There are more than 400 distinctly federally recognized American Indian tribes in the United States, all of whom strive to maintain their traditional culture in the late 20th century, while their arts continue to evolve. Native Americans have been creating silver jewelry since the Civil War era in the Southwest. It is useful to consider some of the traditions of Native jewelry and its stereotypes as a context in which to view the work of contemporary Indian artists.

First marketed to an external (i.e., tourist) audience at the turn of the 20th century, the Indian silver bracelet or ring set with turquoise was the perfect memento of a visit to the Grand Canyon or the Four Corners area of Utah, Colorado, Arizona, and New Mexico. Southwestern Native American jewelry has been produced for use within the tribe as well as for sale to non-Indians primarily by Navajo and Pueblo (prin- cipally Zuni and Hopi) metalsmiths.

The earliest designs were made by the Navajo and initially evolved from Spanish prototypes. They were almost exclusively fabricated or cast in silver (often derived from coins), decorated with elaborate stamping or file work, and set with turquoise stones. Southwestern silver work made before 1920, whether by Pueblo or Navajo jewelers, is difficult to attribute to any one tribe, although it is usually assumed to be Navajo. All of the jewelers were anonymous until at least the 1930s: as late as 1950, most jewelry remained unsigned and could not easily be assigned to a particular artisan.

Over the years of producing jewelry in Navajo designs, in the late 1930s jewelers of Zuni Pueblo developed a new style known as stone-on-stone inlay, or mosaic work, based on their interest in lapidary. This technique allowed for the introduction of new colors and pictorial images in the pieces. The genre was given a boost in 1950, when electricity to run the lapidary equipment reached the village. The innovation was immediately interpreted as "traditional" by the Zuni artists and the public.

Just before World War II, the Museum of Northern Arizona in Flagstaff initiated a project to develop a unique Hopi style. The result was a specific form of silver overlay based on traditional Hopi pottery, textile, and basketwork designs. At least two classes of returning Hopi veterans were taught this technique; through promotions by the Hopi Craft Guild and in national publications, the style quickly became known as "traditional Hopi overlay."

These three styles—Navajo, Zuni, and Hopi—are so well known that they have virtually defined Indian jewelry for much of this century. Most of the pieces produced and marketed by southwestern artisans consisted of rings, bracelets, earrings, and pins. Larger-scale traditional pieces—such as concho belts and squash blossom necklaces—were made primarily for Native wear, or for non-Indian southwesterners familiar with these designs.

Driven by fashion magazine articles and Hollywood films (such as Midnight Cowboy), Indian jewelry became an enormous craft industry in the first half of the 1970s. Varied quantities of silver jewelry (including mass-manufactured versions) produced by Native people and non-Natives here and abroad were sold in fashionable department stores and truck stops across the country. This boom reinforced an existing stereotype of Indian jewelry as cheaply made articles of silver and turquoise. As happens with any fad, the demand for stereotypical Indian jewelry quickly diminished and, with the exceptions of a few dedicated collectors and tourists in the Southwest, the market languished during the 1980s.

A few artists had established fresh directions for jewelry at mid-century. The Navajo metalsmith Kenneth Begay (1913-1977), working out of the White Hogan Shop in Scottsdale, Arizona, in the late 1940s, created strong, simple forms utilizing the Navajo techniques of stamping and chased silver. He also produced tea sets, flatware and ecclesiastic silver during a long career. The best-known modern Native American jeweler, the Hopi artist Charles Loloma (1921-1991) served in the armed forces during World War II and trained as a ceramist in the 1950s on the G.I. Bill at the School for American Craftsmen in Alfred, New York. He pioneered the use of gold, ivory, lapis lazuli and other materials while teaching at the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe in the 1960s. He also created new imagery and textures and a distinctive sense of scale in his jewelry designs. Loloma's work was widely published, particularly in the 1970s, influencing a generation of Native American jewelers. A third artist who opened up avenues for today's jewelers was Preston Monongye (1917-1987), who was of California Mission ancestry but was raised on the Hopi Reservation. His small cast containers and jewelry emphasized line drawings and retained the coarse texture of the tufa stone molds while incorporating beautiful colored stone and shell inlays. The importance of these innovators cannot be overstated. Both Begay and Loloma taught Monongye was often quoted and his work reproduced in numerous articles. His efforts at individualizing designs while retaining the "Indianiness" of his work has given either Native jewelers the impetus to experiment further with materials, techniques and forms.

That same spirit of experimentation within tradition is evident in the work of contemporary Native American metalsmiths selected this spring for exhibition at the Institute of American Indian Arts Museum. In considering the range of expressions in this work, a few general observations can be made about these talented smiths. They are particularly resourceful in the use of materials, quite comfortable and sophisticated in their color sensibilities and particularly adept at drawing. They are very aware of the specific cultural meanings attached to their images, and many of the pieces depict or imply not only a culture but a landscape (where, in many cases, that culture has resided for centuries). Collectively they demonstrate the incredible diversity that exists today in Native American metalwork, a diversity that should deter further stereotyping of Indian jewelry.
RIC CHARLIE, a Navajo, employs tufa stone casting. He draws abstracted landscapes and cloud forms and then finishes the silver castings by contrasting colored chemical patinas with polished silver areas. His belt buckle depicts the landscape of Monument Valley, overlaid with a raised and inlaid drawing of a traditional Navajo horse shoe. His skill at combining traditional silversmithing techniques with the natural features of the Navajo homeland gives rise to a new way of looking at Navajo jewelry.


