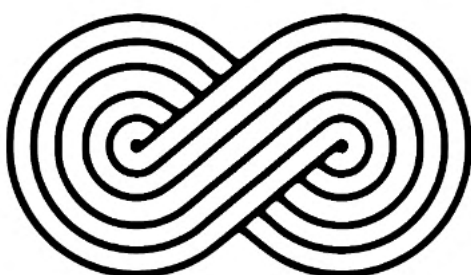
- 1 Roll your clay into a ball.
- 2 Stick your finger into the middle of the ball. This is the part where children love to hold up their super big thumbs in the air!
- 3 With your thumb and forefinger pinch around the sides until the hole in the middle gets bigger and the pot sides get thinner. Do this with a few pinches rather
- 4 Select a design or create one of your own and draw or use a stamp to stamp it on the pot.
- 5 Let the clay air dry until hardened.



### EVALUATION

Evaluate students based on their engagement in discussions, the effort and creativity displayed in their pinch pot creation, and their understanding and respect for Cherokee culture and pottery techniques as reflected in their final piece and participation in class discussions. This lesson plan not only educates students about Cherokee history and art but also encourages them to think critically about indigenous cultures and the importance of preserving such traditions.

- How does creating this pinch pot make you feel connected to the Cherokee story of the Didanisisgi?
- What was the most challenging aspect of creating your pinch pot, and how did you overcome it? How does mastering this technique give you insight into the skill and creativity of Cherokee artisans?
- How do stories, like that of the Didanisisgi (mud dauber), enrich the experience of creating traditional art? How important do you think storytelling is in preserving cultural heritage?



# Goals, Learning Objectives, and Content :

**Goal 1:** Learn about the history of the Cherokee People.

Teaching Strategy	Learning Objective	Content	TN Content Standard
Read the following content from Alica Murphy Wildcatt, Cherokee artisan.	1a. Students learn from a Native Artisan sharing their perspective of history as a member of the Cherokee community.	1b. Cherokee (pronounced CHAIR-0h-key). The name comes from the Creek word chelokee, which means "people of a different speech." The Cherokee refer to themselves as Ani'-Yun'wiya', meaning "the principal people," or Tsalagi, which comes from a Choctaw word for "people living in a land of many caves."	H,C,G,T
Read the following content from Alica Murphy Wildcatt, Cherokee artisan.	2a. Students learn from a Native Artisan sharing their perspective of history as a member of the Cherokee community.	2b. The Cherokee are one of the indigenous peoples of the southeastern United States. Before the 18th century, the lands of the Cherokee encompassed what are now the states of North Carolina, Tennessee, South Carolina, Georgia, Kentucky, and Alabama.	H,C,G,T

**Goal 2:** Understand the significance of pottery in Cherokee culture and society.

Teaching Strategy	Learning Objective	Content	TN Content Standard
Read the following content from Alica Murphy Wildcatt, Cherokee artisan.	1a. Students learn from a Native Artisan sharing their perspective of history as a member of the Cherokee community.	1b. The Eastern Band of Cherokee have the longest continuing pottery tradition of any tribe in the country, going back thousands of years.	H,C,G,T

**Goal 3:** Listen to the story of Cherokee pottery and connect it to Cherokee pottery.

Teaching Strategy	Learning Objective	Content	TN Content Standard
Read aloud or have students read to themselves the story of Cherokee pottery.	1a. Students listen to a Cherokee story told from a member of the Cherokee community.	1b. Please see below for the full story written by Alica Murphy Wildcatt.	C,G,T
Ask students comprehension questions about the story.	Students will be able to recall specific details from the story.	Example questions: Describe the setting of the story. How does it contribute to the narrative?	C,T
Connect the story back to modern pottery.	Students will recognize the impact of stories on contemporary practices.	Example question: How important do you think storytelling is in preserving cultural heritage?	H,C,G,T

## Cont. Goals, Learning Objectives, and Content :

**Goal 4:** Create a Cherokee pinch pot.

Teaching Strategy	Learning Objective	Content	TN Content Standard
Use the following activity instructions to create a Cherokee pinch pot.	1a. Students will develop skills to create their own Cherokee pinch pot.	1b. A good size pinch pot is made from a ball of clay about the size of a tennis ball. <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Roll your clay into a ball</li> <li>2. Stick your finger into the middle of the ball. This is the part where children love to hold up their super big thumbs in the air!</li> <li>3. With your thumb and forefinger pinch around the sides until the hole in the middle gets bigger and the pot sides get thinner. Do this with a few pinches rather than one big squash.</li> <li>4. Select a design or create one of your own and draw or use a stamp to stamp it on the pot.</li> <li>5. Let the clay air dry until hardened.</li> </ol>	C

**Goal 5:** Build an appreciation for Cherokee culture and Cherokee pottery.

Teaching Strategy	Learning Objective	Content	TN Content Standard
Reflect on the history, story, and activity.	1a. Students will share personal reflections of the lesson.	1b. Reflection Questions: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. How does creating this pinch pot make you feel connected to the Cherokee story of the Didanisisgi?</li> <li>2. What was the most challenging aspect of creating your pinch pot, and how did you overcome it? How does mastering this technique give you insight into the skill and creativity of Cherokee artisans?</li> <li>3. How do stories, like that of the Didanisisgi (mud dauber), enrich the experience of creating traditional art? How important do you think storytelling is in preserving cultural heritage?</li> </ol>	H,C,G,T

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