VENITA JOHNSON crafts a Navajo belt buckle with symbolic patterning. Her pieces retain the natural surface of the tufa stone and often contain figurative images inlaid with colored shells and stones.

Belt buckle, 1996. Silver, gold, turquoise, coral, 2 1/2 inches by 1 inch.

JENNIFER LINDEN, a Navajo jewelry working the Hopi overlay technique (combined with traditional stamping, chasing and repoussé), makes detailed drawings of contemporary Indian dancers. Her concho belt features a variety of dancers, including a humorous pair of jester figures (Pueblo clowns) with striped body suits, one riding a miniature motorcycle. Her spangled work expands upon the Navajo storyteller style of jewelry first developed in the 1970s, which often depicts everyday scenes from reservation life: people driving pickup trucks, sheep herding, chopping wood.

Concho Belt, 1996. Silver, leather, each concho 3 by 4 inches.

DENISE WALLACE, of Alaskan Squirrel descent, uses figural images along with those of animals and fish that are so important to her culture. Her amazingly detailed constructions in silver and gold typically are inlaid with carved and silvered fossilized walrus ivory (found buried in Alaska) and often illustrate the traditional dress of the indigenous people of her region. She also employs hand-carved portraits that open to reveal additional hidden figures, a concept based on hinged Northwest Coast tribal dance masks.

Crossroads of Continents Belt, 1999. Silver, gold, lapis, turquoise, coral, fossilized ivory, 2 inches long.

NEREDA PEBE ASAL, a fourth-generation Navajo metalsmith (whose name means silver), creates cuff bracelets that are stamp-decorated and set with stones. But Peshlaka fabricates his own punches, investing hieroglyphics that bear no resemblance to the old Navajo designs. His bracelet is set with a transparent hand-cut rock crystal that magnifies the designs stamped underneath the stone.

Crystal Bracelet, 1998. Silver, rock crystal, 1 1/2 by 7 1/2 inches.

The silversmith ANTHONY LOVATO of Santo Domingo Pueblo works exclusively in the traditional tufa stone casting technique (often mistakenly called "sand casting"). Because of tribal taboos regarding human representation, he abstracts his images and combines them with other natural forms, adding delicate raised drawings on both the front and back of his silver castings. His pin retains the sand texture of the mold in which it was made. Lovato also produces large tufa bowls and hollyhock vases with this technique.

ANGIE BEANO of Santo Domingo Pueblo has successfully recreated a style of overlaid stone work that was first practiced by her ancestors in the Southwest almost a thousand years ago (they dominated the crafts of stone work and bead-making and controlled the mining of and trade in turquoise). She imparts her shell materials from the California coast just like her forebears—but by car.


As a basis for his jewelry, ROBERT GRESS, of the Crow Nation of Montana, has chosen the geometric designs traditionally painted on the parfleche—a rawhide storage envelope. His belt is a masterful interpretation of the original.

Absoluto Parfleche Belt, 1995, silver, opal, coral, lapis, turquoise, leather, each concho 2 by 3 inches, collection of Institute of American Indian Arts Museum.

SHAWN BLUEJACKET, of the Loyal Shawnee tribe, is fascinated with natural materials and softly toned surfaces on silver. Her small container for sacred objects sits on three legs of differing form and color and includes an image of a waterbird spirit on the side.

Sacred Object, 1996, silver, ammonite, chrysoprase, lapis, 3 by 2 by 1½ inches.

The evening bag by MIKE BIRD-ROTERO of San Juan Pueblo utilizes the traditional Navajo and Pueblo techniques of stamping and repoussé to make an object appropriate for a “black tie” occasion—which rarely arises at the Pueblo. This piece shows an inventive understanding of the artist’s audience—collectors looking for exquisite craft within a tradition, yet with a surprising format, one geared to the fashions of the dominant culture.

Opera Purse, 1996, silver, turquoise, 2½ by 5 inches.

Navajo artists CARL and IRENE CLARK collaborate on works that take the Zuni technique of stone-on-stone inlay to an unparalleled level. In their bracelet, set with more than 3,500 pieces of turquoise, jet and shell, one discerns the finely drawn image of a Navajo Yei figure. The natural variations in the turquoise give visual depth to the background and add to the graphic complexity of the surface.


Muskogee Creek metalsmith TIM TICER creates sculptural pieces from a variety of metals, stamped with words that often refer to the relationship between the Federal government and the tribes—a political statement about the treatment and stereotyping of Indian peoples. The work of Tiger and his fellow artists attests to the changes that continue to occur in the world of Indian jewelry and metalwork. They are constantly discovering new materials, forms and ideas with which to express their cultural identity as Native Americans in the late 1990s.

Willy Boy, 1996, copper, brass, silver, wood, 8 by 5¼ by 9¾ inches.

Lone Coutler is a jewelry professor at the Institute of American Indian Arts, Santa Fe, New Mexico, and author of New Mexican Tinwork, 1840-1940 (University of New Mexico Press, 1990).